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### Publication Date

2022

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UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA SAN DIEGO

El Des-Archivo del Campesino Urbano /  
The Un-Archive of the Urban Campesino

A thesis submitted in partial satisfaction of the  
Master of Fine Arts

in

Visual Arts

by

Isidro Pérez García

Committee in charge:

Professor Janelle Iglesias, Chair  
Professor Gloria Elizabeth Chacón  
Professor Danielle Dean  
Professor Kyong Park

2022

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University of California San Diego

2022

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## EPIGRAPH

“Take care and do not forget that ideas are also weapons.”

- EZLN Subcomandante Marcos, 2000

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## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The making of these artworks took place on the original homelands of the Gabrielino/Tongva people, where I live. I migrated to this place from parts of México that are the original homelands of both Hñã-Hñu (Otomí) and Nahua peoples. The artworks from this project are part of my thesis work shown at UC San Diego, an institution located on the original homelands of the Kumeyaay people. I wish to acknowledge and pay my deepest respects to the indigenous owners of these lands, whose sovereignty remains unceded and who we all remain accountable to.

My sincere thanks to the members of my thesis committee – Janelle Iglesias, Danielle Dean, Kyong Park, and Gloria Chacón – for the generous sharing of their time and critical feedback. I feel very lucky to have had the benefit of your perspectives on my work during my time at UCSD.

Thank you to my mentor Janelle Iglesias for your kindness and support. You have always met me where I'm at and helped me work constructively from my own context.

Thank you to Kyong Park for taking an interest in my work from the start and for being in my corner. I wouldn't be here at UCSD without your support.

Thank you to Rubén Ortiz Torres for the valuable conversations and advice, and for pushing me to seguir chambeando. Thank you to Amy Sara Carroll for offering me ideas so generously. Thank you to Ricardo Dominguez for the kind words and for sharing your knowledge and insight. Thank you to Elizabeth Newsome for teaching classes that center the art of this continent.

Thank you to Gloria Chacón and Katie Walkiewicz; your classes were very important to me, and I will be thinking about many of the ideas you introduced me to for the rest of my life.

Thank you to my artistic collaborators, Greg Camphire and José Luís Gallo, for contributing their sound and video artistry to this project. You both shared your skills very generously and thoughtfully, and you helped me add vital layers to the project that I could not have achieved on my own.

Thank you to my family who collaborated with me with open hearts, even when they sometimes felt like they didn't understand "art." In particular, thank you to my brother Martín Alvarado García who lent his many years of experience as a master carpenter. And thank you to my other brother Israel Pérez Mendoza for the conversations, the videos, and for virtually connecting me back to el rancho en México.

And finally, thank you to my partner Adriana who has been my greatest supporter and collaborator along the way.

ABSTRACT OF THE THESIS

El Des-Archivo del Campesino Urbano /  
The Un-Archive of the Urban Campesino

by

Isidro Pérez García

Master of Fine Arts in Visual Arts

University of California San Diego, 2022

Professor Janelle Iglesias, Chair

The project *El Des-Archivo del Campesino Urbano / The Un-Archive of the Urban Campesino* is an artistic attempt to engage with the complex question of how to reconnect with indigenous worlds from the positionality of a de-indigenized indigenous person – uprooted by centuries of genocidal violence inflicted on the original peoples of Ixachilan (or the Americas) by the nation-building and citizen-making/unmaking projects of both México and the United States. The project is a gallery installation of thirteen artworks centered on this question, as well as the networked and layered processes of art-making and of “thinking with things” that produced the final art works. The *campesino urbano* named in the title of

the project is part of an undocumented migrant diaspora who migrated from rural México to the cities of the United States. This project follows the ethical idea that who I am, where I am, the context from which I engage, and how I engage – and the relationship between those things – are important and world-making ideas. As a whole, the *Des-Archivo* is about making – making and materiality as the basis for how we engage in the world – and how we algorithm the world through our making.

## INTRODUCTION

The project *El Des-Archivo del Campesino Urbano / The Un-Archive of the Urban Campesino*<sup>1</sup> is an attempt to engage with the complex question of how to reconnect with indigenous worlds from the positionality of a de-indigenized indigenous person – uprooted by centuries of genocidal violence inflicted on the original peoples of Ixachilan<sup>2</sup> by the nation-building and citizen-making/ unmaking projects of both México and the United States. The project is a gallery installation of thirteen artworks centered on this question, as well as the networked and layered processes of art-making and of “thinking with things”<sup>3</sup> that produced the final art works.

The *campesino urbano* named in the title of my project is (like myself) part of an undocumented migrant diaspora who migrated from rural México to the cities of the United States. Produced out of the collisions and overlays<sup>4</sup> of the nation-building projects of the United States and México, the *campesino urbano* is a subject who is full of seeming contradictions: third-world subject in first-world environment; subject but not citizen; part of the capitalist economy but not “modern”; essential but expendable;

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<sup>1</sup> *Campesino* is a common word in México to refer to someone from a rural area, which might be translated into English as “peasant.” However, for this paper I do not translate the word *campesino* in order to preserve its connotations in Spanish.

<sup>2</sup> The word *Ixachilan* refers to the continents of the so-called Americas, as they are known in the Nahuatl language. This name was taught to me by David Vásquez, a teacher of Nahuatl in Gabrielino/Tongva territory, also known as Santa Ana, CA.

<sup>3</sup> Credit to art historian Esther Pasztory (Hungarian, refugee to US territory) for the concept of art as “thinking with things.” Pasztory argues that “art” is not a universal, given category; it’s not even necessarily a visual activity in her view, but instead makes more sense as a cognitive activity, as a way of “thinking with things” (7).

<sup>4</sup> Philosopher Anne Waters (Seminole) talks about her experience of the world as an indigenous person; when the way she thinks about the world doesn’t fit with the way things are, she says that it creates what she calls “collisions and overlays of blended meaning” (153).

*pobre y humilde*<sup>5</sup> but also threatening; *machista*<sup>6</sup> but also feminized<sup>7</sup>; “*indio*”<sup>8</sup> but not indigenous<sup>9</sup>; subject of art but not artist or audience; etc. These seeming contradictions of the campesino urbano have not come about by accident. They are a result of the type of binary thinking that is characteristic of Western colonial frameworks of legibility (Canter and Jantzen, quoted in Chacón, *Indigenous Cosmolectics* 13). This tendency to see the world in terms of categories and essentialisms leads to distorted, too-easy black-and-white understandings of the world, and/or unintelligible contradictions. However, a campesino urbano way of being in the world is all of these things at once, neither/nor, and

---

<sup>5</sup> Literally, this translates as poor and humble. In Spanish, these words are closely related with a stereotype of campesinos.

<sup>6</sup> Translates approximately as “male chauvinist.” I am almost universally assumed to be a *machista* because I am a Mexican man. I do not deny that I was raised with *machismo* and that I probably carry it inside me unconsciously, although I try not to uphold the values of *machismo* in the way I live my life. Leanne Betasamosake Simpson (Michi Saagiig Nishnaabeg) writes about the replication of gender violence in indigenous communities: “Gender violence is part of a long history of white men working strategically and persistently to make allies out of straight cisgendered Indigenous men, with clear rewards for those who come into white masculinity imbued with heteropatriarchy and violence, in order to infiltrate our communities and nations with heteropatriarchy and then to replicate it through the generations” (*As We Have* 52).

<sup>7</sup> I refer to feminization here as the experience of an undocumented person in the United States, and especially in the workplace, where my body is not under my own control. That is not to say that this is what I think femininity *should* mean, but it is one of the ways gendered power works in Western societies.

<sup>8</sup> The word *indio* is used derogatively in México, similar to the n-word in English. Although it can also be used as a playful insult between friends and family, it still carries weight. When I was about 12 years old, I told my dad that he was “un indio pata rajada, bajado del cerro a tamborazos” (in English, *an Indian with cracked feet, descended from the hills with drumbeats*), which is a phrase people used to say in my rancho. He beat me up for this.

<sup>9</sup> The word *indigenous* is also problematic, because it flattens all people of Ixachilan into one single category defined in opposition to Europeans. However, it is a useful word in the context of this paper, where I try to follow lines of thought originating from across Ixachilan, so I will keep using the word here.

also other/more.<sup>10</sup> Escaping the trap of binary thinking is part of the project of becoming unknowable<sup>11</sup> and refusing Western colonial frameworks as a way of understanding and experiencing the world.

This project is a des-archivo, or an un-archive, because it is an attempt to un-do what the archives of Western colonialism have done – the epistemological violence of “making ‘knowable,’ the unknown” where the “definitions belong to the definers – not the defined” (Benally, *Unknowable* 6, Toni Morrison quoted in Watego 34). It is a gathering together of art works that do not strive to represent or define a body of knowledge but instead are themselves embodied and interconnected processes of thinking. Some of the other important ideas influencing this project include: how Western concepts of “time” have been important to imposing modernity/coloniality onto the land and people of Ixachilan<sup>12</sup>; how “free-floating” knowledge can never fully obscure knowledge that flows through and is grounded in the land<sup>13</sup>; how doing work allows us to see the work that has been done to make things the way they are<sup>14</sup>; the projects of radical resurgence and land as pedagogy<sup>15</sup>; and multiple philosophies and practices of indigenous refusal.<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> I owe thanks to Prof. Gloria Chacón (Maya Ch'orti' and campesino origin) for directing me to the concept of *kab'awil* which she describes in her book as a Mesoamerican civilization concept, that is “in conversation with the cosmos and society” and defined as “a vision that duplicates” (*Indigenous Cosmolectics* 13). She also summarizes the work of indigenous scholars who describe *kab'awil* as having “multiple dimensions” and as “a theory of knowledge that is recognized as an inclusive logic... [that] moves us beyond dualisms or opposites that impede access to a totality” (*Indigenous Cosmolectics* 16).

<sup>11</sup> From thinker/writer/musician/activist Klee Benally (Diné): “In its mapping of existence, colonialism dispossess all life. Its first discreet violence is discovery, the brutal act of making ‘knowable,’ the unknown” (*Unknowable* 6).

<sup>12</sup> Credit to Walter Mignolo (Argentinean, US).

<sup>13</sup> Credit to Brian Yazzie Burkhart (Cherokee).

<sup>14</sup> Credit to Sara Ahmed (UK-based feminist queer scholar of color).

<sup>15</sup> Credit to Leanne Betasamosake Simpson (Michi Saagiig Nishnaabeg).

<sup>16</sup> Credit to Audra Simpson (Kahnawake Mohawk), Chelsea Watego (Munanjahli, South Sea Islander), and the EZLN (which includes Tzotzil, Tzeltal, Chole, Tojolabal, Zoque and other indigenous peoples from the Maya region of México).

In focusing on my own experiences as a campesino urbano and relating scholars' works to my experience, I am not attempting to center myself or universalize my experience. This way of "knowing" by speaking as the authoritative Western "I" – presuming to know everything, everywhere on behalf of all others – is a violence that I do not want to replicate. Instead, I try to follow what Chelsea Watego (Munanjahli, South Sea Islander) describes in this way, speaking from her experience as an Aboriginal person living under Australian colonialism: "I tell this story of the colony through my experience of it... grounded in... knowledge [that] is embodied and relational... I am not claiming the position of 'knower', rather I am showing how I came to know..." (Watego 4-5). For these reasons, I center campesino urbano relationality<sup>17</sup> and also follow the idea of Leanne Betasamosake Simpson (Michi Saagiig Nishnaabeg) that "how we engage in the world—the process—not only frames the outcome, it is the transformation... Engagement changes us because it constructs a different world within which we live" (*As We Have* 19-20). With these things in mind, this project follows the ethical idea that who I am, where I am, the context from which I engage, and how I engage – and the relationship between those things – are important and world-making<sup>18</sup> ideas. As a whole, this project is about making – making and materiality as the basis for how we engage in the world – and how we algorithm<sup>19</sup> the world through our making.

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<sup>17</sup> Thanks are owed to Prof. Katie Walkiewicz (Cherokee) who commented to me regarding a previous project about how an art installation can, through its elements, textures, and layers "demand" a certain relationality between the viewers and the work. She commented that I was asking the viewer "to think *through* [my] relations, asking them to think in relation to [myself] and [my] relations." Her naming of what I was attempting to do has been an important insight for me.

<sup>18</sup> Philosopher V.F. Cordova (Jicarilla Apache) suggests that in indigenous worlds, as opposed to Western ways of thinking, there is no distinction between aesthetics and ethics; an artist, as a kind of maker/thinker and as someone who assists with creating the world through their making, has a responsibility to their community and has the potential to bring good or harm into the world ("Ethics" 251, 253-254). The artist also has the potential to offer art as a kind of medicine.

<sup>19</sup> Credit to L. B. Simpson for the idea of how the world is algorithmed. She says, "our practices code and reveal knowledge, and our knowledge codes and reveals practices" (*As We Have* 22). She proposes "story as algorithm, as coded processes that generate solutions to the problems of occupation and erasure and to life on earth" (*As We Have* 34). Building from this, I also propose making – the physical making and the meaning embedded in the things made – as algorithm.



The following text will walk through the thirteen artworks that make up *El Des-Archivo del Campesino Urbano / The Un-Archive of the Urban Campesino*.

CHAPTER 1: MICA CHUECA

*Mica Chueca / Fake Green Card: Evidence of the Illegality of the System*, 2021. Oil on reclaimed wood that came from the carpentry woodshop where I used to work as an undocumented worker. The painting is an oversized reproduction of a fake green card, the first one that I purchased in order to work in the United States.



Figure 1.1: *Mica chueca / Fake Green Card: Evidence of the Illegality of the System* (front and back), 2021.

I have used several micas chuecas<sup>20</sup> over the years<sup>21</sup> before I was finally able to legalize my immigration status at age thirty-five. These fake<sup>22</sup> work documents are a necessary part of surviving as an undocumented person in the United States because we are unable to work without it. This painting shows the first mica chueca that I purchased in Santa Ana, CA for about \$100 when I was seventeen years old, in order to begin working at Outback Steakhouse as a cook at the salad station. I chose to reproduce this card in particular<sup>23</sup> because of all the micas chuecas I have had this one looks especially

<sup>20</sup> The phrase *mica chueca* is slang for a fake visa ID, or green card, which is the document you need to be able to work legally as an immigrant in the United States. In slang, *mica* refers to the shiny plastic lamination of the card, and *chueca* means crooked.

<sup>21</sup> Micas chuecas have expiration dates, as part of simulating authenticity. This means you must purchase new ones as the older ones expire. Also, sometimes you need to acquire a better mica chueca, if an employer asks for your documents again if they are going through an audit, or if you are going to try to get a better job that needs a better mica chueca.

<sup>22</sup> Art historian Esther Pasztor, speaking of the practice of counterfeiting of Aztec artifacts in México, she says, “the manufacture of fakes goes back to the sixteenth century, when a Tlatelolco barrio was famous for souvenirs made for the conquerors” (215).

<sup>23</sup> Although I was unaware of the work of artist Hung Liu (Chinese, US) at the time of painting my own mica chueca, I have since learned of her 1988 painting of her (real) green card. This painting was part of an exhibition

fake.<sup>24</sup> Although the photo on the card is of me, the fingerprint is not mine, the signature is not mine, and the birthdate is wrong. Most people who have seen this card agree that it does not look “real,” but yet it got me the job I needed at the time.<sup>25</sup> In fact, this card got me a job when there was no “real” document in existence that could have done so.



Figure 1.2: Photo of my original mica chueca (front and back).

in 2021 at the US National Portrait Gallery called “Hung Liu: Portraits of Promised Lands.” The online text from the exhibition reads: “With irony and humor, this painting of an oversized green card underscores the fluid politics of identity, particularly for immigrants. Liu claims her birth year as 1984, the year she arrived in the United States... Liu stressed her invented identity as a ‘resident alien,’ the label used for US green card holders.” You can view it here: [smartify.org/tours/hung-liu-portraits-of-promised-lands](https://www.smartify.org/tours/hung-liu-portraits-of-promised-lands).



Hung Liu, *Resident Alien*, 1988. Oil on canvas.

<sup>24</sup> Thanks are owed here to Prof. Amy Sara Carroll (US), whose concept of “undocumentation” and her class on the topic were very important to creating this work. In her book *REMEX: Toward an Art History of the NAFTA Era*, she talks about “a productively troubled relationship to the prefix ‘un-’ of the ‘undocumented’” (38).

<sup>25</sup> It’s interesting to think that the mica chueca shows an identity of “undocumented worker,” when that was probably the least interesting thing going on in my life at the time. At the same time that I was using this mica chueca to work in Outback, I was going to Santa Ana Community College and was also part of the street team to promote *rock en español* shows for JC Fandango in Anaheim, which was a well-known club where all the big bands would come to play. I was part of a wave of *rockeros* (almost all illegal migrants) that were having a moment in Southern California in the late 90s and early 2000s. We weren’t paid for being part of the street team (so I wasn’t technically “working” and didn’t need documents), but we got in free to see the bands and we got to go backstage with them. While working at JC Fandango, I was able to meet some of the most legendary *rock en español* stars, like Roco from Maldita Vecindad, Vicentico from Los Fabulosos Cadillacs, Víctimas del Doctor Cerebro, Panteón Rococo, and more. These were much more important aspects of my “identity” at the time than anything a mica chueca would cover.

It is interesting to consider the mica chueca in terms of binary thinking – the real-fake binary, but also the metonymic chains<sup>26</sup> of other binaries that go along with it. For example, “real” is associated with official/true/legal/citizen/American/documented/recognized/right/accepted, on one hand. While “fake” is associated with unauthorized/false/criminal/subject/foreigner/undocumented/unknown/wrong/rejected, on the other. Whichever side of the binary you are placed on, it’s a framework that has a power relationship built into it. But what is important to recognize is that a binary worldview, as a system of logic, is a technology – one which allows those on top to justify their power, and gaslights those who are on the bottom. There is always a “top” and a “bottom” in binary thinking, always a “winner” and a “loser,” a “thesis” and an “antithesis.” These types of imbalances created by binaries are a built-in feature of the system, so even if someone is not intentionally deploying power (#notallwhitepeople), they actually are. This is why I am interested in how simple labels, like that of “real” vs “fake,” actually hide layers, complications, power, relationships, etc.<sup>27</sup> Because if you are stuck in binary thinking, you will always fail to recognize that the scales are violently tilted and in a way that upholds the hegemony of the Western colonial project. As scholar Walter Mignolo (Argentinean, US) points out, “to classify is not only a naming of what is there but an epistemic classification and ordering

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<sup>26</sup> This idea of metonymic chains comes from the work of literary and cultural critic John Beverly (US), who talks about the “metonymic chain” of writing/ literature/ letrados/ creole elites/ city/ nation, and how looking at these chains shows the limits of liberal solidarity which is inherently caught in the civilization/barbarism binary even when it claims to be in solidarity with the subaltern (48, 59).

<sup>27</sup> There is a lot of hidden work behind these imbalances, as well. Ahmed writes about “how the reproduction of the same old bodies, doing the same old things, is a result of work rather than being something that ‘just happens’” (*What’s The Use* 168). For example, a potential employer who asks for my documents is “just following the law” to see if it is legal to hire me. Following the law requires very little work on the part of the employer, it’s just a formality. For a “legal” person trying to get a job, it’s also minimal work. The laws and the institutions behind them were created through generations of work, which granted them the power to ask for documents as if it were nothing and to produce those documents as if it were natural. But as an undocumented person without that history of laws and institutions on my side, it’s a lot of work and stress on my part if I have to produce documents that are simply not available to me. With some trouble and risk, I do produce documents but they are the wrong ones. They are not “real.”

of the world” (46). He goes on to say that *Homo sapiens europaeus*,<sup>28</sup> in the process of classifying, found out “that he himself was the master of knowledge and was on top of the chain of being” (46). Thus, a way of thinking becomes a way to impose a power structure and a way to deploy power.

It should also be noted that borders are an integral part of binary thinking. This includes nation-state borders, and it includes the US-México border, which is effectively a sorting ground. On one side you are a citizen, the other foreigner.<sup>29</sup> On one side you are legal, the other illegal. The fact that a person, remaining themselves, can so easily move<sup>30</sup> from one category to its opposite, simply by crossing an imaginary line, emphasizes that the categories and the border itself are not real things but ideas, deeply rooted in Western colonial binary thinking and created to serve national and racial regimes of power.<sup>31</sup> If then, in Western colonial eyes, when I am standing in the so-called US territory I am a non-

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<sup>28</sup> This is one of the four human species, according to the 18<sup>th</sup>-century Swedish naturalist Carl Linnaeus, known as “the father of modern taxonomy” for giving the world the binomial naming system.

<sup>29</sup> I am speaking as a Mexican citizen. There are many people that came from other nations, as well, attempting to cross the US-Mexican border – including people from regions in Central América, South América, the Caribbean, Africa, and Asia. For them, they have become “foreigner” already when they left their home countries, before they ever arrived at this particular border.

<sup>30</sup> This is of course in contrast to the physical crossing of border lines, which can be extremely difficult and risky. At nine years old, I crossed the US-México border by crossing a river canal, carried on the shoulders of the *coyote*, and then all of us running across the 5 freeway. This was in the 1990s, and things have become a lot riskier and more dangerous since then.

<sup>31</sup> Anti-colonial scholar Yannick Giovanni Marshall (US-based Pan-Africanist) names this as an apartheid regime: “What we are speaking about when we’re speaking about the undocumented is the native quarter, is those people who exist within the confines of the invented colony in order to exploit them, exploit their labor, to subject them to extra police violence, to rip them away from health care, etc. All these things are typical of apartheid and so ‘undocumented’ is probably the nicest way to be able to describe the victims of apartheid” (“Illegal Education” 10:51).

indigenous<sup>32</sup> illegal Mexican<sup>33</sup> foreigner, this is more of a description of my conditions of oppression, imposed through colonial structures and language, rather than any kind of “identity.”

So, what happens if you make a “fake” document that somehow challenges the terms of “real” in the first place? In her book *Mohawk Interruptus: Political Life Across the Borders of Settler States*, Audra Simpson (Kahnawake Mohawk) tells the story of how the Iroquois Nationals Lacrosse Team attempted to use their own passports signed and issued by the chiefs of the Iroquois Confederacy to travel to the 2010 World Lacrosse League Championship tournaments in England and Israel.<sup>34</sup> However, the team was prevented from traveling because their Iroquois passports – which were neither “American” or “Canadian” – were issued by a domestic dependent nation.<sup>35</sup> In addition to sovereignty issues, it was also said that because the passports were handwritten, the lack of “security measures” made it so that the authorities could not truly verify whether this was a “real” identification, thus

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<sup>32</sup> As a de-indigenized indigenous person, I would not be recognized as indigenous by either the US or Mexican governments. On the Mexican side, this is part of the nation-building myth of *mestizaje*, which through ideology and policy cut off many communities from their indigenous roots. On the US side, indigeneity is narrowly defined through the politics of federal recognition, which makes it easier to maintain the myth of “the disappearing Indian.” Excluded from the definition of indigeneity by both governments, María Josefina Saldaña-Portillo (Latinx) says, Mexicans are “indigenous people made foreign” (239).

<sup>33</sup> Both the nations of the United States and México are imperial colonial projects, accomplished through land theft, genocide, and enslavement, legitimized by the so-called *Doctrine of Discovery*. The US-México border created by the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo in 1848 separated communities that were formerly connected over thousands of years. In her book *Not a Nation of Immigrants*, historian Roxanne Dunbar-Ortiz (US) goes through the ancient connections between what is now central México and what is now the United States, including migrations, roads, and trade routes. She also points out that “Mexican hating [in the United States] is a form of Indian hating” (231).

<sup>34</sup> A news article on the incident is available at [www.cbc.ca/news/indigenous/iroquois-nationals-face-travel-delays-to-world-lacrosse-championship-over-passport-issues-1.4740828](http://www.cbc.ca/news/indigenous/iroquois-nationals-face-travel-delays-to-world-lacrosse-championship-over-passport-issues-1.4740828).

<sup>35</sup> These are nations underneath other nations, which are not allowed full sovereignty equivalent to foreign nations. Dunbar-Ortiz notes that the phrase “domestic dependent nations” comes from a US Supreme Court decision in 1823 that cites the Doctrine of Discovery, concluding that the original peoples of Ixachilan did not have title to their own lands because they had been “discovered” by Europeans; the same court case continues to be cited as recently as 2005 (33). Dunbar-Ortiz also points out that when Columbus Day is celebrated in the United States, the Doctrine of Discovery is being honored.

whether the person was really who they said they were.<sup>36</sup> A. Simpson calls the unrecognition of the Iroquois passports the “unfreedom” of limiting who can travel “properly” through land (181-182).<sup>37</sup> Instead of submitting to travel on either US or Canadian passports,<sup>38</sup> the team declined to play in the championships. Using this example, A. Simpson discusses two different possible responses of indigenous peoples to settler colonialism as *recognition vs refusal*. Recognition is usually seen as desirable in liberal inclusionary logic, but the Iroquois players refused recognition<sup>39</sup> – they declined to be “included” in either the American or Canadian nations. This is how the story of the Iroquois passports reveals the logic of citizenship (and its documents) as a dispossessing force. Recognition is only offered on the terms of the colonizer, which is tied up in logics that put the colonizer firmly in power. The colonizers set the terms of the game – and it’s possible that some might refuse to play.<sup>40</sup>

<sup>36</sup> A. Simpson describes being able to say who you are in relation to another as a form of sovereign authority: “I know you. I know who I am” (19).

<sup>37</sup> Artist Pilar Castillo (Belize, US) created the artwork *Passport* (2019), which is a hyper-realistic version of a US passport but with the images changed to highlight histories of US intervention in Central America, as well as other historical traumas caused by US imperialism in Ixachilan. She says of the piece, “This work is created as a response to the humanitarian crisis at the US Mexico border and the Central American ‘immigrant caravan’ being denied refuge and asylum.” The piece can be viewed at: [castlepillar.com/passport.html](http://castlepillar.com/passport.html).



Pilar Castro, *Passport*, digital print, 2019.

<sup>38</sup> Mohawk people live on both sides of the US-Canadian border.

<sup>39</sup> From Mignolo: “The anthropos can fight back and show that he or she is also human, claiming recognition. This is the path of assimilation, of being happy to be accepted in the palace of humanitas. By following this path, he or she admits defeat, represses what he or she was, and embraces something that he or she was not” (90). Also, Marshall tweets, “To reify settlers’ imagined order, an order designed to reproduce colonialism, to orient your liberation around it, keep it within its parameters, place it within its narrative, its moral universe, its logic, is not dangerous —it is defeat” (@furtherblack).

<sup>40</sup> This type of refusal is what both A. Simpson and L. B. Simpson call “generative refusal.” L. B. Simpson writes, “refusal is an appropriate response to oppression, and within this context it is always generative; that is, it is always the living alternative” (*As We Have* 33). With *living* referring to that which generates more life.



**Figure 1.3:** An installation view of *Mica chueca / Fake Green Card: Evidence of the Illegality of the System, 2022*.

Recognition vs refusal is a useful story to think about, but it is also a binary, and the mica chueca is different. Instead of claiming sovereignty as the Iroquois passports do, micas chuecas imitate a sovereignty that is not their own. This might be seen as a trickster mechanism<sup>41</sup> that reveals something about the colonizer’s sovereignty. With no option to *refuse* to play the game, we can only cheat it. And in cheating it, the rules come into clearer focus as fictions of colonialism and capitalism. For example, the term “undocumented” itself seems to point to the lack of a document – a piece of paper<sup>42</sup> – as the legitimate reason why we are separated from our rights. It’s very obviously a cover story. This is not to

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<sup>41</sup> Philosopher Brian Yazzie Burkhart (Cherokee) says, “Tricksters are capable, in Indigenous story and history, of expressing the limits of existing knowledge paradigms and exposing the limits of those paradigms through creative and playful manifestations of knowing and meaning in locality. In this way, the trickster modality can undercut the coloniality and guardianship of Western academic philosophy as well as expose Western philosophy to itself” (*Indigenizing* xxv).

<sup>42</sup> In slang, citizenship documents are also sometimes referred to as papers or *papeles*. This term suggests an interchangeability of different kinds of papers. Marshall states, “I would use the status of a document, and the presence and the existence of undocumented people as evidence of the illegality of the colonial system and as evidence of the impossibility of a fairer country, or a fairer state” (“Illegal Education” 30:53).



say that these fictions do not have power over our lives.<sup>43</sup> As migrants when we cross the border into the United States,<sup>44</sup> we are immediately entangled into games of power, law and order, criminality, exploitation, etc.<sup>45</sup> But in our dealings with *coyotes* and *miqueros*,<sup>46</sup> who take it upon themselves to

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<sup>43</sup> My partner has a friend who was killed over a mica chueca. However, it's not always the extreme cases like this which shape our lives the most, although these things give us a lot of fear. Marshall also calls out deaths from poverty, sexual violence, depression, forced migration, and the law as "the violence of the everyday... Conditioned as we are by Hollywood and historical writing to recognize colonialism only through the sensational incident, it is difficult to recognize the violence that has been naturalized" ("There is No"). In addition, it's the way our kinships are targeted. With no valid visa, I was stuck in the United States and unable to return to México for twenty-four years. I also have siblings and other family stuck on both sides of the border, either in the United States or México, who are separated from and unable to see each other because we cannot travel legally across national borders. Even when we do secure proper documents that allow us to travel, long separations have caused profound damage to our family relationships which is not easily repaired.

<sup>44</sup> Illegal border crossings are not undertaken lightly because they are very costly and high risk. It's important to note that these costs and risks are not "natural." But when the border comes to be seen as natural or obvious, this danger that is caused by the colonial imposition of borders might *seem* natural. The deaths produced by the border are dislocated, invisibilized, or naturalized so that they do not seem to be at the hands of the settler state. This happens in the US Southwest, as part of the US Border Patrol's Prevention Through Deterrence policy where the desert is blamed for migrants' deaths. (See Jason De Leon's book *The Land of Open Graves: Living and Dying on the Migrant Trail* for a detailed discussion.) It was also recently reported that falls from the new, taller 30-foot-high border wall have become more frequent and deadly for migrants crossing that way: [www.latimes.com/california/story/2022-04-29/border-wall-injuries-deaths](http://www.latimes.com/california/story/2022-04-29/border-wall-injuries-deaths) .

<sup>45</sup> The *Transborder Immigrant Tool* (2007-ongoing) by the artist collective Electronic Disturbance Theater (US) was a project intended to make the crossing safer and easier for migrants by creating a cell phone app that provided "not only inspiration for survival [through poetry], but also information on food/water caches, security activities, and directions to potentially safer routes." This performance intervention included not only the app itself, but also public reactions and a government investigation. Ultimately, the app was not distributed to migrants because of the potential risks to migrants of possessing the app. An interview with Ricardo Dominguez from Electronic Disturbance Theater about the *Transborder Immigrant Tool* can be found here: [hyperallergic.com/54678/poetry-immigration-and-the-fbi-the-transborder-immigrant-tool/](http://hyperallergic.com/54678/poetry-immigration-and-the-fbi-the-transborder-immigrant-tool/).



Image of the *Transborder Immigrant Tool* in operation, directing user to a Water Station Inc water cache in the Anza Borrego Desert. Photo courtesy of Brett Stalbaum and Wikimedia Commons.

<sup>46</sup> People who smuggle people across the US-México border are known in slang as *coyotes*. *Miqueros* are people who make and sell micas chuecas. It is interesting that the coyote (the animal) is often seen as a trickster figure. The centzontle, or mockingbird, is also sometimes seen as a trickster figure because of its ability to imitate. It's should be noted that tricksters are neither good nor bad, but figures that upset order. What's important about them is that they teach us something through the disorder they cause.

authorize us to travel and to work, we can see the fiction of the nation more clearly. Unlike the Iroquois, we cannot refuse these games – in order to survive, we must play.<sup>47</sup> Thus we don't *refuse* but instead *disregard* US sovereignty – and live and imagine our lives in the everyday spaces of the margins. Just as they un-make us as citizens, we un-make them as authorities in the spaces where their sovereignty doesn't quite reach. It is an un-doing of colonial sovereignty – never complete or secure, in fact very unstable and vulnerable, but workable. In this way, with the disrupting help of tricksters and micas *chuecas*, *seguimos chambeando*.<sup>48</sup>

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<sup>47</sup> Undocumented people have been denied the terms of citizenship – not even given the chance to refuse it. In the refusal/recognition binary, most of us would not refuse. Many would take citizenship if it were offered because it would make things so much easier. Yet even with that small amount of recognition sometimes extended to us, we are still often un-assimilable.

<sup>48</sup> *Seguir chambeando* is slang that means to keep working, referring to working-class jobs. It is a very common phrase, almost a philosophy of life for migrants in the United States. It could refer to working in either the mainstream or underground economies. Although there is a sense of resignation to *seguir chambeando*, as we are condemned to keep working probably for the rest of our lives, there is also a pride and a celebration at being able to *chambear*, because work is survival. Most *campesino urbano* migrants have come to the United States for the exact reason *que no tenían chamba* (they didn't have work) in México. For an example of the celebration of *seguir chambeando*, see the very popular song “Sigo Chambeando” by Fuerza Regida. This unofficial music video of the song was filmed in Santa Ana, CA (Gabrielino/Tongva territory), where I live: [www.youtube.com/watch?v=eAAARKbo7IA](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=eAAARKbo7IA).

## CHAPTER 2. CODICES & UNBOOKS

Archives usually function as places for knowing or for making things knowable – usually<sup>49</sup> through books, documents, etc. An unarchive works against this, exposing and tangling up the rules for the narrative of the archive, how we “know” the archive and it’s “read,” how things are made knowable in the first place, and the possibilities of the unknowable. The mica chueca (see Chapter 1) challenges the archive by bringing up questions of what an “official” document or archive looks like, when what is supposed to be official is actually fake. At the same time, it also embeds the (un)document of the mica chueca into a different network of thought and relationships than it is usually viewed from. In a related way, the project of *El Des-Archivo* also contains a series of codices and unbooks.<sup>50</sup> The form of the codex echoes the codex-making practices of Ixachilan, an indigenous book/record form which started centuries before the invasion of the Spaniards.<sup>51</sup> However, almost all of the ancient codices were burned by the invaders during the 1500s. *Unbooks* are a form that I have created to be books<sup>52</sup> that are in some way

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<sup>49</sup> Ahmed regarding the use of the word *usual*: “The usual is a field of expectations that derives its contours from past experience. The usual is the structural in temporal form” (*What’s the Use* 164).

<sup>50</sup> I’ve been making unbooks and codices as part of my artistic practice for about fifteen years now. Perhaps the impulse to document in this way is related to not having documents. When I first migrated to the United States at nine years old, I came with only a backpack of things and a good pair of shoes. I have only one photograph from my childhood in México, which is a school photo. In a way, my family was profoundly undocumented – not only did we lack the “proper” documentation to be in the United States, but we were also lacking all kinds of documentation of our lives.

<sup>51</sup> Writing and literatures in Ixachilan go back thousands of years, and that lineage continues. It has been widely assumed that indigenous literature in Ixachilan ended with the imposition of the colonial system, but codices and numerous other texts continued to be produced after the Spanish invasion – sometimes under the supervision of the colonizing Spaniards, sometimes not – using the Latin alphabet to produce texts in Nahuatl, Maya, Zapotec, and other languages. In answer to the question “Can the subaltern write?” Chacón responds, “The answer is a sonorous affirmative in multiple languages and their regional varieties” (*Indigenous Cosmolectics* 39). I do not know the language of my ancestors, but I am in agreement with Anne Waters who writes of not knowing her ancestors’ Seminole language: “Although many of us do not know our language, we know that it has survived, and that in it we can find a mirror to our worldview that has been kept alive in and through us for generations” (166).

<sup>52</sup> In his well-known manifesto *The New Art of Making Books*, Ulises Carrión (Mexican) defines a book as “a space-time sequence” or “a sequence of moments.” I was first introduced to this manifesto in 2012 through poet Nicole Cecilia Delgado (Puerto Rican) who traveled to Santa Ana, CA to teach a group of artists and writers here about the *cartonera* bookmaking movement in Latin América, which found a lot of inspiration in this manifesto.

unreadable the way people usually read books for information. Instead, information is obscured, and not everything contained in them is available as knowable. In this particular project, the unbooks consist of a ball of paper combined with light, and a collage notebook that people can't actually touch and access, imitating unknowability through inaccessibility such as in museum and library archives. In both the codices and the unbooks, the contents also often circle back, employing non-linear and overlapping (un)narratives. In these ways, they express a refusal, or an imitation, or even an incapability,<sup>53</sup> of performing as an archive. Instead, the codices and unbooks center making, materiality, and thinking with things as ways of making sense of the world of the campesino urbano.<sup>54</sup>

## PART 1: CODICES



**Figure 2.1:** *Ixachilan Pocket Codex* (front and back), 2022.

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Along with others, we established a cartonera bookmaking press in Santa Ana, called Cartonera Santanera. More information on the cartonera movement can be found here: [search.library.wisc.edu/digital/AEloisaCart](https://search.library.wisc.edu/digital/AEloisaCart).

<sup>53</sup> As historian Allison Margaret Bigelow (US) says, speaking of her own project of mining colonial archives for uncolonial histories, “We approach the archive, not for coherent stories with satisfying narrative arcs, but instead to embrace ‘awkward pairings’ that reveal ‘both the functioning and dis-functioning’ of dominant ideological frameworks. Such a project is not about archival recovery. Rather, it acknowledges... ‘the impossibility of recovery’” (325).

<sup>54</sup> L. B. Simpson writes that her people “didn’t rely on institutionality to hold the structure of life. We relied upon process that created networked relationship. Our intelligence system is a series of interconnected and overlapping algorithms... Networked because the modes of communication and interaction between beings occur in complex nonlinear forms, across time and space” (*As We Have* 23).

***Ixachilan Pocket Codex***, 2022. Collage, text in English and pictographs. Mini-codex created using images from the Codex Nuttall<sup>55</sup> and other clip art.<sup>56</sup> The codex introduces alternative vocabulary for describing time, ways of knowing, and the border. The mini-codex is reproduced on a single page folded into an accordion-style book. Copies given away at thesis show.

***Floritinta Codex***, 2022. Deconstructed book “Wall Chart of World History,” photographic prints of illustrations done using pencil and cochinita, prints of greeting card collages, dried flowers, and stitching with embroidery thread.

The making of this book had a lot to do with the unmaking of the original book, titled *The Wall Chart of World History*. Before I took it apart, the *Wall Chart* was an accordion-style book showing a linear timeline of what claimed to be the history of the world, although it only showed events from Europe and Asia and all through a Christian lens starting with Adam and Eve. I replaced the previous content of the book with a remixing and reworking of some of my own artistic works – erasing and replacing the timeline which had itself enacted such a huge project of erasure.<sup>57</sup> I decided that replacing

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<sup>55</sup> The so-called “Codex Nuttall” was probably produced in the 1300s in the Mixtec region of Ixachilan and was sent to Spain in the 1500s. The codex was named after Zelia Nuttall, an American anthropologist who “discovered” the codex among the private collection of an English aristocrat. The codex was donated to the British Museum in 1917, where it still resides. It’s a mystery how the codex got to be in England exactly, but it’s clear that it was a result of violence, imperialism, and basic questions about who “owns” something. México has recently been attempting to reclaim objects looted during Spain’s conquest: [news.artnet.com/art-world/mexico-repatriate-pre-columbian-heritage-2066589](https://news.artnet.com/art-world/mexico-repatriate-pre-columbian-heritage-2066589). However, it should be noted that México’s attempts to re-claim indigenous artifacts is also an appropriation on behalf of its own nation-building project. Interestingly, an anthropology student of Nuttall’s was Manuel Gamio, who would go on to become very influential in post-1910 Revolution México – a major project of his was advising on policies to incorporate indigenous peoples into the fabric of the Mexican nation.

<sup>56</sup> The Mesoamerican codices can be reproduced as “clip art,” since they are considered to be in the public domain, highlighting intellectual property issues as another aspect of who “owns” or does not own something. The paisley print in the background of one side of the codex is also in the public domain, and it also has its own history of colonial appropriation; the pattern was originally of Persian origin but the British East India Company “introduced it to the world” in the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries. Gloria Chacón has written about these issues in the context of indigenous women’s weaving in Mesoamerica. She describes the women of the National Movement of Mayan Weavers in Guatemala as asserting “that their works are ‘the books colonization couldn’t destroy’ and their designs a continuity of ancestral knowledge that occupation could not erase” (“Material Culture” 51).

<sup>57</sup> The artist Enrique Chagoya (México, US) is well-known for his artistic codices, which use what he calls “reverse anthropology” – the imaginative retelling of various histories from the point of view of the defeated. He said of

the “history” of “the World” with my own personal creations was not necessarily that different from what the *Wall Chart* itself was doing. On one side of the reconstructed codex, the photographic prints show images from a previous codex where I used cochinitilla from my front yard as a natural pigment. On the other side, the prints of the greeting card collages are reproductions from a project I did, along with a collaborator José Luís Gallo, which involved flower vendors in Santa Ana. The dried flowers in the codex were bought from the flower vendors during that project.



**Figure 2.2:** *Floritinta Codex* (front and back), 2022.

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making codices: “I decided that as an artist I have the right to make my own construction of history, not necessarily ideological but by using artistic license to construct a narrative, with humor and a more contemporary feel, that is different from the dominant history. I began to do my codices based on the history I learnt and I pretended to be an indigenous artist who traveled through time making codices and creating similar visual language.”



Enrique Chagoya, *The Ghost of Liberty*, 2004. Color lithograph. This codex can be viewed online at: [americanart.si.edu/artwork/ghost-liberty-85572](http://americanart.si.edu/artwork/ghost-liberty-85572).

## SOME NOTES ON “TIME” & “THE FUTURE”

Prompted by the now-deconstructed “Wall Chart of World History,” I would like to use this space to discuss linear time. The imposition of linear time is closely related to binary classification, as a similar kind of epistemic violence. By organizing people and things along a progressive timeline, hierarchical judgements can be imposed as natural or obvious. Those further along in the linear evolution are supposedly superior to those supposedly left behind – and in this framework, all are oriented toward the same end goal of “modernity.”<sup>58</sup> It is the demand that everyone everywhere is supposed to be on the same universal timeline that weaponizes “time” so that it becomes a cornerstone of coloniality.<sup>59</sup> From there, it’s easy to turn this type of time-based linear thinking into hierarchical binary thinking. For example: modern vs. primitive or traditional; future vs. past; forward vs. backward; developed vs. developing; “there” vs. not-there-yet.<sup>60</sup> These types of time-based judgements are so embedded in the Western culture surrounding us that we tend to see them as neutral and stating a simple truth, without recognizing that they are all based on standing in a certain place and measuring from a certain point of view – and they all have connotations of hierarchy and inevitability. And it is the sense of inevitability that goes with them that is maybe the most powerful part of it all.

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<sup>58</sup> Mignolo emphasizes that it is not only the colonization of space – which is what we usually think of when thinking about colonization – but also the colonization of multiple temporalities into universal “time” that is foundational for the Western modern world to exist. He also notes that Western coloniality presents itself as not only the correct and justified option, but also as the *only* option. Other ways of being and thinking are dismissed as invalid.

<sup>59</sup> Benally notes the violence of this: “[Colonization] has shaped time into the most exquisite of weapons, obliterating memories, killing cycles... It is authoritarian temporality” (*Unknowable 3*).

<sup>60</sup> As a campesino urbano, the descriptions “backward,” “developing,” and “not-there-yet” are phrases that have had too much power in shaping my life. My family are considered “backward” campesinos. In the educational system, I have always been made to feel less-than because somehow my intelligence was always considered to be “developing” as I learned English. As an artist, “not-there-yet” has been used for gatekeeping, when in fact – using this phrase after Tommy Orange (Cheyenne, Arapaho) – “there is no there there.”

An archive exists within these ideas of “time”; on the other hand, an un-archive does its best to unwork<sup>61</sup> “time.” This is because “time” is what provides the narrative continuity to the archive and to “History,” which gives futurity to certain people and ends it for others.<sup>62</sup> Many of us have always lived in states of precarity and uncertainty, where a “Future” is available for some and not for others.<sup>63</sup> The “Future” is not neutral. It is based on Eurocentric visions of linear “progress,” usually referring to promises of technology that will save us from ourselves and dreams of social inclusion that will gradually realize the liberal utopia of multicultural equality. Speaking as a campesino urbano, most of us have a sense that this is a fantasy – a hyper-advertised dream, something to be consumed. And yet, even for those of us who are not really included in the dream – and know it – the fantasies of technology and inclusion are attractive. Overwhelmed by the omnipresence and force of these narratives, many people

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<sup>61</sup> Thank you to Clara López Menéndez (Spain, US), my teacher at CalArts, who introduced me to the idea of unwork, which for her was initially inspired by the *SCUM Manifesto* by Valerie Solanas (US). López Menéndez writes of her 2016-2017 project on unwork: “[Unwork] calls for women’s active and systematic dismantling of the patriarchal labor force by disobeying its laws and destroying its infrastructures... while also acknowledging the piecemeal and ongoing nature of this struggle against dominant ideologies and structural violence.” I feel these words on feminist unwork can easily apply to an unworking for the undocumented, as well.

<sup>62</sup> John Beverly notes that the Zapatistas, as part of their revolutionary actions in México in 1994, burned down the municipal archives where property records were kept. He points out that the Zapatistas viewed these written records as “the record of their legal conditions of propertylessness and exploitation”; in other words, it is not that they didn’t understand the archives that gave rise to the action, which has been suggested. They wanted to burn down the archives precisely because they understand their function (43). The Zapatistas recognized that even when we try to “read” the archive differently, we are not able to change the terms or the world to which it gives rise.

<sup>63</sup> There is a scene in the futuristic cyberpunk thriller *Sleep Dealer* (2008), a film written and directed by Alex Rivera (Peruvian American), where a father in México is standing with his son in their *milpa* (maize field). Water has become a completely corporate commodity in their region due to a dam project, and regular people must purchase their water at expensive prices. The family’s *milpa* is struggling. The son asks the father why they remain there in their town. The father responds by asking the son if he thinks that their future belongs to the past. The son laughs and says that’s impossible. The father replies that they *had* a future (past tense), and that the son is standing on it. He continues to say that when the corporations dammed the river, their future was cut off. The father and son don’t agree during this conversation. The father thinks his son has forgotten who he is, while the son wants to be elsewhere, doing other things. This scene perfectly captures the tensions and dynamics of the “Future” that only exists for certain people and in only one direction, as the next generations are supposed to assimilate into the “modern” world leaving older ways behind (5:25-6:30).



are becoming unable to consider other ways of thinking about the “Future” outside of these frameworks.

It is often proposed that imagining a different “Future”<sup>64</sup> is what is needed to counter coloniality; however, as Mignolo points out, “The future is bound to the chains of the past” (31). In other words, the terms of the “Future” are embedded in meanings that are already set by Western coloniality, and transcending this colonial history of the “Future” is not possible.<sup>65</sup> After 500 years of coloniality in Ixachilan, the “Future” has already come and gone many times over.<sup>66</sup> When the “Future” shows you what it is, believe it the first time.<sup>67</sup>

As you may have seen by now, when I was working on this project, there were certain words that kept coming up and evoking violent colonial histories, becoming very problematic for me.<sup>68</sup> This is

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<sup>64</sup> The artist James Luna (Luiseño, Puyukitchum, Ipai, and Mexican) created this work just before he died in 2018, an ironic take on imagining a different “Future.”



James Luna, *Make Amerika Red Again*, 2018. Mixed media.

<sup>65</sup> Burkhart makes the point that “concepts of coloniality (civilization, freedom, and so on)” cannot mean something outside of their colonial framework. He uses the example of “freedom,” mentioning the 2003 Iraq war as part of his example, saying, “What freedom and civilization mean for Iraqis and Indians is really Western freedom and the coloniality of power... [which means] to be forced into global free enterprise, to be controlled by global capitalism and the coloniality of power. The real meaning of being savage, uncivilized, unfree, and so on is then determined by Eurocentrism, but not in the sense of Eurocentric values and so on, but simply in *being European*” (*Indigenizing* 9). I’m suggesting that “the Future” is another such concept of coloniality.

<sup>66</sup> The group Indigenous Action makes this same point in their zine *Rethinking the Apocalypse: An Indigenous Anti-Futurist Manifesto*, saying, “We live the future of a past that is not our own... built upon genocide, enslavement, ecocide, and total ruination” (1).

<sup>67</sup> After a quote widely attributed to Maya Angelou: “When someone shows you who they are, believe them the first time.”

<sup>68</sup> Theorist Silvia Rivera Cusicanqui (Bolivian) suggests, “The possibility of a profound cultural reform in our society depends on the decolonization of our gestures and acts and *the language* with which we name the world” (66).

why I decided to create the *Ixachilan Pocket Codex* to introduce some alternative vocabulary, described in the table below.<sup>69</sup> Of course, not all colonial violence is contained in only these eight words and phrases<sup>70</sup>; I chose these words specifically for the context of working on this project. For the rest of this paper, when discussing the Western concept, I will use the usual word but in quotation marks to show that I am repeating the colonizer’s term for a purpose. When speaking about something else that is not quite named by the usual term, I will try to use some version of the alternative vocabulary.

**Table 2.1:** List of alternative vocabulary included in the *Ixachilan Pocket Codex*, with notes

Western concept	Instead, I will use...	Definitions & Notes
“The Americas”	Ixachilan	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Ixachilan is the Nahuatl word referring to the continents of the so-called “Americas.” I learned this term from David Vásquez, Nahuatl teacher.<sup>71</sup></li> <li>• Also sometimes called Abya Yala (Guna language) or Turtle Island.</li> </ul>
“To discover”	To find out about	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Although US people have mostly stopped talking about the “discovery” of Ixachilan by the colonizers – due to the multiculturalism of the 1990s – this word is still dropped into casual conversation about other things, usually in ways that are appropriative.<sup>72</sup></li> <li>• The phrase “to find out about” doesn’t deny others prior knowledge of the thing you have found out about or inappropriately claim it as somehow “yours.”</li> </ul>

<sup>69</sup> Thank you to Prof. Rubén Ortiz Torres for the conversation that led to the idea of creating an alternative vocabulary.

<sup>70</sup> Mignolo points out that Western concepts are “linguistically anchored” in the imperial languages (Italian, Spanish, Portuguese, German, French, and English) (125-126). However, I believe that we can still make creative use of the imperial languages we have been born into to achieve our own ends. Burkhart writes: “Indigenous philosophizing reads and speaks language, even the English language, in the manner of Indigenous languages: dynamic, multiple layers of meaning for every word” (*Indigenizing xxx*). Watego also makes the point that loss of language does not necessarily make us “less” indigenous – it makes us indigenous people who have been violently dispossessed of their language (among other things), but no less indigenous. She says, “It is quite something that [the colonizers] could still maintain the power to decide what it is to *be* Aboriginal, and the terms on which it is culturally sufficient enough for us to have our land returned” (34).

<sup>71</sup> Please see an obituary for David Vásquez here: [www.latimes.com/obituaries/story/2021-02-12/david-vazquez-aztec-language-teacher-santa-ana-dies](http://www.latimes.com/obituaries/story/2021-02-12/david-vazquez-aztec-language-teacher-santa-ana-dies). Sr. Vásquez also graciously translated children’s books into Nahuatl for a project through Cartonera Santanera that published and locally distributed bilingual children’s books by community authors in Spanish-Nahuatl and Spanish-Zapoteco.

<sup>72</sup> Benally defines appropriation as taking without consent, a useful definition (“Native America” 14:45).

**Table 2.1** continued

<p>“The Border” especially “The US- México Border”</p>	<p>A linear technology of power</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Borders are often viewed as natural phenomena and only questioned at great cost (i.e., war). In colonialist times, we usually think of them as fixed – either following natural landforms, such as the Río Grande, or falling “naturally” along ethnic lines. This type of “natural” thinking encourages us to forget that borders are the creations of nation-states.<sup>73</sup></li> <li>• Migrant rights activist Harsha Walia (Sikh, Inquilab) points out the technology of power aspect of borders: “Borders are not fixed lines or passive objects simply demarcating territory; borders are productive regimes both generated by and reproducing racialized social relations” (78).</li> </ul>
<p>“The Past”</p>	<p>the days already spun</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• “The Past” is usually associated with history, as a narrative of how we got to where we are now (with “how,” “we,” “where,” and “now” all subject to the colonizer’s interpretation).</li> <li>• “The days already spun” is meant to describe what went before, including a sense of making and accountability.</li> </ul>
<p>“The Future”</p>	<p>the days still to spin</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• As discussed, the “Future” only gives futurity to its chosen ones and not to others.</li> <li>• “The days still to spin” is meant to describe what’s to come, including a sense of making and an awareness of consequences.</li> <li>• Scholar and writer Daniel Heath Justice (Cherokee) gives his alternative formulation for the “Future” as: a continued “abiding in, with, and through the world” (79).</li> </ul>

<sup>73</sup> Drawing attention to the border as a made thing, artists Marcos “Erre” Ramirez and David Taylor completed Project DeLIMITations (2014), which marked the 1821 US-México border from Oregon to Texas – a border which no one ever marked when it was in effect (1821-1848). The artists placed forty-seven monuments placed along it, guerilla-style, while talking to people and documenting their work along the way. In an interview, Ramírez said: “From a Mexican point of view, there is a wound. You are taught in school that there is this territory that was lost. But we don’t have a scar from that wound. So that’s the thing for both of us — let’s mark the wound, let’s make the scar” (C. Miranda). In an echo of this language, Benally also names the border as a scar – “a scar on the earth that was carved in the blood of the people” (“A Scar”). I will talk about scars later in Chapter 3. An article describing the DeLIMITations project can be found here: [monumentlab.com/bulletin/confronting-borderlines-and-border-lies-marcos-ramirez-erre-and-david-taylors-delimitations](http://monumentlab.com/bulletin/confronting-borderlines-and-border-lies-marcos-ramirez-erre-and-david-taylors-delimitations).



Marcos “Erre” Ramírez and David Taylor, “Obelisk 03,”  
*Project DeLIMITations*, 2014.

Table 2.1 continued

<p>“Tradition”</p>	<p>as we have always done</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• “Tradition” is usually thought of as attached to old customs; old-fashioned. The “traditional” in art is usually viewed as craft, and not conceptual or modern.</li> <li>• The “traditional” is also a freezing in time of a people’s practices, tying them to a static temporality against which they can then be deemed “authentic” or not by the authority of the Western gaze.<sup>74</sup></li> <li>• The phrase “as we have always done” is after the title of Leanne Simpson’s book. She describes following the practices of her ancestors: “the process of returning to ourselves, a reengagement with the things we have left behind, a reemergence, an unfolding from the inside out” (17).</li> <li>• Justice describes “tradition” as “the full network of relations and practices [of our ancestors] that enabled health and self-determination” (85).</li> </ul>
<p>“Modern”</p>	<p>colonialist</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• “Modern” usually refers to “superior” ways of thinking/ doing under the domination of the current, colonial condition. The Eurowestern is always at the center of modernity, others are measured by how far behind they are.</li> <li>• Instead of the euphemism of “modern,” the word colonialist better names this way of thinking and acting.</li> </ul>
<p>“Time”</p>	<p>multiple temporalities</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The word “time” is more difficult to get away from because it is usually thought of as a universal, natural phenomena. However, it is actually an imposed way of thinking – especially linear time.</li> <li>• Mignolo names time as “a category of reckoning, not a category of experiencing; it is a category belonging to culture, not to nature” (150).</li> <li>• When possible, the phrase “multiple temporalities” can make room for other frameworks and experiences of “time,” which can vary according to who you are and where you stand.</li> </ul>

PART 2: THE UNBOOKS

**10-Year Unbook (Notebook & Box)**, 2007-2017. Notebook: lined notebook with collaged pages from found materials, created over a period of ten years. Box: wood from the carpentry shop, image transfer, hardware, handle received as a gift. Displayed under plexiglass.

<sup>74</sup> Scholar Mark Rifkin (US) points out that, from the Western point of view, indigenous people are asked to perform “an older and purer version of themselves” in order to be recognized as indigenous, and also that the ways that people change in response to changing circumstances can “become the basis for declaring that a people has ceased to exist as such” (6).



**Figure 2.3:** Selected pages from the *10-Year Unbook (Notebook)*, 2007-2017.

The notebook that started the *10-Year Unbook* was given to me by my mom, who found it in a trashcan. Going through trashcans to find recyclables for extra money is something we had done as a family since arriving in the United States. The materials for the collages in the book came from free magazines that I would find around me over the years. For seven of the ten years covered by the book, my job was in a woodshop, making office furniture for large institutions.<sup>75</sup> In fact, one page of the *10-Year Unbook* has an envelope which contains several micas chuecas that I used during this time – including the one used for my painting *Mica Chueca*. During the last three years covered by the notebook, I had quit my job, started working on getting my papers, and then during the last year started attending art school at CalArts. So you could say that the book itself documents crossing a border

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<sup>75</sup> Many of the contracts we worked on at the woodshop were to provide furniture for places like UCSD and other colleges or universities. When I came to UCSD, I was walking around campus and recognized some furniture pieces from my previous job. This is how I found out that some of the furniture that I had worked on as an undocumented worker was in use at the school. This was the subject of my UCSD First Year Review project, *La Sala de la Mesa Indocumentada / The Room of the Undocumented Table*, which is documented here: [sites.google.com/ucsd.edu/gradexhibitions/past-exhibitions/2020-first-year-reviews/isidro-p%C3%A9rez-garc%C3%ADa](https://sites.google.com/ucsd.edu/gradexhibitions/past-exhibitions/2020-first-year-reviews/isidro-p%C3%A9rez-garc%C3%ADa).

between undocumented and documented. This book is both art and artifact. It is produced out of my life as an undocumented person, and I have also produced it as art.



**Figure 2.4:** Installation view (detail) of my real mica chueca and other fake documents spilling out from the *10-Year Unbook (Notebook)*, 2022.

*10-Year Unbook (Microfilm Machine)*, 2021. Collage notebook preserved on black-and-white microfilm and available for viewers to look at using a 1968 3M 400M Microfilm Reader.

I purchased the microfilm reader from UCSD’s Surplus Sales as a decommissioned machine from the UCSD Library. I had the book converted into microfilm, which can only be done in black-and-white with no gray tones and in negative. The outdated technology<sup>76</sup> distorts the images of the original notebook’s pages, transforming it into something else, an unbook, which is difficult to decipher but is its own experience.

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<sup>76</sup> It was only by luck that I was able to find someone to repair this 1968 microfilm machine. I had taken it to a microfilm services shop in San Diego and was told that the machine was too old to repair. As I was reloading it in the car, I dropped the machine by accident – it’s very heavy. A man came out and helped me load the machine into the car, and it turned out that he was a retired microfilm repair person. What’s more, it turned out that he had worked on this exact machine previously, at least twenty years before, which he realized when he found his own (now-defunct) company’s sticker inside the machine.



Figure 2.5: Installation view of the *10-Year Unbook (Notebook)* & *10-Year Unbook (Microfilm Machine)*, 2022.

***Pelota Unbook: Un mundo donde quepan muchos mundos,***<sup>77</sup> 2021-2022. Paper mâché, tabletop lectern, book ends, tinted mirror tiles, video projection. With video projection mapping, two videos are projected onto a paper mâché ball using tinted mirrors<sup>78</sup> to wrap the ball in light.<sup>79</sup>

The layers of the ball<sup>80</sup> are made up of magazines and art and art history books, which were gifted to me by a friend.<sup>81</sup> The first projected video shows a series of cell phone photos, which document the hidden, inaccessible layers which were lost during the making as each new layer was added. There is no narrative of “history” or “art history” that gives logic to the sequence of images; instead, this was happenstance – the order of how the books were presented to me. A second video is projected onto the surface of the ball showing a scene where another friend, Eliz (@elizpiercings), is teaching me the basics of how to play ulamalitzli,<sup>82</sup> or the Mesoamerican ball game, which is a game Eliz plays as part of a team in the Tataviam territory (also known as the San Fernando Valley). We are using this same paper ball<sup>83</sup>

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<sup>77</sup> Credit to the EZLN for the phrase, “Un mundo donde quepan muchos mundos.”

<sup>78</sup> I use the tinted mirror tiles, which were surplus building materials, as a reference to polished obsidian, tezcacatl in Nahuatl, which was used for mirrors by the ancient Mexica and Maya peoples. We also often find obsidian in Hidalgo, and it is said that much of the obsidian that made the Mexica and Mayan mirrors came from our region. These mirrors had a spiritual purpose: “By gazing into a mirror's smoky depths, sorcerers traveled to the world of gods and ancestors” (Getty Research Institute).

<sup>79</sup> Thanks to UCSD Vis Arts Facilities Manager Lucas Coffin for the idea of using mirrors to wrap the projection mapping in this way.

<sup>80</sup> In choosing to make a ball, I was also influenced by a description of time by V.F. Cordova, as thought of by many indigenous peoples of Ixachilan, where she describes it as being not linear but instead like a ball, with each layer building upon the next, nothing being left behind but creating a foundation for what comes next (*How It Is* 118).

<sup>81</sup> It has been an important part of my artistic practice to pay attention to how materials and things come to me. E.g., how things arrive outside of the logic of commodification – gifted, found, found out about, etc. These books came from my friend, Adriana Martínez (@skinzzzz).

<sup>82</sup> Ulamalitzli is sometimes described as the precursor to and similar to soccer or fútbol, but the ball is struck with the hips instead of the feet. The ballgame has a history of approximately 3,500 years, and thousands of ball-courts have been located throughout Mesoamerica and the Southwest of the United States.

<sup>83</sup> Ulamalitzli is played with a solid rubber ball called ulama. The word we use in Spanish for rubber, *ule*, comes from the Nahuatl word olli meaning a piece of rubber. Rubber trees are indigenous to the Amazona region of Ixachilan, and the extraction of rubber has a violent colonial story to go with it, as well. The colonial days already spun are still very relevant to the days still to spin, apparent in this recent article regarding rubber trees, leaf



for our lesson/performance. Here, Eliz's knowledge is not contained in a book but passed on through relationship, conversation, and movement.



Figure 2.6: Installation view of the *Pelota Unbook: Un mundo donde quepan muchos mundos*, 2022.

#### SOME NOTES ON ART HISTORY

When a friend of mine showed up with a box of books as a gift, saying that I might find them useful, I decided that I needed to make use of the gift – which is how this project initially started.<sup>84</sup> Along with a few fashion-type magazines, the box largely contained art history and illustrated history and

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blight, and the global economy: [www.bbc.com/future/article/20210308-rubber-the-wonder-material-we-are-running-out-of](http://www.bbc.com/future/article/20210308-rubber-the-wonder-material-we-are-running-out-of).

<sup>84</sup> Several experiences with gifted materials have taught me to always try to honor a gift. For example, when I first entered UCSD, I had an important experience in this regard. During our Intro to Grad Studies class, we met with a librarian, and she very kindly donated some colored pens to our class. Later, for our class final show, I ended up using these pens to draw portraits of my classmates, and these were later displayed, alongside the pens. When the librarian came to see the show, she was very touched by the portraits and the pens, and she started crying. I was completely surprised, but she told me that these pens had been given to her by a friend who had asked her to give them to the art students – and that her friend had very recently passed away. I also felt very moved over this story that she told me, and this experience started me thinking about how things are never just things.

anthropology books. These are what make up the pages of the *Pelota Unbook*. Because the *Pelota Unbook* has this subject matter literally layered into it, I would like to also offer here a brief overview of “art history” as conceptualized by historian of Aztec art, Esther Pasztory (Hungarian, refugee to US territory), whose book *Thinking With Things*<sup>85</sup> was very influential to my understanding of the structures of the art world.



**Figure 2.7:** Selected images showing some of the hidden, inaccessible layers of the *Pelota Unbook*: *Un mundo donde quepan muchos mundos*, 2021-2022.

<sup>85</sup> Thanks to Prof. Elizabeth Newsome (US) for introducing me to the work of Esther Pasztory.

Pasztory explains how the field of art history arose in parallel with anthropology<sup>86</sup> and that the two fields of study actually defined each other from their beginnings in the late 18th- and early 19th-centuries (29). Whereas certain types of things might be easily recognized as “art” in a Western context, Pasztory asks why they were harder to define as such in non-Western contexts. As established in the mid-18th century by the German art historian Johann J. Winckelmann, “art” was part of the progression of art movements of “Western Civilization,” moving from Ancient Greece to Rome to the Enlightenment to Modern Art and so on.<sup>87</sup> Winckelmann applied categories of style to art history and he saw the height of art as naturalism emerging from abstraction, a view that continued to be widely accepted into the 20th century (Pasztory 29, 48). Much of the meaning in art, then, came from the idea that each art movement in this progressive series of art movements were linked together, imagined to be in a kind of

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<sup>86</sup> Artist James Luna often took on anthropology in his artwork, such as his well-known work *The Artifact Piece*, performed in 1987 at the San Diego Museum of Man. In this performance, he put his own body on display, along with some belongings such as his college diploma, his favorite music, and family photographs – all with museum labels explaining himself and these artifacts to viewers. Also see his piece *ISHI: The Archive Performance* (2016), which deals with the story of Ishi, an indigenous man from the northern coastal region of so-called California who in 1908 became the only surviving member of his tribe and ended up living the rest of his life in a museum on the UC Berkeley campus. Luna’s performance is documented here: [vimeo.com/313478878](https://vimeo.com/313478878).



James Luna, *The Artifact Piece*, 1987. Wood, metal, and Plexiglas vitrines, sand, text panels, and artist's possessions.



James Luna, *Sometimes I Get So Lonely (Ishi)*, 2011. Chromogenic print.

<sup>87</sup> The idea that “Western Civilization” is itself an unbroken intellectual genealogy originating in Ancient Greece is itself an invention of the Middle Ages. During that time, European scholars saw culture as “a civilizational inheritance” that was passed on from Ancient Greece to Rome, to Europe during the Renaissance, to Paris and London, and so on (Appiah). There’s also a more explicitly Christian version of “translatio studii” where the “light of learning” started earlier over Eden, to Babylon, to Jerusalem, and then to Ancient Greece. Western people saw the “light of learning” as always moving West – ideas which legitimized and contributed to the harm done in Ixachilan by the Doctrine of Discovery and Manifest Destiny.

continuing conversation. Anthropological “artifacts” didn’t fit into this conversation,<sup>88</sup> even though they were playing an important role in defining the conversation – at first, as the “other” that the West defined itself against and then later as the “other” that the West gained inspiration and renewal from. In addition, Pasztory discusses how many of the characteristics of “art” were defined during this era:

- the freezing in “time” of non-Western art while Western art continued (and continues) to develop (54);
- art as a sign of the “divine” or as what separates humans from animals, which has transformed into the myth of artistic genius who embodies what it means to be human (189-190);
- the unfolding of artistic genealogies (or linked series) and needing to be educated into this “hidden text” of various art movements in order to properly enjoy art as elites do (81, 93);
- the aesthetic attitude of detachment, with objects consciously worshipped for their formal (visual) qualities (80); and
- how the world becomes available to the Western artists through appropriation (123).

In just this list, you can see how social structures are embedded in these ideas about “art” – a Western way of thinking about things.

Pasztory also makes important points about the West’s own changing ideas of how they saw non-Western *things* before concepts of “art” and “anthropology” came to define them. Speaking of so-called “primitive” or “village” art objects, she talks about how, for the people that made them, these things were functional – “in transacting, distorting, and explaining power relations; as embodiments of identity; and as repositories of memory” (57). When Westerners first encountered these types of

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<sup>88</sup> The labels “traditional” or “folkloric” get applied to art that falls into this “anthropological” category, something which continues to happen. When I was interviewing to get into an MFA program, I several times had to answer questions that asked me to explain or defend why my artwork was not in fact “traditional” or “folkloric.” Thankfully, at the time I was taking a class at CalArts from Prof. Sara Mameni (Middle Eastern diaspora), called “Disorienting the Modern,” which helped give me the words to, not answer the question, but to question the question.

objects in other societies, the objects were often derided as diabolic<sup>89</sup> or crude.<sup>90</sup> Other times they were just seen as curiosities of no great importance.<sup>91</sup> When the conceptual frameworks of art history and anthropology started to dominate, this gave the West a way to identify and classify different cultures against different measures of “civilization.” Then in the 20th-century, when the “modern” world developed a nostalgia for “simpler” eras, this is when the art world started looking back at so-called “primitive” art for inspiration.<sup>92</sup> These types of shifts are often forgotten, but remembering serves to highlight that these ideas were never universal given concepts in the first place, even though they have come to be regarded that way.

Given this history, Pasztory suggests that the framework of aesthetics perhaps is not so useful, since it is really a measuring stick set up by the Western world during a particular temporality and from a particular point of view. Instead, she suggests that “art” might better be understood as a cognitive activity, a way of thinking with things. Seen this way, we can see that the *things* we call “art” are an embodied practice that “deal[s] with crucial issues of identity and relation to others and the cosmos, and it is definitely problem-solution oriented... Things are needed to think with in order to manage problems of cognitive dissonance... We make things visible so we can understand them” (Pasztory 21).

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<sup>89</sup> Before the concept of aesthetics came into use, Westerners saw non-Western objects mostly in religious terms – i.e., threatening to Christianity (Pasztory 191).

<sup>90</sup> Pasztory points out that “primitivism” is seen as a choice for Westerners, but as a given for non-Westerners. For example, Picasso’s choice to paint and draw in a “primitive” style could be celebrated by the West because it was a choice – and thus a great achievement. Whereas for the non-Western artist, primitivism would be seen as “merely an inadequate attempt at representation” (125).

<sup>91</sup> Things brought back by Europeans in the 16<sup>th</sup> century to Europe from Ixachilan were not seen as art. Objects made from gold and silver were usually melted down. Other things were seen as useless novelties with no value and were given to children as toys to play with. The Codex Borgia, for example, “was saved only after children had burned holes in it” (Pasztory 121).

<sup>92</sup> Pasztory describes how the world becomes available to the Western artist, not only as inspiration but also to be classified into a Western epistemology: “The art of the whole world is accessible not only in reality, through travel, books, and museums, but also conceptually, through comparative formal analysis in which all art styles can be described and distinctions drawn between them. Foreign works of art are appropriated through this discourse and incorporated into a global ‘modern’ tradition” (123).

This opens up very different and non-hierarchical ways of thinking about “art” – where a *thing* works as a piece of art because it is embedded within a specific network of relationality (theory, culture, histories, kinships, etc.) which allow those objects to function, to be powerful, on levels beyond that of simple visual aesthetic pleasure.

As I mentioned in a footnote in the Introduction (Note 18), philosopher V.F. Cordova (Jicarilla Apache) suggests that in indigenous worlds, as opposed to Western ways of thinking, there is no distinction between aesthetics and ethics: an artist, as a kind of maker/thinker and as someone who assists with creating the world through their making, has a responsibility to their community and has the potential to bring good or harm into the world (“Aesthetics” 251, 253-254). The artist also has the potential to offer art – or thinking with things – as a kind of medicine for their community. This is the conceptual framework that I strive to create within and be accountable to, as an artist and as a campesino urbano.

### CHAPTER 3: MAGUEYES

My family is originally from a rural area in Hidalgo, México, which is part of the original homelands of both Nahua and Hñá-Hñu (Otomí) peoples. My family are descendants of indigenous peoples, but we are de-indigenized in the sense that, although we know we belong to this region, we no longer know our indigenous language, customs, or specific lineages, although some indigenous ways of understanding and relating to the world may still survive in us through our everyday practices, in ways we don't recognize<sup>93</sup> – much of which is embodied, for us, by the maguey plant.<sup>94</sup>

In the region of the Huasteca Hidalguense, the maguey has a central role in our lives, containing an entire cosmology and way of life. The maguey has provided food, drink, and material for cloth, paper, rope, and even some types of shelter to the people of the region for thousands of years. For most people, however, the maguey is most known as the source of pulque. Pulque is a fermented alcoholic beverage, which is a very ancient precolonial practice which continues today. The Mexica goddess Mayahuel is closely associated with the maguey and with pulque, but the practices of pulque and the maguey predate the Mexica. The Hñá-Hñu – whose homelands include many parts of Hidalgo and who may have been the first inhabitants of the Valley of México – were also known as people of the maguey, and the Mayans were also known to grow magueyes and produce pulque.<sup>95</sup>

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<sup>93</sup> Mexican ethnologist Guillermo Bonfil Batalla (Mexican) refers to this as “México profundo” (or “deep Mexico”) in his well-known book by the same name. He is referring not only to the indigenous foundations of México, but also to the overlooked ways that México continues to *be* indigenous in daily life and in its character. His argument might be somewhat romanticized and rooted in the framing of the nation-state, but he is also not wrong.

<sup>94</sup> The maguey plant is also known as the agave.

<sup>95</sup> The artist behind Plan Acalli (whose work is referenced later in this section), Ehecatl Morales Valdelamar (Mexican Xochimilca), has opened a small *pulquería* (a place that sells pulque) in Xochimilco, México City, called Chinampulkes: [www.facebook.com/chinampulkes](http://www.facebook.com/chinampulkes). Pulquerías were popular gathering places for campesinos, beginning from the era of early colonial rule, and there were always tensions surrounding them with the authorities. Around the time of México's drive to “modernization” around the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the beer companies began a campaign to put pulquerías out of business, and they largely succeeded. There are very few pulquerías today. Also, rumors still go around about how the fermentation process for pulque is somehow “dirty,” which is the same untrue propaganda originally put out by the beer companies in the days already spun.

My own and my family's experience of indigeneity is fragmented,<sup>96</sup> something we are both connected to and disconnected to, with both good and bad inheritances – including generational traumas which have separated us from the practices of our ancestors.<sup>97</sup> However, when my family still lived in Hidalgo, we kept many food practices related to the maguey. We used the pencas<sup>98</sup> to cook barbacoa.<sup>99</sup> We harvested insects (chinicuilles and chicharras) from the pencas and roots for eating. We also made pulque, which my mom would sell in our rancho el Atorón. However, the way my family related to the maguey changed dramatically after we crossed the border into the United States. With no land of our own and no easy access to maguey plants, we almost lost our relationship to the plant. Even though magueyes grow plentifully in this region, almost all of them here are used for landscaping decoration only – in people's yards and on the sides of freeways. For a while, we tried to continue some of our maguey-based practices by making barbacoas for special occasions. However, this would involve my dad stopping his truck on the side of the freeway at night so we could jump out to harvest pencas de maguey as fast as we could before someone might stop us.<sup>100</sup> Eventually, we stopped using the maguey

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<sup>96</sup> Writers Deborah Miranda (Ohlone-Costanoan Esselen) and Sara Ahmed both talk about fragmentation and the potential of repair. Miranda shares a letter she wrote to a friend where she expressed that she felt she didn't really *have* her indigenous inheritance: "I don't have an enrollment number, I don't have stories. All I have is my father's face, my grandmother's hair..." Her friend replied: "You do have stories... those stories your dad tells are connected with older stories, stories that might not have been passed down to you, but which existed and maybe even still exist in a world that isn't this one... It is a fragment in one way, but like the shard of a pot that can be restored" (*Bad Indians* 132). Ahmed quotes Alison Piepmeier, "The effort to mend, the striving, the work... to think about what it means to hold on, not by trying to restore something to what it was before it was broken, but to keep 'the broken pieces together'" (*What's the Use* 227).

<sup>97</sup> These traumas are both structural and personal. For Mexicans, Saldaña Portillo refers to "the ancestral dispossession of Mexicans and Indians from each other" (212). Ahmed writes: "To be traumatized is to hold a history in a body... We can inherit closed doors, a trauma can be inherited by being made inaccessible... a colonial as well as patriarchal history, of who is deemed entitled to what, of who is deemed entitled to whom" (*What's the Use* 190).

<sup>98</sup> A *penca* is the "leaf" of the maguey.

<sup>99</sup> Barbacoa is lamb meat, slow-cooked in an underground pit while wrapped in pencas de maguey.

<sup>100</sup> In the United States, in Santa Ana, my family would also keep a lamb in our side yard for in preparation for a barbacoa celebration, and as a kid I would be responsible for feeding it. I would find grass from the golf course



in the ways we used to, as it became too difficult to continue. Now, re-engaging with the maguey plant is a way for me to think about what we were forced to leave behind when we migrated – and the power dynamics of why – and to find pathways for reconnection to reclaim our campesino identities in our current urbano context.

Historian Allison Margaret Bigelow (US) in her book *Mining Language* describes how the colonial project changed the meaning of gold – and with it the meaning of indigenous bodies – in Ixachilan. She writes, “A series of legal institutions, economic practices, and intellectual frameworks enabled the transmutation of American gold into imperial money and the transformation of human beings into sources of wealth” (15). As a material, gold had been known and used in Ixachilan prior to the Spaniards’ invasion, but it was just a beautiful metal – not the force that it became, something that inspired violent acts of conquest, slavery, and dispossession. I think about the change in the meaning of the maguey in a similar way. It seems that a parallel counter series of processes involving “legal institutions, economic practices, and intellectual frameworks” also enabled the transmutation of formerly important things into nonimportant things – such the maguey plant. Where I’m from, the maguey was once the center of a cosmos and way of life; where I’m at now, it has become a plant on the side of the 5 freeway that doesn’t even enter people’s consciousness.<sup>101</sup> However, the maguey has not disappeared; we just need

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across the street to give to the lamb. This is another example of relating to the landscape differently – grass for feeding animals vs. grass for decorating a golf course.

<sup>101</sup> This is not to say that indigenous people from this region did not or do not use this plant. Artist Gerald Clarke Jr. (Cahuilla) has been making a series of paintings featuring images of indigenous plant important to his people. The painting *Amul* (2012) is a maguey plant, which is called *amul* in the Cahuilla language. This painting, along with other works, were recently on view for the show “Land as Kin” (2020): [landaskin.org/gerald-clarke](http://landaskin.org/gerald-clarke).

to work on remembering, re-engaging with the “living biocultural archive” that exists within our kinship with the maguey.<sup>102</sup> The magueyes are themselves types of unbooks, and more.

## THE MAGUEY ARTWORKS

***Grabé en la penca del maguey / I carved on a maguey leaf***, 2020-2021. Engravings on maguey leaves.

This is a series of 13 carved maguey leaves (or *penca*s), all taken from suburban California yards, and carved using the *púa* (point) of the maguey leaf.



Gerald Clarke, Jr. *Amul*, 2020. Acylic painting on canvas.

<sup>102</sup> Similarly, the *chinampa* has also contained a cosmos and way of life for the people of Xochimilco. Chinampas are the floating gardens used on lakes in Mesoamerican agriculture. The artist collective Plan Acalli (Mexican Xochimilcas), works “para reconectar con el universo chinampero” (to reconnect with the chinampero universe). Along with other collaborators, they recently presented the project of the *Archivo Biocultural Vivo* (Living Biocultural Archive) (2021-2022) which had as its premise that “archives” should and do exist in the collective memories of communities and their biocultural relationships. Over several weeks of programs and exchanges, the project was an attempt to reconfigure the archive, which was gradually unarchived from institutional spaces to travel and disperse through the public space, where the cultural knowledges were recontextualized and resignified.



A participant in the *Archivo Biocultural Vivo* (2022) working on the *media luna de la canoa* – the half moon arch for a canoe – which was being made collaboratively during the project.



**Figure 3.1:** Selected engraved maguery leaves from the series *Grabé en la penca de un maguery / I carved on a maguery leaf*, 2020-2021.

As the pencas have dried over time, they have turned brown and the carvings have scarred over.<sup>103</sup> The project takes its title from the popular 1976 Mexican film starring Vicente Fernández, *La ley del monte*, where Fernández sings about carving the name of his love onto *la penca de un maguey*.<sup>104</sup> Here, I am trying to re-imagine the act of carving on maguey leaves, thinking of it instead as a gesture of reconnection. Instead of romantic “love,” the engravings show iconography that symbolizes stories of migrant diaspora, creating lines of continuity between existences and relationships that were cut off through both colonialism and migration. In this way, the pencas become the pages in an unbook.

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<sup>103</sup> When I was creating these works, I was only aware of the vernacular practice of carving on pencas de maguey. For example, if you look at the magueyes at Balboa Park in San Diego, you will see them covered in markings. However, I recently saw that the artist Guadalupe Maravilla (US-based Salvadoreño) has also used this technique in his recent body of work *Luz y Fuerza* (2021-2022) which was on view at MOMA. In one of Maravilla’s sculptures, the marked and dried pencas make up the body of a Kulkulkan serpent figure. You can view images from the show here: [www.moma.org/calendar/galleries/5373](http://www.moma.org/calendar/galleries/5373).



Guadalupe Maravilla, *Circle serpent (serpiente circular)*, 2019. At the Museum of Modern Art.



Guadalupe Maravilla, *Circle serpent (serpiente circular)* (detail), 2019. At the Museum of Modern Art.

<sup>104</sup> You can view clips from the 1976 movie *La Ley del Monte*, with Vicente Fernández singing the song “Grabé en la penca de un maguey” here: [www.youtube.com/watch?v=4SAqr04nrLU](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4SAqr04nrLU).



Figure 3.2: *Máquina del des-tiempo / Untime Machine*, 2021.

***Máquina del des-tiempo / Untime Machine***, 2021. Engraved maguey leaves, ixtle (maguey fiber), reclaimed wood, tree branches, wire, beads, feathers, and sound element.

This sculpture was inspired by some of the *temazcales* that are still part of many indigenous people's practices, including throughout Mesoamerica and Native American from the US Southwest, typically referred to as sweat lodges.<sup>105</sup> My sculpture is inspired by these ceremonial places, but I am re-imagining a temazcal as an untime machine that might transport people to other temporalities.<sup>106</sup> The

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<sup>105</sup> Tamazcales can look very different, depending on what region they are from. They are often circular, but they don't have to be. In some regions, they are permanent buildings made of adobe or stone. Sometimes the structures are very temporary, and pencas de maguey might be layered over a wooden frame. No matter the construction, tamazcales are known as places of physical and spiritual healing.

<sup>106</sup> Artist Beatriz Cortez (El Salvador, US) is known for her series of sculptural time machines. As an example, *Tzolk'in* (2018) is a sculpture in two parts displayed as part of the *Made in LA* Biennial. She says of this work that it was "inspired by the ancient Maya 260-day calendar for agriculture, [and] the gears in this sculpture follow a

sculpture is covered with pencas de maguey, which are also engraved with a list of protest phrases: *Land back*, *BLM*, *Vivos los queremos*, *FTP*, *Chinga la migra*, and *Otro mundo es posible*, among others. There is a technological-looking button that when pressed plays the song “Máquina del tiempo” by Rockdrigo González, in which the lyrics ask “Lend me your time machine.”<sup>107</sup> This song commemorates my own rockero days already spun, as well as the 1985 México City Earthquake, a moment when “modernity” came crashing down in México.<sup>108</sup> The reason I say that the untime machine *might* transport people to other temporalities is because an untime machine does not work the way a linear time machine would.

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hypocycloid motion, marking time through a movement that is at once circular and linear.” You can view the work online here: [beatrizcortez.com/tzolk'in/](http://beatrizcortez.com/tzolk'in/).



Beatriz Cortez, *Tzolk'in*, 2018. Welded metal. Photo courtesy of The Hammer Museum.



Beatriz Cortez, *Tzolk'in* (Bowtie Project), 2018. Welded metal. Photo courtesy of Clockshop.

<sup>107</sup> You can listen to Rockdrigo’s song “Máquina del Tiempo” here: [www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZV0jq3mY4Fo](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZV0jq3mY4Fo). The sirens in the beginning of the video are the earthquake sirens which play over loudspeakers in México City to warn people when there is an earthquake. Some of the lyrics to Rodrigo González’s song “Máquina del tiempo” read:

Préstame tu máquina del tiempo  
pues siempre te veo muy feliz  
no seas egoísta, presta el cuento,  
para así poderlo compartir.

*Lend me your time machine  
I always see you very happy  
Don't be selfish, lend the story,  
so this way you can share it.*

Préstame tu máquina del tiempo  
que al cabo tu ni la vas a usar,  
sé que tienes miedo a disolverte  
y perder tu extraña identidad.

*Lend me your time machine  
that in the end you won't even use,  
I know you're afraid to dissolve  
and lose your strange identity.*

<sup>108</sup> Rockdrigo González died in this earthquake. The 1985 earthquake was a wakeup call for many Mexicans and it revealed the lie of modernity, because people saw and remember that many of the newer more modern buildings collapsed during the shaking of the earth, they remember being abandoned by the government authorities, and many people died during this disaster. The devastating shaking of the earthquake was also amplified by another project of modernity – filling in Lake Texcoco in order to build Mexico City over it.

It's not about imagining a "Future" or a "Past" that one can travel to; these "places" do not exist apart from our own making of them. Instead, it's about the way we experience different temporalities in different ways, all the time, with many different collisions and overlays.

***The Angry Maguey***, 2019-2020. Living maguey plant with engravings, originally from my front yard where passers-by interacted with the plant, now planted in an engraved tire as a *maceta* (flowerpot).<sup>109</sup>



**Figure 3.3:** *The Angry Maguey*, 2020.

<sup>109</sup> Artist Betsabée Romero (Mexican) is known for her works of carved tires, which are often very elaborate and deal with Mexican themes. In 2021, a series of her sculptures were installed outdoors along New York Avenue in Washington, DC: [nmwa.org/exhibitions/new-york-ave-sculpture-project-betsabee-romero/](https://nmwa.org/exhibitions/new-york-ave-sculpture-project-betsabee-romero/).



Betsabée Romero, *Huellas y cicatrices (Traces and scars)* (detail), 2018; Four tires with engraving and gold leaf and steel support.

For this project, I carved political messages on the pencas of a living, planted maguey, which was located in front of my house. I was carving these messages during the last year of the Trump presidency, and the environment was full of tension, especially in the neighborhood where I live. I named this piece *The Angry Maguey* because of this element of confrontation, and because it was important to me to find a way to express anger during this time.<sup>110</sup> It was very interesting to see how this project changed how people in my neighborhood related to the maguey. One incident was that a girl from the corner house, maybe 10 to 11 years old, actually flipped off the plant. Other people from the neighborhood would stop and stare at the plant. Another incident was that a group of White women from the neighborhood approached my partner about the plant, asking her if someone had vandalized our plant; they were very concerned.<sup>111</sup> Overall, it was very interesting to watch how these messages on the maguey made people notice it – a plant which they had never seemed to notice and had definitely never interacted with before. At some point, I also started adding images from precolonial texts to the pencas in order to add another layer to the political protest. When the time came to dig the plant out and plant it in a maceta, I decided to decorate the maceta with an image of Quetzalcoatl, referencing the Mexica story of Quetzalcoatl and Mayahuel (the goddess of the maguey), which is a love story.<sup>112</sup>

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<sup>110</sup> Ahmed writes: “Anger is visionary and the fear of anger, or the transformation of anger into silence, is a turning away from [the days yet to spin]... If anger pricks our skin, if it makes us shudder, sweat and tremble, then it might just shudder us into new ways of being; it might just enable us to inhabit a different kind of skin, even if that skin remains marked or scarred by that which we are against” (*The Cultural* 175).

<sup>111</sup> I was actually standing in the front yard as well at the time of this interaction, but the White women never noticed me. In fact, they almost pushed me to the side as they walked by. It seems like they thought I was just a *yardero* (gardener) working at the house. The conversation between my partner and the White women went like this:

White ladies: Um, did someone vandalize your plant?

My partner: Well, we don’t mind.

White ladies (after a short silence): That’s very big of you.

<sup>112</sup> A youtube recounting of the story of Mayahuel (in Spanish) can be seen and heard here: [www.youtube.com/watch?v=aCQuEUODct0](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=aCQuEUODct0).



*Campesino Urbano Video*, 2022. Compilation of videos that were recorded during the making of the *Des-Archivo* artworks. Designed in collaboration with José Luís Gallo, @elgallofilms.



Figure 3.4: Still images from the *Campesino Urbano Video*, 2022.

The purpose of this video is to add context to the artworks in the *Des-Archivo* and resist the kind of decontextualization that happens with finished artworks in the Western art world. The video clips include not only videos that show the making of the artworks, most of which took place in my back yard, but they also show cell phone videos that my brother Israel Mendoza sent me from Hidalgo, México.<sup>113</sup> When working on mixing the video clips, José Luís researched into the ancestral meanings of spiral shape, which has been another important concept informing the artworks.<sup>114</sup> The final sequence of the

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<sup>113</sup> My brother Israel is also a campesino urbano, but in the opposite sense. He is living in the campo, having returned from the city. He had been living here in California with us previously and is now back in Hidalgo.

<sup>114</sup> From theorist Silvia Rivera Cusicanqui (Bolivian): “There is no *post* or *pre* in this vision of history that is not linear or teleological but rather moves in cycles and spirals and sets out on a course without neglecting to return to the same point” (48).

videos move in a spiral sense, back and forth between regions and temporalities. José Luís said of this, “What’s here is there, what’s there is here.”

#### SOME NOTES ON WOUNDS AND SCARS

The campesino urbano was never meant to exist in the days still to spin but instead was meant to inevitably assimilate into the project of coloniality, or “modernity.” There is a history to this – or there are many histories to this, but here is one of them. Historian Kelly Lytle Hernández (African American) recounts how Mexican anthropologist Manuel Gamio, who was a prominent figure in advising the Mexican government after the Revolution of 1910, promoted the project of campesino immigration to the United States as laborers, not only for economic benefits to México in the form of remittances and political benefits in the form of relieved social pressure, but also as a path to “modernizing” the rural campesinos: “Emigrants left Mexico as provincial and backward peasants... but in the United States they received ‘injections of modern culture’” (Hernández 85-87). They were expected to return to México as “modern” subjects.<sup>115</sup> For non-migrating peoples, there were also indigenist policies implemented in México that similarly sought to “modernize” indigenous people so that they would join “*la gran familia Mexicana*.”<sup>116</sup> Hector Díaz-Polanco (Dominican) writes that these types of policies, usually tied to capitalism, “siempre supuso que el destino inevitable de los indios era atravesar por la puerta

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<sup>115</sup> For many Mexicans migrating illegally to the United States, the intention is usually to return. Many do, although many also become stuck in the United States for various reasons. As far as returning as “modernized” subjects, assimilation is never complete. You can take the *campesino* out of the *campo*, but you can’t take the *campo* out of the *campesino*.

<sup>116</sup> This phrase translates to “the big Mexican family,” which after the Revolution of 1910 referred to being accepted as a Mexican citizen. However, the phrase is also connected with José Vasconcelos (Mexican) who as Minister of Education called for “the incorporation of the Indian, still isolated, into the Mexican family.” Vasconcelos is most known for his ideas of “La Raza Cósmica,” which established *mestizaje* ideology (the “mixing” of races), which is anti-poor, anti-Black, anti-campesino, anti-Indigenous, and more. Through *mestizaje*, Vasconcelos wrote, “The Indian, by grafting onto the related race, would take the jump of millions of years that separate [him] from our times” (quoted in Manrique).

‘occidental’ hacia su disolución en la ‘cultura nacional’... podrán liberarse sólo a condición de dejar de ser indios” (*always assumed that the inevitable destiny of the Indians was to pass through the 'Western' gate towards their own dissolution into the 'national culture'... they will be able to free themselves only on the condition that they cease to be Indians*) (649-654). Thus, things like immigration, education, and urbanization are supposed to erase the figure of the campesino from the space of the colonial nation – leaving only “modern” citizens who identify primarily with the nation state.

The United States makes similar demands on campesino migrants, on both economic and ideological terms: as long as they provide cheap labor for the economy, stop producing things on their own,<sup>117</sup> participate in American Dream capitalism, and don’t become too visible or too troublesome, the nation is willing to make room for the migrants’ children who are, with each generation, getting upwardly-mobile jobs and becoming more and more “American.”<sup>118</sup> Further, as the campesino gradually integrates into the “modern” world of coloniality, its processes go to work on destroying – through generational exploitation, poverty, and dependence – the place where the campesino came from. With life in the *campo*<sup>119</sup> no longer sustainable, it leaves the campesino with little choice but to accept their

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<sup>117</sup> L. Simpson writes in *As We Have Always Done*, “Colonized life is so intensely about consumption that the idea of making is reserved for artists at best and hobbies at worst. Making is not seen as the material basis for experiencing and influencing the world.” (23). In a lecture she elaborates, “My ancestors woke up each morning and created an Anishnaabe world... They were makers. They got up each morning and they worked hard... Living as a creative act. Self-determination, consent, kindness, and freedom practiced daily in all our relations, practices replicated over, over, and over. Making as the material basis for experiencing and influencing the world” (“2020 CLC Kreisel Lecture”).

<sup>118</sup> Even my nieces who live in México are becoming more and more “American.” The process of Americanization isn’t necessarily limited to the United States. Citing Peter Hulme (UK), Jodi Byrd (Chickasaw) talks about the “perpetual siting of the United States as future, new” (5). Young people in the rancho are more and more turning to the United States to see their “future” – whether or not they actually travel there.

<sup>119</sup> The word *campo* refers to the countryside, which can include both agricultural fields as well as more natural rural areas. The word *campo* is the root of *campesino*. In the US, *campesino* is often understood to equal a fieldworker. In México a *campesino* might refer to a field worker, but it’s also much bigger than that; it generally refers to people from rural areas who sustain themselves through working the land.

own alienation from their roots and the inevitable disappearance of their way of life. The campesino urbano is a contradiction and a leftover who is not supposed to exist.

After carving on the maguey, the lines scar over. I want to include here a longer excerpt from a blog post by the writer Deborah Miranda (Ohlone-Costanoan Esselen), who thinks about scars in light of the experiences of indigenous peoples in California, and in relation to ideas from Sara Ahmed's 2004 book *The Cultural Politics of Emotion*. Miranda writes:

*Scars: I'm thinking about the ways Indigenous men's suffering and identity fragmentation became a part of who we are today, a remnant of missionization that, like many other scars, we cannot – and perhaps should not – erase.*

*"I want to suggest that we can rethink our relation to scars, including emotional and physical scars," Sara Ahmed writes. She reminds us that we have normalized what a "good" scar is; it is one that is hard to see, preferably invisible; after all, isn't that the goal of a good surgeon? Yet this kind of "good" scar "does not remind us of the wounding." Ahmed says this as if being reminded of the wounding were a good thing. As if it were a kind of writing, a teaching, that we must pay attention to.*

*It's true, we've been taught that if we can erase our scars, make them invisible to ourselves and everyone else, that would be "healing."<sup>120</sup> That would be the end of shame, fear and despair.*

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<sup>120</sup> The Colectivo Plan Acalli created the intervention *Plan Acalote* in 2015. Over six days, they retraced the route of the Mexica-era canals that used to connect Xochimilco to Teotihuacan – both of which have now been absorbed into México City – traveling in an acalli (the name in Nahuatl for the type of boat that used to be used on the lake and is still used in Xochimilco). Many of the major roads in México City follow the former routes of the canals, but very few people remember this. By retracing the route, they are marking the scar of this history. You can see a video of the journey here: [vimeo.com/153205519](https://vimeo.com/153205519). Documentation of the project is here: [ia803006.us.archive.org/24/items/PlanAcaloteBitacoraDeUnTrazo.ColectivoPlanAcalli/Plan%20Acalote\\_bita%CC%81cora%20de%20un%20trazo.%20Colectivo%20Plan%20Acalli.pdf](https://ia803006.us.archive.org/24/items/PlanAcaloteBitacoraDeUnTrazo.ColectivoPlanAcalli/Plan%20Acalote_bita%CC%81cora%20de%20un%20trazo.%20Colectivo%20Plan%20Acalli.pdf)

*And yet, Ahmed continues, "A good scar is one that sticks out, a lumpy sign on the skin. It's not that the wound is exposed or that the skin is bleeding. But the scar is a sign of the injury: a good scar allows healing, it even covers over, but the covering always exposes the injury, reminding us of how it shapes the body ...."<sup>121</sup>*

*How multi-faceted scars are! To simultaneously heal, cover, expose, remind; aren't these the actions of a teacher?*

*"This kind of good scar reminds us that recovering from injustice cannot be about covering over injuries, which are effects of that injustice, signs of an unjust contact between our bodies and others," Ahmed insists.*

*I am drawn to that phrase, "unjust contact" – contact we did not want or ask for; contact that is invasive, appropriative, criminal. Yes, scars do so much work: they remind us that even as we recover from those wounds of unjust contact, we must not forget what caused them, we must remember in order to protect ourselves and others against future wounding. We are holey beings, stitched together by our scars, by which I mean our experiences, our knowledges, a kind of testimony that is literally written on our bodies ("San Carlos").*



Colectivo Plan Acalli, *Plan Acolote*, 2015. Video still from documentation of the intervention.

<sup>121</sup> When I was a child still in the rancho, I received some of my biggest and most long-lasting scars. When I was about six years old, my cousin and I were collecting roly-polys from underneath rocks to play with, and my cousin dropped a boulder on my hand. We lived far from any medical facilities, and it was the local curandera who treated my injury. The bone healed crooked, and the middle finger on the right hand is still chueco.

For those of us living and surviving under regimes of coloniality, we have various strategies to try to evade and cheat the process of becoming what the Western world would make us – but it’s never an easy task. We are full of scars. As Ahmed says in her book *What’s the Use?* “Deviation is made hard: so much violence is abbreviated in this sentence” (204). She makes the point in her book that there are generations of work that make go into making the world of Western coloniality just how things are, or the “usual.” She uses the example of a brick wall to describe how smaller acts of use (i.e., making bricks) build up over time to create something that seems unmovable (i.e., the brick wall). This highlights the amount of generational labor that has gone into the work of coloniality, and that is ongoing. However, as Burkhart suggests, the Western colonial project is never complete, “always obscuring but never erasing.” This is because “free-floating” Western colonial projects of knowledge and meaning are insufficient to replace those grounded in this land (Burkhart, “Indigenizing”). Like the wall at the U.S.-México border, Western coloniality is a kind of wall – but one that doesn’t quite cover the ground that it’s meant to cover. Not only are there ways over, through, and around, but Ahmed’s point also allows us to see that the work that was done to block people means that work can also be done to unblock. It’s not easy work, but a path is possible. At the conclusion of her book, Ahmed calls this “a world dismantling effort” (*What’s the Use* 229).

One small un-brick in the “world dismantling effort” might be related to another of Ahmed’s points – that usefulness is a form of memory. If we can remember other ways of using things (and doing things), then that might become a part making a different world.<sup>122</sup> Things and how we relate to things are an elemental part of how our worlds are built. Ahmed says, “To hold onto things is a memory

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<sup>122</sup> I consider making a different world distinct from imagining a different future. There is a sense of responsibility and work that goes with world-making. It is also not dependent on a linear idea of progress. This is the way the EZLN insists on making the world now. They say: “The world we want to transform has already been worked on by history and is largely hollow. We must nevertheless be inventive enough to change it and build a new world” (EZLN).

project, a way of preserving not just a thing but the intimacies that make things what they are" (*What's the Use* 11, 38). When she says "the intimacies that make things what they are," I think about the maguey plant. I also think of the way that we lost our relationship to the maguey and no longer used it in the same ways after migrating. These kinds of "cognitive dissonances" are what Anne Waters suggests using in a generative way as "mirrors" to an indigenous worldview that may have survived within and through us, despite generations of living under coloniality (166). Also, Ahmed's suggestion that time is bound up in this web of things and their uses/ meanings, as "the structural in temporal form," also rings true to me in this same way. For example, when I ask my mother why we no longer continue to do the things we used to, she says that those days are over and done because the land doesn't belong to us. But there are maguey plants all around us. It's not that the things themselves don't exist anymore, but that their use and meaning is changed.<sup>123</sup> I experience this as a demand to forget, to leave certain things behind as I supposedly move forward with a life in the United States. In order to not forget, this is why we must pay attention to our scars. This is why Benally suggests that "When we restore or heal ancestral living knowledge, we become a remembering against time. Indigenous memories are anti-history and anti-future" (*Unknowable* 7). This is a necessary project so that we don't become subsumed into a settler or Western "Future." So that we can see how our ancestors' days already spun connect to our days yet to spin – and are still spinning. So that we don't forget that other worlds are possible.<sup>124</sup> So that we don't forget that campesino worlds are possible, even in an urbano context.

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<sup>123</sup> One of my brothers expressed this as, "Aquí todo maguey tiene dueño" (*Here all maguey plants have an owner*).

<sup>124</sup> Credit to the EZLN for the phrase, "Otro mundo es posible."

#### CHAPTER 4: UNBRICKS/ SACRIFICIAL HEARTS/ CORAZONES CHUECOS

During the pandemic, I started making things from my backyard. This included creating a mold and then casting and firing hundreds of small objects with the form of anatomical hearts – about the same size as a human heart. I call these objects by several names – *unbricks*, *sacrificial hearts*, and *corazones chuecos*.<sup>125</sup> Although I initially started this practice of casting the hearts because of the limitations during the pandemic, the practice has been for me a version of Rivera Cusicanqui’s “*doing knowledge and practicing theory*” (viii). Part of this has to do with physically interacting with the materials and processes of making, and part is also being conscious of thinking as something that is not fully contained in the mind, but thinking with other parts of the body and through action and relationship, as well.<sup>126</sup>

I’ve been making casts of hearts for two years now. During that time, while working with these materials and forms, many questions have come up. If art is a way of “thinking with things,” then the many cast hearts are (do not represent but *are*) a way of thinking about certain questions. Also, I want to note that I am thinking about these questions not as universals, but specifically from the positionality of a campesino urbano. Also, I have not ended up with answers to these questions; instead, it is the engagement with the questions that has been the point. I am trying to let the process change my thinking and my relationships with the world around me.

- Why the heart? How can a heart made of earth resist metaphor and express something real about the relationship between bodies and this land?

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<sup>125</sup> *Corazón* is the word for heart in Spanish.

<sup>126</sup> Rivera Cusicanqui describes this: “This formula is a whole program of counter-knowledge and counter-power: to look with the whole body is to grope with the skin, to listen with the back, to sound out with the feet, because again it is a series of gestures that decenter the gaze... how we would decolonize Cartesian oculo-centrism and reintegrate the body’s gaze to the flow of inhabiting space-time, in what others call history” (xviii-xix).



- Questions of land. What does it mean for me to call this “my” backyard? What stories and relationships are expressed or obscured by that phrase? What can I learn from the networks of relationships and stories (both human and not) that exist here? How am I implicated?
- Questions of sacrifice. Because the forms of the hearts seem to echo the images of human sacrifice associated with the Mexica, the project has also become a meditation on the themes of balance and sacrifice.<sup>127</sup> If ritual sacrifice was a way of maintaining balance in the framework of their cosmos, what and how can I learn from them about the concepts of balance and sacrifice?<sup>128</sup>
- Finally, I have also been thinking about the severe imbalances in the world which have led up to the outbreak of a continuing global pandemic – during which so many people have been “sacrificed.” If these kinds of imbalances are a structural consequence of Western binary thinking, then how can we think differently?

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<sup>127</sup> When I first began casting hearts, I wasn’t necessarily thinking of human sacrifice, although people’s reactions quickly took the project to that place. This was both surprising and unsurprising at the same time, and it brought up for me the history of the art-anthropology relationship. I decided to think more deeply about the theme of sacrifice, in order to confront the inevitable – why the Western gaze needed to go to that place – but also what could I learn from it as well. Here, in a piece by Guillermo Gómez-Peña, the photo-performance shows an image that expresses the way we are locked into a certain framework of thinking about the Mexica (and other indigenous peoples of Ixachilan), which can’t seem to escape the Western binaries and frameworks.



Guillermo Gómez-Peña and La Pocha Nostra, “Reenactment,” 2005. From the photo-performance portfolio “Post-Mexico en X-paña.” Photo: Javier Caballero.

<sup>128</sup> I will not be performing any human sacrifices. I am not Mexica. I am not trying to reenact anything. There is already enough human sacrifice in the name of empire in this world – it’s just usually not called that anymore.

## THE CORAZONES ARTWORKS

*Sacrificial Hearts/ Corazones Chuecos/ Unbricks*, 2020-2022. Castings from adobe, clay, wood ash, and charcoal, all materials originating from my back yard. Decorated with beads, coins, nails, and other found objects either gifted or from around my household.



**Figure 4.1:** Installation view of some of the *Sacrificial Hearts/Corazones Chuecos/Unbricks* displayed on the *Spiral Table*.

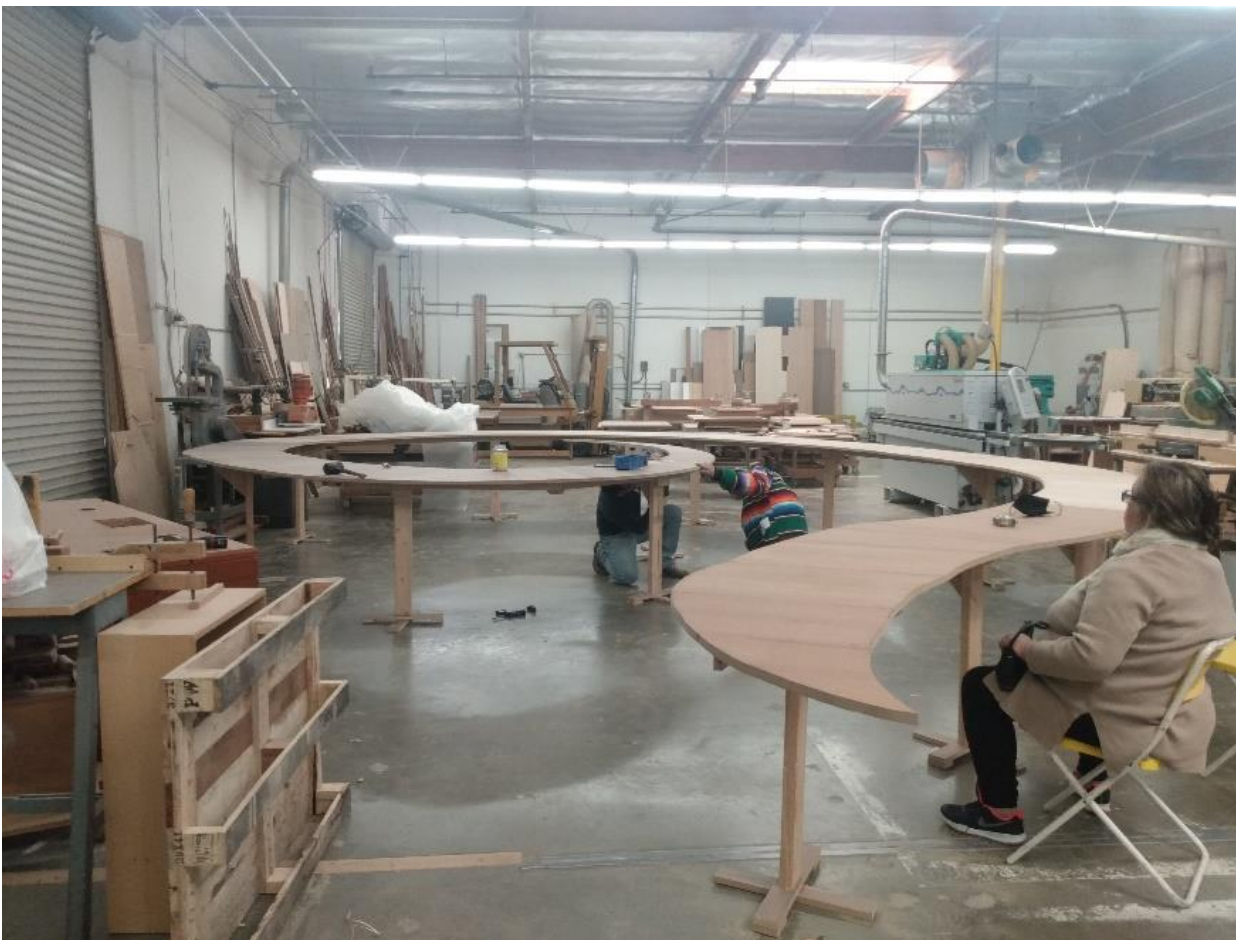
These corazones chuecos come from a mold I created based on a plastic model of an anatomical heart (something I had found in a thrift store several years ago). As I mentioned, during the pandemic I began using the materials around me – materials which would often be considered “primitive” – and I used those materials to cast hearts. For example, I dug up the top layer of dirt from the back yard. What used to be part of the “yard,” now became a separate thing – dirt with which I could make adobe and clay.<sup>129</sup> Another example is the wood ash, which comes from fires that I make in my back yard. My partner and I used to make these fires to simply enjoy them, but now they serve the multiple purposes of using the wood ash for castings and firing the clay hearts in the open flames. The same is true of the

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<sup>129</sup> Adobe was an important material to work with both because the importance of adobe to this region, but also because during my childhood, I lived almost next door (my aunt’s house between us) to the adobe house where my mother was born. Adobe is ancestral.

wood charcoal left over from the fires, which I ground with a molino<sup>130</sup> and also cast into hearts. These are the types of material experiments I have been doing – searching my memories and my home for “hidden” materials that I had forgotten or not noticed before. These are the materials that make up the sacrificial hearts/ corazones chuecos/ unbricks – and with their making creating algorithms out of this continued practice of relating to the land and materials around me in this way, every day for two years.

*Spiral Table*, 2022. Constructed from scrap wood pieces from the carpentry shop where I used to work as an undocumented worker. In collaboration with my brother Martín Alvarado.



**Figure 4.2:** The *Spiral Table* while under construction at the woodshop, 2022. My mother watches my brother and I working.

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<sup>130</sup> *Molino* translates to mill. It is a hand-grinding mill used to grind *maíz* (corn) and other things.



**Figure 4.3:** Overhead installation view of the *Spiral Table* with other artworks, 2022.

Spirals are known throughout Ixachilan as wind symbols, water symbols, symbols of journeys and migration, symbols of knowledge and of finding a center.<sup>131</sup> The spiral is associated with the breath of life, and with the life-giving energies of the sky, the rain, and the wind. Spiral journeys were also journeys of migration and knowledge – often to find or return to a center. The idea of the center of the world is powerful as a foundational concept for community identity and sacred space in both Mesoamerica and the Southwest. Spiral-shaped journeys might be across land, or they might be spiritual. In some places, such as Native California, spirals represent portals into the spirit world for a shaman's spirit to enter a visionary trance. In Mesoamerica, one of the most important uses of the spiral

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<sup>131</sup> Much of this information about spirals comes from my participation in Prof. Elizabeth Newsome's graduate seminars in the Art of the Americas: "Materiality and Being: The Engagement of Mind and Matter in the Americas" and "Sea and Land in the Americas: Indigenous Ways of Knowing, Sensing, and Dwelling at the Water's Edge."

is as a symbol of the deity Quetzalcoatl, known as Kukulcan in the Mayan region, who is associated with learning and knowledge. Also spiral-related, the EZLN uses the *caracol*<sup>132</sup> as an organizing principle for governance and relationship with the world, as “windows to see us inside and for us to see outside,” as “megaphones to get our word out and to hear the ones far away” (Romero). In addition, my relationship with my brother is part of this table. Before I returned to school to get a degree in art, my brother and I worked together at the woodshop where this table was built – me as an undocumented worker and my brother Martín as my manager. I also originally crossed the US-México border with Martín when I was a child and he was a teenager. These are also part of the journeys referenced by the spiral form. All of these meanings are a part of the layered meanings built into the table.

***Campesino Urbano Soundtrack***, 2022. Mix of sounds that were recorded during the making of these artworks. Soundscape designed in collaboration with Greg Camphire, @spookyactionlabs.



**Figure 4.4:** Video still from the *Campesino Urbano Video*, 2022. The grinding of wood charcoal with a *molino* is one of the sounds that can be heard on the *Campesino Urbano Soundtrack*.

<sup>132</sup> *Caracol* means snail in Spanish. It also refers to the spiral, since the spiral form is also found in shells.



Mural on front of the first offices of the EZLN Good Government Junta in the Caracol of La Garrucha.

## NOTES ON SACRIFICE

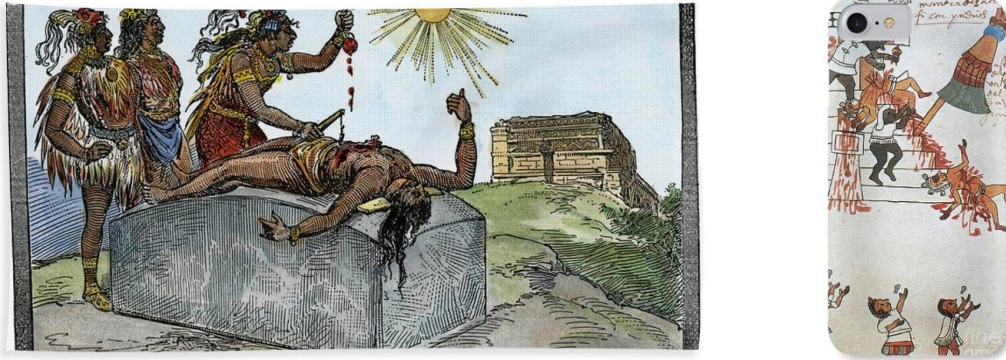
To Western eyes, the Mexica<sup>133</sup> rituals of sacrifice seem mysterious, violent, and bloody. For example, the deity Xipe Totec was honored through the sacrifice of captured war prisoners who were made to participate in a gladiator sacrifice ritual against Eagle and Jaguar warriors, and after their deaths the victims' flayed skins were worn by priests for 20 days before being buried in the temple with offerings (Pasztory 210). In another example, an account of cannibalism is given by Bernal Díaz del Castillo (Spanish), a soldier who accompanied Hernán Cortés in his 16<sup>th</sup>-century invasion of México. In his memoirs, Díaz del Castillo described the Mexica emperor Moctezuma being served human flesh to eat: "I have heard it said they were wont to cook for him the flesh of young boys.... Then they cut off the thighs, arms, and head and eat the former at feasts and banquets" (quoted in Carrasco 432).<sup>134</sup> You can also find countless more examples from internet sources describing sacrificial rituals performed at the Templo Mayor, where priests might decapitate victims and/or rip out their hearts. The image of the still-beating heart ripped from the chest of a sacrificial victim has been reproduced so often that it is now almost a stereotype of who the Mexica people were – with images from the codices, as well as more Europeanized depictions, available to purchase on beach towels, cell phone cases, coffee mugs, and more.<sup>135</sup> However, I would like to offer some other/more views of "sacrifice."

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<sup>133</sup> The Mexica people are often known as the Aztecs. Historian Camilla Townsend (US) clarifies the terminology: "Technically speaking, there never were any 'Aztecs.' No people ever called themselves that. It was a word that scholars began to use in the eighteenth century to describe the people who dominated central Mexico at the time of the Spaniards' arrival" (xi). She clarifies that those who we now call "Aztecs" would have been known as Mexica. The larger group of people who shared the Nahuatl language, not all of whom were Mexica, were known as Nahuas.

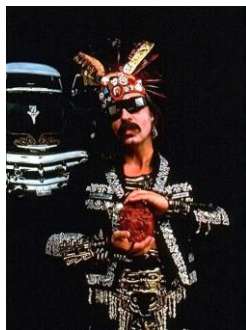
<sup>134</sup> This is only partly true; cannibalism was generally connected to ritual, not for everyday meals for the emperor.

<sup>135</sup> Performance artist Guillermo Gómez-Peña (self-identified Chicano) might call this a fetishized identity. He often creates work on this topic of fetishized identity, and he says: "In the American imagination, Mexicans are allowed to occupy two different but strangely complementary spaces: We are either unnecessarily violent, hypersexual, treacherous, cannibalistic and highly infectious; or innocent, 'natural,' ritualistic and shamanic. It's the barbarian vs. the noble savage narrative replayed over and over again. Both stereotypes are equally problematic and colonizing."



**Figure 4.5:** Beach towel and cell phone case with imagery depicting Mexica human sacrifice. For sale on the internet. Images in the public domain.

*The Migrant Sacrifice.* I know for my own family, sacrifice is something that has always been present in our lives. Not in any dramatic way, but experienced in everyday ways. And I also know that the types of sacrifices that my family has made are very common among the migrant diaspora. For example, my dad left our family very early on to migrate to work in the United States; he had already been largely absent as a presence in the family since before I was born. This was one sacrifice. Back in the rancho, we were very poor, and sometimes my mother would not eat so that we her children could eat. This was another sacrifice. Eventually, my parents left us kids behind in México so that they could both go to work in the United States. For two years, from about ages seven to nine, I was cared for by my teenage brothers. This family separation was yet another sacrifice.<sup>136</sup> When I was nine years old and



Guillermo Gómez-Peña performs as "El Moctezuma Junior" holding a sacrificial heart. 1993.



Gómez-Peña as "El Naftazteca," again holding a sacrificial heart. 1994.

<sup>136</sup> During the Trump administration, family separations at the border received a lot of media attention. Those policies of separation were and continue to be horrible. However, migrants have been experiencing family

my parents decided that my brother and I should travel to join them in the United States, I had to leave my cat Parda behind. And my home behind. This was another sacrifice. Once here in the United States, the sacrifices continue. We sacrifice time with our families in order to work more and make as much money as we can, always trying to climb out of the trap of poverty. If undocumented, we cannot return to our homes for any reason – not to visit, not for funerals, not to help; the only thing we can do is send money back.<sup>137</sup> There are countless undocumented migrants who haven't seen their families in decades, who cannot be there to share in the joys and griefs of their families left behind. As more and more days, months, and years go by, they often lose their families – to death or distance – and still they must continue here. With the increased and increasing militarization of the border, with the threat of deportation, greater and greater sacrifices are required for new arrivals. The undocumented sacrifice a lot to be here, not necessarily for the sake of “here” but because of “there” – the reason for the sacrifice is almost always located in the homeland. And the purpose is always to make a livable life for oneself and for others. Sometimes, we sacrifice up to the point where the homes we left sometimes cease to be our homes. All of these sacrifices are painful and unavoidable – but this is the precarity of life. We sacrifice to survive.

*Sacrifices to U.S. Empire.* Sacrifice is also structurally built into the way of empire in the United States, and elsewhere. This comes in the form of the economy depending on cheap labor – we give over our bodies to the hard work of manual labor which serves to help build the wealth and power of the already wealthy and powerful.<sup>138</sup> It's also how the consequences of imbalance (e.g., wealth inequality,

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separations since long before. These separations simply took place before migrants arrived at the actual site of the border and were therefore less visible.

<sup>137</sup> Dunbar-Ortiz points out the magnitude of these remittances: “One example [of] the sacrifices Mexican workers in the United States make [is] sending a part of their earnings back to their families and villages in México. Even during the 2020 pandemic, such remittances actually increased. In August 2020, they amounted to \$3.57 billion, baffling US economists who predicted an extreme decrease, underestimating the strength of the human networks between Mexican migrants in the US and their families and communities back home” (249).

<sup>138</sup> During 2020, 74% of undocumented immigrants in the United States were considered essential workers – working in farms, food-processing plants, the service industry, domestic work, maintenance work, and health



environmental extraction, etc. ) get displaced onto vulnerable bodies – and we become what are called “sacrifice zones.”<sup>139</sup> Settler colonialism – including the existence of the nation of the United States – depends on the death and disappearance of indigenous peoples. This has been a continuing sacrifice for over 400 years.<sup>140</sup> What’s more, the aesthetic of these sacrifices as *being* structural displaces any responsibility – as if they were no one’s fault.<sup>141</sup> One example is the technology of citizenship<sup>142</sup> - and all of its accompanying documents – that allows for a category of people called “undocumented” to be created, which then is helpful in identifying vulnerable bodies. But citizenship is structured in such a way that it can be said that it's either no one’s fault, or it’s our own fault because we chose to come here without citizenship. These sacrifices which build the US empire come to be seen as either victimless crimes, or situations where we are simultaneously victim and perpetrator.

*Sacrifices for Land.* All of these sacrifices in some way go back to the land.

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care. They continued working throughout the pandemic, sacrificing themselves doing low-wage work, and exposing themselves and their families to the coronavirus before treatments and vaccines were available. At the same time, the combined wealth of Elon Musk, Jeff Bezos and eight other men grew by \$1.2 billion a day (*Democracy Now*).

<sup>139</sup> The term “sacrifice zones” comes from the environmental justice movement, which describes how poor communities face the most direct consequences of pollution and disaster. However, another type of “sacrifice zone” is how barrios and slums are constructed to be barrios and slums – with policing and “criminality” both channeled to certain areas of cities, so that the wealthy and powerful can feel “safe.”

<sup>140</sup> Dunbar Ortiz recounts a history of atrocities that indigenous people have lived through in her book *An Indigenous People’s History of the United States*; she puts it very clearly here: “The objective of settler colonialism is to terminate Indigenous peoples as nations and communities with land bases in order to make the land available to European settlers. Extermination and assimilation are the methods used” (23). More sacrifices.

<sup>141</sup> Migrant activist Harsha Walia writes: “Victim-blaming responses to border deaths put responsibility on people for ‘choosing’ to make unsafe journeys... Even the passive terminology of ‘border deaths’... obscures the violent warscape of premeditated fatalities. The doctrine of deterrence requires mass border deaths to instill fear and prevent migration. Suffocation in cargo trucks, dehydration in blistering heat, hypothermia in freezing waters, unmarked graves in deserts, and wet cemeteries are the racialized deathscape of those killed by border imperialism around the world” (Walia 107).

<sup>142</sup> On citizenship: “The primary way in which the state’s power is made real and personal, affective in its capacity, is through the granting of citizenship and, in this, the structural and legal preconditions for intimacy, forms of sociability, belongings, and affections” (A. Simpson 18, citing Berlant 1997).

The Mexica sacrificed human blood to nourish Tlaltecuhltli – the “Earth Lord” goddess of the land. Although a practice like human sacrifice might seem shocking to the “modern” Western mind, the practice made sense to the Mexica; otherwise it would not have had such a central role in their society. For the Mexica, these types of sacrifices were the literal transfer of human energy to the land and the cosmos, to maintain the workings of the world. For them, the purpose was about balance and reciprocity – a non-binary duality in which there is an exchange relationship between the land and humans. With the sacrifice of human blood, the land would keep nourishing them.

Throughout settler colonialism, generations of indigenous people in Ixachilan have been sacrificed to the cause of European settler colonialism. However, the narrative of “sacrifice” has been flipped. The United States has developed a lot of rhetoric linking patriotism and “sacrifice” – where the settlers have “sacrificed” for the land (in order to acquire it), even though it was mostly indigenous people dying. In more recent foreign wars, it is said that US soldiers who die in combat have sacrificed their lives to protect the country. On a more ordinary but still just as violent level, when the land was mapped, surveyed, and became real estate, “home ownership,” or investment in land, came to define “The American Dream” – something for which we are also supposed to sacrifice. Through the rhetoric of “sacrifice,” settlers justify their presence on the land. They claim ownership of the land by claiming they have sacrificed themselves for it.

As migrants, our sacrifice is that we leave one land for another. Many of us started as campesinos with a very direct and grounded relationship to our homelands, but we are forced off the land through poverty. With the decision to migrate, we often lose our connection to our homeland for the chance to survive elsewhere. But in the cities of the United States, our existence is made all the harder by all the economic hardships. Access to land is mediated through the economy, and we are on the losing end of things. There is very little chance to form any connection to actual land, only “land” in

the abstract – as the idea of the nation. Survival and loss are related for us, and land is at the center of that.

All of this is why land is at the center of decoloniality. Brian Yazzie Burkhart suggests that between the indigenous people of Ixachilan and the colonial settlers who came and remain here, there are “two fundamentally incommensurable ideas of land”: land as kinship and land as object.<sup>143</sup> When the settlers started to forcefully convert sacred land into real estate, they were “reconfiguring the foundational reality that exists in people and the land,” and land-as-kinship became “obscured” (“Indigenizing”). However, Burkhart continues saying that “the attempted obscuring... is never complete. It is always obscuring but never erasing... Knowledge, meaning, history, and culture come to be and continue to exist within the particularity of the land and land-based relationships.” This is because free-floating, “universal” knowledge can never truly be complete, because universality is based on what Burkhart calls an “epistemology of ignorance” – the idea that you can know something before even knowing it. It can never fully encompass the particularity of a place and its people – knowledge flowing through and in relationship with the land itself. This is why it matters that the sacrificial hearts/corazones chuecos/ unbricks are made from a particular land (the back yard) and out of particular kinships. This why they are unbricks.<sup>144</sup> It’s a way of refusing colonial spatialities. It’s a possibility of

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<sup>143</sup> Burkhart also sometimes calls this locality vs delocality. Although this looks like another binary, Burkhart says it is different because it is the *first* binary from which all other confusions, misunderstandings, and imbalances arise. That is because it is the difference from being in relationship with a particular place, versus thinking that you are free-floating from the land and thus a universal being. Burkhart suggests that a trickster might be able to show us the way out. He uses the example of Iktomi, the spider trickster of the Lakota people, but Iktomi is only one example of many possible tricksters. He writes, “Iktomi can reveal how the webs of binary thinking... always arise from a forked path and a first choice between [land-as-kinship] and [land-as-object]. Iktomi can show us the way back to that choice and that if we take a different path, the path to [land-as-kinship], the questions posed and the answers given... are manifestly different” (*Indigenizing* xxxii). By paying attention to tricksters, we might learn something.

<sup>144</sup> What I have called un-work is related to Ahmed’s “queerness of use,” which is a failure or a refusal to “use something properly” (*What’s the Use* 207). Unbricks are a failure or a refusal to use bricks properly. She writes, “By speaking of the refusal to use something properly, I am not simply speaking of use in the present tense; recall that the settler colonial project was to empty the minds of the colonized as well as to empty the lands. A refusal to use something properly, to be impressed by the colonizer’s words and things, depends on other prior

finding solidarity with others through the land, to “think beyond the solidarity of nationalisms... That our solidarity is projected out from our relationship with the Earth” (Benally, *Unknowable* 24).<sup>145</sup> It’s engaging with the land that’s in front of you. It’s creating algorithms with your making. As Leanne Simpson says, “Everyday acts of resurgence sound romantic, but they are not. Put aside visions of ‘back to the land,’ and just think land” (*As We Have* 195). Even the back yard. This is what campesinos urbanos do.

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refusals: a refusal to empty oneself of a history, a refusal to forget one’s language and family, a refusal to give up land or an attachment to land, a refusal to exercise terms that lead to one’s own erasure or, to use Audra Simpson’s powerful words, ‘a refusal to disappear.’ A refusal can be an inheritance” (207). She continues, “To bring out the queerness of use requires more than an act of affirmation: it requires a world dismantling effort. In order for queer use to be possible, in order to recover a potential that has not simply been lost but stolen, there is work to do. To queer use is work: it is hard and painstaking work; it is collective and creative work” (229).

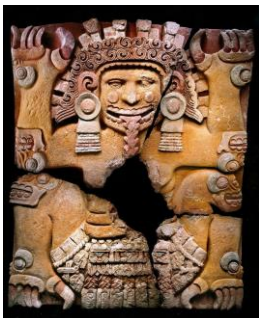
<sup>145</sup> Spiral-like.

## CONCLUSION: THE STORY OF TLALTECUHTLI

This is the story of the “Earth Lord” goddess named Tlaltecuhli.<sup>146</sup> Before there was an earth, a great crocodile-like creature was floating in a watery space. Their joints consisted of eyes and mouths filled with hungry teeth. Two sky gods, Quetzalcoatl and Tezcatlipoca, descended and declared that they needed to make the earth. To do this, Quetzalcoatl and Tezcatlipoca transformed themselves into two great serpents and each seized one side of Tlaltecuhli. Quetzalcoatl and Tezcatlipoca used their serpent bodies to squeeze Tlaltecuhli with intensity, and they tore their body apart right down the middle. One half of Tlaltecuhli’s dismembered body became the earth, and the other half rose into the sky. Then, all the gods, in order to compensate Tlaltecuhli for the damage done to their body, descended to console them. The other gods ordered that from Tlaltecuhli’s body would grow all the fruit necessary for human life to exist. Their hair became the trees, plants, and grasses; their skin became the flowers and herbs; their eyes became the springs, cenotes, and caves; and their nose became the valleys and mountains of the earth. Their joints made of hungry mouths became the cosmic jaws that occupy the body of the earth. This is why the Mexica make sacrifices of blood. Tlaltecuhli’s joints must be flexed and fed – irrigated with the blood of human sacrifice – in order for the fruits of the earth to grow and nourish human beings.

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<sup>146</sup> This version of Tlaltecuhli’s story is based on two accounts. One is given in “Cosmic Jaws: We Eat the Gods and the Gods Eat Us” by David Carrasco (Mexican American). The other is from *Queer Ancient Ways: A Decolonial Exploration* by Zairong Xiang (Chinese). Note that Tlaltecuhli is ambiguously gendered, thus my use of the pronoun “they.” You can see more on the Tlaltecuhli sculpture found in Tenochtitlan here: [www.youtube.com/watch?v=uxtl0OuRh1s](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=uxtl0OuRh1s).



Tlaltecuhli. A relief sculpture on a stone slab found near the base of the Templo Mayor of the Aztec capital Tenochtitlan. Currently located in the Museo del Templo Mayor. Photo: Proyecto Templo Mayor-INAH.

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