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Vestiges of the Past, Visions of the Future:
Archival Transformations in the Works of Beatriz Cortez

A thesis submitted in partial satisfaction of the
requirements for the degree Master of Arts
in Latin American Studies

by

Adela Elizabeth Arriola

2026

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ABSTRACT OF THE THESIS

Vestiges of the Past, Visions of the Future:
Archival Transformations in the Works of Beatriz Cortez

by

Adela Elizabeth Arriola

Master of Arts in Latin American Studies
University of California, Los Angeles, 2026
Professor Charlene Villaseñor Black, Chair

In this thesis, I examine how diasporic Salvadoran artist Beatriz Cortez engages with archival records and pre-Columbian history to situate the trauma of war and migration in conversation with centuries of Indigenous neglect and erasure in Central America. Through the use of archival materials, contemporary artists can access buried histories, propose alternative interpretations, and recover what has been suppressed. Throughout her artistic career and her collaborations with the Kaqchikel art collective Kaqjay Moloj, Beatriz Cortez has developed a different relationship with archives and objects that moves away from notions of the past as dead and inaccessible towards the active transmission of knowledge, according to Indigenous epistemologies. I examine the works *Armor for Rufina Amaya* (2014) and *El Altar de Kaqjay* (2021) and identify how they function to disrupt and counter official histories that perpetuate

singular, disconnected narratives and communicate the shared experiences of Indigenous and Central American diaspora communities. I argue that engaging with archives creates opportunities for audiences to participate in the recovery of historical memory and Indigenous knowledge.

The thesis of Adela Elizabeth Arriola is approved.

Robin Derby

Alex Ungprateeb Flynn

Charlene Villaseñor Black, Committee Chair

University of California, Los Angeles

2026

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Introduction

The stigma of death haunts contemporary Central American art, as it does Central American lives. The histories of Central America are intense—armed conflicts, guerilla warfare, political assassinations, massacres, and genocide have all taken place in recent memory. In El Salvador, the state perpetuates a postwar narrative that frames the Salvadoran civil war as a distant memory, to be moved on from and forgotten, whereas forgetting means ignoring the physical deaths of thousands and the symbolic death of hundreds of thousands more. Many Central Americans fled north, toward the United States seeking reprieve from the political violence and persecution in their countries, only for the U.S. to systematically deny asylum and refugee status to migrants. Negating their personhood and right to safety is akin to a death sentence that affects thousands of migrants and their families.¹

As someone born and raised in the United States by Salvadoran immigrant parents, this thesis emerged from a desire to access historical memory and understand how visual artists aid in the recovery and transmission of marginalized histories. Throughout my studies the pervasiveness of death became overwhelming. I began to question how death functions in contemporary Salvadoran and Central American visual narratives, not as a definite end, but as a facet of life. This thesis investigates concepts and artistic practices that challenge death as a disruption and recenter the living. Drawing from Indigenous Maya paradigms, whose artists, activists, and scholars have been at the forefront of decolonial praxis and discourse in Central America, my aim is to discuss a developing dimension of contemporary archival and Central American art in relation to Salvadoran history, migration, and Indigeneity. Scholarship on

¹ As of writing this thesis, U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services (USCIS) recently announced that Temporary Protected Status (TPS) for El Salvador will expire in the coming weeks, putting thousands of Salvadorans in the U.S. in a state of limbo, at risk for deportation.

Indigenous Central American visual culture and decoloniality has been growing extensively within the last few years, but El Salvador is left out of the conversation under the assumption that Indigenous culture has long since vanished. Paralleling the transformation of archives from dead repositories into living embodiments, this thesis is an attempt to challenge the perception that contemporary Salvadoran experiences are somehow disconnected from Indigenous histories. I argue that engaging with archives creates opportunities for audiences to participate in the recovery of historical memory and Indigenous knowledge.

Archival engagement is crucial to Central American and diasporic communities attempting to piece together their postwar realities and make sense of their experiences. Artists make use of archival materials to remember and expose the historical processes that affect marginalized communities. However, traditional archives do not fully encapsulate lived experiences, thus, I turn to alternative archives, embodied memory, and Indigenous paradigms in an effort to understand what and who Central American archives are for. The focus of this thesis is El Salvador: its history from different perspectives, its national and communal archives, its people and how they make sense of their world. I present a case study of two installations by the artist Beatriz Cortez (b. 1970, El Salvador) that illustrate archival engagement and transformation, rooted in the experiences of a Salvadoran migrant.

Artist Selection

Beatriz Cortez was born in El Salvador and came of age during the height of the Salvadoran civil war. Her earliest works explored memory and migration, focusing on the aftermath of violence and loss. In recent years, she has focused on creating large-scale sculptural

works that communicate themes of Indigeneity, multiple temporalities, and speculative futurity.² Her practice integrates collaboration and collectivity; since 2007, Cortez has collaborated with Kaqjay Moloj, a Kaqchikel Maya community and art collective from Patzicía, Guatemala.

As a scholar, Cortez has written extensively on racism and the exclusion of Indigenous people from Central American imaginaries and cultural production. State-constructed narratives have normalized the exclusion of Indigenous histories by denying state-sponsored violence towards Indigenous communities and obfuscating the contributions of Indigenous people to nation-building. As an artist, she participates in projects seeking to dismantle borders, spaces, and temporalities, and draws connections between the historical processes that have adversely affected Indigenous Central American communities. Cortez and Kaqjay Moloj are concerned with subverting state narratives and Western ideas with Indigenous ideas about archives, archaeology, land and materials, and community and collaboration.

My decision to concentrate on Cortez's sculpture works stems from her explicit engagement with archival materials and transnational collaborations with Indigenous communities. She is recognized for her futurist and reparative speculative work that centers Indigeneity, such as *Chultún El Semillero* (2021) and *Nomad 13* (2017) with rafa esparza, and interventions in traumatic histories, like *Memory Insertion Capsule* (2017) and *Memorial for Óscar Alberto Martínez Ramírez and His Daughter Valeria*, part of her *Underworld* (2019) project.³ For the purposes of this paper, Cortez and her artworks exemplify the intersection

² A selection of the artist's work can be found on her website: <https://beatrizcortez.com/>.

³ Meilan Solly, "Immerse Yourself in Five Futuristic Worlds," *Smithsonian Magazine*, June 15, 2021, <https://www.smithsonianmag.com/smart-news/immerse-yourself-five-alternate-worlds-envisioned-leading-artists-180977990/>.
Javier Fuentes Martinez, "Mercado de Artesanías: Crafting Latinx Identity," *C Magazine* 156 (2024): 56-62.

between Salvadoran migration to the United States, diasporic and Isthmian art practices, and Indigenous Maya thought and visuality. Furthermore, she was invited to exhibit at the Venice Biennale's 60th International Art Exhibition in 2024. She is a prominent figure in the Latin American art scene, her reach and visibility as a Salvadoran-born artist in the United States is wide-ranging. Cortez has expressed that she and her work should not be limited by the framework of a Salvadoran artist discussing Salvadoran issues, and likewise I do not wish to put her in a box.⁴ I chose her works precisely because they transcend national borders and notions of isolation. Highlighting her Salvadoran-ness in this paper offers a familiar frame of reference before venturing into ideas about plurality, shared histories, and connected experiences.

Major Themes in Contemporary Central American Art

Art historian Kency Cornejo has done extensive work to articulate the way Central American artists and activists engage politically in the production of visual art to expose and condemn injustices perpetuated in postwar Central America. She has identified a diverse range of artists and bodies of work that embody Black, Indigenous, feminist, and queer responses to the exclusion and erasure of marginalized communities.⁵ In order to understand Central American creative productions, it is first necessary to understand the history and context that make Central America, its people, and its diaspora unique.

Kency Cornejo, "Decolonial Futurisms: Ancestral Border Crossers, Time Machines, and Space Travel in Salvadoran Art," in *Mundos Alternos: Art and Science Fiction in the Americas*, eds. Robb Hernandez and Tyler Stallings (Riverside: UCR ARTSblock, 2017).

Carolyn Fornoff, "The Rio Grande as It Could Be: Beatriz Cortez's *The Underworld*," *ASAP/Journal* 6, no. 2 (2021): 379-402.

⁴ Johnathan Griffin, "Sculptor Beatriz Cortez: 'Imagining is Already Optimistic,'" *The Financial Times*, November 15, 2021, <https://www.ft.com/content/b8c025a8-3771-4046-93b8-adaed46224fc>.

⁵ See Kency Cornejo, *Visual Disobedience: Art and Decoloniality in Central America* (Duke University Press, 2024).

In the mid-twentieth century, the United States provided economic and military aid to Central American authoritarian regimes, including intelligence advisers and counter-insurgency military training, to annihilate alleged communists that threatened security, democracy, and U.S. economic interests.⁶ U.S. intervention in Guatemala, El Salvador, and Nicaragua was directly responsible for exacerbating state violence being enacted against their own populations, especially Indigenous groups, driving thousands of people to flee their countries. Political conflict and military repression claimed thousands of lives, including the *desaparacidos*, or the disappeared people, who were made to vanish without a trace. In the immediate aftermath, the governing bodies of these countries denied that any atrocities ever occurred. The United States also refused to admit responsibility for escalating the conflicts in Central America and denied entry for asylum seekers.

As migration to the U.S. swelled, so did the disagreement over how to represent and label migrants from Central America—refugee or economic immigrant? Recognition of Indigenous sovereignty or *mestizo* nationalism? Refugee status would have legally obligated the United States to provide access to shelter, work, education, etc., and safeguarded individuals from deportation and criminal charges related to immigration, allowing for much-needed safety and stability for Central Americans fleeing war and genocide.⁷ The U.S. denied migrants refugee status, along with the moral and political obligation to provide them with protection, because doing so would recognize the detrimental effects of military and economic interventionism.

⁶ Susanne Jonas, “Central America As a Theater of U.S. Cold War Politics,” *Latin American Perspectives* 9, no. 3 (Summer, 1982): 126.

⁷ United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), Convention and Protocol Relating to the Status of Refugees, UNHCR, <https://www.unhcr.org/media/convention-and-protocol-relating-status-refugees>.

Cecilia Menjivar posited that the artistic expressions of Central American migrants reflect emotions and experiences related to their ambiguous legal positions, including temporary and undocumented statuses.⁸ Furthermore, “refugee” labels also served an aesthetic purpose for solidarity movements that employed “tragic victim” tropes to tug on the heartstrings and rally support against U.S. interventionism in the 1980s.⁹ Cornejo examines how postwar Central American visuality was dominated by film, television, and photography aimed at U.S. audiences during the armed conflicts. She argues that these “solidarity aesthetics” contribute to the tropification and objectification of Central Americans in media, which contemporary artists then counter through artistic expression. This does not suggest a monolithic U.S. Central American aesthetic born exclusively from displacement and migration narratives; however, I acknowledge this aspect of U.S. Central American identity that drives artists to explore alterity and resolution. It is important to recognize how these artists speak about their own experiences for themselves and their communities, after a period when most of the visual media and culture produced about Central America came from outsiders.

The Salvadoran Context

The specific Salvadoran context behind contemporary diasporic visuality is multifaceted. While the civil war and mass migration play contributing roles in defining an aesthetic, so did the transnational Indigenous movements of the 1980s. The years 1980 to 1992 mark the duration of the civil war in El Salvador between the leftist Farabundo Marti National Liberation Front (FMLN) and the right-wing Salvadoran government, although heavy violence preceded it and

⁸ Cecilia Menjivar, “Immigrant Art as Liminal Expression: The Case of Central Americans,” in *Art in the Lives of Immigrant Communities in the United States*, eds. Paul DiMaggio and Patricia Fernandez-Kelly (Piscataway: Rutgers University Press, 2010), 181.

⁹ Elana Zilberg, *Space of Detention: The Making of a Transnational Gang Crisis between Los Angeles and San Salvador* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2011), 29.

civil unrest persisted in the aftermath. El Salvador's government received military aid and economic assistance from the United States, which was used to create death squads, specialized counter-insurgency forces trained by the U.S. military.

Recent scholarship has further complicated the dynamics of the Salvadoran civil war through ethnicity-focused readings. Mneesha Gellman presented two case studies on Nahua-Pipil and Lenca mobilization during the war that demonstrate the continuity of Indigenous resistance in El Salvador. According to scholars, the legacy of the 1932 Indigenous and campesino uprisings against disenfranchisement and their subsequent massacre by government forces, known as *La Matanza*, impacted how individuals engaged with different sides of the civil war.¹⁰ All this to say that the roles of Indigenous communities in shaping El Salvador's political landscape are still being understood. However, visually, Indigeneity in El Salvador is typically understood as belonging to an inaccessible past.

The Matanza, and the resulting loss of material and linguistic culture, is also cited by art historians as the reason why there is a lack of contemporary Indigenous visual culture.¹¹ In the presumed absence of Indigenous communities in El Salvador, attempts at decolonial readings of Salvadoran and diaspora art struggles to reconcile conflicting histories, narratives, and visual aesthetics. Though the consequences of the massacre were undoubtedly felt across the country by

¹⁰ See Mneesha Gellman, "Nahuas in El Salvador: Negating 'Pupusas' but Eating Them Too," and "Cultural Erosion: Fragile Lenca Persistence in Morazán, El Salvador," in *Democratization and Memories of Violence* (Routledge, 2016); Aldo A. Lauria-Santiago and Jeffrey L. Gould, "Memories of La Matanza: The Political and Cultural Consequences of 1932," in *To Rise in Darkness: Revolution, Repression, and Memory in El Salvador, 1920-1932* (Duke University Press, 2008).

¹¹ Rudy Mondragón, "Carlos 'El Famoso' Hernández: Material Culture and Representations of El Salvador's First World Champion Boxer," *Aztlán* 50, no. 1 (2025): 81-108; and John Kennedy Godoy, "Healing in Transdisciplinary Art by Guadalupe Maravilla: Disease Throwers, Jun Winaq', and Acompañamiento," *Aztlán* 48, no. 2 (2023): 195-212.

other Indigenous communities, the connection between the criminalization of Nahua-Pipil language and culture and the prevalence of Maya visual motifs in contemporary Salvadoran art is under-investigated. The “Mayanization” of Salvadorans is attributed to the erasure and subsequent imposition of Indigeneity by the state government.¹² The state went from ignoring Indigenous history to putting great emphasis on its ancient Maya heritage following Indigenous movements in Guatemala and international support for Maya-centered projects in Central America.

In his analysis of a Salvadoran boxing champion’s robe, Rudy Mondragón argues that the presence of Maya glyphs on the garment is a way of remembering El Salvador’s painful past, alluding to the Matanza.¹³ Similarly, John Kennedy Godoy suggests that the absence of Nahua motifs where Maya visuality is utilized by a contemporary Salvadoran artist reflects the “silences” produced by ethnocide and repression.¹⁴ Ultimately, it seems as though references to Indigeneity are an attempt to connect traumatic experiences and process the harm that has been done to Salvadoran people over the course of centuries. Rather than a replacement for Nahua-Pipil visuality, however, I argue that engaging in Maya visuality in tandem with Maya epistemologies underscores a shared connection between diaspora and contemporary Indigenous communities in Central America. Beyond remembering ancient civilizations, contemporary Indigenous visuality teaches us about continuity and solidarity in the present to imagine better futures for Indigenous and non-Indigenous communities.

¹² Virginia Q. Tilley, “New Help or New Hegemony? The Transnational Indigenous Peoples’ Movement and ‘Being Indian’ in El Salvador,” *Journal of Latin American Studies* 34, no. 3 (2002): 525-554.

¹³ Mondragón, “Carlos ‘El Famoso,’” 97.

¹⁴ Godoy, “Healing in Transdisciplinary Art,” 198-199.

Chapters

The first chapter, entitled “The Archive, Dead and Alive,” lays the foundations of archival theory and archival art as they have been traditionally understood. Traditional archives are sites of institutional power that operate with a stigma of imminent obsolescence. Often excluded from institutional archives, marginalized communities navigate how to utilize archival practices for their benefit. In contrast, Indigenous archives transform notions of dead archives into living repertoires that are continuously accessed, allowing for the active transmission and embodiment of historical and cultural memories. The next two chapters explore theory in practice and the application of archival materials in contemporary art by Beatriz Cortez. I discuss the archives behind her works, *Armadura para Rufina Amaya* and *El Altar de Kaqjaj*, and analyze how installation art makes archives and difficult experiences accessible to wider audiences.

Chapter 1: The Archive, Dead and Alive

Introduction

The goal of this chapter is to understand archival engagement in contemporary Central American and diaspora art. The archive is constantly being accessed, interrogated, and reappropriated, resulting in bodies of work that both employ archives to counter state constructed narratives and reconceptualize the archive altogether. The first half of the chapter examines the relationship between archives and state power—how archives are constructed and utilized for and against marginalized communities in Central America. This is followed by a discussion of archival limits and introduction to how communities work around exclusion and engage in alternative archival practices. Indigenous archives, based on Indigenous epistemologies, value different forms of knowledge transmission that allows for artists to continuously access the past for the benefit of present and future generations. I argue that while institutional archives have proven useful in the production of counter visuals and counternarratives to state violence and disavowal, engaging with alternative archiving, gestures towards decolonizing art and archives.

1.1 Archival Power

In the postwar Central American context, the use of archival materials in conceptualizing and creating art, reviving history and bringing the dead back to life are recurring notions. While an archive can refer to a collection of objects or their physical storage location, philosophers like Michel Foucault and Jacques Derrida were concerned with the institutional construction of narratives derived from archival materials. Archives are customarily fragmented; a collection of documents, photographs, and other objects, in which the collector, or keeper of the archive, determines the selection and interpretation of materials. According to Foucault, “[The archive] is the general system of the formation and transformation of statements,” which lends to the idea

that keepers and viewers engage with the archive to generate narratives and not the notion that archives contain absolute histories.¹⁵ As such, archives hold and represent power, especially on institutional levels.

Given Central America's history with state sponsored violence, the persistent denial of any wrongdoings by state governments was supported by their selective engagement with archives. Testimonies of the atrocities committed by U.S.-funded death squads went ignored by authorities in El Salvador until concerted efforts by photojournalists, like Susan Meiselas, and the UN-sponsored Truth Commission sought to document the extent of human rights abuses. Official records and U.S. government documents pertaining to their knowledge and involvement in the armed conflicts were only declassified after attention was brought on by the commission's investigations.¹⁶ State archives document the full extent of state power. While their utilization by activists and human rights organizations empowered those seeking justice, their underutilization by government authorities demonstrates the state's power to control narratives and deny allegations.

Furthermore, state violence incited large-scale displacement and drove waves of migration from Central America to the United States. Susan Bibler Coutin refers to the Salvadoran civil war as an act of "dismemberment," in reference to the physical separation of people from their history, homes, and lives.¹⁷ After experiencing dismemberment in their home

¹⁵ Michel Foucault, *The Archaeology of Knowledge* (Tavistock, 1972), 130.

¹⁶ "Newly Released Department of Defense Files Recount El Salvador Military Operations," University of Washington, Center for Human Rights, October 4, 2018, <https://jsis.washington.edu/humanrights/2018/10/04/defense-department-files-recount-salvadoran-military-operations/>.

¹⁷ Susan Bibler Coutin, "Re/membering the Nation: Gaps and Reckoning within Biographical Accounts of Salvadoran Émigrés," *Anthropological Quarterly* 84, no. 4 (2011): 811.

countries, migrants to the United States were then denied legal recognition, refugee status, and personhood by state entities. In researching rural campesino refugees, historian Molly Todd found that “official” Salvadoran records were either destroyed, not publicly accessible, or said to not exist, according to authorities.¹⁸ Because national and international agencies imposed their own narratives about migrants falling into one of two categories—tragic victim or rebel subversive—Todd refers to these migrants as “a people without history.”¹⁹ She highlights the gap in historical and archival knowledge about entire communities of people, which signals their social death. This multi-layered dismemberment explains the fragmentation of communities, memories, and archives in the Central American diaspora.

Interest in Central American archives is also an interest in recovering the memories and voices of those lost, disappeared, and displaced. State control over archives and narratives adds another dimension to the ways in which Central Americans have been marginalized and illustrates the need to produce counter visuals and counter narratives that better reflect their experiences and allow space for healing. In engaging with archival materials, Central American artists are able to centralize their perspectives and rewrite historical narratives that previously excluded them.²⁰

1.2 Archival Death

A core facet of archival engagement is confronting notions of death, of which Central Americans are intimately familiar, given the circumstances described above. Achille Mbembe

¹⁸ Molly Todd, *Beyond Displacement: Campesinos, Refugees, and Collective Action in the Salvadoran Civil War* (University of Wisconsin Press, 2010), 8.

¹⁹ Todd, *Beyond Displacement*, 4.

²⁰ Kency Cornejo, “US Central Americans in Art and Visual Culture,” *Oxford Research Encyclopedia of Literature* (2019): 3.

draws out the relationship between archives and death in his description of archives as “traces of the deceased,” and the act of archiving as “laying something in a coffin.”²¹ Mbembe suggests that this archival process removes and isolates objects from the present and creates distance with the living. Therefore, archival engagement “results in the resuscitation of life, in bringing the dead back to life by reintegrating them in the cycle of time.”²² This resurrection, however, is temporary and dependent on the living to maintain contact with the archive; otherwise, it is laid to rest, once again.

In *Ghostly Matters*, sociologist Avery Gordon argues that ghosts have real presence and influence over our present; they manifest through haunting to notify and interfere with repression.²³ She examines how the Mothers of the Plaza de Mayo in Argentina utilized photographs of their missing children to protest disappearances and the military regime. The Mothers rejected spectacle displays of mutilated bodies and remains, and the idea that sensational images are the only way to motivate support.²⁴ Likewise, Kency Cornejo also argues against the circulation of images that impose victimhood on Central American migrants and advocates for visualities created by and for the affected communities. In the artistic productions

²¹ Achille Mbembe, “The Power of the Archive and its Limits,” in *Refiguring the Archive*, by Carolyn Hamilton, Verne Harries, et al., eds. (Springer, 2002), 22.

²² Mbembe, “The Power of the Archive,” 25.

Foucault and Derrida also frequently mention the “resurrection” and “resuscitation” of archival materials; see Foucault, *The Archaeology of Knowledge*, 129. And Jacques Derrida, *The Beast and the Sovereign, Volume II*, trans. Geoffry Bennington (University of Chicago Press, 2011), 131.

²³ Avery F Gordon, *Ghostly Matters: Haunting and the Sociological Imagination* (University of Minnesota Press, 2008), xvi.

²⁴ Gordon, *Ghostly Matters*, 110.

of U.S. Central American artists, ghostly figures and specters are employed to disrupt the state narratives that sought to ignore the violence and structural reasons behind their displacement.

To reiterate, ghosts and haunting function as reminders of narratives that cannot be overwritten and disappeared as people's bodies were, and "revived" archives provide the evidentiary support. However, as Kirsten Weld points out, the spatiotemporal barrier between the dead and the living is not so easily overcome: "what is rescued [from the archive] remains a paper cadaver, not a citizen: a testament to the repression suffered by that citizen, a thin and tragic representation of a once-full life."²⁵ This emphasis on archives as dead material highlights the tension between archives that have temporary life in the present, but ultimately remain rooted in notions of death and a distant, unreachable past.

1.3 Archival Limits

Engaging with institutional archives in order to expose injustices and propose alternative readings of history can be limited by source materials that are inherently exclusionary. Criticisms of institutional archives stem from their role in systemic control and exclusion. The practice of recording and keeping data on land, population, political affiliation, crime, etc. has been used by colonial authorities and totalitarian regimes to target, control, and oppress groups of people throughout history.²⁶ Archival art is often concerned with critiquing institutions by representing the underrepresented, recovering untold stories and marginalized histories; and while critiques

²⁵ Kirsten Weld, *Paper Cadavers: The Archives of Dictatorship in Guatemala* (Duke University Press, 2014), 19.

²⁶ Eric Ketelaar names colonial empires, Nazi Germany, and the Soviet Union as examples of state entities that utilized archives to surveil and oppress. Eric Ketelaar, "Recordkeeping and Societal Power," in *Archives: Recordkeeping in Society* by Sue McKemmish, Michael Piggott, Barbara Reed and Frank Upward, eds. (Wagga-Wagga, Charles Sturt University, 2005): 277-298.

draw attention to fundamental issues with institutional archives, they do not necessarily offer solutions for excluded communities.²⁷

Archivist Eric Ketelaar posits that even though archives are tools of the state, they can also be “instruments of empowerment and liberation, salvation and freedom” under the circumstance that the state relinquishes control.²⁸ Ketelaar puts forth truth commissions as the executors of justice in opposition to oppressive regimes. However, the truth commission’s investigations would not have gotten far without the testimonies of survivors, despite the intense scrutiny of their experiences by national and international institutions.²⁹ Shifting the focus to how community-led projects bypass official narratives altogether reveals a type of archival engagement that is driven by the lived experiences of Central Americans, migrants, and diaspora communities that have been denied access to institutional archives for decades.

For example, in the case of Molly Todd’s research, where records were near non-existent and not so easily turned over by state entities, liberation from repression and violence was not state-led and originated with community organizing. Todd’s “from the ground-up” approach to research, involving interviews and smaller, private collections of records, revealed the grassroots efforts of refugees to write their own histories and challenged the dominant narrative with

²⁷ Sara Callahan, *Art + Archive: Understanding the Archival Turn in Contemporary Art* (Manchester University Press, 2022), 40.

²⁸ Ketelaar, “Recordkeeping,” 287.

²⁹ The controversy generated by David Stoll’s attempt to dismiss the reliability of Rigoberta Menchú’s testimony in his book *Rigoberta Menchú and the Story of All Poor Guatemalans* by collecting supplementary testimonies and “documentary sources” exemplifies the ramifications of favoring one form of knowledge over the other. Stoll, an anthropologist and academic, wielded the fullest extent of his institutional privilege to undermine Menchú’s legacy. See Rigoberta Menchú, *I, Rigoberta Menchú: An Indian Woman in Guatemala*, ed. Elisabeth Burgos, trans. Ann Wright (Verso, 1984); David Stoll, *Rigoberta Menchú and the Story of All Poor Guatemalans* (Westview Press, 1999); and Arturo Arias, “After the Rigoberta Menchú Controversy: Lessons Learned about the Nature of Subalternity and the Specifics of the Indigenous Subject,” *MLN* 117, no. 2 (2002): 481-505.

resources beyond institutional archives. Adjacent, women and children in Honduran refugee camps created embroidered mantles depicting scenes of life in the camps, military violence, and internal migration alongside sewn messages and memories. Their embroideries also represent alternative histories and testimonies to the devastation of war from the perspective of Salvadoran refugees who did not “exist” in official documentation.³⁰ Traditional, institutional archiving does not leave room for alternative practices nor perspectives, especially those of marginalized communities who have been systemically repressed and historically excluded, like rural refugees.³¹ To summarize, traditional archives are exclusionary, inaccessible, and close to death. As such, marginalized communities engage in their own practices and continue traditions of knowledge keeping and sharing not represented in institutional archives.

1.4 Embodied Knowledge

In the words of Aymara-Bolivian sociologist Silvia Rivera Cusicanqui, “in colonialism, there is a peculiar function of words: they do not designate, but rather conceal.”³² Black and Indigenous scholars have been contending with archival concealment and exclusion and have expressed alternative ways of engagement rooted in life, embodied practices, and the present,

³⁰ For a more in-depth analysis of the embroideries, see Cornejo, *Visual Disobedience*, 138-140. A digital archive of MUPI’s collection can be accessed through the Latin American Digital Initiatives (LADI) repository: <https://ladi.lib.utexas.edu/collections/mupi03/>.

³¹ Reflecting from a Palestinian perspective, Ariella Azoulay conceptualizes archives as “thresholds” that can be crossed, akin to nation-state borders. She writes that those dispossessed by institutional archives are forcefully categorized as “infiltrators,” “refugees,” and “undocumented,” when they attempt to cross that threshold to engage in the archive. She reiterates the inherent violence of institutional archives that physically manifests as targeted attacks against photojournalists and archivists from dispossessed communities, in this case Palestinians. She also highlights the radicality of Palestinian photographers and journalists who are deeply involved in the communities they document, that is their own communities, and their efforts to assert sovereignty. Ariella Azoulay, “The Imperial Condition of Photography in Palestine: Archives, Looting, and the Figure of the Infiltrator,” in *(W)Archives: Archival Imaginaries, War, and Contemporary Art*, ed. Daniela Agostinho, Solveig Gade, Nanna Bonde Thylstrup, and Kristin Veel (Sternberg Press, 2020), 309-335.

³² Silvia Rivera Cusicanqui, *Sociología de la imagen: Miradas ch’ixi desde la historia andina* (Tinta Limón, 2015), 175.

rather than death and loss.³³ On one hand, engaging with archives suggests that the dead can be brought *back* to life to communicate historical knowledge. On the other hand, embodied practices, like Diana Taylor’s concept of the *repertoire*, centralize the role of *living* embodiment in transmitting knowledge. Taylor suggests that the ephemeral repertoire, consisting of “performances, gestures, orality, movement, dance, singing,” generates and transmits knowledge that is as legitimate as the written archive and offers an alternative historical perspective.³⁴ In a similar vein, Cusicanqui posits the “sociology of the image,” and “oral history” as non-written methods through which Indigenous people communicate their unspoken and censored histories.³⁵ These frameworks intentionally decenters Western knowledge systems that privilege written histories and recognizes forms of transmission that are important in Indigenous archival work.

Indigenous archives differ from the traditional systems that value the physicality of objects, documents, photographs, etc. that are interred in a sepulcher and “removed from time and from life,” as Mbembe describes.³⁶ Indigenous archives incorporate ephemeral experiences, embodiment, and frame the past as living in the present rather than haunting it. In the first place, embodied practices and the actions of the repertoire, including the historical memories and traditions they embody, are therefore living in the sense that they necessitate active, live participation and allow for transformations over time, according to Taylor.³⁷ She demonstrates

³³ Floridalma Boj Lopez, *Indigenous Archives: The Maya Diaspora and Mobile Cultural Production* (Duke University Press, 2026), 4-5.

³⁴ Diana Taylor, *The Archive and the Repertoire: Performing Cultural Memory in the Americas* (Duke University Press, 2003), 20-21.

³⁵ Rivera Cusicanqui, *Sociología de la imagen*, 283-292.

³⁶ Mbembe, “The Power of the Archive,” 19 & 22.

³⁷ Taylor, *The Archive and the Repertoire*, 20 & 24.

how engaging with physical and material archives is not the only method to transmit history; the archive and the repertoire work in tandem with each other to transmit historical memory. Cornejo considers how the archive and the repertoire decenter Western definitions of performance art and decolonize our understanding of embodied Indigenous creativity.³⁸

On the topic of Indigenous archives, Floridalma Boj Lopez's notion of the *mobile archive of Indigeneity* challenges the stationary archive. This idea that cultural objects, such as clothing, photographs, and books, can be mobile and that memories, knowledge, and culture can be transmitted via a multitude of embodied experiences beyond archival documents addresses the limitations of the traditional institutional archive and introduces the continuity of ancestral Maya knowledge systems. Furthermore, she underlines how mobile archives of Indigeneity function *for* Maya collectives and diaspora, without focusing solely on loss and absence.

Indigenous archiving aids their own communities to retain and transfer knowledge, not for the benefit of any institution or government authority. Museum collections house stolen Maya artifacts and display objects that are decontextualized from the history and lived experiences of contemporary communities. In an institutionally archived setting, these objects are distant from the lands in which they were taken and the people they were taken from; the fragmentation and displacement of objects reinforce notions of Indigeneity belonging to an inaccessible past. However, Indigenous archives and epistemologies take what is perceived to be the fragmented, disembodied dead and remind us of the survival of living people and the continuity of their practices in the present.

1.5 Kaqjay Moloj

³⁸ Cornejo, *Visual Disobedience*, 14 n23.

Beatriz Cortez has been a longtime collaborator with Kaqjay Moloj and their Comunidad Kaqchikel de Investigación (Kaqchikel Research Community), a group of Kaqchikel students of anthropology, archaeology, and history who propose alternative methodologies for engaging in archaeological-based research by centralizing community narratives. Their environment within Cerritos Asunción necessitated an alternative approach to the archive, given that people lived among ancient objects in their day-to-day life. Stones, figurines, pottery fragments, and other artifacts were commonly found in people's backyards as they maintained their land for farming, construction, and living.

Kaqjay Moloj also runs the Kaqjay Community Museum, which was founded by and for the community to better understand and maintain their local historical memory and culture. Their first two exhibitions, in the late 2000s, featured portrait photographs of people killed during the Guatemalan civil war (1960-1996) and documentation of daily life in Patzicía between 1940 and 1980. The goals of the exhibitions were to bring people together across generations and activate collective memory. For Kaqjay, “the idea of collectivity transcends time and territory, since its thinking and notions are based in a permanent connection with communities of the present and the past.”³⁹ In contrast with the institutional archives described in the first half of this chapter, the connections that are fostered between archival materials and people in Patzicía are not framed as temporary hauntings. Instead, there is a focus on embodied practices that benefit the community outside of exhibitions and institutions.

By nature, institutional archives are typically confined materials to particular locations, which facilitates ghostly encounters with the past. Meanwhile, the ancient objects in Cerritos

³⁹ FIEBRE Ediciones, “KAQJAY MOLOJ: El museo como idea,” in *KAQJAY (2006-////)* by Carla Lamoyi, ed. (FIEBRE Ediciones, 2018), 9.

Asunción were and are scattered throughout the village that was built alongside the archaeological site, Kaqjay. People often took these objects into their homes, decorating them and incorporating them into daily rituals, maintaining their spiritual use and value. According to Kaqjay, even though traditional archaeologists and archivists might consider this treatment inappropriate they are objects that are carefully maintained with respect by the families in Cerritos Asunción, and the community perceives these objects to be inseparable from their land, history, and culture.⁴⁰

The Kaqchikel believe these objects carry *k'u'x*:

k'u'x has been translated as soul, center, essence, heart. *K'u'x* is understood to be a vital force or energy possessed by all beings (humans, objects, animals, plants, mountains), like the heart that defines and gives life to the being. Every ancient object contains *k'u'x*, and it is inherent within it.⁴¹

With *k'u'x*, uncovering ancient objects is not framed as an interaction between the dead and the living because the objects already contain this living energy, which in turn makes them interlocutors and active participants in the present and the future. Therefore, ancient objects are understood as having been created in the distant past but not necessarily belonging to it. The past is conceptualized as a time that can continuously be accessed and interacted with.

Conclusion

Archives are pertinent to Central American and diasporic communities attempting to hold on to memories of violence and displacement in a social environment that encourages their forgetting. There exists a tension between Central Americans and institutional archives due to the

⁴⁰ Comunidad Kaqchikel de Investigación, “OBJETO ANTIGUO: diversas narrativas sobre el pasado de Cerritos Asunción y Kaqjay,” in *KAQJAY, (2006-////)* Carla Lamoyi, ed. (FIEBRE Ediciones, 2018), 114.

⁴¹ Comunidad Kaqchikel de Investigación, “OBJETO ANTIGUO,” 84.

forces of exclusion and dispossession embedded in the construction of state archives. On the one hand, Central Americans and diaspora have been engaging with these archives in an effort to intervene and interject with their own histories. In an art historical sense, the framing of archival engagement in contemporary art is also centered around institutional archives, written documents, photographs, and videos. However, the original sources are limited in what they can offer, and that is why, on the other hand, marginalized communities also reject traditional archival practices and engage in their own active process of writing and producing knowledge for themselves. Rather than centering death and absence, Indigenous Mayan archives and epistemologies celebrate living embodiment practices that aid in the transmission of knowledge and culture to future generations. In contemporary Central American and diaspora art, Maya artists and creatives are at the forefront of articulating and practicing alternative forms of archival engagement. As the next chapter will discuss, the collaborative efforts of Kaqjay Moloj and Beatriz Cortez visualize transnational solidarity and the transition from chasing dead archives to embracing living objects in U.S. Central American art.

Chapter 2: Witnessing Archives and *Armadura para Rufina Amaya* (2014)

Introduction

Following the end of the civil war, the Salvadoran government made a considerable effort to cultivate a sense of national identity and belonging among the transnational migrant population that had been displaced by the armed conflict. This connection/re-connection was achieved by promoting narratives that placed the civil war firmly in an inaccessible *past*, no longer to be dwelled upon or thought about as society progressed forward into the future.⁴² However, hopeful speeches and tourist initiatives did little to provide a sense of closure for the victims of the war and their families. Counternarratives, including the testimonies collected by the Truth Commission and human rights organizations as evidence for trials against the perpetrators of violence, challenge the historical amnesia perpetuated by the state. Combining historical documents with embodied experiences and visual aesthetics supports an affective form of archival engagement that communicates the layered processes of trauma and healing.⁴³

This chapter is about one of Beatriz Cortez's earlier steel sculptures and installations, *Armadura para Rufina Amaya* (Armor for Rufina Amaya). This work illustrates the application of archival reconstruction and haunted encounters in contemporary art. Inspired by the Mozote massacre survivor, Rufina Amaya, the artwork *Armadura* immortalizes testimonies of violence that were ignored and outright denied by government authorities during the civil war. Cortez

⁴² Susan Bibler Coutin recalls conversations with embassy staff who commented on improving the "institutional image" of El Salvador and a 2002 speech by then Salvadoran Vice President Carlos Quintanilla Schmidt who stated, "[the civil war] is part of a history that, though it is a tragic history, is one that should not make us look toward the past but we should look to that future we have in front of us." Quoted in Bibler Coutin, "Re/membering the Nation," 814.

⁴³ A. Naomi Paik argues that "aesthetic works of testimony," that is, creative works born from testimonial experiences have the capacity to communicate concepts and evoke feelings that are difficult to convey through words alone. A. Naomi Paik, "Residues of Rightlessness: Ghosts and the Afterlife of Internment," in *Rightlessness: Testimony and Redress in U.S. Prison Camps since World War II* (University of North Carolina Press, 2016).

translates traditional archival materials, such as photographs and death records, as well as the more embodied actions by Rufina Amaya, who spent years sharing her story and recounting the events of the massacre for a wide range of audiences, into an audiovisual experience. I argue that Cortez established a dialogue between archive, testimony, and installation art and created a space for viewers to witness, reflect, and heal. The first section of this chapter provides context for the El Mozote massacre, which is followed by an analysis and interpretation of the installation, *Armadura para Rufina Amaya*, by Beatriz Cortez. The last section engages critically with Indigenous histories and archival practices in El Salvador.

2.1 Context

Understanding the context of state-sponsored violence and displacement that took place during the Salvadoran civil war is important for this installation; however, beyond the macrostructural forces, it is also essential to highlight survival, resilience, and the efforts of individuals to challenge national erasure and disavowal.

The massacre in El Mozote occurred on December 11th, 1981, one day after the Atlacatl Battalion entered the village of El Mozote in the Department of Morazán and detained all of its inhabitants. The battalion proceeded to systematically torture and execute hundreds of the village residents and hundreds more in the surrounding areas, totaling over 1,000, the majority of which were women and children.⁴⁴ Salvadoran authorities denied there was a massacre and refused to

⁴⁴ Leigh Binford cites “1,061 [bodies] identified as of the summer of 2012,” in Leigh Binford, *The El Mozote Massacre: Human Rights and Global Implications Revised and Expanded Edition* (University of Arizona Press, 2016), 222.

investigate, later stating that no records of that time existed, despite witness testimony and physical evidence from the bodies left behind.⁴⁵

By mid-January, reports of the massacre had spread from FMLN radio, and U.S. journalists from the *New York Times* and the *Washington Post*, including photojournalist Susan Meiselas, were invited in to cover the story. Meanwhile, U.S. authorities insisted that they could not verify anything for certain. In a memorandum from the U.S. Embassy in El Salvador, redacted individuals simply did not believe and outright denied that a massacre had occurred (**Figure 1**). On January 30th, 1982, a month and a half after the initial event, officers from the U.S. Embassy were sent to the area to investigate, and based on evidence collected from around the area (not the specific community) they concluded that: El Mozote was guerilla “infested,” and therefore susceptible to violence; there could have been civilian casualties, but there was “no evidence” of excessive force used by the military; there was no more than 300 inhabitants in the “entire” canton, so FMLN reports of 700-1000 had to be “highly exaggerated;” and that the military unit responsible had yet to be identified.⁴⁶

There was one survivor from El Mozote, Rufina Amaya (1943-2007), who, in spite of the pain and terror, rose to the challenge of doing rounds of interviews, guiding tours through El Mozote, pushing for a court case, and advocating for justice for her community. Her memory lives on through Beatriz Cortez’s installation *Armadura para Rufina Amaya* (Armor for Rufina Amaya) and *La Multitud* (The Multitude), first exhibited at the Orange County Center for

⁴⁵ United Nations, Commission on the Truth for El Salvador, “From Madness to Hope: the 12-year war in El Salvador: Report of the Commission on the Truth for El Salvador,” UN Document no. S/25500 (1993): 114-120.

⁴⁶ Embassy press release quoted in Binford, *The El Mozote Massacre*, 59-68.

Contemporary Art (January 25-February 22, 2014) and later at the Museum of Art in El Salvador (MARTE) in 2017.

2.2 Installation Elements

Armadura para Rufina Amaya (**Figure 2** and **Figure 3**) is a steel sculpture, welded into the shape of a dress and apron, commonly worn by *campesina* (peasant) women. It references a photograph of Rufina Amaya taken by Susan Meiselas in early January 1982 (**Figure 4**) and transforms her simple dress into hardened armor. Cortez explained how she watched Rufina Amaya's testimony online and wanted to make a steel dress, "to protect her...even though a suit of armor cannot traverse time nor space."⁴⁷ Kency Cornejo reads the sculpture as protection for Amaya's history and memory, as well as the thousands of victims who could not be recovered. Through the installation, she argues, Cortez honors victims of violence without resorting to graphic, objectifying images of bodies and remains because the focus is the image of a living Rufina.⁴⁸

Nonetheless, the second element to the installation, Meiselas' original photograph on display nearby, materializes the dead archive. Published alongside Amaya's obituary in 2007, it is the image most people associate with her life and her death. The photograph emphasizes the preservation of the past by preserving the subject, who was certainly still in mourning at the

⁴⁷ Simón Vega, Curator, "'Donde Hubo Fuego...': Arte Contemporáneo de El Salvador, 2003-2017," in *DIÁLOGOS en el arte Salvadoreño 1900-2017* (Museo de Arte de El Salvador, 2018), 48.

⁴⁸ Cornejo, "US Central Americans," 16-17.

time, in a state of quiet stillness that feels distant through a black and white lens.⁴⁹ Cortez then takes this archival representation and transforms it into a living object and experience.

The final part of Cortez's installation is a sound installation called *La Multitud*.⁵⁰ Two voices alternate in whispering the names of the dead victims of El Mozote, one by one. The whispers start to overlap and repeat, and after a few minutes, it becomes more difficult to hear individual names as the layered voices grow more overwhelming. "Child" is repeated many times; Cortez explains that because all the adults were killed, there was no way to identify the names of all the children—including the infants—so, where their bones were counted but no name recorded she dubs them as "child" in recognition.⁵¹ As the overlapping voices in the background intensify, the result is ambient noise reminiscent of a forest, or jungle, filled with swarming cicadas, frogs, and the sounds of nature common in rural El Salvador. Visitors to El Mozote after the massacre described encounters with "thousands" of fireflies and grasshoppers, whose sight and sound created a surreal, overwhelming atmosphere.⁵² Over the course of the nine minute audio, listeners are made to understand the ambience of a place that experienced horrific violence.

The subterranean, a return to the earth, and decomposition are themes Cortez has explored in other projects. In *La Multitud*, this theme comes across in reference to the dead and

⁴⁹ For more on the association between photography and death, see: Alberto Ribas-Casadayas and Amanda L. Peterson, eds., *Espectros: Ghostly Hauntings in Contemporary Transhispanic Narratives* (Bucknell University Press, 2016): 133-135.

⁵⁰ The audio can be accessed on the artist's website: <https://beatrizcortez.com/armor-for-rufina-amaya/>.

⁵¹ Beatriz Cortez and Candice Lin, "A World Not Meant for Us: Conversation between Beatriz Cortez and Candice Lin," *X-tra: Contemporary Art Quarterly* 22, no. 2 (2019): 71-72.

⁵² Binford, *The El Mozote Massacre*, 197-198.

decomposing bodies left behind in El Mozote. After the massacre, the soldiers left the bodies unburied and set fire to the buildings, erasing the village's existence, forcefully returning it to a “natural” state.⁵³ *La Multitud* mimics a natural-sounding environment through unnatural means (audio manipulation), which might be compared to the village’s violent, unnatural silencing; however, the whispering voices remind listeners that the dead are still present. In layering the voices on top of one another, Cortez does not seek to homogenize the victims, but to deliver the impact of what hundreds of dead spirits sound like. It is because the sounds are all distinct names that the result is disjointed, eerie, and haunting. Cortez is successful in giving the dead a voice to disrupt the present and the listener’s experience, subverting the forced silence of the past.

2.3 Archival Transformation

The combination of the sound installation alongside the visuals of the steel sculpture can have a profound effect on visitors, acting as vehicles for both transformation and transportation. This installation lays the groundwork for archival engagement that honors life, memory, and the continuation of struggles against injustice. Though Amaya may have passed, trials and investigations into the perpetrators of war crimes were ongoing when this piece was installed at MARTE.⁵⁴ The armor is still necessary to protect the memories of those who are still seeking justice and whom history tried to forget. From Los Angeles to San Salvador, the events of El Mozote and Rufina Amaya’s strength and dedication can be seen and heard through the installation.

⁵³ UN, “From Madness to Hope,” 116.

⁵⁴ Cortez and Lin, “A World,” 66 n4, 70.

The nature of armor is to protect, and made of steel, *Armadura* can certainly withstand the test of time. The texture of the manipulated steel gives the illusion of actual fabric: the apron is wrinkled where it cinches in at the waist and ties into a bow at the back (**Figure 5**), the pockets appear stitched on, and rivets double as little buttons. This sculpture looks like a dress that can be worn. There is a delicacy to the treatment of the steel as fabric, but rather than conjuring images of fragility, viewers can visualize the strength of its wearer, whether it be Rufina, survivors of violence, or even themselves. The emptiness of this vessel encourages viewers to embody Rufina's grief as well as her strength. With *La Multitud* as the soundtrack that transports listeners to the environment of the massacre, the *Armadura* transforms the archive of Rufina's memory from photographs and newspaper clippings into an embodied experience a viewer can partake in.

Art historian and critic Claire Bishop defines installation art by the presupposition of an “embodied viewer” whose senses are fully engaged with an artwork.⁵⁵ Immersion is a sensory experience that includes rooms plunged in darkness, or full of mirrors, or overwhelming and hypnotic sounds like *La Multitud*. The repetitive quality and lack of discernment in the disembodied voices in *La Multitud* influences the viewer to lose their sense of self, similar to meditation or hypnosis, and in doing so, allow themselves to be fully immersed within the installation. This decentered state facilitates the transfer of messages and memories, allowing the viewer to embody the weight of Rufina Amaya's trauma.

As previously mentioned, there is a haunted, spectral element to this experience. Amaya's archival portrait, the disembodied voices, and the empty armor contribute to the presence of death that haunts the installation. However, as a sensory experience, the installation transmits

⁵⁵ Claire Bishop, *Installation Art: A Critical History* (Tate Publishing, 2005), 6.

memory to living participants, evoking the feeling as if Rufina or another guide were actively sharing the story of the massacre.

Furthermore, in 2019, *Armadura para Rufina Amaya* featured in Cortez's artist project, *The Underworld*. In a pair of stereoscopic slides (**Figure 6**), an image of the sculpture from behind can be seen overlooking a landscape of black lava rocks and green hills. In the slide, titled "Armor for Rufina Amaya over Imagined Black Lava Field Where the Town of El Mozote Once Was," Cortez describes the armor as a wandering entity visiting the remains of the massacre in El Mozote. Using a stereoscope device, viewers are able to see the slides as a three-dimensional image, transporting them into the environment arranged by the artist.⁵⁶ Once again, a dress that stands empty yet is capable of traveling across different landscapes and witnessing the aftermath of violence without a wearer evokes the feeling of a haunted object. Here, the sculpture takes on a life of its own, performing and teaching viewers about El Mozote as Rufina had done for years following the massacre. Cortez's inclusion of the armor in these images highlights the mobility of her sculptural works. Despite the initial claim that a suit of armor cannot traverse time and space, Cortez made it possible for her artwork to move and embody memory in ways that encourage viewers to do the same by curating environments and experiences to complement static images and written documents.

2.4 Embodied Histories of the War

There is another aspect to El Mozote and the testimony of Rufina Amaya that warrants more attention within this discussion of archives and embodied knowledge. While the initial

⁵⁶ Instructions and a cut-out model for making a "3D viewer"/stereoscope are included in the magazine where this project was published. See Beatriz Cortez, "The Underworld," *X-TRA Contemporary Art Quarterly* 22, no. 2 (2019): 46-61.

installation by Beatriz Cortez engaged with traditional archival materials in ways that sought to critique and disrupt institutional narratives and preserve historical memory, as is often the formula behind archival art, the additional detail about Cortez watching videos of Rufina Amaya underlies elements of engagement with the repertoire that has yet to be examined. To be clear, the videos on YouTube of Rufina Amaya's interviews are not necessarily the subject of my interest, though they remain incredibly important digital resources.⁵⁷ It is Rufina Amaya and her memory, the orality of her advocacy, and her legacy that is survived by plays, operas, and international art exhibitions that come to encapsulate alternative archival work.

Armadura does not only transform dead archives, it engages with living embodiments, acts of testimony, and advocacy that are also intrinsically tied to the work. Through an audiovisual experience, Cortez makes witnesses out of viewers. Floridalma Boj Lopez, Diana Taylor, and Silvia Rivera Cusicanqui recount examples of testimonies, specifically Indigenous testimonies from survivors of massacres, as performances.⁵⁸ Through these performances, trauma and memory are transmittable, making witnesses out of the audience. Rufina Amaya shared her story countless times, guided visitors through El Mozote, testified for the Truth Commission, and spoke at protests and vigils, nationally and internationally. Local guides also took up roles in performance for visitors, who ranged from school and church tours to international solidarity

⁵⁷ Footage of interview with Rufina Amaya in 1996 was published by the Museo de la Palabra y la Imagen (MUPI) in 2014: "Jorge Ramos entrevista a Rufina Amaya 'El Mozote,'" posted by Museo de la Palabra y la Imagen "MUPI," YouTube, 7:46, <https://youtu.be/9zMPRWpyUSU?si=vGapVCgLOTYin6Kw>. More archival footage of Rufina Amaya and MUPI's digital collection can be accessed through Archivo Mesoamericano: <https://archivomesoamericano.org/collections/pz50gw084>.

⁵⁸ *Sentado en un árbol caído*, written by Emanuel S. Loarca and performed by Manuel Chitay, based on the testimony of Jesús Tecú Osorio of the 1982 Río Negro massacres in Rabinal, Baja VeraPaz, Guatemala in Boj Lopez, *Indigenous Archives*, 1-2. *Contrael viento* written and performed by the theater collective Yuyachkani, based on the 1986 massacre at Soccos, Ayacucho, Peru in Taylor, *The Archive and the Repertoire*, 190-191. The 1974 Massacre of the Valley in Cochabamba, Bolivia in Rivera Cusicanqui, *Sociología de la imagen*, 76-77.

groups.⁵⁹ Ethics of tourism aside, this manner of memory transference and witnessing illustrates the repertoire at work. The immersive audiovisual experience of Cortez's installation makes witnesses out of viewers by recalling Amaya's legacy and testimony.

In situating the role of "external agents" in organizing and pursuing justice for El Mozote, anthropologist Leigh Binford reiterates points made in the previous chapter; that it was because survivors and key witnesses to the massacre *chose* to join local and international organizational efforts, with all of their economic and political resources, that any progress was made towards justice.⁶⁰ People's oral testimonies were critically important to the institutions that helped to transcribe, videotape, and document the testimonies and submit them as evidence for the legal case. As Taylor suggested, the traditional archive and the repertoire work with and complement each other; however, given how focused institutions have been on traditional written archives, it is especially pertinent to center the repertoire of embodied experiences and re-focus on the life of survivors. The emphasis on life, rather than death, is another way Cortez's installation transforms archival engagement to strengthen connections with present and future generations.

Additionally, the landscape, demographics, and history of dispossession in Morazán are also relevant to the discussion of Indigeneity and engagement with Indigenous archives in El Salvador. El Mozote is located near the northern edge of the Morazán Department. It is no coincidence that Morazán is within a historically underdeveloped, rural area, dubbed "the forgotten land."⁶¹ Molly Todd conducted most of her research with the refugees, who were

⁵⁹ Binford, *The El Mozote Massacre*, 217-221.

⁶⁰ Binford, *The El Mozote Massacre*, 237.

⁶¹ La Prensa Gráfica quoted in Todd, *Beyond Displacement*, 16.

forgotten by official records, in the areas along the northern border of El Salvador with Honduras. Rufina Amaya, too, was among the many civilians from Morazán who fled to the UNHCR refugee camp in Colomoncagua, Honduras. It is also where the highest percentage of Indigenous-identifying people in the country live, according to 2024 census data.⁶²

Indigenous Salvadoran perspectives are almost never centered in discourse over historical events, not explicitly. As a consequence of rampant repression and violence, the myth of *mestizaje*, or the idea that the country has reached a fully homogenized population without ethnic divisions, persists, making it difficult to identify non-mestizo narratives.⁶³ The events of El Mozote have been compared in violence and scale to the 1932 Matanza of Nahua-Pipil Salvadorans and Amaya was compared to Maya K'iche' activist Rigoberta Menchú for their testimonies of survival, and yet, ethnicity is not considered to be a factor of the violence.⁶⁴ What happened in Morazán was not an isolated event within the broader colonial history of the state; institutional neglect and disavowal towards Indigenous populations played a role in how

⁶² According to the 2024 census, 1.2% of the total population of El Salvador, or 68, 148 people, identifies as Indigenous. 4.4% of the Department of Morazán identifies as Indigenous, with 74.6% of those people belonging to the Kakawira community in Cacaopera (about twenty miles south of El Mozote). However, it should be noted that national censuses tend to be inconsistent and Indigenous activist groups and UN affiliated agencies have estimated that there are roughly 500,000-600,000 Indigenous people in El Salvador, or at least 10% of the population. For the 2024 Census see Banco Central de Reserva de El Salvador, “VII Censo de Población y Vivienda El Salvador 2024,” accessed July 11, 2025, <https://censo2024.bcr.gob.sv/wp-content/uploads/tablas-geoportal/presentacion-nacional-resultados-censo-poblacion-vivienda-el-salvador-2024.pdf>
See also, Virginia Q. Tilley, *Seeing Indians: A Study of Race, Nation, and Power in El Salvador* (University of New Mexico Press, 2005), 171; and Robin Maria DeLugan, *Reimagining National Belonging: Post-Civil War El Salvador in a Global Context* (University of Arizona Press, 2012), 70.

⁶³ In the decades following the Matanza, the national census got rid of the race category altogether, and birth records stopped recording race by the 1950s. These omissions allowed the state to claim a majority mestizo population with little proof, and the assertion that only communists were targeted and killed during the uprisings allowed the state to claim that the nation had been mestizo, or at least without ethnic divisions, for much longer than was accurate. Tilley, *Seeing Indians*, 170 & 179.
For more discussion on the misinterpretation of census data and *mestizaje* in the Central American context, see also Jeffrey L. Gould, “‘¡Vana Ilusión!’ The Highlands Indians and the Myth of Nicaragua Mestiza, 1880-1925,” *The Hispanic American Historical Review* 73, no. 3 (1993): 393-429.

⁶⁴ Binford, *The El Mozote Massacre*, 192, 199, 222.

conflicts and their outcomes are perceived by the state and its citizens. My purpose in including this context is not to ascribe Indigeneity to swaths of people who do not identify with it, but at the same time I do not want to dismiss the fact that, during the civil war, the military intentionally targeted Indigenous community members and massacred campesinos who fell under the category of “subversive.”⁶⁵ Acknowledging the severity of the harm that has come to both Indigenous and non-Indigenous identifying communities, due in large part to the effects of colonialism, ensures that the absence of Salvadoran Indigeneity in historical discourse is not normalized. Despite a lack of official documentation on the matter, whether they are dispossessed migrants or survivors of massacres, embodied knowledge has been and continues to be valuable to marginalized rural, campesino, and Indigenous communities in El Salvador.⁶⁶ Examining archives provides an opportunity to uncover truths, get closure, and understand history. As an artist, Beatriz Cortez takes these archives and experiences and translates them for different audiences.

Conclusion

On the surface, *Armadura para Rufina Amaya* is a ghostly encounter with a dead archive but recentering the role of testimony and embodied knowledge in Rufina’s story highlights

⁶⁵ The Truth Commission reported on the case of “El Junquillo,” where, in March 1981, the military killed several families in Cacaopera, Morazán. Furthermore, in the case of “Las Hojas,” the Jaguar Battalion entered the Las Hojas cooperative of the Asociación Nacional de Indígenas (ANIS) in Sonsonate with a list of alleged subversives who they identified, arrested, and executed on February 22, 1983. United Nations, “From Madness to Hope,” 67-69; 76-80.

⁶⁶ Mneesha Gellman’s interviewees described seeing Indigenous-associated practices, such as ritual sacrifices to maintain water sources, while stationed in rural regions of the country. Gellman, “Cultural Erosion,” 159. Also, Alicia María Siu was told about a special task force of guerilla warriors who could interpret dreams to form battle strategies and predict enemy movements. Alicia María Siu, “The Coloniality of Violence in the 1932 Massacre of the Pipil and Art for Healing,” (M.A. Thesis, University of California, Davis, 2010), ProQuest (1493707), 32. See also, Adela Arriola, “Indigenous Visuality in El Salvador, Past and Present: El Indio, Atlacatl (1921) by Valentín Estrada and Timeless Warriors (2010) by Alicia María Siu,” *Hemisphere: Visual Cultures of the Americas* 17, no. 1 (2026): 28-52.

archiving for collective memory across borders and generations. Cortez's consideration for both historical documents and oral testimony in the execution of her installation work illustrates how the archive, the repertoire, and the visual arts operate together to create an opportunity for viewers to learn about history and feel it, too. Cortez's commitment to exposing buried histories is both a confrontational gesture towards institutional neglect and an invitation to her migrant and diaspora communities to remember and engage with the past to shape the future.

Throughout her artistic career, Cortez has continued to bring attention to issues affecting marginalized communities in Latin America, the United States, and beyond, whether by homing in on events, like the Mozote Massacre, or historical processes, like labor exploitation and migration. She has been particularly committed to incorporating Indigenous epistemologies and visual aesthetics in her sculpture works since *Armadura*. The Indigenous influences in this installation are much more subtle and require a deeper consideration for the history of Indigenous repression and marginalization in El Salvador, but embodied memories and storytelling are clearly valuable mediums. While there is still work to be done in terms of recognition and support for Indigenous communities in El Salvador, across the Río Paz, in Guatemala, Maya epistemes are at the forefront of decolonial art practice in Central America.

Chapter 3: Paradigm Shifts and *El Altar de Kaqjay* (2021)

Introduction

The year after *Armadura para Rufina Amaya*, Beatriz Cortez created her first collaborative work with Kaqjay Moloj, *La máquina de la fortuna* (The Fortune Telling Machine) (2015). Focused on Kaqchikel memory and language, *La máquina* is an interactive sculpture that is programmed to print a prediction for the future written in Kaqchikel, Spanish, and English. The predictions were sourced from members of the Kaqjay community. Their messages acknowledge the painful history of genocide while manifesting the continuity of their community into the future.⁶⁷ As an archive of both violence and survival, *La máquina* promotes healing, hope, and strength among the Kaqchikel community. It also demonstrates continuity and development within Cortez's body of work, translating the archive into an experience that premises healing and futurity.

The following chapter is an analysis of Cortez's collaboration with Kaqjay Moloj and FIEBRE Ediciones, *El Altar de Kaqjay* (The Altar of Kaqjay), which is based on Kaqchikel epistemology and notions of k'u'x. This collaboration demonstrates a departure from traditional, institutional archives in favor of Indigenous strategies for remembering and transmitting knowledge. Representing a stone altar that was found inside a home in Patzicía, Guatemala, the different mobile elements of the installation *Objeto Antiguo* (Ancient Object) encourage viewers to share space with Maya knowledge systems that have survived centuries of colonization. I argue that *El Altar* invites viewers to contemplate connected experiences across distances and temporalities and form their own bonds to Indigenous paradigms, a process which Cortez

⁶⁷ A list of the messages can be found on the artists website: <https://beatrizcortez.com/the-fortune-teller-machine/>.

embodies as artist and scholar in her later works based on the Ilopango volcanic eruption. The first two sections of this chapter break down *El Altar*'s conception and presentation in U.S. exhibitions and offer a visual and material analysis of the installation elements. This is followed by an examination of themes and issues raised during the exhibitions and the notion that the same artwork could convey different yet connected messages in different contexts. The final section investigates Beatriz Cortez's independent application of k'u'x and Indigenous epistemology to a Salvadoran landscape.

3.1 Exhibitions

In 2021, *El Altar de Kaqjay* was installed in the group exhibition “Intergalactix: against isolation/*contra el aislamiento*” (May 15 - Aug 14, 2021) presented by Los Angeles Contemporary Exhibitions (LACE) in Hollywood, California (**Figure 7**). The installation, collectively referred to as *Objeto Antiguo* (Ancient Object), was a collaborative project between Cortez, Kaqjay Moloj, and FIEBRE Ediciones, who had previously worked together on a publication about Kaqjay Moloj's research, community projects, and creative practices since the collective's inception in 2006.

Each element of the installation—consisting of a steel sculpture, small stone figurines, a paper cutout of the altar, and printed takeaways with instructions for constructing an altar at home—was conceptualized and designed together by the collaborators, with each contributing their own specialty to execute the full concept. The paper cutout on the wall and the printed handouts were produced by FIEBRE Ediciones from Mexico (**Figure 8**). Smaller altars with figures carved from stone and clay placed on straw mats along the edges of the room were created by Kaqjay in Guatemala (**Figure 9**). *El Altar*, the sculpture, was constructed in Cortez's L.A. workshop from sheets of steel.

For each collaborator, the installation represented different, yet connected ideas: members of Kaqjay Moloj and the Comunidad Kaqchikel de Investigación highlighted the concept of narrative agency and the right of Indigenous communities to investigate, construct, and interpret their own histories, FIEBRE Ediciones also discussed countering hegemonic narratives by mobilizing knowledge through publications and materials that can travel as extensions of the original, and finally, Beatriz Cortez underscored themes of migration, memory, and the shared experiences that transcend time and space with her time machine.⁶⁸ At its core, the sculpture communicates solidarity, alterity, and shared cultural memory in Latin America and its diaspora.

In 2025, *El Altar de Kaqjay* was installed at the Americas Society (**Figure 10**) for “Beatriz Cortez x rafa esparza: Earth and Cosmos” (January 29 - May 17, 2025), a joint exhibition between Beatriz Cortez and rafa esparza, another longtime collaborator. The themes presented in “Intergalactix,” concerning solidarity and connection in opposition to isolation were expanded upon in “Earth and Cosmos,” which focused on the displacement of people, objects, ideas, and memories. This recent show situates contemporary migration and notions of disruption and inaccessibility in conversation with centuries of historical processes in Latin America. More details about this exhibition are provided in later sections of this chapter. First, I will focus on the sculpture’s inception for the “Intergalactix” exhibition.

Altar 1 of Cakhay

The concept behind *El Altar* is based on a stone altar found inside a home in Cerritos Asunción, Patzicía, Guatemala in 2002 (**Figure 11**). Recreating the stone altar in different forms

⁶⁸ Kaqjay Moloj (Edgar Esquit, Ixmukané Choy and Edie Tocón), FIEBRE Ediciones (Carla Lamoyi and Antonio Medina), and Beatriz Cortez, “Objeto Antiguo SOMA 7/21 (English),” moderated by LACE Chief Curator Daniela Lieja Quintanar, July 21, 2021, posted November 3, 2021, by LACE, YouTube, 1:55:39, <https://youtu.be/gdbEhqN4ps0?si=xzdOjnJbKd59XZds>.

is grounded in the Kaqchikel concept of *k'u'x*, an energy that flows across time and space, connecting to all versions of itself.⁶⁹ As such, ancient objects are understood as having value and presence across temporalities. The reproductions of ancient objects for the installation visualize and physically manifest the idea of living objects and the idea that ancient objects should remain in their place, while ideas and memories are able to travel. *El Altar* has been described as a “time machine,” situated in an exhibition space designed to evoke reflections about the past, present, and future at once.

In 2010, Cortez and a group of colleagues and students from Cal State Northridge were invited by Kaqjay Moloj to visit Patzicía.⁷⁰ There, they had the opportunity to view the stone altar, dubbed *Altar 1* by the archaeologist José Benítez. The altar was discovered by a local, Don Julián Sirín, on February 21, 2002.

Altar 1 was identified as belonging to the Late Classic Period (600-900 C.E.), and the surrounding site showed evidence of abandonment and resettlement until the Post Classic Period (900-1524 C.E.) suggesting the continued use and spiritual importance of the altar. Its four sides mark the cardinal directions, and it is covered in carvings representing earth, water, and the cosmos.⁷¹ The altar in Don Julián’s house became recognizable for its monumental size and religious significance. According to him, archaeologists attempted to remove it from where it rests on his property, but “the stone didn’t want to leave.”⁷² Ancient objects are perceived to have

⁶⁹ Comunidad Kaqchikel de Investigación, “OBJETO ANTIGUO,” 84.

⁷⁰ Beatriz Cortez, “El Colectivo Kaqjay Moloj: La construcción local de la memoria y el imaginario del futuro,” in *KAQJAY (2006-////)* by Carla Lamoyi, ed. (FIEBRE Ediciones, 2018), 128.

⁷¹ José E. Benítez, “Altar 1 of Cakhay,” *XVII Simposio de Investigaciones Arqueológicas en Guatemala*, ed. J.P. Laporte, B. Arroyo, H. Escobedo y H. Mejía (Museo Nacional de Arqueología y Etnología, Guatemala, 2004), 158.

⁷² Quoted in Cortez, “El Colectivo Kaqjay Moloj,” 131.

their own agency, related to k'u'x, and it is through *richin wi'* (luck) and their will that objects reveal themselves to people.⁷³ There is immense love and care that goes into the maintenance of ancient objects in Cerritos Asunción, and this respect is what constitutes the foundation of a mobile, interactive altar in a contemporary art exhibition.

The language surrounding these objects is also worth noting. Kaqjay calls them *objetos antiguos*, not *ruinas* (ruins) or *reliquias* (relics) which draw attention to what has been destroyed and suggest a pastness that is separate and inaccessible to the present. In the words of Gastón Gordillo, “ruins are objects without afterlife: dead things from a dead past, whose value originates far in time.”⁷⁴ While an “ancient object” is undoubtedly old, recognizing its ancient quality relates to beliefs in ancestral connections and k'u'x. There is an implied connection to the land itself that has been occupied by different people over time and continues to be occupied in the present; there is no sense of an inaccessible past when people are continuously living off the same land as their ancient ancestors.

3.2 Paper, Clay, Steel, and k'u'x

Unpacking each artist's choice in material for the installation elements allows for understanding of their unique take on manifesting k'u'x. Each material—paper, clay, and steel—is specific to a collaborator and can be considered their version of a mobile archive. FIEBRE Ediciones chose to highlight the accessible quality of printed materials, whether taken home from the exhibition or downloaded and printed at home.⁷⁵ Kaqjay Moloj brought mini altars into

⁷³ Comunidad Kaqchikel de Investigación, “OBJETO ANTIGUO,” 82. Cortez, “El Colectivo Kaqjay Moloj,” 131.

⁷⁴ Gastón R. Gordillo, *Rubble: The Afterlife of Destruction* (Duke University Press, 2014), 8.

⁷⁵ The handouts can be found here: https://welcometolace.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/06/objeto_antiguo_online_version.pdf. It was also reproduced in the exhibition Pocket Book

the exhibition space, which represented the continuity of embodied spiritual practices in their community. Beatriz Cortez introduced her classic steel work which formed a time machine, unaffected by natural elements and able to traverse time and space as the embodiment of k'u'x. In an interview with LACE, Cortez suggested this project was an archive of altar, a recording before it weathered.⁷⁶ By definition, k'u'x challenges the notion of dead archives and objects; through installation art, Cortez and her collaborators archive the affective quality and embodied experience of Maya epistemology without extracting and decontextualizing an object.

To start, the printed handouts designed by FIEBRE Ediciones' Carla Lamoyi and Antonio Medina reinforce notions of mobility and transforming the archive from a dead repository into something that can actively and continuously be engaged with. They are not simply archives of the Altar and Kaqjay's stories, it is an activity for viewers to participate in. Similar to Cortez's *The Underworld* project, which included directions for making a stereoscope, the handout for *Objeto Antiguo* contained a template of Altar 1, its three dimensional form translated into a flat material able to be reconstructed through cutting and pasting by the receiver. The full handout is written in three languages, Kaqchikel, English, and Spanish, which makes it more accessible to audiences in and outside of the Kaqjay community without privileging colonial languages or excluding Indigenous voices. The text includes the context of Altar 1 and Kaqjay's mission. Although it is partially a written document, it is not meant to be buried among records; it is publicly available for download and printing on the gallery's website. The handout connects the audience to the artwork and the meaning of k'u'x.

for "Earth and Cosmos," found here: <https://www.as-coa.org/articles/beatriz-cortez-x-rafa-esparza-earth-and-cosmos-pocket-book>.

⁷⁶ Kaqjay Moloj, FIEBRE Ediciones, and Beatriz Cortez, "Objeto Antiguo."

The next part of the installation builds on the notion of ritual practices as mobile archives. In the LACE exhibition, clay figures were placed on woven mats along the wall of the exhibition like miniature altars. The figures were made in Guatemala by Kaqjay Moloj and traveled to Los Angeles with the help of a team member. These little altars mirror how the community members of Cerritos Asunción revere their found objects. Kaqjay Moloj argues that the finding and keeping of ancient objects, as it happens in the village compared to archaeological sites, is how families establish new relationships with their ancestors and the history of the community as a whole.⁷⁷ For Kaqjay, creating their own ritual objects challenges the notion that objects extracted from their place of origin and put on display are the only viable way to engage with Maya spirituality and knowledge. They highlight the continuity of traditions by and for contemporary communities, not just their ancient counterparts.

The rest of the gallery room was transformed into an immersive ritual encounter. Both exhibitions at LACE and Americas Society featured a layer of pine needles on the floor during the opening as a part of a ceremonial welcome for the altar and related objects. At LACE, one wall was adorned with an image of candles lit around Altar 1 in Patzicía, and next to it, a bookshelf with relevant readings on Maya history and culture, like the Kaqchikel Annals and the Popol Wuj, referred to as the Library of Memory (**Figure 12**).⁷⁸ The spatial design facilitates a learning space for viewers to engage with Maya spirituality, k'u'x, and current issues related to history, archives, and narrative agency. This combination of texts and objects encapsulates

⁷⁷ Comunidad Kaqchikel de Investigación, “OBJETO ANTIGUO,” 82.

⁷⁸ Edgar Esquit Choy organized a similar library with Kaqjay Moloj for the exhibition “Vida y memoria de Patzicía (Life and Memory of Patzicía)” (January-March 2015). He underlined how literacy and the dissemination of knowledge challenges state attempts at censorship and changing narratives that put Indigenous communities at a disadvantage in society. “Vida y memoria de Patzicía,” Kaqjay Moloj, Asociación Comunitaria, Patzicía, accessed May 30, 2026, <https://kaqjay.wordpress.com/>.

Kaqjay and their Kaqchikel Research Community's approach to academic research centering the perspectives of the locals and the integration of traditional archival materials, spiritual practices, and artisanal artmaking in a contemporary art installation.

The centerpiece of *Objeto Antiguo* is Cortez's steel sculpture, *El Altar de Kaqjay*, a steel construction of Altar 1. As explored in the previous chapter and her previous work—inspired by buried bodies, lost histories, and the survival of oral testimony—in conceptualizing *El Altar* with her collaborators, Cortez took inspiration from what lied underneath the surface, people and objects perceived to be lost to the past, yet ultimately persisting. Like *Armadura para Rufina Amaya*, which protects Rufina's legacy in the present and future, this sculpture supports a future where Kaqjay's story, ideas, and legacy are sustained. Her contributions as an interlocutor, academic, and steel artist bolster Kaqjay's vision and Indigenous epistemology that anchors the whole project.

Staged on a floor of pine needles in the LACE exhibition, and on top of a platform of adobe bricks made by rafa esparza in the Americas Society exhibition, the steel sculpture remains rooted to land while creating a visual contrast between processed and unprocessed materials. In an interview with *X-TRA* editor Candice Lin about her artwork, Cortez discusses the significance of the materials she uses in her works, such as plants and steel, and their relation to her interest in the subterranean in multiple projects. Steel is made from iron that is mined from underground, and it is precisely this underground quality that Cortez is drawn to. She expresses her interest in the sacredness of the Underworld,⁷⁹ or *Xibalba* from the Popol Wuj, which

⁷⁹ Cortez and Lin, "A World Not Meant for Us," 71-72.

"indexes that which is subterranean, submerged, or obscured from hegemonic view."⁸⁰ Steel sculptures appear like futuristic machinery on account of the metallic finish and industrial, welded details. For Cortez, steel is a material that communicates both a futurist aesthetic and an ancient, underground quality. Her sculpture visualizes simultaneity, existing in multiple timelines and contexts at once, which explains why her sculptures are often referred to as time machines.

As previously mentioned, the stone altar in Patzicía did not want to move, and as a community, residents and Kaq'jaj did not want their material heritage reduced to an archaeological object for study outside of its context. In order to transcend borders and boundaries, generate dialogues, and recuperate collective memory in the diaspora, the reproductions of the altar in steel and paper form materialize ideas and spirituality in a way that stays true to embodied practices. The steel sculpture, though monumental in size, is able to travel from Cortez's workshop to Hollywood and New York City. Through these showcases, the artwork has the capacity to reach and connect with different audiences as an extension of the stone altar and the memory it carries.

3.3 Deconstruction and Reconstruction

Objeto Antiguo embodies the capacity for multiple, continuous connections to be made across borders and generations of Maya people affected by the prolonged effects of colonialism. Lakota scholar Maria Yellow Horse Brave Heart defines historical trauma as the "cumulative emotional and psychological wounding over a lifespan and across generations."⁸¹ The installation aids in connecting historical trauma to current issues affecting Indigenous

⁸⁰ Fornoff, "The Rio Grande," 387.

⁸¹ Maria Yellow Horse Brave Heart, "The Historical Trauma Response Among Natives and Its Relationship with Substance Abuse: A Lakota Illustration," *Journal of Psychoactive Drugs* 35, no. 1 (2003): 7.

communities which is critically important for the continued survival of culture and traditions among diasporas.

Behind the altar, the gallery wall held the 1:1 scale net of Altar 1 that was reproduced in the handout. As a feature of the installation, the altar's deconstructed state, and suggested reconstruction, parallels migrant and diasporic experiences and supports the overall theme of the exhibition "against isolation" and the separation of people, land, and memories. Historian Andrew Apter posits that historical trauma can be accessed and activated through "ritual archives," that is the repertoire of embodied memories performed during rituals.⁸² In reconstructing an altar once lost to time, and continuously engaging in the reconstruction of this altar, viewers actively participate in the ritualized recovery of embodied memories of Kaqchikel ancestors and their contemporary descendants experiencing disruption and displacement. The installation unlocks an understanding of time that is more cyclical than linear, able to resonate with many peoples and histories at once. It generates a space to reflect and potentially heal from the trauma of displacement because it recognizes that disruption is not experienced in isolation, nor does it signal the end of knowledge, culture, and community.

Working from different countries and disciplines, experiences with migration are what connected the collaborators during their U.S. exhibition.⁸³ People have been and continue to be displaced by ongoing issues in Latin America; migrants face the deconstruction of their identity and personhood to enter and survive in the United States, where communities might eventually be rebuilt. The continuity of cultural practices and connections are especially important for Maya

⁸² Andrew Apter, "Historical Ethnography and the Ritual Archive: The 2024 Jensen Memorial Lectures," *Paideuma* 70 (2024): 158-160.

⁸³ Kaqjay Moloj, FIEBRE Ediciones, and Beatriz Cortez, "Objeto Antiguo."

diaspora, who face structural forces of elimination. Boj Lopez illustrates how mobile archives of Indigeneity challenge the notion that displacement results in the loss of Indigenous culture and identity by centering “continuity, attachment, and genealogy.”⁸⁴ Likewise, FIEBRE Ediciones, Kaqjay Moloj, and Beatriz Cortez use the visual and physical manifestation of Altar 1 to communicate the continuity, mobility, and transference of ideas across time and space with respect to the original land and objects. Their installation challenges the death of objects, practices, and people; it is not about the revival of things that were presumed to be lost to time. Instead, the installation foregrounds the presence of the living and immerses the viewer in a space designed for contemplation and connection. It acknowledges harm that has been done to Indigenous and non-Indigenous communities while valuing human connection, shared understandings, and the capacity to rebuild.

Furthermore, in the conversation with LACE, Kaqjay members Edgar Esquit and Ixmukané Choy revealed that while passing through U.S. customs, Josué, the handler, was detained, and the packed objects were “stabbed” and investigated for contraband. Esquit compared this to the experience of traveling and migrating as an Indigenous person.⁸⁵ There are layers to the violence experienced by Maya and Indigenous migrants in the United States, where Indigenous loss and dispossession have been normalized. Boj Lopez argues that the categorization of Maya migrants as Guatemalan or Latino in the United States erases their Indigenous identity “in order to incorporate these populations into US racial logics that are already premised on settler colonialism and Native elimination.”⁸⁶ With this context and

⁸⁴ Boj Lopez, *Indigenous Archives*, 50.

⁸⁵ Kaqjay Moloj, FIEBRE Ediciones, and Beatriz Cortez, “Objeto Antiguo.”

⁸⁶ Boj Lopez, *Indigenous Archives*, 38.

understanding of U.S. migration and dispossession, Cortez and the curatorial team prioritized the careful recovery and construction of Kaqjay's objects in the exhibition. Once again, these acts demonstrate the capacity for communities to help and heal one another.

3.4 Presenting Ancient Objects

Whereas the theme of the LACE exhibition was countering isolation, the Americas Society exhibition was focused on countering extraction. In this recent exhibition, Cortez expands on the shared experiences of ancient objects and migrants from the Isthmus. In New York, *El Altar* was displayed within the context of displacement and looted artifacts—artifacts that form the core of major museum collections. *El Altar* was presented with dual meanings: one focused on the extension of spiritual practices and connection to ancestral lands, as described above, while the other interpretation explores the agency of objects.⁸⁷

As in many cases throughout Indigenous territories, ancient objects have been removed from Kaqchikel communities, including Kaqjay, and transformed into subjects of study by archaeologists and academics from outside of the community.⁸⁸ Following the extraction of objects, they were then presented at museums and universities as relics of “vanished” cultures, an Indigenous past that had no connection with or continuity from contemporary Indigenous communities.⁸⁹ In presenting her *Altar* in New York, the location of famous institutions with

⁸⁷ Beatriz Cortez and rafa esparza at Americas Society, “Earth and Cosmos: Panel Conversation and Video Screening,” a conversation with Carin Kuoni, Rachel Remick, and Aime Iglesias Lukin, May 6, 2025, posted May 9, 2025, by Art at Americas Society, YouTube, 1:16:10, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Qt0g0XOy2Kc&t=1s>.

⁸⁸ Comunidad Kaqchikel de Investigación, “OBJETO ANTIGUO,” 98-115. See also, Amy Lonetree, *Decolonizing Museums: Representing Native America in National and Tribal Museums*, (University of North Carolina Press, 2012).

⁸⁹ It was a common belief among Guatemalan elites of the nineteenth century that contemporary Mayas were poor, uncivilized, burdens to modern society compared to their glamorous ancestors who once built great structures and

histories of accessioning trafficked artifacts,⁹⁰ Cortez subverts the expectation that you will find uprooted, decontextualized objects in a museum. *El Altar*, alongside other artistic renditions of ancient artifacts, sends the message that those objects are not for institutional consumption, thus emphasizing their absence in the exhibition.⁹¹ Altar 1 is absent from a museum because it remains in its community, but oftentimes, objects are absent from museum displays because they were looted or trafficked and the museum lacks the authority to display them, on top of robbing a community's agency to choose display in the first place.

“Earth and Cosmos” critiques the treatment of Indigenous people and their material culture as dead or belonging to the distant, isolated past. Simultaneously, *El Altar* celebrates the life and traditions of Kaqchikel Maya in Guatemala and the diaspora. Art historian and critic Megan Kindcaid writes, “the artists may not be reanimating the corpse, but instead may be pointing to its already vivid, if entangled, afterlives.”⁹² Rather than trying to replicate the extractive conditions of the past, Cortez and esparza convey respect and solidarity with ongoing Indigenous issues, like repatriation, migration, and structural exclusion.

monuments. Rebecca Earle, “Citizenship and Civilization: The ‘Indian Problem,’” in *The Return of the Native: Indians and Myth-Making in Spanish America, 1810-1930* (Duke University Press, 2007), 167-168.

⁹⁰ Spencer Woodman, Malia Politzer, Delphine Reuter and Namrata Sharma, “More than 1000 artifacts in Metropolitan Museum of Art catalog linked to alleged looting and trafficking figures,” *International Consortium of Investigative Journalists*, March 20, 2023, <https://www.icij.org/investigations/hidden-treasures/more-than-1000-artifacts-in-metropolitan-museum-of-art-catalog-linked-to-alleged-looting-and-trafficking-figures/>.

⁹¹ Other works in this exhibition include rafa esparza's *Hyperspace: -100km + ∞* (2025) and Cortez's *Cabeza de Jaguar (Monumento #47)* (2022) and *Gift of the Artist to the Ancient Object Labeled as Human Head Emerging from Monster Jaws, One Migrant to Another, in Memory of your True Name and your Land* (2023). <https://www.as-coa.org/exhibitions/beatriz-cortez-x-rafa-esparza-earth-and-cosmos>.

⁹² Megan Kincaid, “Beatriz Cortez and rafa esparza,” *Artforum*, May 31, 2025, <https://www.artforum.com/events/beatriz-cortez-rafa-esparza-americas-society-1234731406/>.

The exhibiting artists and curatorial teams displayed *El Altar* in spaces designed to convey themes of collaboration among artists, Indigenous communities, and ancient objects. In response to shifting sociocultural dynamics in the 1990s, Nicolas Bourriaud coined the term *relational aesthetics* to describe “judging artworks on the basis of the inter-human relations which they represent, produce or prompt.”⁹³ Bourriaud maintained that contemporary art should “model,” or embody, alternative worlds/better worlds, and the exhibition space is where an exchange of ideas and knowledge happens.⁹⁴

Beatriz Cortez’s installations at LACE and Americas Society are perhaps the best examples of an embodied world that is shared with viewers. *El Altar* physically manifested Kaqchikel ideas, transnational collaboration, and contemporary Indigenous issues. The model being proposed is one that centers love and respect for people and objects, as well as shared memories and experiences. Perhaps adjacently related to Bourriaud’s critiques of individualism and consumerism, notions of isolation and social division have roots in neoliberal ideology, which shaped institutional structures in the United States and Latin America beginning in the late 1970s. Seeing as how the LACE exhibition was themed around countering isolation, it was the ideal circumstance to facilitate these discussions and foster a community that embraced alterity.

3.5 Archiving Indigeneity in El Salvador: The Stelae Series

As previously mentioned, Cortez and Kaqjay Moloj became acquainted in 2007. In 2015, they collaborated on several projects for the exhibition “Vida y memoria de Patzicía (Life and

⁹³ Nicolas Bourriaud, *Relational Aesthetics*, trans. Simon Pleasance and Fronza Woods with the participation of Mathieu Copeland (Dijon: Les Presses du réel, 2002), 112.

⁹⁴ Bourriaud writes: “learning to inhabit the world in a better way...the role of artworks is no longer to form imaginary and utopian realities, but to actually be ways of living and models of action within the existing real, whatever the scale chosen by the artist.” Bourriaud, *Relational Aesthetics*, 13.

Memory of Patzicía)” (January-March 2015).⁹⁵ Kaqjay describes their collaboration with Cortez as an “exchange [that] permitted...the joint production of diverse types of knowledge and wisdom and the strengthening the organizational processes of these two [Indigenous and non-Indigenous] communities.”⁹⁶ Over the years, Kaqjay and Cortez have been influential to each other, and following their collaboration on the altar piece, Cortez evokes the meaning of k’u’x in her individual artworks exploring Salvadoran-Maya Indigeneity.

Between 2022 and 2024, Cortez created a series of steel monoliths inspired by ancient Maya stelae: *Ilopango, Stela B, 536-2022* (2022), *Ilopango, Stela A* (2022), *Stela Z, after Quiriguá (Contrary Warrior)* (2023), and *Stela XX (Absence)* (2024) (**Figure 13**). Cortez titles the artworks with alphanumerical archaeological naming conventions but subverts traditional methods of organization by naming them out of order (**Figure 14**). The stelae interpret the dissemination, or migration, of dust particles from a cataclysmic event known as the *Tierra Blanca Joven* (young white earth/ash) eruption, whose epicenter was the ancient volcano Ilopango, in what is now Lake Ilopango, El Salvador. Ilopango erupted sometime in the sixth century C.E., encasing the landscape in a layer of ash which is believed to have contributed to the mass disruption and displacement of Maya societies and culture in Mesoamerica.⁹⁷

⁹⁵ The collaborative artworks include *Libro quemado* (Burned Book) and *La máquina de la fortuna* (The Fortune Telling Machine) (2015).

⁹⁶ Original Spanish: “Este intercambio ha permitido compartir formas de organizarnos y de colaborar, producir juntos diversos tipos de conocimientos y de saberes, y fortalecer los procesos organizativos de cada una de estas dos comunidades.” Kaqjay Moloj, “Vida y memoria de Patzicía.”

⁹⁷ The exact date of the eruption is unknown, but geologic studies estimate between 536 and 550 C.E. with more precise estimates claiming 539-540 C.E. Robert A. Dull, et al., “Radiocarbon and geologic evidence reveal Ilopango volcano as source of the colossal ‘mystery’ eruption of 539/40 CE,” *Quaternary Science Reviews* 222 (2019). See also, Robert J. Sharer, et al., “The Prehistory of the Southeastern Maya Periphery,” *Current Anthropology* 15, no. 2 (1974): 172.

Through her steel monuments, Cortez attempts to reconnect with an Indigenous history of El Salvador that has been relegated to an inaccessible past. She applies Indigenous paradigms, like k'u'x and the treatment of land and objects as living beings, in order to access and make accessible a connection to Salvadoran Maya culture that is presumed to have been disrupted.⁹⁸ At the same time, she relates her own migration experiences and the historical trauma of displacement and dispossession to the eruption, illustrating how despite violence and disruption, marginalized communities have persevered and will continue to do so.

Having grown up in the “Land of Volcanoes,” Cortez shares a vested interest in volcanoes and archaeology with Salvadoran artists throughout history, though her consideration for Indigenous ideas is notably contemporary. El Salvador’s National Painting Collection houses two paintings by early twentieth century artist Juan José Laínez (1868-1937), *Lago de Ilopango* and *Ruinas de Izalco* (1908) (**Figure 15** and **Figure 16**). Laínez’s verdant green landscapes project a sense of quiet romanticism for the natural environment of El Salvador, where Ilopango is hidden beneath the surface of the lake and ancient monuments are overcome by overgrown vegetation. These depictions reaffirm a notion of the past that is in the process of being forgotten, submerged in the lake, and buried beneath the ground; they represent archives of the landscapes of yesteryear. In comparison, Cortez’s shiny, futuristic stelae and her monumental volcano sculpture that journeyed its way through the Hudson River remind viewers of an active and mobile Indigenous presence that extends beyond the archeological site.⁹⁹

⁹⁸ For more on Indigenous paradigms, see: Susan A. Miller, “Native America Writes Back: The Origin of the Indigenous Paradigm in Historiography,” *Wicazo Sa Review* 23, no. 2 (2008): 10.

⁹⁹ I am referring to her sculpture and performance *Ilopango, the Volcano that Left* (2023). More information can be found via the Storm King Art Center: <https://collections.stormking.org/Detail/occurrences/206>.

Her interest in Maya visual aesthetics and Salvadoran Maya archaeology can be contextualized by the archives of Indigeneity that are common in El Salvador. In El Salvador, access to information and materials concerning Indigenous cultures was limited until after the civil war, when there was a concerted effort to invest into history and anthropology programs.¹⁰⁰ Virginia Tilley argues that *Mundo Maya* projects incentivized the Salvadoran Institute for Tourism to categorize ancient sites in relation to the Maya to capitalize on Maya tourism in Central America (Guatemala, Honduras, and Belize). Other Salvadoran Indigenous groups were disadvantaged by the hyperfocus on Maya culture and, given the lack of accessible scholarship and material on their own history, activist groups had little other choice but to rely on state-sponsored pamphlets to attempt to reclaim their Indigenous roots.¹⁰¹ This way of thinking can be harmful to the ways in which Indigenous thinkers are trying to establish themselves and identify what works for the survival of their communities. In fact, it is also true that people genuinely resonate with contemporary Maya culture and heritage, with some preferring “Nahua-Pipil-Maya” and “Maya-Lenca” labels and participating in ceremonies led by Maya spiritual leaders from Guatemala, not to mention the resurgence of Maya Poqomam and Ch’orti’ communities in northern El Salvador and those who share cultural traditions with neighboring Indigenous communities in Guatemala and Honduras but do not identify as ethnically Indigenous.¹⁰²

¹⁰⁰ DeLugan, *Reimagining National Belonging*, 53-54.

¹⁰¹ Tilley, *Seeing Indians*, 100-101.

¹⁰² DeLugan, *Reimagining National Belonging*, 78. Tilley, *Seeing Indians*, 101. Brent E. Metz, “Northwestern El Salvador: Can Indigeneity Disappear,” in *Where Did the Eastern Mayas Go? The Historical, Relational, and Contingent Interplay of Ch’orti’ Indigeneity* (University Press of Colorado, 2022), 258, 262, 265. See also, Tilley, “New Help,”; and Robin Maria DeLugan, “Commemorating from the Margins of the Nation: El Salvador 1932, Indigeneity, and Transnational Belonging,” *Anthropological Quarterly* 86, no. 4 (2013): 965-994.

Furthermore, transnational Indigenous movements, particularly the Pan-Maya movement, have defined Indigenous activism and decolonization efforts in Central America since the 1980s. During a Maya chronicles study group, Pan-Mayanist scholar and activist Pakal B'alam suggested that internalizing that Kaqchikels have their own way of knowing, understanding, and relating to others and the world around them was valuable whether or not “true history” could be located within pre-Columbian texts.¹⁰³ In a similar vein, Kaqjay Moloj emphasizes that communal historical narratives are not secondary to national or academic narratives; they are of the same political and cultural importance to the community and beyond it.¹⁰⁴ Indigenous sovereignty—control of their own land, resources, and agency over their historical narratives, which includes material culture and objects that institutions have denied Indigenous communities access to—is a core facet of the Indigenous paradigm.¹⁰⁵ Naturally, recovering and developing Indigenous epistemes in El Salvador is an ongoing process. Engaging with ancient objects, archives, and recalling the past is not necessarily problematic, rather it is a vital step in the recovery process for communities suffering from the effects of colonization. For non-Indigenous observers, there is a risk of romanticizing the past and falling into patterns of ideation, which is why it is important to foreground continuity and confront colonial logics that perpetuate Indigenous obsolescence in order to support affected communities.

Returning to the work of Beatriz Cortez, the stelae series offers a sincere effort to address all of these complexities that accompany discussions of Salvadoran Indigeneity and decolonial

¹⁰³ Pakal B'alam quoted in Kay B. Warren, “Finding Oneself in a Sixteenth-century Chronicle of Conquest,” in *Indigenous Movements and Their Critics* (Princeton University Press, 1998), 149.

¹⁰⁴ Comunidad Kaqchikel de Investigación, “OBJETO ANTIGUO,” 76. For more on community-based history see Giovanni Batz, *The Fourth Invasion: Decolonizing Histories, Extractivism, and Maya Resistance in Guatemala* (University of California Press, 2024).

¹⁰⁵ Miller, “Native America,” 13.

practice. Her sculptures and installations present histories and experiences that are almost too vast for words, putting nearly 1,500 years of human history in conversation with the present to imagine better futures. On one hand, she effectively incorporates Indigenous visuality and epistemology to communicate historical continuity and shared experiences among Indigenous and non-Indigenous communities affected by colonialism. Staging these encounters in the United States also invites conversations about how to contend with disruption and the occupation of land.

On the other hand, it is unclear whether her work addressing Salvadoran Indigeneity directly engages with contemporary Indigenous Salvadorans. The stelae are presented in such a way that people in and outside of El Salvador can relate to and understand; however, the artworks also capture a very specific Salvadoran context. They underline the absence of Indigenous Salvadorans in contemporary decolonial Central American discourse and the reasons why this has been the case for decades while simultaneously putting El Salvador back on the map. The stelae bring attention to one of the most impactful events in pre-Columbian Mesoamerican history, whose epicenter is located in what scholars have dismissed as the “margins” of Indigenous societies, historic and contemporary. In a way, the Ilopango series—which considers the vast range of the Tierra Blanca Joven eruption—recenters El Salvador and provides an opportunity for meaningful discussions about Salvadoran Indigeneity, or lack thereof. Contemporary Indigenous Salvadorans should not be left out of the conversation that involves them but attempts to bridge the gap between their long history and contemporary issues is a start.

Conclusion

Over the course of her career, Beatriz Cortez's artworks, installations, and exhibitions have demonstrated a deep, personal understanding of historical processes and exclusion, from state narratives, archival materials, and art history. The work presented here exemplifies the tension between contemporary art, historical institutions, and community narratives. They focus on the archive, in its many forms and alternatives, while foregrounding Indigenous knowledge and recovery. *El Altar de Kaqjay* indicates a turning point in Cortez's practice. Her commitment to Indigenous epistemology and archival practices that sustain the life of everything, including ancient objects, created an opportunity to recognize her Native El Salvador within a decolonial framework. Her recent works embrace transnational collaborations and the shared experiences of marginalized communities, inviting audiences to participate in navigating critical engagement with historical narratives in order to promote brighter futures.

Conclusion

In 2022, Indigenous Central American diaspora artist Alicia María Siu (b.1983, Honduras) served as a Maya community consultant and featured artist in the ongoing exhibition “Maya Peoples: Heart of the Sky Heart of the Earth” (Current iteration: June 2022-Present) at the Museum of Us in San Diego, California. For the past decade, the Museum of Us has been dedicated to its Decolonizing Initiatives, which outline real structural and institutional changes the museum is making towards taking accountability to recognize and support Indigenous knowledge and sovereignty. Their projects include revisiting provenance research for their entire collection, repatriation, and community consultations, such as with the Maya Peoples exhibition. As a consultant, Alicia helped the museum review, reframe, and rewrite the entire exhibition. In a conversation I had with her last year, she talked about how the consultants made decisions to remove sixty burial items from display and began the process for repatriating another item. She also painted a mural for the exhibit while it was open to the public, so visitors to the museum could watch the work develop in real time. This example clearly demonstrates how in recent years, the discourse around Indigenous sovereignty and decolonializing institutions has transitioned from theory to praxis.

The interconnected relationships between institutions, archives, art, Indigenous communities, and diaspora are at the core of this thesis. The study of U.S. Central American art is in constant development, but it is clear that archival engagements contribute a significant part to how Central Americans and diaspora internalize and respond to histories of violence and injustice. In transforming the concept of the archive from something that is dead or dying to something that lives within us, artists can manifest the transmission of knowledge through art.

Though the Salvadoran state has a complicated history with Indigeneity and its lack of support for contemporary communities, Salvadoran and diaspora artists and individuals are very interested in reconciling historical exclusion with contemporary representation. Robin Maria DeLugan suggests that diaspora populations are particularly attuned to Indigenous issues, given their shared space among the margins of society.¹⁰⁶

I have had the opportunity to see Cortez's steel sculptures in person; the most recent as of writing this thesis being *Ilopango, Stela A* (2022) in the "Grounded" exhibition the Los Angeles Contemporary Museum of Art (September 14, 2025-June 14, 2026). What I was most interested in, as part of the Salvadoran diaspora and a scholar of Central American history and art, was seeing Salvadoran Indigeneity elevated in the same space as other decolonial art. Throughout my studies, I have encountered no shortage of references to El Salvador as belonging to the periphery, the edge, the fringes, the frontier, and just simply beyond the reach of ancient Mesoamerican cultural centers.¹⁰⁷ Meanwhile, official government narratives speak of the imminent extinction of contemporary communities.¹⁰⁸ The myth that El Salvador has very few

¹⁰⁶ DeLugan, "Commemorating from the Margins," 970.

¹⁰⁷ Some titles include, but are not limited to: Patricia A. Urban and Edward M. Schortman, eds., *The Southeast Maya Periphery* (University of Texas Press, 1986); Erlend M. Johnson, Pastor Gómez Zúñiga, and Mary Kate Kelly, "Ch'orti', Lenca, and Pipil: An Onomastic Approach to Redefining the Sixteenth-Century Southeastern Maya Frontier," *Ethnohistory* 66, no. 2 (2019): 301-328.; Jan Szymański, Miriam Méndez, et al. "San Isidro, El Salvador: A Large Preclassic Site at the Eastern Edge of the Maya World." *Mexicon* 40, no. 4 (2018): 100-104. See also Virginia Q. Tilley, "In the Shadow of the Maya," in *Seeing Indians: A Study of Race, Nation, and Power* (University of New Mexico Press, 2005): 61-83.

Furthermore, older ethnographic and historical archives often described Nahua-Pipil culture and language as inferior and lesser than their Maya and Central Mexican Nahuan counterparts. See Carl Vilhelm Hartman, "Reconocimiento Etnográfico de los Aztecas de El Salvador," trans. Claudia García, *Mesoamérica* 41 (2001): 146-191; and Laura E. Matthew and Sergio F. Romero, "Nahuatl and Pipil in Colonial Guatemala: A Central American Counterpoint," *Ethnohistory* 59, no. 4 (2012): 765-783.

¹⁰⁸ According to the 2024 census, the four most common Indigenous identities are Nahuat-Pipil, Lenca, Kakawira, and Maya (Ch'orti' and Poqomam). There was an "Other" category consisting of Xinca, Mangue, Mixe, and Alagüliac, which on the census website, under "general definitions," are referred to in the past tense as extinct, or nearly extinct, cultures. "Definiciones generales," Portal Geoestadístico, Resultados del Censo de Población y Vivienda 2024, accessed July 11, 2025, <https://poblacion.bcr.gob.sv/>.

Indigenous people and virtually zero Indigenous culture persists, despite the ongoing fight against repression, exclusion, and dispossession and continued efforts to preserve culture and language.

Indigenous Salvadoran visuality is, and has historically been, difficult to define. When I see Salvadoran artists, like Cortez, engaging in Indigenous scholarship while including elements of Salvadoran experiences, I think it creates the opportunity to critically engage with what symbols are chosen to represent Indigeneity, why, and who does it benefit?

Beatriz and her work embody transnational solidarity and a desire to collapse national boundaries; in recent years, her work has been about much more than just the Salvadoran experience. This is also an important notion to consider as it reflects the social reality of Central American identities in the U.S., and the legacy of ideas Indigenous scholars and activists have built in Central America. The world that I wish to see modeled is one where conversations can happen, memories can be activated, and actions can be taken to support communities without the stigma that has often prevented them from speaking out.

Cortez is only one example of a U.S.-based, Salvadoran-born artist committed to learning from her collaborations with contemporary communities. Alicia María Siu, who is Nawat-Pipil and Maya Poqomam, is another example of a practicing Indigenous artist who has contributed to the production of Indigenous Salvadoran visuality and demonstrated a respectful relationship with contemporary communities in El Salvador.¹⁰⁹

Also, Brandt Peterson describes the belief that there were no more Indigenous people in El Salvador as “hegemonic” and any remaining communities were perceived as “vestigial holdouts of a culture whose disappearance was inevitable.” Brandt Gustav Peterson, “Consuming Histories: The Return of the Indian in Neoliberal El Salvador,” *Cultural Dynamics* 18, no. 2 (2006): 170.

¹⁰⁹ Find her work on the artist’s website: <http://www.aliciasiu.com/>. See also, Arriola, “Indigenous Visuality,” 40-45.

Further exploration into Indigenous Salvadoran artists, their practices, inspirations, and relationships is still warranted, given the low visibility of Indigenous Salvadorans as a whole. There is also the possibility of artistic practices rooted in Indigenous epistemologies that are not Maya. El Salvador, and Central America, is incredibly diverse, and there are numerous perspectives that I did not have the time to discuss in this project that deserve further investigation. More discussion about Indigenous issues and diaspora responsibilities alone is not going to resolve centuries of repression and separation; however, in having these conversations and engaging with artistic productions, I do hope we can embody more of what it means to have solidarity with ongoing fights against systemic erasure.

Figures

MORAZAN
memorandum

DATE: January 29, 1982

REPLY TO: POL: Carl Gettinger

SUBJECT: Mozote and Arambala

TO: DCM: Bleakley
THRU: POL Driscoll

*CLARK
FILE
WHEREVER MORAZAN
MASSACRE STORY
IS FILED
TIMING*

PP
EXCISE
PP

This morning I spoke with [redacted] about the alleged massacre in Morazan. Their comments are summarized below.

[redacted] told me what he knows about the issue. [redacted] is the source of allegations that 1000 people were killed in and around Mozote and Arambala during a military operation there in December. [redacted] she reportedly heard the story from a Protestant evangelical who made it out of the area of the supposed massacre and arrived in [redacted] story is backed up by a Radio Venceremos broadcast which reported 1009 victims of machine gunning during the December operation. *PP*

[redacted] does not believe that any massacre such as the one described above ever occurred. He has two bases for his rejection of the story. First of all, he dismisses both [redacted] and the FMLN broadcast as obviously biased sources. Secondly, and more substantially, he has obtained a statement [redacted] which includes the two affected cantons which refutes the [redacted] FMLN allegations. [redacted] reports that the military did undertake a sweep ("limpieza") of the area, that residents of the area were given time to leave it, that most did and that among the unknown number of victims of the operation were some (unspecified) evangelicals who unwisely chose to stay behind. According to [redacted] has denied that any massacre such as that described by [redacted] occurred. *PP*

[redacted] believes that the supposed victims of a massacre are now--living--in San Francisco Gotera. [redacted] is Cacaoopera but who resides in Gotera has recently requested assistance from Caritas in San Miguel for additional assistance for 2000 plus refugees. [redacted] believes that among that number are many from Mozote and Arambala. He is currently engaged in getting San Miguel Caritas chief Mendoza to determine what percentage of the 2000 are from the area where the massacre supposedly took place. *PP*

[redacted] whose source is [redacted], told me the same story but in less detail. *PP*

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Figure 1. United States Embassy, El Salvador, *Morazan Memorandum*, January 29, 1982. Courtesy of the DNSA collection: El Salvador 1980-1994.



Figure 2. Beatriz Cortez, *Armadura para Rufina Amaya*, 2014. Steel, photograph, and sound installation. Installation view, Orange County Center for Contemporary Art, January 25-February 22, 2014. Image courtesy of the artist.



Figure 3. Beatriz Cortez, *Armadura para Rufina Amaya*, 2014. Steel, black lava rocks, photograph, and sound installation. Installation view, *Donde hubo fuego...:Arte contemporáneo de El Salvador, 2003-2017*, Museo de Arte de El Salvador, December 2017- December 2022. Image courtesy of MARTE and the artist.



Figure 4. Susan Meiselas, Rufina Amaya in Honduras, 1982. Photograph. Courtesy of the photographer.



Figure 5. Beatriz Cortez, *Armadura para Rufina Amaya*, 2014. Installation detail, Orange County Center for Contemporary Art, January 25-February 22, 2014. Image courtesy of the artist.



Figure 6. Beatriz Cortez, *Armor for Rufina Amaya Over Imagined Black Lava Field Where the Town of El Mozote Once Was*, 2019. Paper. Beatriz Cortez, "The Underworld," *X-TRA Contemporary Art Journal* 22, no. 2 (2019): 52.



Figure 7. Beatriz Cortez, Kaqjay Moloj, Fiebre Ediciones, *Objeto Antiguo*, 2021. Multimedia installation. Installation view, *Intergalactix: against isolation/contra el aislamiento*, Los Angeles Contemporary Exhibitions (LACE), May 15 - Aug 14, 2021. Image courtesy of the artists and LACE. Photo: Yubo Dong.



Figure 8. Beatriz Cortez, Kaqjay Moloj, Fiebre Ediciones, *Objeto Antiguo*, 2021. Installation detail, clay and stone figurines on petate and pine needles, *Intergalactix: against isolation/contra el aislamiento*, Los Angeles Contemporary Exhibitions (LACE), May 15 - Aug 14, 2021. Image courtesy of the artists and LACE. Photo: Yubo Dong.



Figure 9. Beatriz Cortez, Kaq'ijay Moloj, Fiebre Ediciones, *Objeto Antiguo*, 2021. Installation detail, Take-home handout pages, *Intergalactix: against isolation/contra el aislamiento*, Los Angeles Contemporary Exhibitions (LACE), May 15 - Aug 14, 2021. Image courtesy of the artists and LACE.



Figure 10. Beatriz Cortez, Kaqjay Moloj, Fiebre Ediciones, *El Altar de Kaqjay*, 2021. Installation view, *Earth and Cosmos* at Americas Society, January 29 - May 17, 2025. Image courtesy of Americas Society and the artists. Photo: Arturo Sanchez.



Figure 11. Students visit Altar 1. Image courtesy of Kaqjay Moloj.

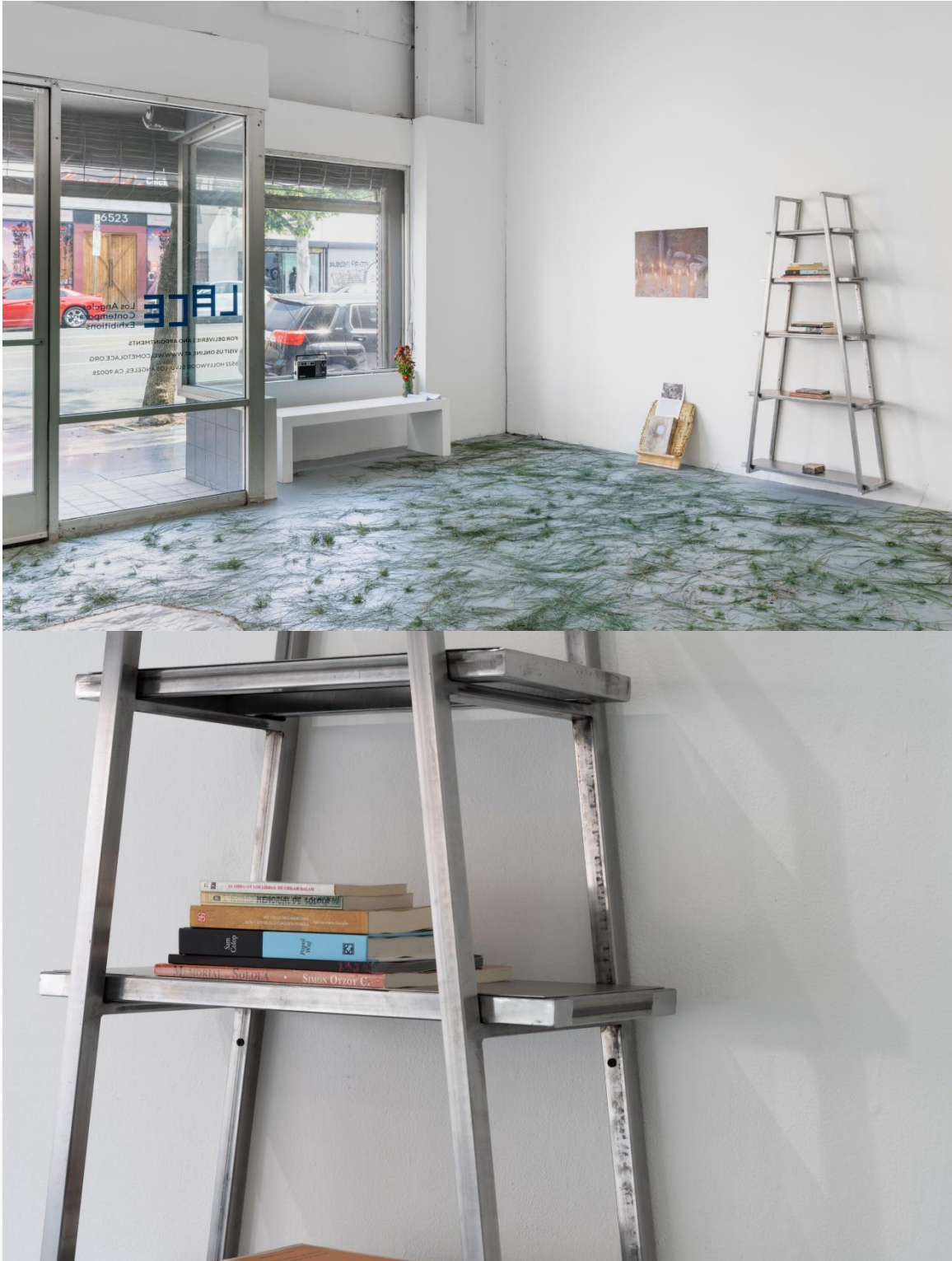


Figure 12. Library of Memory, Installation detail, *Intergalactix: against isolation/contra el aislamiento*, Los Angeles Contemporary Exhibitions (LACE), May 15 - Aug 14, 2021. Images courtesy of LACE and the artists. Photo: Yubo Dong.



Figure 13. Beatriz Cortez, *Stela XX (Absence)*, 2024. Steel, approx. 96 x 40 x 23.5 inches. 60th International Art Exhibition at the Venice Biennale, “Foreigners Everywhere,” curated by Adriano Pedrosa, 2024. Image courtesy of the artist.

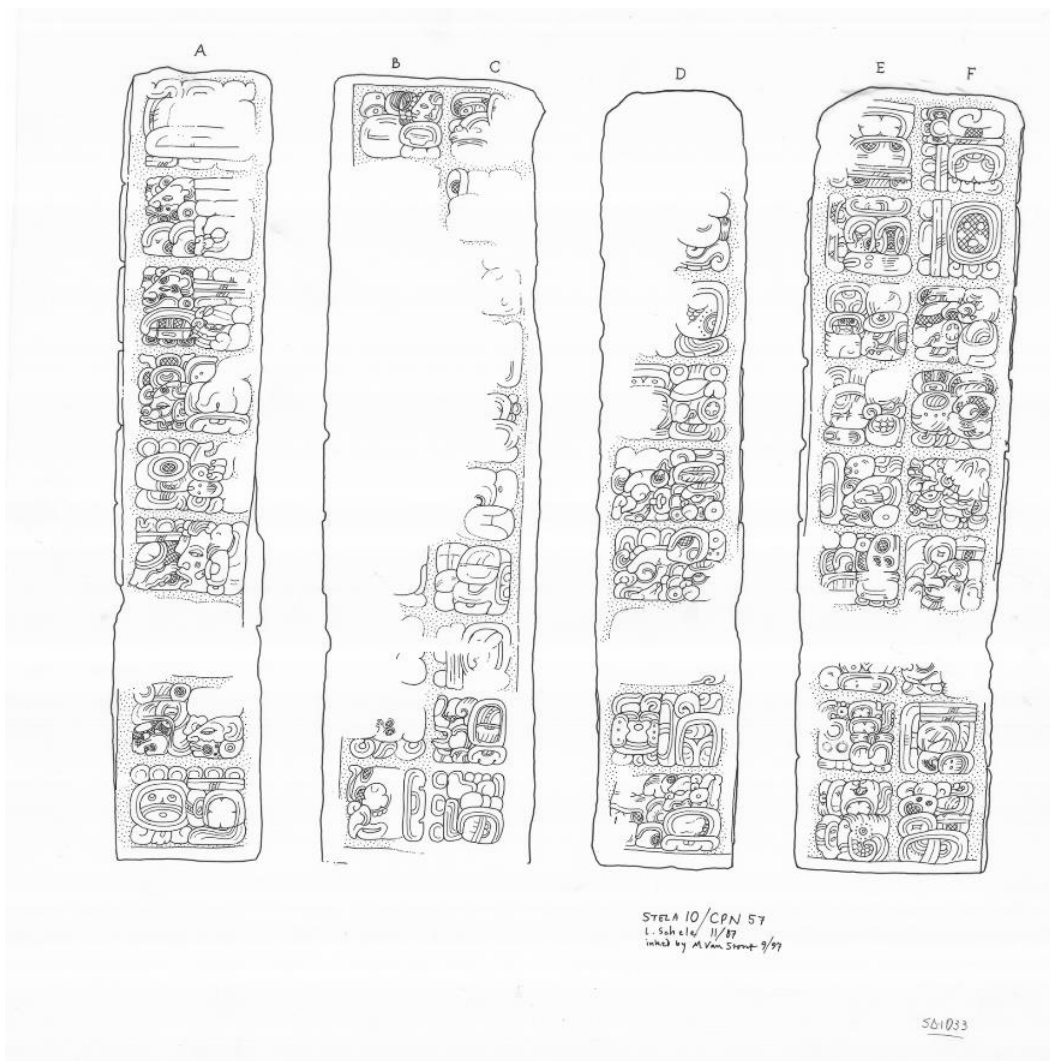


Figure 14. Linda Schele, *Drawing of four sides of Stela 10*, 1987. Ink on mylar, 20 ½ x 19 ½ inches. Schele Drawing Collection, SD-1033. Image courtesy of Ancient Americas at LACMA.



Figure 15. Juan José Láinez, *Lago de Ilopango*, 1908. Oil on canvas, 149 x 232 cm. Courtesy of the Colección Nacional de Pintura, San Salvador. Image courtesy of MARTE.



Figure 16. Juan José Laínez, *Ruinas de Izalco*, 1908. Oil on canvas, 149 x 233 cm. Courtesy of the Colección Nacional de Pintura, San Salvador. Image courtesy of MARTE.

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