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**BORDERLAND VITALITY:
UNSETTLING FORM THROUGH DECOLONIAL POETICS**

A dissertation submitted in partial satisfaction
of the requirements for the degree of

DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

in

LITERATURE

with an emphasis in LATIN AMERICAN AND LATINO STUDIES
and VISUAL STUDIES

by

Nathan Xavier Osorio

JUNE 2024

The Dissertation of Nathan Xavier

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Abstract

Borderland Vitality: Unsettling Form through Decolonial Poetics

Nathan Xavier Osorio

This dissertation is a hybrid critical and creative investigation of decolonial aesthetics composed of 1) a research-based analysis of Latinx poetry and cultural productions, 2) a lyrical meditation on the archive of my parents’ “illegal” immigration to the U.S., and 3) a community-facing manual for decolonial cultural production and public learning. I construct a conceptual framework for understanding how Latinx artists unsettle form and the production and circulation of their art while intervening within a cultural borderland where the West continues to reenact oppressive colonial struggles and ignore the urgent demands of the Capitalocene. I argue that these artists enact a decolonial poetics in their creative practices, allowing them to interrogate, resist, and disconnect from Eurocentric histories, embodiments, and knowledges—revealing other aesthetic, poetic, and epistemic possibilities. I consider how the artists, many of whom also identify as Indigenous and/or Queer, use creative expression to exercise their vitality or power to endure and thrive within coloniality. Building upon the research of borderland scholars Pedro Pablo Gómez-Moreno, Walter D. Mignolo, Jennifer Ponce de León, Macarena Gómez-Barris, and their exploration of “Decolonial Aesthetics,” my dissertation considers writing in its traditional forms as imperial artifacts deployed by a U.S./Euro-centric cosmopolitanism to undermine aesthetics that do not reflect or sustain the hegemony. The Latinx poetic productions at the center of my dissertation include two contemporary books of

poetry (Natalie Diaz's (b. 1978) *Postcolonial Love Poem* and Francisco X. Alarcón's (1954 – 2016) *Snake Poems: An Aztec Invocation*,) an installation and performance by a visual artist (Beatriz Cortez's (b. 1970) *Memory Insertion Capsule*), and a literary labor action campaign (The Undocupoets. Although contemporary (1992–2020), my subjects of analysis are entangled with knowledges produced during key historical moments of Latin America's colonization in 1629 and 1899. By considering these productions together, my dissertation offers a genealogy of Latinx decolonial aesthetics built on politics of care, survival, and rebellion. I also map out these cultural productions across Central and North America (San Salvador, El Salvador; Puebla, Mexico; and the Mojave Desert, California) and utilize Latin American Studies to unveil how Latinx poetic productions reach beyond the textual, invoking orality *and* other modalities of expression of Indigenous, Queer, and Latinx knowledge.

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This dissertation is dedicated to Kristi D. Osorio, who held me up when I couldn't.

Introduction

There are some stories that go unwritten, that linger in a father's body, in the air that vibrates when the instrument of his throat is rung. In August 1982, a Border Patrol agent found a 19-year-old undocumented teenager fixing his stalled truck on the side of a San Diego highway. He had only been living in the United States for two years, having migrated north unaccompanied from Mexico City after leaving his hometown in Puebla, Mexico. That teenage boy would later become my father.

Today, I ask him a series of questions about this moment. I ask if he can think past the tan of the border agent's uniform and remember the color of his skin, articulate it into language so that he can share as much of it as possible with me, beyond what is only felt in tenuous translations and broken languages. If he can remember what road he was on or what time of day it was. If he can remember what part of his friend's truck he was repairing in what might have either been a blistering summer day or a torrential downpour, moving flows of mud down the side of mountains. He pauses long enough to make me wonder from where he's recollecting his memory. There are some stories that ultimately escape language, histories only embedded in the memory of the tongue, in the hollow burn of a shotgun shell, or the collective cry at an altar.

¿Sabes que, hijo? La única cosa que puedo recordar definitivamente es que me quitaron mi troque. They stole his truck, the sum of years of labor and lucky breaks, the start of what he believed to be his American Dream. Immigration Customs Enforcement might argue “asset forfeiture is an essential element of comprehensive

and effective law enforcement ... The forfeiture of assets can be and is utilized as a sanction in criminal, civil, and administrative investigative activities¹” (Devereaux, Woodman). Two languages in conflict, each with varying power, warring to set the record straight. I ask my father what kind of truck it was, and he says it was a black 1974 Chevy Silverado. I can hear him beaming, his smile forcing wrinkles that I too see in the mirror. He was deported a few hours later, only to return with a version of the story that never reaches the official record, one that he articulates to me in a Spanglish that is both from a pueblo deep in the Mixtecan heart of Mexico and lifted from his diverse community in Los Angeles. His truck remains missing, maybe sold at a police auction, rotating in a brightly illuminated display room before going to the highest bidder. Or maybe it’s at the cold bottom of the ocean or burned out on the side of a hill.

“Borderland Vitality: Unsettling Form through Decolonial Poetics” is a hybrid critical and creative investigation of decolonial aesthetics composed of 1) a research-based analysis of Latinx poetry and cultural productions, 2) a lyrical meditation on the archive of my parents’ “illegal” immigration to the U.S., and 3) a community-facing manual for decolonial cultural production and public learning. I construct a conceptual framework for understanding how Latinx artists unsettle form and the

¹ In 2017, ICE’s Homeland Security Investigations “Asset Forfeiture Handbook” was leaked to the public. The text is a detailed manual on how ICE agents should appraise, seize, and sell property whose proceeds bolster ICE’s partnership with local police departments. The manual is 71 pages long, a carefully constructed textual tool for violence (Devereaux and Woodman).

production and circulation of their art while intervening within a cultural borderland where the West continues to reenact oppressive colonial struggles and ignore the urgent demands of the steadily destabilizing Capitalocene. Throughout this dissertation I rely on verbs like “unsettle” and “trouble” to describe how these artists are deploying formal poetic strategies that directly challenge, rework, or otherwise undermine how and to what effect dominant ways of sensing and knowing the world are entrenched in colonial legacies². I argue that these artists enact a decolonial poetics in their creative practices, allowing them to interrogate, resist, and disconnect from Eurocentric histories, embodiments, and knowledges—revealing other aesthetic, poetic, and epistemic possibilities. Through Walter Mignolo, I expand on Aníbal Quijano’s concept of ‘desprenderse’ or delinking as a disconnecting from colonial epistemologies through creative practices that enact decolonial modes of thinking and being from a plurality of non-U.S./Eurocentric worlds. I consider how the artists, many of whom also identify as Indigenous and/or Queer, use creative expression to exercise their vitality or power to endure and thrive within the open wound of the 1492 colonial encounter that catastrophically reshaped the region recognized today as Latin America. Building upon the research of borderland scholars Pedro Pablo Gómez-Moreno, Walter Mignolo, Jennifer Ponce de León, Macarena Gómez-Barris, and their exploration of “decolonial aesthetics,” my dissertation considers writing in

² To “unsettle” form is to think around, through, and beyond the commonly accepted possibilities of poetry and its forms. By unsettling and troubling form, these artists work to destabilize its functions, possible impacts on time and space, and its material roles in shaping how we sense, feel, and interact with our world(s).

its traditional forms as imperial artifacts deployed by a U.S./Euro-centric cosmovision to undermine aesthetics that do not reflect or sustain the hegemonic status quo. These traditional forms include textual objects that reinforce dominant cultural and social orders like the museum catalogue, the colonial translation, and the codex of Indigenous knowledge, or even received poetic forms like a book of sonnets or the love poem.

The Latinx poetic productions at the center of my dissertation include poets, activists, and artists who are creating in the first thirty years after the quincentennial of the colonial encounter of 1492. This colonial encounter marks the implementation of aesthetics as part of a colonial matrix of power or what Walter Mignolo and Rolando Vazquez describe as: “the imperial structure of control that began to be put in place in the sixteenth century with the emergence of the Atlantic commercial circuit and the colonization of the New World, and that was transformed and expanded through the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, and up to this day” (4). Dominant aesthetics controls its subjects and ensures that the colonial wound—the painful experience of survival within the colonial matrix of power—lingers open ensuring that civilizations in the past, present, and future are discriminated against or outright denied. The artists in my dissertation use their creative practices to invite us to rethink the possibilities of aesthetics. They work decolonially by creating work that insists on alternative ways to sense, understand, and interact with the physical world. The poetic productions I consider include two contemporary books of poetry (Natalie Diaz’s (b. 1978) *Postcolonial Love Poem* (2020), Francisco X. Alarcón’s (1954 –

2016) *Snake Poems: An Aztec Invocation* (1992), an installation and performance by a visual artist (Beatriz Cortez's (b. 1970) *Memory Insertion Capsule* (2017)), and a literary labor action campaign (The Undocupoets (2017)). By analyzing recent Latinx poetic productions and interviews with select artists, I demonstrate how their aesthetic decisions defend insurgent decolonial worldviews, relationships to time and space, and modes of expression. Although contemporary, my subjects of analysis are entangled with texts, archives, and bodies of knowledge produced during key historical moments of Latin America's colonization like the publication of Hernando Ruiz de Alarcón's *Treatise on the Heathen Superstitions that Today Live Among the Indians Native to this New Spain, 1629* and the incorporation of the United Fruit Company in the West Indies and Central America in 1899. By considering these productions together across time, my dissertation offers a genealogy of Latinx decolonial aesthetics built on politics of care, survival, and rebellion. I also map out these cultural productions across Central and North America (San Salvador, El Salvador; Puebla, Mexico; and the Mojave Desert, California) and utilize Latin American Studies to unveil how Latinx poetic productions reach beyond the textual, invoking orality *and* other modalities of expression of Indigenous, Queer, and Latinx knowledge. To facilitate this multi-genre, multilingual, and transdisciplinary analysis, I've based each of my dissertation chapters around five conceptual themes for decolonial Latinx poetics: "Labor and Permanent Debts," "Bodies and Water," "Unruly Tongues," "Knowledges and Untimely Communities," and "Home."

In an early chapter, I pose a series of questions that I would like to include here further introduce the central inquiries of my dissertation's creative and critical analysis. To better understand my—and perhaps other Latinx artists'—poetic instincts, I ask here: why am I, and others born within the coloniality of power, drawn to poetry, a form that has historically failed to represent people like my father, and countless others from Latinx, undocumented, and Indigenous communities? Why is this form invoked to make sense of the harm and ongoing legacy of the colonial wound despite our communities' fraught relationships to dominant textual languages? How then do these artists create poetry within systems of oppression that actively work to eject us and our forebearers before our bodies ever had a chance to take up space except to labor? Before our body had a chance to create and preserve memory and affect in language? What kind of poetry is it? What must it do to survive within systems meticulously designed to hijack our vitality so that our productions are only labor that feed the systems in return? What form of labor can poetry be when it is about the experience of manual laborers? What forms of accumulation and experience of (subaltern) knowledge does it allow? And crucially, for whom? How is it fought for and defended through collective action? What does it mean for marginalized people to collectively enact labor in the name of the preservation of ideas versus the pure exhaustion of physical bodies for the accumulation of wealth by others?

In my experience of reading and writing poetry from within the colonial wound, I have found that I, and others, can best record memory, celebrate our vitality, and resist further forced amnesia in community. As these artists show us, when we

reach out from the solitude of the white page and into the neighborhoods where poetry must not only be read and written but *embodied* colonial apparatuses become exposed, their constitutions bared open for critique. I'm not alone in this practice, but an observer and practitioner operating from within a community of Latinx artists, disparate constellations pinging off one another virtually and in person, writing from within a colonial paradigm that frustrates and demands othered relationships to poetic forms and aesthetics.

Chapter Summaries

In chapter 1, "Permanent Debts, Melancholic Wanderings: Labors of Love and Organizing as Decolonial Method in Contemporary Latinx Poetry," I focus on an early organizing campaign by the Undocupoets and poems by two of its founders. In 2015, poets Marcelo Hernandez Castillo, Christopher "Loma" Soto, and Javier Zamora organized the Undocupoets Campaign to protest the ways key first-book publishing contests required applicants to provide proof of citizenship and thus reinforced the colonial divide between U.S. poets and those from elsewhere in the Américas. By mobilizing a network of online journals and a coalition of writers from diverse communities, the Undocupoets Campaign was successful in altering, to different degrees, language on citizenship requirements for most first-book poetry prizes (Pineda). By reimagining how, why, and what their racialized bodies labored to produce in response to coloniality, the Undocupoets' labor campaign incited institutional changes in the production and circulation of writing, resulting in a significant systematic intervention that expanded and protected access to

marginalized representation in U.S. poetry. In this chapter, I analyze cultural productions by two of the founders of the Undocupoets, including an interview with Marcelo Hernandez Castillo, and two poems by Javier Zamora. I close read Quijano's coloniality of power and its naturalization of the relationship between race and labor (2000), alongside theories of precarity (Paret and Gleeson, Butler) and affective labor (Hardt) as analytical tools to describe poetic and literary organizing labor as a manifestation of a decolonial aesthetics (Ponce de León). My analysis demonstrates how contemporary Latinx poets organize and create poetry to change and create access within hegemonic cultural institutions. By reclaiming their own labor through vital cultural production (organizing for access to literary opportunity and troubling traditional poetic forms), the Undocupoets enact a decolonial aesthetics that reshapes the sensorium, allowing readers to imagine racialized bodies outside of cartesian dualism that defines them as both exploitable and dominatable sources of labor within Coloniality. I also connect their creative and organizing labors to the labor of other precarious migrants, like my parents, who continue to work for a higher standard of living promised—yet often unfulfilled—by “The American Dream.” By linking the Latinx poet to the Latinx laborer, which I present here through braided poetic and biographical interludes describing my own parents' migration and labor in the U.S., I reveal valuable insights as to how the colonial binary that establishes the racialized body as object—and not subject—is productively unsettled in poetic labor. This labor, I argue, works multidimensionally to generate a decolonial creative vitality that

struggles against hegemonic cultural institutions to secure and preserve representation within stifling cultural imaginaries like “The American Dream.”

In chapter 2, “If the river is a ghost, am I? ”: Unsettling the Archive through Embodiment in Natalie Diaz’s *Postcolonial Love poem* (2020) I consider a duet of poems (“The First Water is the Body” and “*exhibits from* The American Water Museum”) central to Natalie Diaz’s 2020 Pulitzer Prize winning poetry collection. These poems, I argue, assert an Indigenous onto-epistemology wherein the Colorado River is the Indigenous body and the Indigenous body is the Colorado River, an existential source of spiritual and material sustenance for the southwest and its native Mojave community (Diaz). Through perspectivism (Viveiros de Castro), I demonstrate how Diaz unsettles poetic formal conventions in the two poems to textually embody an interconnectedness between humans and nonhumans that critiques colonial genocide and its ongoing manifestations in water crises throughout the Americas. In this process, Diaz’s poems become an embodiment of the relationship between the Indigenous body and the Colorado River. Moreover, by analyzing this work alongside my own creative interventions, like memoiristic reflections of my own family’s migration to the U.S., their relationship to bodies of water and the archive, and the inclusion of intext writing prompts for readers, I demonstrate how Diaz’s textual embodiment of the Colorado River liberates Indigenous onto-epistemologies from the dominant Western cultural archive, thus offering alternatives to the intensifying ecological destabilization of the Capitalocene. Deploying multimodal poetic elements, like multilingualism, translation, and

performance directions Diaz’s critical meditation on water crises moves readers to think, feel, and create beyond the limiting framework of the nature/culture divide (Watts) and to reconsider the connectedness of Queer, Indigenous, and Latinx bodies—and their relationships with and as examples of the natural world.

In chapter 3, “¡Viva Las Deslenguadas!: Mirroring Colonial Translation in Francisco X. Alarcón’s *Snake Poems: An Aztec Invocation* (1992)” I read closely multigenerational and polyvocal translations of Nahuatl invocations.

In *Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza*, Gloria Anzaldúa writes of the “Deslenguadas:” “We are your linguistic nightmare, your linguistic aberration, your linguistic *mestisaje* ... Because we speak with tongues of fire we are culturally crucified. Racially, culturally, and linguistically *somos huérfanos*—we speak an orphan tongue” (80). Anzaldúa’s lyrical exploration of this liminal linguistic position presents multilingual poetic and translation strategies as an expression of creative vitality used by contemporary Latinx poets. To survive and redeem the textual legacies of coloniality, Latinx poets trouble Western literary forms to transform their writing and translations into cartographies of justice and resistance. In this chapter, I’m in dialogue with Walter Benjamin’s notion of translation as the “renewal of something living,” Anzaldúa’s conceptual term the “Deslenguadas,” or the “foulmouthed,” and Johannes Göransson and Joyelle McSweeney’s theory of translation as witness to analyze Francisco X. Alarcón’s poetry collection *Snake Poems: An Aztec Invocation* (1992), a multilingual transgenerational translation assembled from a contentious exchange between colonizer and colonized

subjects. *Snake Poems* is then both a reimagination and defiant retranslation of Hernando Ruiz de Alarcón's own colonial translation of the Aztec Indigenous epistemologies found in *Tratado de las supersticiones y costumbres gentílicas que hoy viuen entre los indios naturales desta Nueva España* or *Treatise on the Heathen Superstitions That Today Live Among the Indians Native to This New Spain* (1629). Alarcón does not produce an extension of Ruiz de Alarcón's colonial ethnography but critically intervenes by reaching back to the Indigenous knowledge and language embedded within and in between the dueling Nahuatl, Spanish, and English. It is the expansive retranslations, restive Nahuatl, transtemporal collaboration, and unsettling of Western forms that make *Snake Poems* a critical and ongoing site for decolonial aesthetic struggle.

In chapter 4, I examine Beatriz Cortez's (b. 1970, San Salvador, El Salvador) *Memory Insertion Capsule*, a steel space shuttle frozen in time as it might have been in a loading bay days before its voyage to another world. The installation and the capsule construct a performance-like configuration where passengers embark on their journey by passing through a carefully arranged constellation of visual symbols and references, eventually becoming "implanted" with archival memories. In this chapter, I dialogue with Linda Tuhiwai Smith's *Decolonizing Methodologies* to reconsider the way colonial archival materials are transformed once they're extracted from their defined colonial contexts and Mario Blaser and Marisol de La Cadena's *A World of Many Worlds* to support an analysis that includes nonhuman subjectivities as loci of worlds and ways of knowing in their own right. My analysis shows how Cortez's

installation brings together multiple temporalities and subjectivities signaled by the symbols she deploys (stones, the visor, tent, capsule, Mayan sigil for zero, etc.). I also argue that Cortez enacts a reclamation project wherein she maps out an immersive poetry performance that deploys linguistic, visual, and spatial strategies that use the speculative to trouble colonial relationships to gender, migration, knowledge, and resources. The installation's performance equips the viewers with various types of knowledge like strategies for care that are key for survival during a critical moment in the planet's history, described by Jason W. Moore as, "the unpredictable but inevitable onset of terminal crisis ... not merely a transition from one phase of capitalism to another, but something more epochal: the breakdown of the strategies and relations that have sustained capital accumulation over the past five centuries" (2015, p.13). By thinking with time (the Capitalocene) and subjectivities (human and nonhuman) on this scale, the archival materials can tell stories other than those they were designed to tell. Instead, they become records of alternate histories of vitality and world building. Transforming colonial archival material through the speculative mode, Cortez invites the spectator to imagine non-Western relationships to memory and site-specific materials to transport us to futures where other, more liberated relationships and worlds are possible.

My final chapter "Home" is an interactive poetry performance manual that brings together the previous conceptual categories under the physical and theoretical enclosure of "home." This chapter is a tool for facilitating a reproducible poetry performance that readers can recreate in their communities to critically engage with

the ways labor, history, language, knowledge, and bodies have been shaped by colonial systems of oppression, extraction, and exploitation.

Each artist's contribution to these five conceptual themes organizing this dissertation serves as evidence of how decolonial aesthetics includes but also moves beyond the discussion of what art *is*, and instead constitutes an ongoing process of vitality as a means to survive and build more just worlds through creative labors.

By braiding critical analysis, pedagogy, and memoiristic reflections of my own parents' migrations to the U.S., my research blends the rigor of traditional scholarship with the intimacy of familial and community knowledge. My dissertation builds upon the scholarly traditions of Queer women of color including Gloria Anzaldúa, Audre Lorde, and bell hooks to consider colonial histories of varying scales, ranging from the current water crisis on the Colorado River, to the deportation of my father in the 1980s, and even the generational trauma sparked by expulsion and migration after U.S.-backed civil unrest in Central America. Accessible writing prompts for collective discussion and writing are embedded throughout my dissertation, particularly within the final chapter, "Home." This section enacts the very decolonial methodologies I analyze and is designed as a freely available public resource that uplifts voices and narratives of communities historically ignored by the academy.

My research and my creative productions extend decolonial world building projects including that of the Ejército Zapatista de Liberación Nacional (EZLN) and

their assertion that “another world is possible.” My research also operates as a public humanities project that shifts the locus of enunciation away from the academy and towards Latinx communities impacted by the illegalization of migration and other legacies of colonialism. By bringing together the methodological tenets of literary, performance, and cultural studies, I produce and enact multilingual creative writing, translation, testimonios, critical pedagogy, and archival research to argue that art making in Latinx communities is a social practice for rescuing home and constructing alternatives to coloniality.

My dissertation chapters aim to best understand how some Latinx artists create poetically in response to moments like the deportation of my father or the generational forgetting spurred by expulsion and migration—and the role language, textual and not, plays in both instances. Moments where the open wound of the 1492 colonial encounter is active, urgently reshaping the region that we recognize today as an extended Latin America and those we recognize as Latinx. However, as these artists demonstrate, the open wound of colonialism is not exclusively a poetic metaphor. Directly supporting the colonial enterprises that continue to exploit the region, imperial armies violently alienated native populations on their own land by forcing on them Western cosmovisions and Eurocentric epistemologies that fetishized written text and European languages, effectively rendering them powerless in the eyes of newly arrived imperial scriptocentric institutions.

As Martin Lienhard identifies in his book *La voz y su huella* (The voice and its footprint), the monopolistic implementation of textual language—a semiotic tool

that made Indigenous communities mute on their own land—was and continues to be a key weapon in the colonization of the Américas (2003, 32). These imperial strategies have since become coopted by the U.S. and its active colonial projects, which continue to perpetuate bodily and epistemological harm against subalternized people and their land in the Américas. For Lienhard, the scholarly transformation of Indigenous orality into a textual form that is desired by and necessary for the West is a central feature of the colonial enterprise (17). Through a close reading of four creative productions, I argue that writing, in its hegemonic context and discrete forms,³ are imperial artifacts deployed by a Euro/U.S. centric cosmivision to stunt and undermine any aesthetics that do not reflect, support, or sustain, the hegemonic status quo. These works represent or otherwise participate in a counterhegemonic aesthetics that transforms writing into a liberational tool in defense of insurgent decolonial worldviews, relationships to time and space, modes of expression, production, and circulation of creative productions.

In this research and in the following poetry performance manual, I'm interested in exploring a decolonial aesthetic to better understand a moment in Latinx poetics where the tools for creative production reach beyond the textual, invoking orality *and* other modalities of expression of Indigenous and mestizo knowledge

³ I imagine the term “discrete form” according to Adrian Piper’s definition from *Performance Catalysis on the Street and in the World*: “that quality of separateness, isolation, that art objects have, and that any artwork which occupies its own time and space also has; that kind of existence that makes it possible for the work to exist with an art context independently of the interaction of the artist and the viewer” (42).

(including elements of performance, installation, aurality, and labor organizing). In an effort to better understand how the proliferation of Latinx and Indigenous poets is using, subverting, and transforming poetic forms to resist coloniality, my dissertation provides additional space where the complexities of these cultural productions and their possibilities can be identified, remembered, and reflected upon. I'm also specifically interested in the way the cultural productions produced from the writing prompts located throughout my dissertation and in the performance manual transform the "text," its production, and circulation, into a cultural borderland where contact between the Indigenous and the West continues to play out in conflict (Lienhard 26). This interface becomes legible on the page and in performance through what Lienhard terms as *huellas* or traces of Indigenous worldviews that still need to be found, inventoried, and studied, to grant them their place in a decolonizing history (15).

During a reading for a public university in New York state, a student asks me why I chose to include a sonnet crown as the received form for a central series in my chapbook. I can only respond in one of two ways: I can describe the merits and formal capacities of the sonnet and its legibility to U.S. literature, or I can tell them how as a Latinx poet, when I wield the form, I become estranged and converted into a vandal with suspicious motives. The second option requires confessing my fear that I will be othered the moment I pour my lived experiences into the European container. The experience is ultimately frustrating, leaving much to be desired by both speaker and listener. This frustration of trying to create from within a colonial paradigm is

triggered by what Adrian Piper describes as “discrete forms or objects in art [which can no longer be seen] as viable reflections or expressions of what seems to be going on in this society: They refer back to conditions of separateness, order, exclusivity, and the stability of easily accepted functional identities that no longer exist” (42). Although Piper specifically speaks from her Black, female subjectivity, her frustration of being compelled to create art while unable to define it in any aesthetic terms at her disposal—leaving her “very much at sea”—is an account that resonates with me as being a fundamental experience for both artists and publics creating from within the borderlands⁴ (31).

In, “Talking to Myself: The Ongoing Autobiography of an Art Object,” Piper reflects on the moment when, for her, the aesthetic isolation of the Western art world became invaded by the “outside world.” She describes the outside world as determining her and her work in ways that confront her with the politics of her position whether she wanted to know them or not, after which she declares, “I have become self-conscious” (Piper 32). The moment the levee separating her lived experience from Western aesthetics overflows and breaks, Piper is thrust into a self-

⁴ Piper’s feeling “very much at sea” alludes to the affectual experiences that shape the work of the artists in my dissertation, artists who are critiquing colonial paradigms with colonial forms and tools. I believe this phenomenon has affectual resonances with what cultural scholar José Esteban Muñoz describes as *brown feeling*: “What unites and consolidates oppositional groups is not simply the fact of identity but the way in which they perform affect, especially in relation to an official “national affect” that is aligned with a hegemonic class ... Not in terms of simple being, but through the nuanced route of feeling ... a certain mode of “feeling brown” in a world painted white, organized by cultural mandates to “feel white” (68).

consciousness that illuminates how “the aesthetic possibilities of discrete objects have somehow been exhausted by [her] aesthetic vision” (41). She then writes, “I like the idea of doing away with all discrete forms and letting art lurk in the midst of things” (37). By invoking Adrian Piper, I aim to invite two elements of her aesthetic analysis into my dissertation and poetry performance manual: 1) decolonial aesthetics and poetics come from marked bodies, shifting us away from the Eurocentric colonial objectivity that originates from an unmarked body—which is often both white and male. This shift disrupts what Donna Haraway describes as the “conquering gaze from nowhere⁵,” effectively deactivating a powerful weapon in the colonial arsenal (581). 2) By resisting discrete forms that are often the historical cultural result of colonialism and may sustain and perpetuate the colonial enterprise, diasporic Latin American and Latinx cultural productions from the borderlands—particularly those created not from a singular artist or “genius” but from community—become a decolonial labor. As a poet and a scholar who insists on recognizing that he is making and thinking from an embodied positionality alongside various communities (which include artists, workers, students, family members) throughout the borderlands, I am invested in a decolonial and counterhegemonic aesthetic that breaks from colonial

⁵ Donna Haraway’s concept of situated knowledges from her article, “Situated Knowledges: The Science Question in Feminism and the Privilege of Partial Perspectives,” resonates with Piper’s reflection. Haraway writes, “I would like to insist on the embodied nature of all vision and so reclaim the sensory system that has been used to signify a leap out of the marked body and into a conquering gaze from nowhere. This is the gaze that mythically inscribes all the marked bodies, that makes the unmarked category claim the power to see and not be seen, to represent while escaping representation” (581).

paradigms. Alongside the Indigenous, Queer, and mestizo artists at the center of my dissertation who are working across various genres, forms, languages, and modalities, I enact a decolonial poetics in my dissertation by using a critical and creative methodology which includes memoirist reflection, creative writing prompts, poetry, and communal creative practices.

In my poetry performance manual specifically, I demonstrate how community creative productions can help publics stage poetry performances that highlight things like the incompatibility of the Western archive, alternative relationships to language that better represent lived experiences not faithfully rendered in the West, and methodologies on the production and circulation of work built alongside insurgent collectives. The publics who conduct this poetry performance contribute to these conceptual categories in ways that demonstrate how decolonial aesthetics includes but also moves beyond the discussion of what *is* art and constitutes instead an ongoing process of building more just worlds through collective creative labors. My hope is that this manual facilitates poetry performances around the interconnected conceptual categories of my dissertation and that this design invites readers to lead with their interests and actively participate with the materials more as a constellation.

Labor and Permanent Debts

Permanent Debts, Melancholic Wanderings: Labors of Love and Organizing as Decolonial Method in Contemporary Latinx Poetry

In 2015, poets Marcelo Hernandez Castillo, Christopher “Loma” Soto, and Javier Zamora organized the UndocuPoets Campaign to protest the ways key first-book publishing contests required applicants to provide proof of citizenship and thus reinforced the colonial divide between U.S. poets and those from elsewhere in the Americas. As part of a small and rarely lucrative market in U.S. publishing, emerging poets have historically relied on first book, chapbook, and individual poem competitions to earn an opportunity to publicize, publish, and circulate their work. By limiting access to book prizes and competitions to only documented poets—especially within competitions designed to uplift emerging voices and diversify U.S. poetry—generations of undocumented poets have been excluded from publication and its benefits. The benefits of publication through these prizes can include access to university employment, wider readership, and funding for sustained and protected time to develop craft, which for many poets can be the life changing difference between precarious and secure living conditions.

As one of their campaign strategies, Hernandez Castillo, Soto, and Zamora used their platform as formerly undocumented emerging poets and poets of color to publicly demand ten highly visible and renowned first book prizes to remove language stating that U.S. citizenship was a requirement for submission or publication (UndocuPoets). By mobilizing a network of online journals and a coalition of writers

from diverse communities, the Undocupoets Campaign was successful in altering, to different degrees, language on citizenship requirements for most first book poetry prizes (Pineda). By reimagining how, why, and what their racialized bodies labored to produce in response to coloniality, the Undocupoets and the collective labor of aligned artistic communities, incited institutional changes in the production and circulation of writing, and thus made a significant systematic intervention that expanded and protected access to marginalized representation in U.S. poetry. The nuanced and multidimensional representation of undocumented, immigrant, and queer narratives of color inscribed in the U.S.-Eurocentric canon through their poetry was now being reinforced by the labor of their collective organizing that worked to force open literary institutions for future generations of diverse writers.

The Undocupoets' literary labor organizing is part of a larger tradition of activist and movement building cultural production throughout Latin America. In Magalí Rabasa's 2019 work, *The Book in Movement*, she analyzes how many independent small presses throughout Latin America support autonomous social movements through the construction of what she terms as *the organic book*, which she defines as: "an autonomous object that emerges not from institutional dynamics and structures (nor singular individual author) but rather from collective practices of experimentation and becoming" (14). According to Rabasa, these small presses produce low-cost books, autonomous political perspectives, collective forms of organization, while engaging in local and transnational political networks of presses, writers, and movements to embody and actualize an autonomous political framework

(16). Politics of autonomy are defined by Rabasa as “self-organization, horizontalism, cooperativism, and mutual aid ... [shifting away] from programmatic and top-down approaches to political organizing and privilege[ing] dialogue and communication as their basic modes while working from the everyday to build prefigurative politics”

(5). The Undocupoets’ literary campaigns differ from the literary projects that Rabasa examines like Raúl Zibechi’s *Dispersar el poder*, Bajo Tierra Ediciones’s volume *Pensar las autonomías*, and Claudia Korol’s *Caleidoscopio de rebeldías* (31-32).

Primarily, the distinction is the Undocupoets work to enact change onto hegemonic literary institutions whereas those independent literary projects work through collectives to achieve a politics of autonomy apart from such institutions. Similarly, both groups work outside of hegemonic cultural institutions to highlight “the limits of the revolutionary potential of a state project” and operate using a community driven politics of autonomy (27; Woods 261).

If we imagine the collective action of the Undocupoets as an embodied performance, this labor then extends their poetry beyond the poetic form on the page or within the book while materially intervening with hegemonic state and private cultural institutions. These state and private cultural institutions become hegemonic by establishing social relations “in which a dominant class or fraction of a class gains the “active consent” of subordinate or allied classes by exercising “cultural, moral, and ideological” leadership over them. (Ponce de León 6; Gramsci 395). Literary collectives like the Undocupoets, or Rabasa’s independent literary presses, then work as counterhegemonic forces to disrupt what Gramsci imagines as state and private

organization's dissemination of a dominant class's "conception of life." This "conception of life" ultimately merges political and civil society so that consent for the organization of social relations is consciously or unconsciously given (Gramsci 1992a, 187, 1979, 204). The ripples from these disruptions to hegemonic conceptions of life are far reaching. Collective action through these literary organizations challenges and reveals how we read the work of writers critical of dominant epistemic cultures but more specifically, the way we characterize the racialized literary labor conducted by the precarious bodies on which hegemonic social orders are built. Poetry written and collectively organized by racialized bodies then becomes part of a multidimensional form of labor that troubles a key cartesian dualism in the conception of modernity that I will define now.

In Aníbal Quijano's essay, "Colonialidad del poder, eurocentrismo, y America Latina," the Peruvian sociologist and political theorist points out, "modernity refers to a specific historical experience that began with America" that upheld "the emergence a Euro-centered, capitalist, colonial power structure" and that represented "a new place for the idea of future in the world imaginary, especially among the peoples that configured Europe" (221). With modernity came an understanding of space and time that was grounded in the key terms "modernity" and "rationality," European products fabricated to uphold Eurocentric epistemological dominance. Quijano describes that key to "modernity" and "rationality" was the mutation of "the old dualist way of looking at the universe" (221). He writes:

First, unlike in all non-western imaginaries, after Descartes 'body' was simply forgotten as a necessary component of the idea of human or person. In that

version, 'body' was installed in rational knowledge as a lower-status 'object' of study. It is only the 'subject' that counts, as the protagonist of *cogito*, since 'subject, 'spirit' or 'reason' are but secularizations of 'soul.' Second the relations between European and non-European suffered a temporal alteration: all non-Europe belonged to the past, and so it was possible to think about relations between them in an evolutionary perspective ...

... the 'inferior' 'races' are 'inferior' because they are 'objects' of study or of domination/exploitation/discrimination, they are not 'subjects', and, most of all, they are not 'rational subjects.' Thus, they could legitimately be dominated and exploited. And only from that peculiar point of view was it ('rationally') possible to consider all non-European peoples as the past as previously articulated: as objects of knowledge or of domination and exploitation by Europeans. (Quijano 221)

According to Quijano, modernity mutates cartesian duality so that bodies racialized within coloniality are rendered first and foremost exploitable due to their lack of subjectivity and reason and proximity to nature and the past. Within modernity then, the racialized body is imagined as a producer of labor incapable of creating objects, experiences, and narratives that illuminate subjectivity and reason. This binds those dominated and controlled by coloniality from intervening with the status quo, and most importantly from using art to critique, investigate, and otherwise put pressure on Western dominance. As queer poets of color with mixed citizenship status, the Undocu poets then reappropriate the labor they produce to trouble the colonial binary that denies them reason. By doing the very thing that's expected of them, laboring, they are able to mutate cultural production as a form of racialized labor to build more just worlds outside of modernity.

In this chapter, I analyze works by two of the founders of the Undocu poets, including an interview with Marcelo Hernandez Castillo, and two poems by Javier

Zamora. I theorize poetic and literary organizing labor as a manifestation of a decolonial aesthetics in dialogue with Quijano's coloniality of power and its naturalization of the relationship between race and labor (2000), theories of precarity (Paret and Gleeson, Butler) and affective labor (Hardt) (Ponce de León). My analysis demonstrates how contemporary Latinx poets organize and create poetry to change hegemonic cultural institutions by creating access to their resources (wide recognition, publication, publicity, etc.) for nondocumented poets and writers. By reclaiming their own labor through vital cultural production (organizing for access to literary opportunity and troubling traditional poetic forms) the Undocupoets enact a decolonial aesthetics that reshapes the sensorium, the contested sensory apparatus through which we come to feel and know the world. These cultural productions allow readers to imagine racialized bodies outside of the mutated cartesian dualism that defines them as both exploitable and dominatable sources of labor within Coloniality. (Moving forward, I'll refer to this dualism as a binary that upholds coloniality). I also connect their creative and organizing labors to the labor of other precarious migrants, like my parents, who continue to work for a higher standard of living promised—yet often unfulfilled—by “The American Dream.” By linking the Latinx poet to the Latinx laborer, which I present here through braided poetic and biographical interludes describing my own parents' migration and labor in the U.S., valuable insights are revealed as to how the colonial binary that establishes the racialized body as object—and not subject—is productively unsettled in poetic labor. This labor, I argue, works multidimensionally to generate a decolonial creative vitality that

struggles against hegemonic cultural institutions to secure and preserve representation within stifling cultural imaginaries like “The American Dream.”

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I can trace many of my family’s beginnings: beginnings in dark adobe homes, humid with cobwebs and dirt floors, beginnings overlooking Lake Managua, Momotombo’s cone covered in cloud, beginnings in a Los Angeles grocery store during the holiday season, jingles piped in over loudspeakers. To the son of immigrants, beginnings are seductive. They mark an imaginary place on the page to start the alphabetic line and somehow convince me that before this imaginary point there was nothing and after there will be so much more.

My parents met when they both worked for a grocery store chain that would eventually become Food4Less in central Los Angeles (see figure 1). My father was 17 years old, a recently arrived undocumented minor from Puebla, Mexico working as a night janitor with the help of a counterfeit social security card that he purchased in MacArthur Park. My mother had been living in the U.S. since she and her eight sisters became refugees after the Managua, Nicaragua 1972 earthquake. The quake leveled the city they called home, killing thousands, and leaving hundreds of thousands without shelter or running water (Orlich).

U.S.-backed dictator Anastasio "Tachito" Somoza Debayle failed to bring relief to Nicaragua in the months and years that followed the earthquake. The military strongman embezzled international aid and used his pharmaceutical company, Plasmaferesis, to re-export recently arrived blood plasma, selling it to the U.S. and

Europe for profit despite the desperate need in his capital city (Coppa, Wilson).
Tragedy struck at home, too. Within the year, my maternal grandmother was killed by a drunk driver on her way back from the restaurant where she worked. The nine daughters—who had now become orphans in a home country crippled by natural and political disasters—had no choice but to relocate to the U.S. to live with their estranged father who had been living in Los Angeles for work.

What do you Remember about the Earth?

after Bhanu Kapil

I do not remember the bending bough of the mango tree, the round bellies of the fruit round like ours, round from the spools of tapeworms we found in the outhouse.

I do not remember the long lake and the volcano at its center, the billowing ash like a tower for the angelic, for lightning.

I do not remember the road that ran through the center of Niki Nomo and the secrets it kept from the adults, the demon's procession in the early hours of morning. The drunken hand on the doorknob, my five younger sisters pretending to be asleep on the other side.

I do not remember the lumber yard and the photo of the shoeless children, your aunts, humid among the splinters.

I do not remember all their names.

I do not remember the sweat stained man in the backyard.

I do not remember the howls of the monkeys fighting over a round bellied mango.

I do not remember your grandmother and her beautiful hands, her thick hair electric in the sticky night.

I do not remember the leftovers she'd walk home for her nine daughters from the Italian restaurant she worked at as a waitress.

I do not remember your grandfather and the 18-wheeler he'd drive to haul lumber from Managua to Los Angeles.

I do not remember the family he started there in his ferocious hunt for a son.

I do not remember if he was there the morning the earth opened, the morning after which all that was left standing was the volcano and its tower of angels, its tower of furious red bolts.

I do not remember the drunken man in the taxi.

I do not remember if your grandmother felt pain.

I do not remember which loss came first.

I do not remember if when the earth swallowed the city it took time with it.

I do not remember if your grandfather ever came back for her body or if he left her spilled in the street.

I do not remember if the earth closed over her, embraced her for me, for my sisters, for even you.

I do not remember who drove the station wagon of orphans to Los Angeles.

I do not remember if we ever make it back.

At that time my mother mostly spoke English because my grandfather, a cruel patriarch who insisted on assimilation, had prohibited his daughters from speaking Spanish, misguidedly hoping that it make them more employable. Once at the grocery store, my parents fell in love after a few years of friendship, in between languages and overnight and swing shifts. Although the events that brought them to the U.S. were distinct, they had both been marked as bodies who were here for one reason: to labor. Working at the grocery store was a common ground, a shared impulse, an expected bodily response, instructed to them by the world around them and ingrained in the memory of their muscle. Labor as a blueprint to survive immigrating to the

U.S. from a place rendered too exploited, too dangerous—a place without a future—
was all around them, in the music they consumed, the television they watched, and in
the conversations they had with family and friends.

Mami, Tell Me That Story Again

the one about kissing Papi for
the first time in the taco shop
on Florence, the one you would

take us to with the tiled fountain
at its center, the rusting pennies
in its basin growing mossy after

so many wishes. Tell me about
the scar tissue after the car accident
that crushed Papi's shin, how he was

an undocumented minor so the doctors
had no choice but to put him back
together. Tell me how public medicine

did a poor job of placing the long bolt
so shallow there's a color we can only
explain as a silverfish humming

beneath a veil of skin. You trace
your fingers over its threads to feel
how it remembers the winter's cold.

I can't remember where the accident
happened so that road has become
all roads. Oh, Mami, tell me that story

again where you tell us we men
can do better, where you're grateful
that medicine came at all to a boy

with no papers, and where you teach me
the inheritance of a furrowed brow
to keep the buzzards at bay. Yet even then,

the company pickpockets whittle
at his other bones until he's a bow
aching at the cash register. Mami,

did you ever kiss him there?

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Laboring Towards Civilization

Quijano argues that despite the fall of the Spanish empire in the Americas, new historical identities and social structures were built on inherited colonial legacies, principally unjust epistemological frameworks that interlocked understandings of race, labor, and nature. These elements remain tightly wound together due to the coloniality of power and, despite the rise of egalitarian political imaginaries, they continue to be foundational in the preservation and fortification of the capitalistic and colonial nation states that developed in Latin America after the Spanish empire.

Quijano writes⁶:

Las nuevas identidades históricas, producidas sobre la base de la idea de raza, fueron asociadas a la naturaleza de los roles y lugares en la nueva estructura global de control del trabajo. Así, ambos elementos, raza y división del trabajo, quedaron estructuralmente asociados y reforzándose mutuamente, a pesar de que ninguno de los dos era necesariamente dependiente el uno del otro para existir o para cambiar.

The new historical identities, produced on the basis of the idea of race, were associated to the “naturalness” and location of the roles⁷ in the new global structure for the control of labor. This way both elements, race and the

⁶ I include both the original Spanish and English translation here and elsewhere for additional reference.

⁷ Quijano uses the word “naturaleza” here in reference to how racial identities and their connected role as laborers were, in colonial linearity and cartesian duality, closer to nature than civilization and also considered as naturally occurring.

division of labor, remained structurally associated with one another and mutually reinforced even though neither of the two were necessarily dependent on one another to exist or to change.” (“Colonialidad,”865)

Quijano invites us to imagine the ways that the legacies of colonial time-space and modernity created new historical identities within coloniality wherein race is intentionally tethered to labor as a natural and controlling identifier. As a result of this configuration, the division of labor is a predetermined factor of the minoritized existence within the Spanish empire and the nation states that rose throughout America after its fall. An individual’s race determines their role in society while insisting that their position is solely a consequence of their being closer to nature and further away from civilization as a racialized person. As previously described, within coloniality the racialized body is primarily an uncivilized object of nature that cannot be reimagined as anything else but exploitable labor. My parents are captured in the gravitational pull of this configuration. As someone who witnessed their lived experiences, the sensation that other forces were at play was palpable; how else could they live as though they were first and foremost a body, a source of labor and a site of ideas, reason, spirit, and soul second? (Quijano 2000, 221).

The tethering of race to labor is an intentional strategy to preserve and perpetuate the coloniality of power and to debilitate and exploit marginalized populations. Throughout their lives but especially upon their arrival to the U.S., my parents had preconstructed positions in the national imagination whether they accepted them or not. Like many immigrants from both rural and urban communities in Latin America, many of their early interactions in the U.S., which ranged from

awkward encounters to dangerous conflicts, were a result of their being enmeshed in colonial power dynamics as racially marked and precarious laborers. At an early age, my father confessed to me that if he could have chosen, he would have been a teacher. Despite this desire, it was clear that he was not to be an artist, an intellectual, but on the basis of the color of his skin and the mythology of the American Dream to which he prescribed, he was predestined to labor with his body. Employed on the pretenses of false documentation, my father's employment was characterized by an insecurity common to those without citizenship and others who belonged to the precariat or workers who do not have access to contemporary employment securities like: guaranteed employment, opportunities for upward mobility, protection against dismissal, and income security (Standing; Paret and Gleeson 279). In *Precarious Life*, Judith Butler expands on the notion of the precariat to include those who are "socially constituted bodies, attached to others, at risk of losing those attachments, exposed to others, at risk of violence by virtue of that exposure" (20). In this way, my parents' relationship with one another and their community was mediated through the workplace and so these valuable social connections and safeguards could just as easily be taken away through unemployment, rendering their positions yet even more precarious.

Griffen and Leibetseder argue that advancing biotechnologization has resulted in the transformation of bodies into commodities, forced to work through intimate labor (3). Although they imagine biotechnologization as the technology driven processes in which bodily interventions are enacted like the remolding of gendered

bodies or assisted reproduction, I extend the term to include corporate technologies like the pressures of sales goals, the monitoring of warehouse inventory and employee performance, and points of sales which have material impacts on the bodies of precarious employees. These corporate technologies, ever present in the day-to-day life of a grocery store employee, become part of my parents' immigrant bodies and reshape them as intimate laborers whose work is defined by affectual dimensions. As Hardt writes, "interactive and cybernetic machines become a new prosthesis integrated into our bodies and minds and a lens through which to redefine our bodies and minds themselves." (95). I argue that my parents' bodies are subjected to customer service and affordable access to subsistence in low-income communities and so are thus enmeshed in labor conditions that render them exploitable, vulnerable, and exposed to bioprecarity. Griffen and Leitbetseder define bioprecarity as:

Bioprecarity articulates the interrelation between body or embodied self and precarity. Here precarity is not only a matter of precarity of employment but of the embodied self as it is employed, most obviously perhaps, in intimate labour. 'Bio' thus stakes a material terrain in this volume – that of the body. Its use in terms such as biopower and biopolitics simultaneously points to the important fact that the body put to work and precarized through that process is also a political entity, the subject and object of politics and policies. (7)

As embodied workers consumed by the demands of the workplace, the biological facts of their lives were also integrated in this environment and I, as their child, was too. Some of the earliest stories that I've been told of my own life are of my father rushing to the grocery store lunchroom so that my mother could breastfeed me on her 15-minute break—that private and familial act rendered public by the workplace's prioritized demand on my mother's body. My earliest memories of my childhood

include playing unsupervised with buckets of green plastic army men and red “Indians” that I pulled off the shelves unsupervised. I remember plunging my hand into the bucket and pulling out the green and red bodies before they poured through my fingers in the small discount toy aisle. In my memory, I’m squatting on the polished concrete aisle, likely just waxed overnight by my father, my hands dark with soot from reaching into the steel shelves past the stacked products, perhaps to feel that place, that surrogate home, press up against my small frame.

The bioprecarity of my parents’ employment manifested in their absence from the household, as well as in the toll their bodies paid. It was as if according to the colonial logic of the “American Dream,” they would be able to sacrifice their bodies as an assertion of their immigrant agency, that “simultaneously ... motivating and constraining factor ... a comparative advantage that employers seek out, as well as a factor shaping when and how workers come forward to contest forms of abuse” (Paret and Gleeson 282). My father’s body in particular was a resource he was willing to expend to enact social change at the immediate level of his family, but also at the level of the largely Black and brown staff and community he served. According to Hardt:

To one degree or another, this affective labor plays a certain role throughout the service industries, from fast-food servers to providers of financial services, embedded in the moments of human interaction and communication. This labor is immaterial, even if it is corporeal and affective, in the sense that its products are intangible: a feeling of ease, well-being, satisfaction, excitement, passion—even a sense of connectedness or community. Categories such as “in-person” services or services of proximity are often used to identify this kind of labor, but what is essential to it, its in-person aspect, is really the creation and manipulation of affects. Such affective production, exchange, and

communication is generally associated with human contact, with the actual presence of another, but that contact can be either actual or virtual. (95-96).

In exchange for his body and the care he could render affectually in the workplace, my father was able to materialize his membership as a citizen—be American enough—and gain legitimacy in the ethos of the country that he immigrated to. In my memory, this isn't something that is ever spelled out clearly, or instructed to me in the curriculum of the Los Angeles Public Schools that I attended. Instead, it was conveyed to me somatically in the dry and cracked skin of my father's hands, in the aluminum towers of beer cans piled in the backyard, in his porous fingernails that had been rotted away by the fungi that lived in his blood after he cut his hand on the job (See figure 2).

When I was a boy, my father's return home from work was a ceremony. He would unlock the door and let out a whistle that could be heard throughout the house. He would kiss my mother who had returned from work earlier in the day or was preparing for a night shift and sit in the living room. I would bring him a beer and then after he sat on the couch, I would take off his shoes and socks in a childish attempt to somehow share in the labor of waking up, dressing for work, working, returning home, and then undressing for the evening. As an adult, I now understand what a shift at work does to the feet. How they become swollen, overheated, and damp, carrying the toll of each invisible mile walked up and down the aisles at the molecular level. This ache is part of the corporeal price paid to ensure that the customer doesn't think twice about the seemingly automatically appearing bags of

tortillas, the gleaming produce arranged in kaleidoscopic displays of undoubted bounty and its overflowing fridges of booze. Hardt goes on to write:

Caring labor is certainly entirely immersed in the corporeal, the somatic, but the affects it produces are nonetheless immaterial. What affective labor produces are social networks, forms of community, biopower. (Here the division between economy and culture begins to break down.) In the production and reproduction of affects, in those networks of culture and communication, collective subjectivities are produced and sociality is produced—even if those subjectivities and that sociality are directly exploitable by capital. This is where we can realize the enormous potential in affective labor. (96-97)

At first, all three of his sons would run over to greet him, but as we got older, I'll admit, it was eventually only me. The impact of my parents' affectual labor in service of his community and our family was volcanic and reshaped how our household experience life, reshaping how we all related to one another but more importantly to ourselves. I don't remember the last time I participated in this ritual of whistle, beer, and feet, but what I remember vividly is that sensation of being close to a body that was paying a permanent debt that wouldn't—and perhaps couldn't—soon be paid off, that expressed its exhaustion, agency, and vitality, in terms beyond language.

Overtime

I'm assured that on the devil's ridge
I'll understand my trek out from the valley.

I'm assured that from some vistas
you can still find the language in the fly's transit

across the orange sun. I'm assured that soon
my number will be up and that the butcher,

with the pink bloom on his white smock, will invite me
to begin to live, to undock my petite's damned ship

which rolls in the harbor, the mystique of lies
gathering in a cloud of gnats over its tilted mast,

swirling to cover the sun in the smoky dawn.
Growl or no growl, I can't do this alone.

I can't bend myself into the knots demanded by industry,
into the forgetfulness that it takes to unhear the puma's cry,

into the dementia of time folding in on itself,
like a thick sludge poured into our hollowing cave.

Sweetheart, embrace me as I get old.
I can hardly hold the weight of it anymore.

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Creative Labors: Organizing and Writing in Defense of Colonized Bodies

For the founding members of the Undocupoets, the act of telling stories is another kind of affectual labor that centers the experiences of their migrant bodies within the aesthetic framework of the poem. Both Javier Zamora and Marcelo Hernandez Castillo, who migrated to the U.S. as undocumented children, reflect on their experiences across three critically acclaimed collections of poetry and two memoirs. Their work as writers and as labor organizers, productively troubles the colonial binary that works to deny the mind—reason and soul—from the racialized and laboring body. In fact, their creative and poetic labor painfully enshrines the experiences of their bodies in the maddening migratory circuits towards, away, and then back to the U.S. (Rouse 15). In a 2020 interview with Marcelo Hernandez Castillo on the release of his memoir, *Children of the Land*, Hernandez Castillo

shared with me his reflections on the physical pain of rendering textually his experiences as an undocumented person:

NXO

Public discourse often reduces immigration to being about going from one place to another but in your memoir, that's turned on its head. When reflecting on your family's history you write, "One hundred years after [my grandfather's] first crossing, we were still trying to cross, still moving in maddening helplessness, a revolving door without an exit." Was the act of writing the book a way for you to finally arrive?

MCH

I'm not sure if this maddening circle we've been going through will stop, but certainly writing this was at least the first time I've ever sat down and put my words to a page to let them exist outside of me. I need to reference Javier Zamora's essay, "Silence at the Border: Telling the Hard Stories of Undocumented Immigration" that was published in LitHub. It just made me weep. It's such a powerful piece because it illuminates just how silent we are even though this madness is happening inside of us and we're going and going like hamsters on a wheel. Neither of us can bring ourselves to talk about it, to be vulnerable in it even in the most vulnerable confessions of our biographies. You know what I write in my book, and what many other writers have written about their experiences, the violence they have witnessed, that they have experienced, yet regardless of that, there's still another inner circle that's inside of us that we keep to ourselves.

For the longest time, Javier and I, we didn't know just how much we were both in anguish at the same time in the same manner. He, too, at the Poets and Writers Gala was drinking, as he says in his essay. He did it to just try and fit in, so that he could subdue this pain, and that's exactly what I was doing.

When he read my reflection of the same moment in the memoir, he said it really got to him. It sheds a light on how insular and how inwardly reflective the immigrant experience is. It's only when I talk to other people who have been undocumented that it's, Oh I understand this, I know exactly what you mean by this.

I don't know if I'll ever stop moving or if I'll ever stop thinking about some of the things that led me to the behaviors that allowed me to survive as a kid or to let us go under the radar—that's the kind of madness and behavior that you have to adopt, but I hope they at least stop with my son.

Naively and on the outside of the undocumented experience, my question at this point in our conversation is an optimistic one. I imagine that after publishing multiple award-winning poetry collections and a popular memoir, Hernandez Castillo might

feel as though he had finally arrived at some solace, a terminus for healing and moving beyond the explicitly embodied agony of being trapped in an impossible circuit of migration. Instead, he reflects on the impossibility of this arrival and how he finds solidarity in knowing his peer and fellow undocumented poet, Javier Zamora, identifies with his experience. The labor of these writers and of the Undocu poets demonstrates how the act of inserting undocumented experiences in contemporary literary poetry troubles the colonial binary that demands that racialized people exclusively contribute to the capitalist nation state through labor that is without letters and unpoetic.

As undocumented poets producing from within the colonial wound, the act of creativity isn't exclusively for catharsis, enlightenment, or pleasure as would be expected from mainstream cultural productions in other genres like popular adult fiction. Nor does their creative labor qualify as a financially lucrative and valuable business endeavor which albeit rarely happens historically in literary poetry, could happen with the skillsets of these artists in different more capitalistically attuned medium (social media, television or film, and other commercial industries). The affectual and intimate labor of these poets cannot be disconnected from the toll it takes on their bioprecarious bodies. Hernandez Castillo makes multiple references to the physical anguish that he experiences navigating the memory of the violence experienced as an undocumented person. Despite a mastery of the English and Spanish language, he struggles to "to talk about it, to be vulnerable in it even in the most vulnerable confessions of our biographies." The bioprecariousness is also

exemplified in his relationship with Zamora. In this interview and in other writing, they both allude to struggling with substance abuse to dull the pain of being outsiders in an insular, elitest, and largely white literary institution. Even in Zamora's 2022 memoir, *Solito*, he begins with an epigraph from *The Body Keeps the Score*, a popular psychology self-help book on the relationship between trauma and the body⁸. In a 2023 interview with *Public Books*, he writes:

Solito wouldn't have happened in the present tense, how and when it happened, without *The Body Keeps the Score*. Another quintessential book that explained so many things about my suffering, my emotional suffering, and the ways that I coped with things, and why. It helped me understand why I had trouble being potty-trained, why I was a weird kid, and how I attached myself to the adults and the mother figures in the room. And this is very typical of children who get left behind by either one or both parents, which happened to me. (Zamora and Cuéllar)

Yet despite, the physical and psychological burden of their identity as undocumented poets, both writers strategically assert their immigrant agency. Paret and Gleeson write:

Immigrant workers often make nuanced decisions about when to call out employer abuse, and when to persevere, even in the face of egregious violations. These survival strategies represent a form of constrained agency, even if it is ultimately not emancipatory. Co-workers compete with and hold each other accountable, absolving employers of the need to police their workers at all times. (282)

In the summer of 2023, the UndocuPoets created a campaign to expand eligibility for the Pulitzer Prize in Literature to include undocumented writers. Under the pressure of highly publicized editorials and a popular petition with nearly 300 signatures, one

⁸ The epigraph reads "Our bodies are the texts that carry the memories and therefore remembering is no less than reincarnation."

of the most prestigious English language literary awards in the U.S. agreed to expand its award eligibility to include noncitizens including in the Music and Drama category (Chang, Zamora, Contreras). Practicing tact and nuance, Zamora, Hernandez Castillo, affiliated members of the UndocuPoets, and other likeminded writers, asserted their agency to organize for more equitable opportunities for writers working in the U.S.

In his interview, Hernandez Castillo ends his response on an optimistic note, hoping that his pain is only a consequence of immigration that gets to end with him, saving his son from the madness of longing and displacement. Although my parents don't have traditionally creative practices, they, like Hernandez Castillo, strategically asserted their agency through community building with family and friends, and in the process found one another. As part of the generation following those who arrived here from elsewhere, I recognize and find solidarity in the impossibility of these efforts. Despite best efforts, no single poem, book, or organizing campaign can permanently ease the migrating body. Instead, each generation asserts its agency differently, creating vital and insurgent cultural interventions, hoping that it will result in less pain for the next. Here, writing becomes the labor and the vehicle for reflecting on the trauma of migration. This labor becomes yet another place where the migrant is able to assert their agency and to work to overcome the burdens of coloniality.

Self-Portrait as Papi
after Chen Chen

Papi loves to say drink the beer, don't let it drink you.
Papi works long hours at the grocery store, and if
I add the overtime, the holiday time-and-a-half,
the accrued sick days, and subtract the company luggage
gifted for thirty years of labor that he'll never use,

I wonder if he's ever left that place. However, for certain,

Papi is drunk in the backyard, tomato red despite
the bedrock ochre of his skin. In Los Angeles,
these are signs of drought, signs that even the roaring
wildfire can die from thirst but you couldn't tell here,
the slow gush of water reaching both the bush
with roses only slightly larger than his heart

and the sticky bin spilling over with crushed cans of Miller Lite,
an altar of aluminum. An open grave. Papi makes
beautiful things. But what can I make of the empty vessel
and its relationship to his heart? It's years later now,
and I have yet to gather the courage to name the thing,

despite the courage I spent summer afternoons collecting
bottle caps encrusted in the garden soil, despite the courage
of ritual, of unfurling his damp socks to witness his tomato red feet,
red like those roses, and still hot with the goliath distance
of his 12-hour shift at Food4Less. After a day at my desk,

I walk into my garden and unfurl my socks, lift my shirt over my
shoulders to reveal a blue softness, unbuckle my pants
until I'm left with myself. I don't need the control of reflection
to know the contours of my body, to know the stubborn ways I wear his.

*

Resisting Forgetting: Transcribing Memory as Decolonial Labor

At fifteen, I traveled to Puebla, Mexico to meet my paternal grandfather for
the first time. Unlike his son, he was never interested in chasing the promise of blue
Levi's or black Chevy Silverados that the north had made to young Mexicans like my
father who were willing to endure seemingly never-ending labor. I was seduced by
the idea that I could use my grandfather's memory to go back far enough in time to
find an origin that didn't ground my father as labor. Perhaps I could even uncover a
chain of expulsions from his hometown, or from a time and place before that, which

would explain how, why, and who embedded my father into a cultural and social schema where his primary expected life contribution was the labor his body could produce. I struggled through my pocho Spanish to ask him if he knew where the Osorios came from, if they ever spoke another language, and if we had any connections to the various Indigenous Mixtecan and Zapotec communities in the area. These fraught questions came from a youthful desperation to identify a historical, linguistic, and geographical origin, a people, place and language that could stand in in my imagination as an alternative to the migratory circuit—a reference people or point that had somehow escaped the precarity. I knew enough Spanish to understand that the answer was no. Aside from my great grandfather who had spent a few years working throughout the U.S. as part of the Bracero program, this was it. I understood by the gesturing of his hands, the sinking but accepting tone in his voice that the valley on the southern edge of Mexico's Transvolcanic belt was all that he ever knew, and that the Spanish that he acquired in the fields as a sugarcane farmer was all his voice would ever carry.

Despite my grandfather's insistence that there was no lost past worth remembering, I still longed to better understand the unshakable feeling that our conditions were, to a meaningful degree, predetermined. These were palpable forces that essentialized my father into disposable racialized labor and were inextricably entangled with how the sharing of communal memories and knowledge from one generation to another was throttled as if by design, as if to ensure that nothing could be handed down and built upon. In 1615, Franciscan Juan de Torquemada completed

an expansive book wherein he expressed concern regarding Amerindian ability to have history and construct coherent narratives. In it he writes: “This (or something like this) is what happens in this history of New Spain, for just as the ancient inhabitants did not have letters, or were even familiar with them, so they neither left records of their history” (Mignolo 128). Due to their unfamiliarity with the alphabet, the letrados in New Spain labeled Indigenous people “the second class of barbarians” (Mignolo 129). As such the letrados expected that history in the “new world” abide by the conditions and expectations created by the experience of alphabetically written historical narratives (Mignolo 133). Since the Amerindians seemed not have the resources to meet this expectation, “the letrados appointed themselves to write the history of this people “without history” and in the process worked to destroy the capacity of Indigenous people to produce and preserve memory (Mignolo 133). Even for me, as a non-Indigenous person of color born in the U.S., my labor as a poet works to respond to the way the coloniality of power restricts and controls access to memory. My creative labors are inflected by the gravity of the colonial wound, and within this context, poetry provides precise language and other tools to search for the restive vitality in my father or to find the joy in my mother’s escape from a country that was devastated by both natural disaster and capitalist greed.

To better understand my—and perhaps other Latinx artists’—poetic instincts, it’s critical to ask: why am I, and others born within the coloniality of power, drawn to poetry, a form that has historically failed to represent people like my father, and countless others from Latinx, undocumented, and Indigenous communities? Why is

this form invoked to make sense of the harm and ongoing legacy of the colonial wound despite our communities' fraught relationships to dominant textual languages? How then do these artists create poetry within systems of oppression that actively work to eject us and our forebearers before our bodies ever had a chance to take up space except to labor? Before our body had a chance to create and preserve memory and affect in language? What kind of poetry is it? What must it do to survive within systems meticulously designed to hijack our vitality so that our productions are only labor that feed the systems in return? What form of labor can poetry be when it is about the experience of manual laborers? What forms of accumulation and experience of (subaltern) knowledge does it allow? And crucially, for whom? How is it fought for and defended through collective action? What does it mean for marginalized people to collectively enact labor in the name of the preservation of ideas versus the pure exhaustion of physical bodies for the accumulation of wealth by others?

To a degree, I am haunted by the grocery store. I can only write from its reverberating fluorescent aisle, from the junk of capitalism that my father has and continues to labor over as a lifetime employee of the Kroger Company, the U.S.'s largest supermarket operator (Buzalka). It was only until he was converted into an employee with the aid of a fake I.D. that he was able to successfully dodge deportation. It was only his labor that rendered him physically immovable, and so maybe it's the labor of my poetry that can stall or change the system. Similarly, maybe it's only through my active literary citizenship and that of others, that we can work to defend and organize for the proliferation of voices that sing from within the

colonial wound. Maybe this is one way we can halt the systematic forgetting and leave a trace of our memory behind.

As a racialized individual, my father is positioned in the national imagination as a body whose purpose is to enact labor by any means necessary. His immediate identification as a laborer is then a tool for domination where his body is inscribed with a specific social status, a set of limits, and a devalued cultural trajectory. Quijano makes clear the consequences of the way coloniality links race and labor:

Así, cada forma de control del trabajo estuvo articulada con una raza particular. Consecuentemente, el control de una forma específica de trabajo podía ser al mismo tiempo el control de un grupo específico de gente dominada. Una nueva tecnología de dominación/explotación, en este caso raza/trabajo, se articuló de manera que apareciera como naturalmente asociada. Lo cual, hasta ahora, ha sido excepcionalmente exitoso.
Each form of control of labor was articulated with a race in particular.

Consequently, the control of a specific form of labor can also be a control of a specific group of dominated people. A new technology of domination/exploitation, in this case race/labor, becomes articulated in a way that appears naturally associated. Which, until even now, continues to be exceptionally successful (“Colonialidad,” 867)

By detailing precisely how the nation state conjoins race and labor, Quijano describes how the coloniality of power in the Americas allows for racialization to be imagined closely with how, why, and for whom the racialized body labors. The linking of race with labor becomes so successful in linking the two in our imagination, that the domination and exploitation of these bodies is assumed to be as natural as the association. The linkage also reinforces and fortifies the colonial binary between nature and civilization, body and mind. Within this colonial dualism, the racialized body’s association with labor is rendered natural, but so is the body’s intimate

proximity to nature. The racialized body exists within or close to nature and always in opposition to civilization and enlightenment. Within this framework the body is explicitly severed from the idea. To use Quijano's words, "las ideas deben ser respetadas. El cuerpo, en cambio, puede ser torturado, triturado y muerto"⁹ (890).

The physical and cultural destruction of Indigenous bodies was key to the capitalistic growth and success of what eventually would become nation-states. Quijano reminds us that the genocide of Indigenous Americans in the first decades of colonization wasn't exclusively due to the violence of the conquest, nor the infectious diseases that the conquistadores imported, but also largely due to the way Indigenous bodies were used as disposable labor, forcing them to work until the moment of their deaths (Quijano 868). My father's relationship to Indigeneity is unclear and our relationship to these colonial, traumatic, and violent histories has been shrouded by generational forgetting which, within coloniality, feels logical. My aim here is not to long for an essentialized and nostalgic Indigeneity that is locked in the past. I recognize that in doing so I would be perpetuating colonial logics that render Indigenous communities as without agency while ignoring the very real and vital Indigenous communities who produce creative labor, some of which I analyze in other chapters in this dissertation (Diaz, Cortez). Instead, Indigenous labor histories within coloniality serve as valuable parallels to the way my parents' bodies and their precarious relationships to memory and resources are also the consequences of exploitative colonial strategies. This precariousness then becomes a shared reference

⁹ "Ideas must be respected. The body, on the other hand, can be tortured, crushed, and dead."

point for mobilization, an opportunity to unite distinct groups like Indigenous, undocumented, migrant, and other communities who have been marginalized by neoliberal globalization within coloniality (Paret and Gleeson, 282).

Altarpiece

For the past twenty years, my days have begun in this warehouse,
with the only instant coffee I've ever needed or known.
The morning crew will want to talk sports to shake the sleep,
so I set the AM radio's dial to pick up last night's baseball score,
and I listen, my breath slowing to a curdle in the walk-in freezer.
They're always on time, swollen backs kept sewn together
by leather lifting belts. Once, I caught my son wearing mine
like a luchador. He pounded his chest as it hung off his hip,
yelling, *I am El Hijo del Santo!* Today, we will move hundreds
of cases of fruits and stack their bruised hearts
into miniature pyramids that tilt north, facing the sun
painted over the carnicería. I once thought I did good work
because it never ended, but now that I know that this sun
will not track against its painted sky, and that one day another
will come and lift the rolling gate to receive the next forty years,
I wonder.

—Papi

In the rearview mirror, I can see how the little one nods off
onto his brother's shoulder on the drive to school. I know it's 6 a.m.,
and at this hour, the fog gets wrangled in by the freeway and the hills,
but the walk is long and they're still too young to fold the towels
they dry their bodies with; the shower's steam
as thick as the mist now. It wasn't their choice to shatter
the porcelain Mary, yet sometimes, I swear, I can hear something
break when I shake them, asking, What if tomorrow I die?
like my mother once did. I don't tell them about how little I can see
in my dreams, how the earthquake opens up the road till it feeds itself,
stirring her photo locked in the file cabinet rooms away from the
family album. We pull up to the junior-high marquee
and before I can tell them to be good,
the big one opens the door, leads them out into the murk
until they're distant, and then gone.

—Mami

The tostitocos lady opens my Cheetos bag
and squirts hot sauce into it out of a red squeeze bottle.
A buck goes a lot farther on this side of the school gate.
Even time slips slower here, dripping from the olive leaves
that hang over the white and yellow shoots of grass.
The abuelitas in the park say that before the Spanish came
with their horses and the fat ticks sucking at their bellies,
this all used to be our land, but the gringa teachers don't talk
much about that, only the old folk who I bow my head for.
I press my arms across my chest for their blessing.
Their hands, dark and wrinkled like an avocado, carve a cross
into the open air in front of me. I try not to get caught staring,
but I've heard that one of them has eyes the color
of rattlesnake skins we find in the hills behind our house.
They say if she does catch you, she'll sit at the foot of your bed
while you sleep and only disappear with the morning fog.

—Abi

The Poem and its Line as Labor

The historical racialization of bodies of color as producers of labor creates an opportunity to reimagine the characteristics of their poetic productions. A poem—an assembly of lineated textual language used to represent images and sounds attuned to create affectual responses in a reader(s)—can always be read as an act of labor, but when produced by a body of color its effects on U.S./Eurocentric imaginaries produce unique possibilities. These poems, even when not explicitly responding to coloniality (like in love, pastoral, or confessional poems) reveal the way that these poets, even at the granular level of the lyrical line are troubling the colonial binary that renders them first and foremost as embodiments of physical labor, incapable of laboring through language. The Undocupoets, for example, wield the poem both in their labor organizing and literary productions as an aesthetic object that is more than just beautiful, but instead resists the generational amnesia of bodies not remembering, bodies exclusively laboring into forgetfulness. Here, I invoke an understanding of aesthetics that positions it as a key battleground for imagining and building liberated worlds that exist outside of coloniality. In *Another Aesthetics is Possible*, Jennifer Ponce de León 's defines Aesthetics:

Aesthetics—here understood in its broad sense as the socially forged sensory composition of a world—constitutes a crucial site of struggle in this effort. Because aesthetic practices and productions shape how we perceive and understand the world, they can and do participate in the multidimensional and collective labor of creating and defending another social reality. In this sense, an other aesthetics refers to the forging of worldviews that support the collective struggle to make and defend this other possible world. (4)

Ponce de León 's definition of aesthetics, enables us to read the Undocupoets' cultural productions, both their labor organizing and poetry, as part of multidimensional practices that allow others to first imagine and then work towards building and defending other possible worlds outside of coloniality.

The decolonial text works to highlight worldviews that are historically oppressed and ignored as part of a larger effort to uphold and preserve coloniality. When delivered effectively by decolonial poetry and other cultural productions, these worldviews then have the potential to shift individual and collective sensoria. Ponce de León and Rockhill write:

My heterodox use of the concept of aesthetics derives from my understanding that “ideology operates as an all-encompassing sensorium that emerges from the actual life-processes of Homo faber. It composes an entire universe through the collective and historical production of a shared world of sense that is at one and the same time physical *and* mental. (6; Ponce de León 6)

The impact of the shift is two-fold, where each part doesn't necessarily have to come before the other. In one part, decolonial texts work to reforge the sensory composition of the world to allow for the imagination of more liberated relationships to time, space, and bodies. In another part, decolonial texts facilitate the creation of worldviews that inspire collective movements that struggle for the material creation of more liberated worlds. The Undocupoets campaigns demonstrated the movement building power of poets. Its organizing efforts, alongside those of other likeminded poets and literary community members who stood in solidarity, showcased a collective faith in poetry's decolonial capacities to materially change how we imagine our worlds and their various futures. As we'll see now, the Undocupoets

simultaneously produced work that enacted at the level of the line decolonial gestures that troubled colonial expectations for the labor of racialized bodies while creating the conditions for and benefiting from larger decolonial literary movements.

Javier Zamora labors decolonially at the level of the poem in “Exiliados” from his debut collection, *Unaccompanied*. In this short poem, Zamora uses the compact and yet stable tercet to highlight the compressed tension of romance while processing the traumatic traces of migration. Despite his attempts to be present, the nagging echo of his unaccompanied journey north from war-torn El Salvador, tug at his imagination, swerving his experience always and forever back towards that longing and incurable hurt of the undocumented experience. This push and pull echoes Hernandez Castillo’s “maddening circle” while troubling the formal expectations of the madness of romantic affection and physical attraction. Zamora begins:

We didn’t hold typhoons or tropics in our hands.
I didn’t reach across the table on our first date
at Cornelia Street Café. In my humid pockets,

my fists were old tennis balls thrown to the stray dog
of love bouncing toward the Hudson down
to South Ferry. We didn’t hold hands in that cold

October wind, but the waves witnessed our promise
to return to my cratered-deforested homeland,
and you to your parents’, sometime in the future.
(80)

In the initial gesture of intimacy that “Exiliados” attempts to capture, an extended hand during a first date, the specter of that violent journey towards the U.S. lingers.

The bringing together of two distinct memories creates a striking effect on the reader. On one hand, Zamora enacts a familiar poetic trope and generates a retelling of a first date. However, on the second hand, the speaker is unable to speak in the present, incapable of articulating what happened with certainty. Instead, the dark shadow casted by the violent departure from a homeland enables Zamora to remember in the negative. By deploying the negative, Zamora creates a ghosting effect. The romantic encounter is marked not by what occurs but what certainly didn't. The refrain of the specter and of the negative creates a mood inflected by haunting and ghostliness. The meticulously condensed lines highlight what could have been faintly like in a sculpture relief. Instead of the image of flesh hand in hand, we're presented the distant and longed-for homeland.

Zamora continues to deploy the negative to highlight the proximity of the specter of immigration and how it continues to be primary and urgent on the page. In the imagination of the speaker, the body continues to fail to capture the events of the first date, "We didn't hold hands in that cold October wind." Yet in a surprising change of possibility, it is nature and the outside world that finally confirms a detail of the event: "waves witnessed our promise / to return to my cratered-deforested homeland, and you to your parents', sometime in the future." Here, it's revealed to the reader that although there is a difference in the proximity to the immigration experience, a sense of transnational and transgenerational solidarity is established. Although, the beloved figure is one whole generation into the experience of

Americanness, there is still a connection, a meaningful understanding of life as a non or not-yet American.

Nature delivers the first confirmed detail of the poem, the first texture that feels certain in the imagination of the reader. Ironically, the detail isn't one of the current moment of the poem but instead a harken back to the ancestral homeland of both lovers. The image of the return home reminds the reader that even in a moment of romance, the experience of being an unaccompanied minor migrating to the U.S. permanently marks that body. This marking is so deep that a love poem also becomes a space for longing for the impossible return home and even suggests, perhaps idealistically, that a return to origin could bring relief to the migrant trapped in this impossible circuit.

In the second half of the poem, Zamora illustrates how the liberating possibility of two bodies coming together during a first date is still tethered to a past scorched by migration:

Then, us in the subway at 2 a.m. Oh the things I dreamed:
a kiss to the back of your neck, collarbone, belly button, there—
to kneel and bow my head, then return to the mole

next to your lips and taste your latitude together.
Instead, I went home, you touched my cheek,
It was enough. I stood, remembering what it's like

to stand on desert dirt wishing stars would fall
as rain, on that huge dark country ahead of me.

(80)

As the speaker longs for the touch of their lover, they're instead moved out and across their "latitudes." This language of the cartographic transforms his lover's bodily

features into a travelogue, a record of how the poet can roam in their imagination—still bridled by fear and danger but perhaps, for once, free. The body also becomes analogous to the territory explored in imperialism. The metaphorization of the body as territory highlights how even the speaker becomes seduced by the colonial logic of territory as feminine, virgin, and unexplored. The poet is captured by the territorialization of desire and their lover’s body but is denied satisfaction. Instead, the speaker is forced to meditate on the touch of their cheek before the entire levy of the poem collapses, hurdling speaker, lover, and reader into the offing of ancestral memory. Zamora enjambes the line to let us, even for a brief moment, imagine that the speaker is remembering “what it’s like” to be connected to another human, to find solidarity in romance with someone who has been affected by the immigrant experience even if in different proximities. However, Zamora cleverly deploys the enjambed line to jettison us out towards the immense memory of immigration. Instead of completing the romantic trope of the love poem and staying in line with generations of English writing poets before him, Zamora breaks away, inviting us to imagine the intimacy of a first date enveloped by the haunting memory of that “dark country” looming ahead.

If we read Zamora’s meditation of a first date through Quijano’s understanding of how the colonality of power results in the separation between body and mind, we can detect poetic strategies and creative labors that are explicitly decolonial. Quijano demonstrates how colonality of power insists that the racialized body, which in Zamora’s poetry collection is that of an unaccompanied minor

migrating to the U.S., is built to be exhausted and sometimes destroyed in service of the capitalistic nation state. I'm reminded of my own parents and their migration to the U.S. as undocumented minors. Shortly after their arrival, they spent years working for minimum wage with few opportunities to escape their precarious cycles. The precarious positions echo the sacrifices of Indigenous bodies forced into hard labor after the colonial encounter. Although the precariousness of undocumented and Indigenous people is experienced distinctly across space and time, both are ultimately valued by nations, not for their control of aesthetics, but for their labor contributions. In fact, the labor their bodies produce fuels the nation state, ensuring that its success can be guaranteed for as long as there are bodies that can be exploited.

In "Exiliados" we observe two racialized bodies of lovers and their inability to come together and fulfill the trope of the romantic poem since both are trapped in maddening cycles of longing experienced during and after migration. Zamora's creative labor of building an unconventional love poem thwarts colonial dualism. The emotional and creative labor on the page is palpable. By reappropriating the form of the love poem to illustrate the inability to escape the pain that his literal body experienced throughout his journey from El Salvador to the U.S., Zamora recasts the labor of the undocumented person—not in service of the nation state—but as a tool to better understand the complexities and capacities of the minoritized body. In this poem, and in many other poems by undocumented poets, the body suffers but also generates ideas, vitality, and joy. By complicating the body of the migrant as a sacrificing object but also one with a subjectivity that inspires and yearns for love, the

colonial separation between the body as object and the mind as subject is troubled, revealing the decolonial capacity of poetic labor.

It might be useful to further illustrate this point by taking into consideration Zamora's debut collection as a whole. *Unaccompanied*, which details the murder of his family members in the moments leading up to the U.S.-backed coup, his journey to the U.S. and then his arrival, is predominantly focused on meditations looking back to this journey. Despite this focused scope of his collection, "Exiliados," represents a brief departure to a romantic encounter in the future. This poem provides to even the reader, a brief moment of relief away from the grave details of the author's migration to the U.S. The complicating of both the migrant narrative and the love poem showcases how a decolonial aesthetics can "dismantle the worldviews imposed by the powerful and replace these with an alternate critical and coherent sense of reality through which people can grasp social contradictions" (Ponce de León 6-7). Zamora denies us an uncritical narrative about migrant escape from war torn worlds in the global south, the salvation of American Exceptionalism and a one-dimensional romantic encounter. Instead, he braids together seemingly disparate and contradictory affectual modes and personal and national histories to refute how hegemonic aesthetic practices construct limited ways to perceive and understand the world and the people in it.

Despite Zamora's swerve towards the romantic mode in this poem, he uses the opportunity to highlight the impossibility of escape from the migrant experience. The romantic encounter is a brief sojourn that works to braid together the two racialized

bodies marked by migration. “Exiliados” demonstrates, on both the level of the poem and the collection, how the poetic labor of textualizing experiences from within the colonial wound troubles the deadly dualism separating the racialized body and its labor from ideas. The act of laboring over a love poem then becomes a decolonial intervention since the poem, written from a racialized body, contaminates the tired form of the love poem, which is traditionally written from a universalizing and Eurocentric “I” to a passive and inert beloved subject. Zamora reappropriates the love poem as an activist reclamation of the racialized body and its ability generate ideas and emotions, while maintaining nuance through illustrating his own vulnerability to the seduction of territorialization. Creative labor that works to reforge the sensorium through decolonial aesthetics, alongside the labor organizing campaigns that materially broaden undocumented narratives’ access to prestigious literary awards, represents an arsenal of decolonial strategies that demonstrates how the racialized body can produce another kind of labor that thoughtfully meditates on the pain, exhaustion, affection, and madness caused by the coloniality of power.

The creative labor enacted by the Undocupoets and other artists producing from the colonial wound is also characterized by the haunting evasiveness of decoloniality. As many decolonial scholars have pointed out in the past, the work towards a decolonial future is a long and sustained march (Mignolo, “Prospect of Harmony”). Although this evasiveness is marked by melancholy, brought upon by the sensation of being trapped in a cycle, it does create the conditions for hope, where artists can mine their experiences to participate in an aesthetics that troubles colonial

binaries, like that which separates racialized bodies from ideas, to slowly shift their material world and the world of others. The shift is hard won. Every creative production that helps audiences sense, imagine, and perceive a future that is more just, more reflective, and more compassionate for the racialized body as a feeling, caring, and loving thing is an incremental but significant step towards decolonization.

Collective Labors Off the Page

The Undocupoets are not alone in pairing artistic practice with labor organizing to dramatically effect meaningful change on U.S. literary and cultural landscapes. Scholars like Jennifer Ponce de León or Macarena Gómez-Barris have theorized how artists and movements have engaged in reciprocal relationships throughout history where art is part of movement cultures and movements produce counterhegemonic ideologies about culture and art (Ponce de León 7; Gómez-Barris 10). As Ponce de León highlights, labor organizing and artistic production are twinned decolonial efforts that help movements and cultural productions more efficiently bend towards decoloniality:

Artists I discuss take up knowledge, discourses, and tactics that movements have produced, elaborate upon them and translate them into new aesthetic forms. In instances, they produce more speculative or utopian elaborations of worldviews movements have produced. Some artists fuse their art production with movement's forms of social action—be these direct action or economic resistance. They also engage in ideological struggles taking place within movements to amplify more radical tendencies (7)

Art organizations and collectives across the U.S. and Latin America are also troubling colonial expectations by highlighting the complex embodied and sensorial experiences of communities rendered precarious within coloniality like Black,

AANHPI, undocumented, and Indigenous people. Member-led organizations like Canto Mundo, Cave Canem, Kundiman are dedicated to the creation and cultivation of creative writing by writers with ethnic identities and sponsor prestigious first book awards that create additional avenues for the publication of texts that can assist in the active decolonial forging of the sensorium. Las Nietas de Nono, a performance collective from Puerto Rico, works to highlight the ongoing colonialism of Puerto Ricans through the implementation of grassroots art workshops for local artists and community members, despite critical acclaim and recognition from U.S. museums and institutions (Osorio, “Las Nietas”). Los Angeles based visual arts collective, Self-Help Graphics, has long provided a gallery space in East L.A. that highlights visual art productions by local artists while sustaining a collective labor model wherein the community directly partakes and benefits from the production and selling of art. A few miles away in the San Fernando Valley, where my father continues to work as a grocery manager, local artists, youth, and the scholar Judith Baca collectively organized a community driven project where participants created a mural that transformed the concrete walls of the city aqueduct (Baca). Today, “The Great Wall of Los Angeles,” is a public gallery that presents an alternative history. It demonstrates the connection of the region to lesser known, yet critically important, precarious communities, permanently fusing these histories onto the physical infrastructure of the city (Baca).

These efforts, along with many more, highlight how similar collective artistic labors also function as decolonial methodologies that break open and undo the

separation between the racialized laboring body and the mind. It is as if generations of labor exploitation have equipped precarious communities with the skillsets needed to wield their energies against coloniality. Through my parents falling in love in the grocery store and raising me within that site of capitalistic exploitation, that space became part of me. My own creative labors now work to transform that site into a space of ideas, meditations, and reflection. The oppressive site of bodily exploitation is reframed as vitality: a place of immigrant agency, creative generation, family making, and community. From their love, despite the traumas of the journey to the U.S., came the opportunity to create art that reveals the complexities and beauties of immigrant and undocumented life.

Procession of Flies

The tongue remembers all kinds of things
like your name and the blood I ring out from it.
I lift the lid to find the sow's head;
its gaping mouth a cave where a muscle
had been pulled from its roots.
It says, No, primo, you've got it all wrong,
a butcher's fever isn't for gold
but for the long hours in darkness.
I fish out the bougainvillea petals from the aqueduct
and let the casinos slip away into daylight.
When we see the cassette's black ribbon
and how it strangles the roadside shrine,
you ask, Hijo, do you think I could have been someone?
your body tumbling miles down the road.

*

In our interview, Marcelo Hernandez Castillo reflected on how the migratory experience is more akin to an inescapable circuit. He clarifies that unlike how I might

have suggested, there is an instinct that there is no way to arrive home. Instead, the undocumented, racialized body within the framework of coloniality is torn in at least two directions; it works to return to an impossible ancestral origin while always hoping the next generation can move forward and escape the burden of the memory of immigration. Or perhaps it's more of an intergenerational bind that depends on the seemingly contradictory processes of looking backward to look forward. There is also another process involved here: the individual cannot speak as autonomous, because they are not simply allowed to be expressive of individuality but connected, enmeshed, tethered, and wrangled within coloniality in perpetuity. Despite this entanglement between generations, I find hope. In Hernandez Castillo and Zamora's desire to put the trauma on the page so that the next generation might find a way to read and meditate through it, I see my own father's endless labor in the grocery store. Perhaps, he might think, if I give my body to this machine, my children won't suffer as I have. Labor for this purpose recasts the exploitation of the body as an act of love in literature and in the aisles of the grocery store.

When I imagine the Undocupoets fighting to make more widely available not only their experiences as undocumented writers, but the experiences of countless others who will inevitably arrive in the future, I see my own father and mother and their swollen feet laboring for those who have come after them. The experience of being a racialized body within the colonial wound is not self-contained, but spills out and over to lovers, parents, children, and entire communities. In this interconnecting creative process, poets making from the decolonial wound don't find hopelessness but

new ways to labor to create works of art that dig their heels into the cultural imagination, slowing down the erasure and enshrining our existence.

Bodies and Water

“If the river is a ghost, am I?”: Unsettling the Archive through Embodiment in Natalie Diaz’s *Postcolonial Love poem* (2020)

Indigenous ways of being in relationship with land and water—and these nonhuman beings themselves—become erased and rendered inconsequential in dominant U.S. onto-epistemologies that insist they are natural resources best put to work by and for instruments of extraction. Today, for example, the Colorado River is on the brink of a traumatic shift due to unchecked extraction of and overdependency on its waters under the 1922 Colorado River Compact. The continued failure of states to reduce water usage endangers the 1,450-mile river that stretches from the Rocky Mountains to the Sea of Cortés (Brulliard). Reduced water flow from extraction and climate change¹⁰ could be seen in the next 50 years and would devastate the 40 million people the Colorado River serves in the U.S. and Mexico, including all 30 federally recognized tribes (Brulliard). The crisis isn’t contained to the U.S. either: the natural path of the Colorado River empties into the Sea of Cortés south of the U.S.-Mexico border, where it transforms into a Delta wetland that once boasted remarkable biodiversity and marine ecosystems. The Morelos Dam now stands in its way, 100 miles from the Sea of Cortés, preventing river and sea from connecting (Wood).

The extractive practices enacted by pipelines, channels, and dams inflict pain and suffering on the Indigenous communities whose relationship to nature is distinct

¹⁰ Climate models suggest that if warming continues, the river's flow could be reduced by 30 per cent by 2050 and 55 per cent by the end of the century. (Whyte)

from dominant U.S. onto-epistemologies. Viveiros de Castro defines the term “perspectivism” to illustrate how Indigenous onto-epistemologies from across the Américas understand beings of all kinds, like rivers and other bodies of water, as possessing subject positions (472). In perspectivism, all beings are capable of suffering; therefore, categorizing nonhuman beings as “natural resources” causes suffering that threatens and endangers humans and nonhumans alike. Despite such affronts to life, or perhaps in light of them, Indigenous artists and their communities survive this destruction and even create alternative cultural archives as defiance in the face of destruction. I invoke Foucault to define the archive as the law of what can be said and the systems of enunciability that determine how what can be said is composed, organized, related to, maintained, or blurred (129). In *Culture and Imperialism*, Edward W. Said situates the archive within the context of imperialism, highlighting its colonial and racial implications. Borrowing from Said, I imagine the dominant U.S./Eurocentric cultural archive as “where the intellectual and aesthetic investments in ... dominion are made” (xxi). The narratives, histories, and aesthetic productions contained within the dominant cultural archive represent settlers as “the principal authority, an active point of energy that made sense not just of colonizing activities but of exotic geographies and peoples” (xxi). Indigenous cultural productions then work to unsettle this Western cultural archive. They trouble the nature/culture divide present in the dominant cultural archive by revealing the ignored alternative archives that exist within them and insist on liberated worlds where relationships between humans and nonhumans are reciprocal and sustainable.

Natalie Diaz (Gila River Indian Tribe) has produced expansive bodies of work in response to the ongoing water crisis on Indigenous land in the American Southwest and elsewhere throughout the Americas. In this chapter, I conduct a close analysis of a duet of poems central to Natalie Diaz's 2020 Pulitzer Prize winning poetry collection *Postcolonial Love Poem*. I close read how Diaz responds to extractive colonial histories and presents by reimagining U.S.-Eurocentric archives through using poetic form to embody the Colorado River. Dominant readerly relationships with poetic forms then become challenged as Diaz's poems transform into non-Western ways of knowing and being, thus unsettling discourses on both bodies of water and Indigenous bodies. I begin by examining how Diaz complicates the act and form of translation in her poem "The First Water is the Body" by highlighting Indigenous worldviews wherein the Indigenous body and the river are entwined and thus difficult to render in traditional and formally conservative English language poetry. Then I analyze how Diaz forces open the spatial and performative possibilities of textuality by using her poem "*exhibits from The American Water Museum*" to critique the extractive and colonial machinery of the American museum.

Diaz invokes the act of translation and the space of the museum to illustrate the loss experienced when Indigenous peoples are torn from the lands and waters they steward, and when the Western colonial archive reorganizes these histories to preserve coloniality. A central thread of these poems is an insistence on an Indigenous worldview that, as readers, we confront to reassess our understanding of water crises like that which is occurring to the Colorado River and the people who

depend on it. Using a complex array of languages, invocations, and references, Diaz's poetry replicates in language the entanglement between the Colorado River, an essential source of spiritual and material sustenance for the Southwest, and the Mojave people who alongside their ancestors have been its stewards for thousands of years (James). Scholars have previously written on Diaz's poetic subversion of the cartesian binary between mind and body and the ways her work subverts the logic of capitalist colonialism that renders the colonized subject as a resource for extraction (Zeng 804). I expand on these arguments by insisting that Diaz's poetic strategies transform her poem into an embodiment of the Colorado River which troubles Western cultural archives while illuminating the radical and liberatory possibilities of the poetic expression situated within Indigenous onto-epistemologies.

Although unique to Mojave cosmologies, Diaz's poems also consider other abuses of Indigenous and subaltern access to clean water, and thus participates in a solidarity network that works to fight against coloniality's abuse of the nonhuman. Through lyrical strategies that exceed the formal and disciplinary expectations of the poem in the Western cultural archive (multilingualism, translation, performance directions, the incorporation and collaging of archival materials), Diaz invokes Mojave and other Indigenous worldviews and creation stories to blur the line between the body, the Colorado River, and the poetic form. Building upon Stephanie Papa's analysis, which reads "The First Water is the Body" as kinetic poetry that gestures towards the reader outside of the fixities of text, I argue that Diaz's textual

embodiment unsettles the readerly relationship with her poems as purely aesthetic objects for consumption by calling the reader into action (237).

Diaz also triangulates Queer, Indigenous, and Latinx bodies; their relationships to and as an example of the natural world within Indigenous worldviews; and the dominant Western cultural archive that she critiques. By examining the tension between these three elements, I illustrate how Diaz ruptures Western cultural archives and their forms by embodying the Colorado River to liberate future worlds unburdened by Western ontologies and that rightfully locate their bodies in relationship to and as nature. In challenging the nature/culture divide from an intersectional positionality, Díaz complicates the divisions present within Queer, Indigenous, and Latinx identities themselves and asserts a form of holistic and interconnected Latinidad situated within Indigenous onto-epistemologies.

Inspired by my close reading of Diaz, throughout my analysis I meditate on my own family's personal archive, their relationships to bodies of water key to their migration to the United States, and how they have become severed through destructive colonial processes. I invite readers to participate in their own reflections through interactive writing prompts. These creative interventions highlight the way Diaz's poetry enacts and inspires a cracking open of U.S./Eurocentric archives to liberate alternative archives that uplift other sustainable ways to relate to the nonhuman world. I also use this creative methodology to push against predominant loss-based readings of Diaz's work that position Indigenous onto-epistemologies as beings erased or destroyed by colonialism (Zeng; Papa; Eils). By inserting my creative reflections in my

analysis to highlight the way Diaz enacts and inspires a restive and creative vitality through her work, I argue that Diaz's poetry situates Indigenous ways of knowing and being as ignored, not erased, as overflowing with radical and liberatory potentiality, not inert.

Sadiya Hartman's concept of "critical fabulation," or the imagining through language of the erasures present in the dominant archive, lends my analysis an additional theoretical tool. What Hartman describes as "Critical fabulation" is another way to understand how the cultural archive works to deny and dismiss non-Western relationships to the body, ignoring where the subaltern creates to reembody. By thinking with Hartman's careful attention towards the irrecoverable histories lost in the archive of the transatlantic slave trade, I show how Diaz creates poems that embody Indigenous relationships to nonhuman beings by sifting through the wreckage of the colonial archive to tease out existing yet ignored fragments of histories, eyewitness accounts, and testaments of alternate epistememes and worldviews.

Through creative practices, Diaz writes in response to what Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o defines as the colonization "of the mind" (1986). By creating within Mojave worldviews where the Indigenous body and the Colorado River are entwined, Diaz offers an alternative way of being with nonhumans that enforces the protection of the Indigenous homes and bodies of water that continue to be endangered by coloniality. The poem then is a decolonial tool that attempts to undo the colonial gaze that renders the Colorado and the Missouri rivers as voiceless objects of research for corporate assessments before the construction of dams or pipelines. According to

Linda Tuhiwai Smith, an object to be researched for extraction within coloniality “has no life force, no humanity, no spirit of its own, so therefore ‘it’ cannot make an active contribution” to colonial Western knowledge and is thus the perfect object for the colonial project as it is “an object that can be commodified as property belonging to the cultural archive and body of knowledge of the West” (70). Coloniality urges that the nonhuman are in fact inert “natural resources” that must be collected from the space of the “other.” The space of the “other” is located in the nowhere and the outside, so the nonhuman beings must be brought back towards the civilized and modern center of capital to benefit the dominant cultural archive and body of the West (70). By reading these poems, Diaz’s audience is challenged to confront Indigenous knowledge as not just another entry in the cultural archive, but as an embodied reality experienced by the poem’s speaker that also affects the nonhuman world the reader occupies. This challenge posed by Diaz’s poetry confronts the colonization of the mind and refutes critiques of metaphorical decolonization by proving that conceptual decolonization can recirculate alternate relationships to the nonhuman by revealing these possibilities to audiences beholden to the dominant cultural archive.

The poems examined in this chapter are not the repatriation of land or nonhuman beings and bodies, yet I argue that their existence demonstrates an affective and epistemological vitality that challenges coloniality and how we imagine Indigenous bodies which include bodies that also identify as Queer, female, and Latinx. Resistance against water crises like the exhaustion of the Colorado River are

not singular events but networked responses across space, time, and various vulnerable communities. The way creative labors represent these moments in history through differently powered cultural archives is critical to the struggle and complements the fight on ground. These labors make pathways to critical and restive understandings of colonial histories and liberated futures. Thus, they are decolonial tools waged in defense of oppressed and subaltern communities in borderland spaces in the U.S. and Latin America.

Sadiya Hartman's Critical Fabulation

In the 2008 article, "Venus in Two Acts," Sadiya Hartman contemplates writing into the unknown and the effects of imagining impossible histories through language for the writer, reader, and the subject. "Venus" represents an enslaved African teen girl who is murdered by white enslavers trafficking humans and thus is only briefly referred to in both ship ledgers and then again in Hartman's 2008 nonfiction book, *Lose Your Mother: A Journey Along the Atlantic Slave Route*. In her article, Hartman reveals that the archive, and the subsequent texts that use it as source material, borrows language from the captor and the master (2). The figure of Venus—and us as its readers—are again subjected to its colonial control and ongoing violence. This grammar of subjugation continues to enact violence and replicate histories of control through the language of market and capital. This cycle forecloses the possibility of knowing the life Venus possessed as it becomes invisible within a cultural archive dominated by enslaver accounts and ledgers. The cultural archive then becomes "a death sentence, a tomb ... an asterisk in the grand narrative of history" (Hartman 2). As such, it becomes

impossible for readers and writers to hold onto these lives and imagine them in a “free state” (Hartman 2).

I argue that Diaz uses poetry to embody the life of the river that is not privileged agency within the cultural archive and is thus absent while Hartman uses fiction to conjure narratives about the lives of people violently erased and not documented in the cultural archive. Although separate, Hartman’s reading and then rereading of the history of Venus enacts an attention that is useful when reading Diaz’s multimodal poetics and the way she works to handle the river as a nonhuman not present within the dominant archive because its subjectivity is not respected in U.S./Eurocentric onto-epistemologies. Whereas Hartman creates fiction to recover erased histories, what she emphasizes is how history—in erasing the records of certain bodies—denies them subjectivities. Díaz, turns to poetry to enact a similar move, to use the poetic form to embody the nonhuman subjectivity denied in other genres. Hartman shows us one way to consider the missing material that resonates throughout archives on extraction and Indigenous bodies. Thinking with Hartman, we can imagine Diaz as using traditional poetic forms to embody nonhuman subjectivities to reveal ignored worlds that actively exist despite the dominant cultural archive’s reenactment of violence on subaltern bodies.

The differences between an archival recovery of an enslaved African teen girl in Hartman’s article and the recovery of the relationship between the Indigenous body and nonhuman being in Diaz’s work are numerous and valuable points of tension. For instance, the subject of recovery in Hartman’s work is an enslaved girl. Whereas in

Diaz, the being that is being recovered is water as a nonhuman being that is also part of the Indigenous body—not a resource or site of extraction for capital. However, Hartman’s analysis establishes a line of inquiry that illuminates an understanding of how Diaz uses the poetic form to access archival materials that uplift onto-epistemologies that center Indigenous relationships to the nonhuman.

Dominant forms appropriated and reworked through poetic expression begin as entries in the archive. They exist because others do not. These forms include the ledger of enslaved peoples, the exhibit catalogue, the court transcript—each overloaded with colonial dynamics where powerholders are bestowed as the knowers, while others are objects or listeners¹¹. In these two poems and even in Hartman’s scholarly essay, we see the maker refashion archival fragments and forms without recreating “the grammar of violence,” but productively drawing attention to the matter with renewed vigor and attention. Readers are invited to revisit the imbalances of power that made the violence possible in the first place. Hartman writes that “The loss of stories sharpens the hunger for them. So it is tempting to fill in the gaps and to provide closure where there is none. To create a space for mourning where it is prohibited. To fabricate a witness to a death not much noticed” (8). Diaz fashions multimodal poetry to show the body of the river that no longer howls into its ocean except in the museum archive and in her body. These poems challenge us to ask if that river can ever return to those who have and continue to be entangled with it. They ask if those relationships can return to how they once

¹¹ Which position do you occupy? What do you know? When are you the object? When do you listen? Are these positions of power or of helplessness? What is ignored or prioritized to make this subject position possible for you or for those you love?

were, so that others unfamiliar with them, can respect and recognize its enduring knowledge and connections to Indigenous bodies. The relationships between Indigenous and nonhuman bodies tears at the inevitability and supremacy of dominant Western onto-epistemologies as our only option. The act of knowing alternative means of connecting with the nonhuman world is a step towards a more liberated future.

Diaz's poems behave like reflective mirrors that prompt readers to consider their relationships to the nonhuman. After reading her poems, I imagine she identifies with the river, feels connected to it the way I feel coming across an old friend or family member—or even myself. I'm struck with grief. Grief that I know of bodies, rivers, and family that have been severed from me by forces of capitalism and colonialism. When I turn to the past, I see how just one generation before my father and mother were sent away from their land, their bodies of water, and their ways of understanding home. Now they are marked by their labor and deemed useful only by how well they exhaust their bodies to care for others. Where in the archive do these people and the nonhuman speak? If poetic forms are ready made containers shaped to slot within the archive, what happens when they fail to contain historically dominated subjectivities? Are their voices found in the breaking down of these forms that fail to contain them? What's left after the form fails? Is it sound, translation, and archival fragments longing for the body outside of Western ontologies? These things permeate beyond the body, exist in the afterlife of form, are the conveyance between languages and bodies. Can these bodies be a kind of home?

My father's body has lived outside his home of origin for nearly forty years. Now he spends most of his time in the grocery store where he labors to make others feel at home. In this luminescent box, whose contents are logically ordered for freshness, to entice our tastes and hunger, my father's body fulfills what the West expects of him¹². As I grow older, I see less of my father. I imagined his body floating, exchanging his labor for the sustenance of others. After forty years in this luminescent box, does it become a type of nature?¹³

I see my first river when I'm thirty years old. Growing up, the Los Angeles River may have been nearby, but its form had been frozen in concrete since 1938 (Guerin). I watch archival footage of the Los Angeles Flood of 1938 that prompted the construction of the concrete channels that hold it in place now. The river is brutal, sidwinding across coastal and valley plains, destroying hill sides that I recognize from sitting in traffic on the 210. This was the river's body: unpredictable, serpentine, autonomous, dangerous. Does today's concrete channel help us understand what the disembodied looks, sounds, and feels like? Can they tell us what they yearn for? What do they show us? When I read Diaz I sense an insistence of a body, of a being that I can't see.

¹² After work he drinks beer and gardens. He grows the largest roses I've ever seen in my life, is astonished by the the beauty of the San Gabriel hills he can see in his backyard.

¹³ Think of your childhood grocery store. Put faces and names to the people who stocked the shelves, collected the shopping carts in the parking lot, who completed your transaction at the cash register. Write a one-page sketch of them reminding yourself who they were and what has become of them today.

I call home and speak to my mother on the phone. She tells me she's emptying out the file cabinet and throwing everything away. In photos and medical bills, we have bodies. They're captured in the filing cabinet, but they feel heavy and awkward despite the clothing in the photos or the shifting numbers recording height in the medical paperwork. My mother cleans out the archive forever. She throws out an image of us in a grocery store and another image of us on the beach in Ensenada. They have no precedent, are bizarre because they too are unlike anything that came before. There is an image of my father that I think of often but haven't seen in years: he is a child in simple clothing. He's barefoot and his feet look dirty. He has one hand on a thatched fence de una "casa de basura."¹⁴ I've written of this image in the past and if I close my eyes, I can see it, but I can also see the passage that I've written about it. The translation is inadequate. The image has been lost for years. My mother once told me that she put it in the mail to send to my grandmother, but it never arrived. This hurts her. She's exhausted by the misconnections, the discrepancies in memory. She would rather continue to empty out the filing cabinet, load up all the paperwork and photos into the wheelbarrow and set a match to it. I have many memories of coming home. If I close my eyes, I can walk down the hall a million times at a million different points of my

¹⁴ The term is offensive and translates to homes built from trash. Visiting my father's pueblo, he would show me the adobe and thatched homes that he was raised in and casually call them "casas de basura." He meant no harm, but he didn't have to. The language did the work for him. We both knew they were more than that but since he didn't have another word to capture that place, to render it for those who came after him it stuck.

life. My mother is always in the backyard and the light is red, tiny flakes of ash peppering the night sky.¹⁵

Breaking open the Cultural Archive

Diaz begins “The First Water Is the Body” with the line, “The Colorado River is the most endangered river in the United States—/ also, it is a part of my body” (46). We enter the space of the poem through a moment of crisis and extinction. We’re asked to imagine the Colorado River as being part of the speaker and so both things are on the verge of extinction. The enjambed and full stopped line allows the em dash to force a slow and methodical readerly attention. The first line is surgically clear as if it had been lifted from a grade school textbook on American geography. The ease of the language creates room for the reader to casually enter the poem, but we are quickly forced to pay the consequences of letting our guard down. The river is endangered but it is also part of the speaker’s (“my”) body. That “my” is at once intimate and urgent in the brief opening act of the poem. It is not an anonymous “I,” but a simultaneous act of possession and self-reflection that cuts against the sterile language of the encyclopedia we first encounter. The enjambed line forces the reader’s imagination to leap from one line to another and once it arrives at the next line it encounters how the speaker transforms into the very thing that is endangered. The gesture is not universal

¹⁵ Sit with a document that somehow records a time before your memory. This can be a photo, a letter, a bill. How does the subject of that photo relate with the world around it? What of the world around the subject do you still know today? What of it has gone missing? What of it has become ignored?

and doesn't reach out to embrace the reader warmly. Diaz wields the enjambed line and troubles the exclusively imaginary realm of the metaphor to create tension. We're tempted by the seemingly familiar metaphor of the speaker as the river, however Diaz insists that it isn't a metaphor. This act raises a mirror of language back to the reader that asks us to consider our own relationship to the river: what of us is or isn't the Colorado River?¹⁶

As readers, we encounter Diaz as the Colorado River, and we attempt to understand the river by imagining what it isn't and juxtaposing it against our own bodies and our own versions of the Colorado River. In this way, we can imagine Diaz's lyrical rendering of the Colorado River as an example of Foucault's heterotopia in that it is a place where, "I see myself there where I am not, in an unreal, virtual space that opens up behind the surface; I am over there, there where I am not, a sort of shadow that gives my own visibility to myself, that enables me to see myself there where I am absent" (Foucault 4). As a heterotopia, Diaz's Colorado River is a reflexive tool that invites the reader to undo the fixed limits of bodies—especially Indigenous ones—within Western ontologies. Instead, Foucault might argue, the Colorado River as represented in Diaz's poem:

exerts a sort of counteraction on the position that I occupy. From the standpoint
of the mirror I discover my absence from the place where I am since I see myself

¹⁶ What of you is or isn't the Colorado River? Look up where your water comes from. Find the name of the river that quenches your thirst. Write this name onto a sheet of paper and carry it with you for a month. Everytime you reach into your pocket remind yourself of that river. On the final day of the month, visit the river and place your body into it.

over there ... I come back toward myself; I begin again to direct my eyes toward myself and to reconstitute myself there where I am. (4)

Foucault's heterotopia shows one way Diaz's textual embodiment of the Colorado River invites readers to consider our relationship with the body of water. Unlike a traditional mirror, Diaz's Colorado river denies us the ability to superimpose ourselves into its same field. This moment is critical because Diaz's poem shakes down my reality where I presume I know the river. Instead, to borrow from Foucault again, it allows me to "discover my absence from the place where I am since I see myself over there." Diaz's poem describes for us what that over "there" is. That "there" recognizes my disconnection from Mojave cosmologies and understands what it would mean if the river died

In my case, I feel invited to approach Diaz's identification with the river as a member of a cosmology where the river is her body, while reckoning with my own body having been severed from ancestral bodies through conquest and colonization. I write this analysis of Diaz's multimodal portrait of the Colorado River with admiration but also sadness. I return to that photo from my imagination and from my family's personal archive, that signal towards a past that somehow existed due to unusual circumstances (was it a wealthy relative in town who had a camera and that happened to stumble upon my father? Or was it part of an anthropologist's exploration of the region and part of a local library or university project?). As the photos and oral histories become erased, my past is pushed further and further towards extinction. In the opening of this poem then there is grief for those who have forgotten and who have not

preserved the non-Western ways the body can be kept whole. Instead, there is an extraction site, a hueco of longing and then that feeling of seeing yourself on the verge of disappearing.

Is the photo of a parent's childhood just a historical document, and is the river just a feature of the land? Diaz looks out onto the river and sees herself: "I carry a river. It is who I am 'Aha Makav. This is not a metaphor" (46). When I look at the photo of my father in my imagination, I see myself, my father in the past, and who my father will become in the future. I think of my mother at the heart of the fire, burning the paperwork, the precious documents with identification digits, the numbers that finally signal our existence—our accumulation, our failures, our debts—inhaling the toxic fumes of ink dyes. I don't blame my mother because she too was born into a stage of extinction and is no longer able to bear the weight of the archive and its failures.

Diaz's insistence that she is the river, and that the river is her grates against the formal expectations of the poem as a genre governed by metaphorical possibilities, expectations, and comparisons. For Diaz, the poem in the hands of the reader is not an exercise in imagination but a material means to fortify and reassert a particular relationship between Indigenous cosmologies and nature. It's as if Diaz challenges us to think beyond the familiar literary device of poetic metaphor embedded in U.S.-Eurocentric practices of reading and to strain our imagination to think of the Colorado River, and other beings deemed natural resources, as extensions of Indigenous bodies. Diaz's poem also resists essentializing the human experience and deactivates the universalizing quality found in traditions of U.S. and English language poetry where

the speaker can be assumed to be a white male speaking with authority on behalf of all humanity on topics such as nature and interpersonal relationships. The speaker here is not speaking in metaphors about a universal experience but speaking materially about a very specific people and their embodying of the Colorado River. We as readers are expected to find ourselves within or outside of this experience. This tension doesn't stall the poem but instead forces the poem into a generative mode. My analysis shows how this mode challenges readers to practice compassion, recognize our limits as readers embedded in the West, and imagine what is being described as not sheer metaphoric possibilities but what is materially present and absent.¹⁷

The question of materiality is key in the work of Diaz. Materiality is central to the subaltern figure of the Indigenous women in Diaz's poetry who have had the materiality of their home, land, water, and sustenance taken away throughout histories of imperial expansion and exploitation. Throughout the duet, Hartman helps us understand that the language is response to the endangered materiality and corporality of the Colorado River ignored at the center of dominant cultural archives. Diaz evokes the finite waters of Colorado. She uses language to embody the river and meditate on its (her) scarcity in the Mojave Desert but also within the lyrical spaces she creates in her poems. Diaz writes, "So far, I have said the word *river* in every stanza. I don't want to waste water. I must preserve the river in my body" (46). With this statement Diaz

¹⁷ Read Diaz's poem "The First Water is the Body." What is your position in relationship to it. Do you feel brought in or set aside. Are you comforted or estranged? Write a poem in response to this feeling. If you feel comforted consider why and how you might carry this feeling to others. If you feel estranged, where are you physically now? What nearby brings you comfort and how does that differ or resonate with the Colorado River?

stops the momentum of the poem and pulls back from exhausting her body by refusing to use the language of water any further. As the line unravels, the reader anticipates the full stoppage of water and textually encounters the precarity of drought that is the reality of so many in the American Southwest. The textual poem on the page begins to rattle like a drought-struck irrigation system as Diaz invokes the bone-dry materiality of the page the reader holds in their hand. The precarity of water is then also the precarity of Diaz's body. This transformation of language on the page as flesh brings the reader's attention to the makings of the poem, its materiality, and its stakes to remind us of the endangerment signaled to us in the opening warning cry. Diaz tends to herself and her land by recognizing the power of invoking her water and river textually.

The scarcity of the Colorado River must be honored and respected. The demand for conservation extends beyond water and reaches towards the language that embodies the river within the poem. Diaz does not want to waste the water that runs throughout the Colorado River, "*through the middle of [her] body,*" and now through the language that embodies it within the cultural archive (46). She insists: "In future stanzas, I will try to be more conservative." This concluding line of "The First Water Is the Body" signals to the reader the poem and poet's ability to conserve but also to create waste. The reader is reminded that the water of the Colorado River and the language describing the water are Diaz's own body, and that by being wasteful of water in her poem—which is burdened by the inheritance of Western tradition and expectations—the poem runs the risk of exhausting the very body of the writer. The danger of scarcity

and the looming specter of disappearance, drought, and forgetting lurks beneath these moments. The poem demands the creation of images in the reader's imagination through the braiding together of language. In the case of this poem about the Colorado River the word "water" is key. However, through extreme caution and care, Diaz shows us that the act of invoking the image of water through its textual inscription on the page comes at a great cost. She writes: "How can I translate—not in words but in belief—that a river is a body, as alive as you or I, that there can be no life without it?" (Diaz 48). Thus, using language wastefully is a threat to the Indigenous body that can be exhausted through its inscription on the page. The situation is a catch 22 because it's this very language that the Indigenous body invokes in order to crack open the dominant cultural archive in hopes to save itself. Here, Diaz offers a miniature *ars poetica* or a lesson on how she imagines the cost and stakes of poetic production for her body and its nonhuman dimensions. One part lesson and another part demonstration, Diaz invites us to experience how she reaches into the filament of the poem to carefully rewire its materiality so that it does not come at the cost of hers.

Diaz brings to the lyrical and textual poem an Indigenous cosmology that reworks the poem into something unfamiliar. As a thread in a larger collection titled *Postcolonial Love Poem*, the poem participates in an attempt to rewrite a familiar Western form like the "love poem" in order to place it beyond the grasp of colonialism. The text and its form then become an embattled site between Indigenous and Western cosmologies. This act of self-preservation creates a productive tension with the reader, too. As readers, we're positioned to wonder about the impetus of the poem and ask

questions like, “what is the Colorado River and why is it endangered?” Diaz writes, “Would this water/ stanza have been exhausted had I not come to the page to “drink from it”?” (49) Diaz’s insistence that the poem is water, and thus the poem is her body, and that these two things are to be carefully held and meditated upon troubles Western readerly notions of the poem. In Western tradition, the text often takes the shape of the body but for different kinds of speakers. We can imagine the text as the body in Judeo Christianity¹⁸ (Mignolo 70). In this tradition, the text behaves as the voice of an all-powerful deity that can traverse time and space. In Diaz’s poem, that expectation again frustrates traditional readerly expectations because the voice that we feast upon here, that body that we drink from to be replenished is that of a Queer, Latinx, Mojave poet. Diaz concludes her opening stanza with, “In future Stanzas, I will try to be more conservative,” scrambling readerly senses of time. This poem is happening with us as we read, enacting the ephemeral fluidity of the river on the page, and placing us, at times uncomfortably, at its banks.

There is power in the river as a figure that summons multiple approaches and imaginations. The Colorado River is Diaz, but it brings to mind those bodies of water that are also embodied by other human beings— and those human beings that are not connected to a river or a land that they can call their own. As Diaz states, the river is not a metaphor, yet it possesses multiple values dependent on who senses the river

¹⁸ Mignolo argues that archetype of the book is the expression of the Divine Word. The Holy Book is then the formal container of all knowledge which has been materialized through alphabetic characters. The book then offers opportunities for man to know god and also censure “false” books wherein the devil is present. (Mignolo 70)

through the language on the page. I know there are rivers in my history. I know that in recent history, my father crossed bodies of water on multiple occasions. I can also imagine the rivers that fed into and out of volcanic Lake Managua and how my mother must have felt as she drove away from it, not knowing she wouldn't see it again for decades. Or perhaps my own river, that concrete gouge at the center of Los Angeles that, like a desert arroyo, swells and bursts in a fury as we're faced with another historic drought. All these rivers have histories, and along with those born on their banks, they are forgotten or ignored, often reshaped into frontiers, into international investments and canals (like the now abandoned Nicaragua Canal), or into toxic sites forced onto publics (like at Flint, Michigan).

What Diaz creates then is something in relief of all that forgetting or ignoring, a textual embodiment where the river once again courses through the land and our bodies. That river is a body in crisis that yet survives the violence enacted by imperial extractivism through its place in the poem. Diaz's poetic labor then breaks the form of the poem to stop that generational forgetting. The poem as the river, as her body, imprints her Indigenous cosmologies elsewhere, not only along the banks of the Colorado River, but within the center of the colonial archive on her terms. Diaz then shows us that if we let a form that appears, at first, as a poem under our skin only to find that it's an Indigenous river, we can contest the colonial logic and cultural archive to which we are beholden.

This work isn't only designed to survive. On the page, Diaz sings into her readers a joyous pride for a homeland and for its resilience. Diaz writes, "Natives have

been called red forever ... I live in the desert along a dammed blue river ... The Only Red People I've Seen/Are White Tourists Sunburned After Staying Out On The Water Too Long." Diaz is funny. She takes the stereotype of the red Indian and refashions it as she plays with the form of the poem to demonstrate that the only red people in the desert are those whose bodies are physically burnt and rejected by the land itself. The river carries the white people but not without harming them. This relationship highlights how this land isn't their land. This humor is delivered in plain spoken and casual English. It's embedded between sections of cultural criticism, but Diaz showcases that subaltern hardiness, that humor that is only built in the fires of desperation and pain caused by generations of cultural abuse and exploitation. The poem then isn't just a vessel to message endangerment but also a means to signal to the audience of the insurgent vitality that soars throughout.

Diaz's poem is broken into 16 distinct sections and each section break is like a moment where the needle returns the thread of the tapestry. In her poem, we encounter the grace of carefully selected language, but we also return to the issue of the Indigenous body as the river again and again. Diaz likens the act of using the poem's metaphoric potential to translation. This connection allows for a discussion on the movement of meaning between one body of language or knowledge to another. Within the framework of translation in her poem, Diaz imagines critically the origins of her Mojave language and it's possibilities. Diaz writes: " 'Aha Makav is the true name of our people, given to us by our Creator who / loosed the river from the earth and built it into our living bodies" (46). The source of the original nature and the original language

used to describe it here is the divine. Any translation then is attempting to reshape the language of a Creator, an overwhelming task for the mortal poet.

Diaz pushes the English language and the poem as a form to its limit by challenging it to illustrate what the Mojave language means in English: “Translated into English, ‘Aha Makav means the river runs through the / middle of our body, the same way it runs through the middle of our land” (46). Diaz’s translation is a secondary thought and even echoes the image of the river running through the body, which we’ve encountered in the early stanzas of the poem, and which she recreates in the body of the poem itself. Diaz undercuts her own gesture and invokes again plainspoken and cutting language when she admits that the task is ultimately a failure. She states, “This is a poor translation, like all translations” (46). The failure of language and translation returns us to a central longing that makes clear to the settler the relationship between the river and Indigenous body and the stakes of that relationship. Perhaps then the Indigenous body is a type of translation of the river, one that is more successful than any textual translation. What is clear, however, is that the poem and the act of translation are considered as a less than perfect form that doesn’t fully capture what the original divine language intended to set forth. We’re always grasping to get more from the language in hopes of moving closer to that thing that it originally describes. Diaz guides the reader to the affectual response at the center of her experience as an Indigenous woman whose body is also an endangered river. This space is a place of important emotional resonance, a place where we long for what the language and the poem are incapable of recreating.

Diaz invokes Derrida to explore this mourning at the center of her poem. She quotes the French theorist's decree, "*Every text remains in mourning until it is translated*" (47 italics in original). This invocation demonstrates Western theory as contributing to Diaz's exploration while reminding the reader that her poem participates in a cosmology that can also build from Western literary criticism. "The First Water Is the Body" then radically straddles traditional Western literary expectations and Mojave cosmologies, forcing open the form of the poem to contain even further possibilities of knowing. Diaz also uses this opportunity to highlight translation within the poem as an imperfect and vulnerable literary act that is just as much dependent on what is mournfully lost in the imperfections as what is created. Diaz writes, "When Mojaves say the word for *tears*, we return to our word for *river*, as / If our river were flowing from our eyes. A great weeping is how you might / translate it. Or a *river of grief*" (47). Diaz goes beyond offering a Derridean reading of the Mojave translation for water and instead presents various possibilities that further illustrate water within a Mojave cosmology. The semantic connections and differences between "tears," "river," and "river of grief" in dominant U.S. English and the Mojave language draw our attention to translation as a border crossing method to meaning making.

Diaz then asks plainly, "But who is this translation for, and will they come to my language's four-/ night funeral to grieve what has been lost in my efforts at translation? / When / they have drunk dry my river will they join the mourning procession across / our bleached desert?" (47). According to the logic that Diaz sets

forth in this poem's opening section writing "water" on the page exhausts the Indigenous body and actual water itself. Thus, the act of translation drinks "dry my river," because it takes material key to Mojave creation stories in the process of rendering it textually on the page for the consumption of a reader. However, the Mojave language and its cosmology that Diaz pours into the poem pushes back against constrictive and extractive Western forms. Translation here cannot render something part of the cultural archive when that source language is not merely textual but also the actual Indigenous body and the river. A conventional understanding of English as the target language of Diaz's translation splinters under the weight of the river: "I mean *river* as a verb. A happening. It is moving within me right now." (48)

As readers embedded in Western cosmologies, it's likely that when we read this poem we encounter fragments of an unfamiliar onto-epistemology. Diaz works diligently to make these fragments clear and to show us how the two halves of the river and the Indigenous body represent a whole: "This is not juxtaposition. Body and water are not *two unlike things*—they / are more than *close together or side by side*. They are same—body, being, / energy, prayer, current, motion, medicine" (48 italics in original). Diaz then challenges the incantation of the poem to be more than only translation, or an image existing in one language, and then being rewritten through new parts in another language. Diaz's poem is tasked with illustrating to the reader that the relationship between the body and water is sameness, and that they are both a type of energy, faith, electricity, verb, and healing. Within Western cosmologies, the relationship is unusual, and the poetic embodiment has no familiar comparison within

Western onto-epistemologies. The poem as a form and its devices are unsettled by Indigenous cosmology in hopes that it can imagine the Indigenous body and the water that become endangered and lost.

Early in the poem, Diaz demonstrates to the reader that she and the Mojave people—‘Aha Makav—are the Colorado River existing tentatively, clinging close to the verge of extinction. This danger haunts the poem and is a spectator that creates momentum and urgency. Diaz writes, “If I say, *My river is disappearing*, do I also mean, *My people are disappearing?*” (48). This logic and its devastating consequences creep into the imagination of the speaker in real time. The poem defines its own poetics, its own relationship to language wherein to erase a river is to erase an entire people who are it, too. What then is left in the absence of those people? Of that river? Diaz cites another scholar when she writes:

“John Berger wrote, *True translation is not a binary affair between two languages but a triangular affair. The third point of the triangle being what lay behind the words of the original text before it was written. True translation demands a return to the pre-verbal.* (48 italics in original)

Diaz’s poem provides the reader with a genealogy that reaches before the English and to the language of the Creator in Mojave cosmology. By reaching towards that pre-verbal, Diaz pushes her reader outside of linear time, into an instance of recognition where the river does not possess the language we’ve assigned to it through modernizing projects. In this state, Diaz guides us to return to the river as a pre-semiotic entity that is mourned for as it approaches extinction.¹⁹

¹⁹ Look outside your window. Focus on the trees, mountains, rivers, skyline. Extinction is a thing we know of but can’t fully understand. Write, sing, or draw something that illustrates

Diaz asks, “What is this third point, this place that breaks a surface, if not the deep-cut / and crooked bone bed where the Colorado River runs—a one-thousand- / four-hundred-and-fifty-mile thirst—into and through a body?” (50). We’re guided again back into the river as a embodied thing, not a metaphor that flows through our imagination as a figure of many possibilities or of many landscapes, but a specific river with dimensions and heft for a specific people. Diaz meditates further on the river before it’s burdened by language and translated: “Berger called it the *pre-verbal*. *Pre-verbal* as in the body when the body was / more than body. Before it could name itself body and be limited bordered / by the space *body* indicated” (50). Diaz again demonstrates how Western poetic forms and language dams and restricts how we imagine the Colorado River. The poetic form and its devices inscribe the body and the river into demarcated and siloed entities. Even as metaphors within a Western cosmology, it cannot truly be another thing, because language in the poem, even at its most fanciful, creates order and longs for specificity. Poets may use devices like simile or metaphor to temporarily lend qualities of the river to the body and vice versa like in the final line of William Stafford’s poem “Ask Me.”. Or use juxtaposition to create contrasts that highlight distinctions between the two separate entities like what we encounter throughout John Ashbery’s “Rivers and Mountains.” In the end, these devices only reinforce their separation. Using tools built from Western cosmologies, we observe Diaz’s struggle to translate the river into both the river and the human body.

how extinction might reshape this vista, how it might reshape what you and feel outside your window.

The act of translation, like the metaphor, forecloses the possibilities of it as a metaphor. In finding an analogue in the English language, translation severs ways of knowing the river and the Indigenous body as truly connected. Diaz makes meaning by lingering upon how literary forms dislocate Indigenous people from the beings and bodies that historically constitute their bodies.

The poet then imagines the river in another shape and form, in another condition beyond that of endangerment. Diaz writes:

What does 'Aha Makav mean if the river is emptied to the skeleton of its
Fish and the miniature sand dunes of its dry silten beds?

If the river is a ghost, am I?

Unsoothable thirst is one type of haunting.” (50)

The poem is then a gateway into the ignoring or loss of a body for one and for many. If the river dies, then, Diaz suggests, so does she. Her people and her land are relegated to ghostliness, forced to revert to what could be described as postverbal state wherein they speak, but only of a constricted and fragmented ontology, and only to those few who are willing to listen. There is palpable frustration and grief in this realization. The generative possibilities of the Western poem and its tradition instead reveal a haunting. The poetic form cannot capture, in great universalizing swaths, the experience of many. The poem's own aesthetic and formal logic is entrenched in the loss for which language and the act of translation are responsible.

I think of the misplaced and disappeared archive of my own family. I close my eyes and see the young boy in the image and how he looks in that photo. The photo exists beyond language, is preverbal, and is defiant in that it exists despite

overwhelming odds. Today, the photo is imaginary, a specter, lost to the material world. Diaz ends her poem reflecting on the condition of colonial loss and how it always forces us to return, to long to go back to a place of wholeness where we aren't divided by the way language dams and borders. The return feels like a return to a place of equilibrium, a place of home:

“Toni Morrison writes, *All water has a perfect memory and is forever trying to get back to where it was. Back to the body of earth, of flesh, back to the mouth, the throat, back to the womb, back to the heart, to its blood, back to our grief, back back back.*” (52 italics in original)

I think of how this return to an elusive homelike place, a place of origin, has shaped my thinking for so much of my life. I search for my father's home in the photo of him. I'm searching for my mother's home in the belongings she burns in the backyard, in the vulnerable home waters that I imagine have called out for them to return for decades. But why reflect obsessively over returning homes that are mine but also were never mine? Why linger in that longing for that “back back back” that even troubles those who went away? Like that water, I can't help but feel as though we're always pointed in a particular direction, always longing for the soothing comfort of knowing where we're from and where we're headed, knowing full well in the end, we'll reach beyond that future bend to spill into something greater. Perhaps then there is hope beside that longing, hope that the return home can pull us towards a place of familiarity,

through terrain that we will know. The terrain of our own bodies, no matter how unusual they may seem, no matter how little we may know of them.²⁰

In the Halls of The American Water Museum

Natalie Diaz couples the poem, “The First Water is the Body” with a poem that extends and nuances her exploration of the connection between water and the body. By employing specific strategies that invoke installation and curatorial methodologies, Diaz invites the reader into the imaginary yet very real space of the American Water Museum. By invoking the space of the museum, Diaz transforms the speaker of the poem into that of a docent-like figure while echoing and animating the familiar form of the museum catalog. In doing so, Diaz collapses space and time and creates a textual museum of many places and times, again invoking Foucault’s space specific “heterotopias.” These sites are both places of abundance and intrigue, yet they are also deserts, vacancies, and other sites of mourning in line with her exploration of Indigenous and Latinx loss in light of coloniality.

“*Exhibits from The American Water Museum*” is presented to us as a sequence of numbered catalog entries. Through the poetic device of the vignette, fragments of exhibitions arrive to the reader through museum descriptions, interviews, and directions. In the “Notes” section of *Postcolonial Love Poem*, Diaz describes the origin

²⁰ Imagine your personal archive. It may appear to you as a shoebox in a closet, a file cabinet, a photo album beneath the living room television. What of that archive is missing, what of that archive has been ignored? Bring that elusive thing onto the page anyway that seems fit to you. Where or what does this thing connect you to?

of the museum: “this space has been on my mind since I first read Luis Alberto Urrea’s *The Water Museum* ... The book’s title made a water museum a real space in my wonders. The poem is a small part of how the American Water Museum of my mind exists” (99). The poem invokes various forms and spaces typical to a museum like performance descriptions and instructions, guidebook entries, and dioramas of surprising and unsettling scenes and objects like marginalia from government documents, metonymic experiences, and even a magic show. The poem is also a collaborative space, where Diaz makes her own contributions, creating an “open-access” poem wherein the Western notions of ownership and capital, which she critiques in her work, are troubled. In bringing these collaborative spaces together in the formal container of a museum, Diaz constructs a textual space that acts as a collection of sites that accumulate histories. Diaz’s use of the textual to invoke a real space where readers are invited to not only react emotionally and thoughtfully, but to move physically to engage with the histories represented in her work brings to mind Foucault’s concept of heterotopias as spaces that look back onto us and reconstitute who we are (4).

Through Diaz’s invocation of spatial elements like space, sound, and movement through an imaginary museum, we are invited to analyze her poem as a heterotopia. The contents of these museums reflect back to readers very real material conditions of oppressed peoples who suffer at the abuse of unjust water management and government violence within Western cosmologies of extraction. Our wandering through the museum mirrors to us our positions within these conditions. We see ourselves in the

exhibits even though they are imaginary places built from the shadows of our lived universe. Within the exhibits are a collection of spaces and times that tell us about ourselves and the conditions in which we've left the world and nonhuman beings and bodies. In this way, the American Water Museum is a museum that has always existed in one shape or another, embedded within archives on the internet or in the memory of Indigenous people who've suffered in the constant war that has been waged over the land and the resources they've stewarded for generations. Yet by curating these spaces into a heterotopia, we reckon with the admission price of reading a poem in which we are deliberately implicated in a personal way. We see this in an early section:

5.

Admission is general and free
Except for what the children pay—

and they pay in the kidneys. (64)

By invoking the form of the museum, Diaz raises the mirror of the museum to question our participation in it. The critique is scathing, as admission to the museum to wrestle with the realities of access to clean water is “general and free” while the most vulnerable communities pay with the body. Our shadow cast within this imaginary space reflects back to us the possibility that we are voyeurs visiting the museum at the cost of the children whose bodies are ruined by poisoned water or by water they cannot access. The range of emotions that the reader is pushed to feel is varied across the 27 entries and presumably the other 2,973 that the poem doesn't capture textually. The accumulation of entries creates a runaway sensation that overwhelms us as we are unable to sense the end or beginning of this visual space. The sensation reminds us of

Foucault's analysis of the museum as a heterotopia that indefinitely collects time, never pausing but accruing even over its own summit (7). In this way, the museum becomes a physical manifestation of the cultural archive that "enclose[s] in one place all times, all epochs, all forms, all tastes, the idea of constituting a place of all times" (7). This place of all times is remarkable in that it, unlike the human body, is outside of time and free from its destruction, allowing it to look back onto pasts that it controls, measures, and organizes, while shaping the way we imagine our futures (7). For Foucault, and Diaz too, the cultural archive and its museum are tools of modernization specific to Western cosmologies (7). Thinking alongside Foucault and Diaz, we can imagine the museum as an example of colonial technology which has the means to stall time and to collect multiple spaces and times in one place for an audience. As a modernizing device that works to control and describe history from a U.S.-Eurocentric position, the form of the museum and its motifs are historically situated devices used to celebrate colonial conquests while violently rendering Indigenous forms of knowing silent.

Unlike the museum that celebrates colonial conquests, Diaz's contributions to the water museum critically consider the suffering underlying such projects for Indigenous and other subaltern communities. Diaz's American Water Museum creates new space, or mirrors, for visitors to identify and reckon with the dangers of water misuse and the missing bodies that are implicated in the disjointed and haunting choir of voices we hear throughout the catalog entries. At the same time, it derides museums that showcase what the cultures upholding them have destroyed. The numbered entries are incomplete, out of order, and vast, ranging from 0 to 3,000. The disjointed

collection of numbered entries signals back to the haphazard and gluttonous desire to contain everything at all costs. This gesture critiques the museum as a colonial form while reminding us through the absences that despite what we're able to see, so much is still missing. This echoes the figure of the very real missing body of the enslaved African teen girl in Hartman's "Venus in Two Acts." Hartman allows us to read Diaz's American Water Museum as a collaborative critical fabulation. As a collaborative critical fabulation, we can understand this poem as a textual space wherein real voices are only the remaining fragments of the colonial mistreatment of the nonhuman. The poem then acts as a poetic archive constructed of a polyvocal collage that the reader is pushed to do more than just read through. By invoking the nontextual through deliberate references to sound and space, the text breaks out beyond its margins, unsettling the reader's familiarity with the form while at the same time immersing and alienating the reader.

In the opening sequence of the poem, it is key to note the way the reader is brought within the realm of the American Water Museum. It works as a tutorial for the reader, teaching them how to be and move about within the space of the American Water Museum:

0.
I can't tell you anything new about the river—
You can't tell a river to itself.

17.
A recording plays from somewhere high,
or low, floating up or down through the falling
dust-light.

It is a voice out of time, a voice of quickness,

voice of glass—or wind. A melody, almost—of mud.
How it takes a deep blue to tumble wet stones
into a songline. The music any earth makes
when touched and shaped by the original green energy.
The song, if translated, might feel like this:

You have been made in my likeness.

I am inside you—I am you/or you are me.

Let us say to one another: *I am yours*—

And know finally that we will only ever be

as much as we are willing to save of one another.

Upon our entry to the American Water Museum, we encounter a surprising gesture that folds us into the imagination of the poem. Recalling Foucault's heterotopic mirror, the museum calls out to the reader to notify us that we are the subject of analysis. We can't learn anything new because what the museum has to offer already exists within our body. This moment is jarring because instead of stepping away from the reader and alienating them, it renders them intimately close. The closeness asks us to consider that there may be knowledge about our bodies that we do not understand, and that it may contain ways of understanding the world that have escaped our understanding within Western cosmologies.

After the first section, which the reader passes through like a threshold into the sacred space of the museum, Diaz shocks our understanding of how we might interact with the space. Diaz invokes a sound that exists beyond the textual and the space of the page, which reaches us as an aural experience. This gesture invokes forms of knowledge that are unbound to U.S.-Eurocentric perceptions of text. The sound

descends from above and pulsates through the space of the museum while intermingling with the light. The poem's speaker insists that knowledge comes from the sound and light and not the text, scrambling our relationship to the language on the page. We then doubt its integrity by recognizing, like in "The First Body is the Water," that the text is a fraught translation that stands in for the haunting of that preverbal being. The voice is described as being timeless yet also intimately terrestrial and built of the land. The knowledge is earthly and preverbal because it exists without the human, suggesting ancient forms of collective nonhuman knowledge that invite alternate ways of knowing. This knowledge runs counter to what we expect to find in the museum.

In a later section of the poem, we encounter "*River,*" an interactive performance piece that makes demands of its viewers. In this section, the river stops saying "*no, no, no—Don't repent. This is a museum not a church*" (66 italics in original). Diaz's poem invokes the divine while simultaneously critiquing the space of the church. At times, the river speaks to us as a god would and moves through the museum as if to instruct us how to use our body to think and move through the sacred space. The ethereal and nonverbal voice of the river reminds us at one point: "You have been made in my likeness. / I am inside you—I am you/or you are me" (63). The voice emitting from the exhibit estranges the reader from their own body. The container of our body and what it carries is brought into question. When the river speaks "I am inside you—I am you/or you are me," we're invited to participate in a radical act of empathy where we push past the Western divide between the human and nature. In this alternative onto-

epistemological reality, the reader is free to imagine how these two things are critically entangled. Again, we're reminded how for Diaz the river is a nonhuman energy, perhaps a spirit, that exists on either side of ourselves: on our exterior but also our interior. While at the same time, Diaz is the river, and the river is Diaz. The river binds the subject matter of the poem, its speaker, and the reader together, inviting us to reimagine relationships to knowing our own body that are beyond the reach of U.S.-Eurocentric ontologies²¹.

It's important to note that Diaz chooses the figure of the museum, the classic colonial archive, to trouble our relationships with our bodies, but also relationships with tools for controlling and exhibiting Western knowledge and histories. The formal arrangement of the poem invites the reader to move within its various chambers to discover a counter archive that presents non-Western ways of knowing the river and the body. In the 99th exhibit of the American Water Museum, Diaz showcases the radical transformative ability of her complex form to bring the reader closer to the realities of non-Western ways of knowing. She writes:

99.

From an original rock painting in Topock, Arizona, now digitized on a wall-mounted monitor:

Before this city, the Creator pressed his staff
Into the earth, and the earth opened—

It wasn't a wound, it was joy—joy!—!

²¹ Is there a nonhuman being in your life that appears in your consciousness regularly? Something that you look or feel fondly about. Something that dominant culture might consider a thing or an object. What happens when we imagine this “thing” as a being? What if we could converse with it? What would communicate to you? Write down that conversation.

Out of this opening leaped earth's most radical bloom: *our people*—

We blossoms from the original body: water,
Flowering and flowing until it became itself, and we, us:
River. Body. (64)

In this key section, we enter the gallery space through the tension of the rock painting digitized on the wall monitor. Within the desensitizing, limiting, and sanitizing frame of the wall monitor, the viewer finds an Indigenous rock painting in Topock. The entry way into this moment of the gallery brings to mind the formal container of the book of poetry. At the center of a familiar container, we find another kind of knowledge. The monitor then speaks and we encounter a creation narrative wherein the “radical bloom” gives birth to “*our people*” (64). The people are not born of violence or of a wound but instead of joy. This gesture towards joy is noteworthy because of the way it pushes up against the suffering woven throughout the poem. In another section, Diaz recounts what she calls in a footnote, “The prayer of an Elder Mojave woman shot in the head and throat by two rubber bullets as she sat in prayer before a tractor and a row of German shepherds breaking against their leashes at the site of yet another pipeline” (68). Despite these horrors, which invoke generations of violence centered around the removal of Indigenous people from their native land and resources, Diaz still finds it critical to meditate on the “joy—joy!—!” which like the Mojave people, radically blooms from the center of her poem. This blossoming is a stark reminder that the flowering of people is also a flowing, and that water and the body are one: “it became itself, and we, us: us/ *River. Body*” (64).

Diaz works across these two poems to demonstrate how the forms of the poem and the museum can break archives open. Once the Western archive is cracked open, Diaz's use of form exposes an alternative body of knowledge and Indigenous cosmovision that denies the Western notion that Indigenous bodies can be extracted from the nonhuman beings and bodies that constitute extensions of their own bodies and subjectivities. The poem is then an invitation to embody a new set of relationships between human and the nonhuman, one that unsettles and resists dominant one-world views where Western ways of knowing and feeling and the capitalistic social orders they reinforce are inevitable and the only possible world for those living within coloniality. The reunion of the nonhuman beings and bodies like the Colorado River and the body is a source of joy, but also one that resists the overwhelming powers of coloniality.

In my imagination, the ash accumulates in my backyard until it surpasses its own summit. Today, my mother burns the family archive waiting for me to pick up on the message that floats up from the flames. The ashes blow into the sky with the energy released from their own destruction. This might be the lesson. This glowing arc into the summer evening might be how we learn to make, how we stave off the ongoing destruction by harnessing the energy left behind. When I sift through the few singed photos that remain or listen to the fragments uttered in the foggy memory of my elders, I feel as though I'm looking at ruins. Those rivers that perhaps lay barren thousands of miles away except for that restive trickle that cuts across its deepest parts, in an ancestral home I'll never know. The ruins speak to me and to others,

longing for us to feel in ways that demand different bodies, formal containers different than those that have failed to make them whole for so long.

Despite our efforts, the Colorado River may soon run dry, may never run its natural course into the Sea of Cortés during our lifetime. If our new forms do fail to liberate the body, like those that have failed historically, the river won't. One day, we'll be gone, the dams will crumble, and the river will resume its course and take its fluid shape along land. Perhaps these artists make work to echo that past and future ancestral form, to capture its fury flowing across all dimensions of time, so that it may burst—finally free.

Unruly Tongues

¡Viva Las Deslenguadas!: Mirroring Colonial Translation in Francisco X. Alarcón's Snake Poems: An Aztec Invocation (1992).

*Tauuuhiiii, Tauuuhiiii, Tauuuhiiii, Tauuuhiiii!*²²

—Francisco X. Alarcón

In the years following the fall of Tenochtitlan in central Mexico in 1521, Spanish colonizers weaponized the ideological frameworks of Christianity to justify the systematic destruction of Nahua places of worship and the devaluation of Nahua spiritual and cultural leaders (Díaz Balsera 3). Despite the largely successful forced Christianization of Nahua communities—which resulted in mass baptisms, Indigenous built churches, and public displays of devotion where Indigenous peoples demonstrated complex understandings of Christian tenets—clergymen throughout central Mexico were dissatisfied (Díaz Balsera 4). Many were suspicious that Indigenous religious practices had not been entirely wiped out in the region but had instead been integrated with Christian practices or hidden altogether (Díaz Balsera 4, 9). To further identify, control, and alienate Nahua cultural and spiritual practices, the Archbishop of Mexico, Juan Pérez, commissioned a decade long investigation (1619-

²² Tauhi in nauahtl means, para llamar a otro or to call to another. (de Molina). At the start of Francisco X. Alarcón's poetry readings, Alarcon would occasionally instruct the crowd to call "tauhi" with him as they raised their hands in reverence of the four directions. In some instances, Alarcón would invite the audience to call "tauhi" in the fifth direction. That fifth direction, he used to say, was to be found in another person (Stanford, Smithsonian).

Here, I call *Tauuuhiiii!* to Francisco. I call out to him.

1629) led by the priest Hernando Ruiz de Alarcón (1597 - 1646) (Díaz Balsera 4). By interrogating Nahua people, often under the threat of torture, Alarcón collected and transcribed more than 60 invocations or nauhualtocaitl, “language or names that wizards use” (Díaz Balsera 4, Ruiz de Alarcon 1994, 148)

Once completed, Alarcón’s bilingual *Tratado de las supersticiones y costumbres gentílicas que oy viuen entre los indios naturales desta Nueva España* or *Treatise on the Heathen Superstitions That Today Live Among the Indians Native to This New Spain* (*Treatise* moving forward) represented a transcription of oral Nahua traditions from circa 900 C.E. to 1519 C.E (Díaz Balsera 4). Upon their utterance, the nauhualtocaitl facilitated interactions between the speaker and nonhuman subjectivities, primarily for daily subsistence practices like incantations for planting corn, casting sleep, or finding affection (Díaz Balsera 4). The nauhualtocaitl were Nahua invocations enacted by embodied utterances with the expectation and hope that they would result in material changes in the perceived world. An objective of Ruiz de Alarcón’s *Treatise* was to use editorialization, intext commentary, and translation to recast the Nahua sources of the nauhualtocaitl as malicious and cunning idolaters who tainted Christian ceremonies and ways of life with diabolic and superstitious practices (Díaz Balsera 6-7). Although the *Treatise* is a textual technology that alienates Indigenous communities by rendering them locked away into a pre-salvation past, it also ironically permits contemporary readers to approach a rich archive of Nahua oral tradition. Alarcón’s and the Catholic Church’s colonial inquiry into the nauhualtocaitl has become one of the most important records of

Indigenous knowledge after Spanish conquest in central Mexico (Coe and Whitaker 23-29; Diaz Balsera 17).

In the early 1980s in San Francisco, the poets Francisco X. Alarcón and Lucha Corpi visited the home of gay artist, advocate, and friend, Juan Pablo Gutierrez for an annual gathering and exchange of creative work. On this visit, Francisco X. Alarcón recounts having a vision where he watches himself translate from the Nahuatl, a language he first encounters in his youth through his grandmother's singing in Mexico whom he identifies as a "traditional Nahuatl woman" (Aragón). After his vision, he insists to Corpi that he isn't the person he watches translate from the Nahuatl. Shortly thereafter in 1982, Francisco X. Alarcón encounters Hernando de Ruiz Alarcón's *Treatise* at the Museo Nacional de Antropología while on a Fulbright scholarship in Mexico City. In 1992, nearly 400 years after the *Treatise's* publication and during the Columbus quincentenary, Francisco X. Alarcón publishes a collection of retranslations interspersed with poems that act as lyrical responses to the invocations entitled, *Snake Poems: An Aztec Invocation*.

In this text, the poet uses the *Treatise* to generate his own translations of Ruiz de Alarcón's nauhualtocaitl transcriptions into English and Spanish alongside lyrical responses to his meditation on the dueling bodies of knowledge present in the text. Moving forward, I'll refer to the author of the *Treatise* as Alarcón and the author of *Snake Poems* as Francisco. Together, the *Treatise* and *Snake Poems* demonstrate the restive vitality of Nahua Indigenous knowledges surging beneath the text and scrambling temporal linearity and reader-text relationships. Despite Alarcón's best

efforts to foreclose the possibilities of the *nauhualtocaitl* within Eurocentric and Christian archives, Francisco's lyrical responses and creative translations illuminate how Nahua knowledges continue to reshape how we know and interact with the contemporary world and the human and nonhuman beings to which we are connected.

In this chapter, I engage in dialogue with Walter Benjamin's notion of translation as a "renewal of something living," Johannes Göransson and Joyelle McSweeney's theory of translation as witness, and Gloria Anzaldúa's term "deslenguadas" to close read the way *Snake Poems* expresses the continued vitality of the *nauhualtocaitl* in recent translation and poetic cultural productions. First, I provide a brief contextual map of the structure of the *Treatise*, the two editions of *Snake Poems*, and key biographical points of Francisco's life. Then, thinking with Benjamin's theory of translation as afterlife, I show how *Snake Poems* uplifts the orality and embodied knowledge of the *nauhualtocaitl* by using verse to highlight how it creates linkages between humans and nonhuman subjectivities. Afterwards, I close read examples of lyrical responses to Alarcón's transcriptions in *Snake Poems* to show how they create a mirroring effect that enables Francisco to contemplate the way language constitutes an extension of his own identity, while accepting the impossibility of liberating the *nauhualtocaitl* from coloniality. Lastly, I illustrate how Francisco's retranslation of Alarcón establishes what Göransson and McSweeney call translation as witness, wherein Francisco uses the creative act of poem making and retranslation to speak and look out onto the *nauhualtocaitl* while the *nauhualtocaitl*

speaks and looks out back onto him, the two bodies intermingling and leaving one another changed.

Despite much acclaim, Francisco's *Snake Poems* is largely critically ignored. Existing research doesn't tend to the role of translation with the exception of Juan Pablo Rivera's 2010 article. Here, Rivera argues that Francisco's broad use of multilingualism in his poetry and translation enacts a linguistic flirtation that formally embodies a "sexualized mystical fusion" creating a rare queer male visibility at the borders of Chicanismo (Rivera 99). In George Hartley's 2001 article on *Snake Poems*, he invokes the term difrasismo as an analytical tool, which he defines as "a term used to characterize the Nahuatl metaphorical method of naming an object with a compound of two seemingly unrelated worlds." (21). His careful analysis characterizes both Francisco and *Snake Poems* as "the embodiment of difrasismo," embattled sites of self-perception as conqueror and conquered (Hartley 22). Unlike Hartley, I believe Macia' Gonzalez's 1994 critique of *Snake Poems*, which deploys Bakhtin's term "historical inversion" to show how Francisco idealizes a historically frozen Aztec empire in his desire to bolster Chicano lineages, allows for further rethinking (99). I complicate Gonzalez's argument by imagining Francisco as establishing reciprocal relationships between the three layers of knowledge, language, and speakers resulting in spiraling translations and lyrical responses that go beyond the seduction of mythologization.

Forming the Nauhualtocaatl for the Western Archive

I will preface my analysis with a brief overview of the structure of the *Treatise*, the different editions of *Snake Poems*, and the way the Nahua knowledge continues to exist today. By mapping out these structures, I show how their asymmetries invite readers to think back and forth through them in ways that disrupt Eurocentric and Western narrative and spatiotemporal logics. Both in the ethnographic project of Alarcón and Francisco's lyrical responses, the text reveals a desire to organize and create efficient structures that facilitate the consumption of the *nauhualtocaitl*. Although Francisco does not set out to create a faithful revision or extension of the ethnographic project begun by Alarcón, the expectations of Western literary production force the textualization, organization, and preparation of oral Indigenous knowledges for the Western archive²³ (Arteaga xviii, Mignolo 125).

Francisco's consideration of the *Treatise* as an ethnographic tool can be detected in the author's note of *Snake Poems*, wherein he contextualizes his own project by identifying the location and shape of its source material:

the only extant manuscript copy of Hernando Ruiz de Alarcón's [*Treatise*] is in the library of the Museo Nacional de Antropología in Mexico City. This manuscript has a total of 109 folio pages and includes 73 different chapters divided among 6 main treatises. (xiii)

In the forward, the scholar Alfred Arteaga describes the structure of *Snake Poems* while framing it as an expansion of the scheme first established by the *Treatise*:

²³In the case of the *Treatise*, Alarcón, acts as the "letrado" or man of letters who uses the alphabet to textualize and organize Indigenous belief as part of a larger religious salvation project that rendered Indigenous people "barbaric" due to illiteracy and a lack of written narratives (Mignolo 129).

There are 104 *Snake Poems*, not an arbitrary number but one chosen for its significance in Native thought. One hundred and four is twice the fifty-two-year cycle of the Mesoamerican calendar. It is as if one cycle occurred in the first translation of Nahuatl thought, Ruiz de Alarcón's *Tratado*, and the second occurs now with *Snake poems*. The First section of *Snake Poems*, "Tahui," contains twenty poems, one for each day of the Mesoamerican month. The final section, "New Day," contains six poems, alluding to the new era of the Sixth Sun. (xviii)

In the second section of *Snake Poems*, Francisco provides a selection of translations of *nauhualtocaitl* from the *Treatise* organized in six sections entitled: penitents, hunters, farmers, lovers, diviners, and healers. Although parallel to the six *tratados* of the *Treatise*, Francisco takes liberties in his editorial and translation process to condense, modernize, and rearrange the 73 chapters describing *nauhualtocaitl* into 26 different invocations.

In my own description of *Snake Poems*, I recognize how difficult it is to resist the ethnographic compulsion to enumerate the various forms of the *nauhualtocaitl* and the way they appear and disappear both between the *Treatise* and the two different versions of *Snake Poems*. This culling and reshaping at the hands of nonindigenous authors and editors highlights both the impossibility of ever recovering an "original" or faithful understanding of *nauhualtocaitl*, while simultaneously recognizing their remarkable ability to inspire shifts in the imaginations of those who encounter them.

Although not structural in the textual sense, Francisco's biography illuminates his authorial interest in resurging the *nauhualtocaitl* through *Snake Poems* and, to use his words, "redeem the *cabrón*, Hernando Ruiz de Alarcón" to whom he was convinced he was related (Stanford, Smithsonian). Born to a Mexican father and

Mexican American mother in Wilmington, California on February 21, 1954, Francisco lived in the working-class cannery town where his family founded the Latinx-serving Catholic Church in 1928²⁴ (Aragón). When he was six, his family moved to Guadalajara, Mexico, where he lived full time until he was a young adult. In Mexico, his grandmother helped him develop his Spanish reading and writing skills and introduced him to the Nahuatl language through her oral storytelling traditions and singing (Aragón, Mendoza and Angeles 10). Upon his return to California, he was formally trained as a poet at California State University, Long Beach and Stanford. Eventually Francisco became an active organizer, editor, writer, and translator within the Chicano literary community in the Bay Area, where he developed working friendships with colleagues like Juan Felipe Herrera, Cherrie Moraga, Lucha Corpi, Gary Soto, Gloria Anzaldúa, and many more (Aragón, Mendoza and Angeles 7). Based in San Francisco's Mission District, he would become a fixture in the Bay Area literary scene, organizing and leading the popular Día de los Muertos procession for over 30 years, which began as a communal response to the AIDS epidemic and melded poetry and Aztec invocations (Aragón). Francisco would also go on to mentor queer Latinx poets like Eduardo C. Corral and Rigoberto Gonzalez, who have since become critically acclaimed and have turnkeyed

²⁴ Francisco's family is cited as being deeply religious. Openly atheist, Francisco agreed to accept Communion from his brother, a well-regarded priest, near the end of his life. Francisco likely participated in the Catholic ritual to please his 92-year-old mother, and when she found out she surprised his family by laughing while exclaiming, "Did he know what he was eating?" (Leovy 2)

his community-oriented ethos for another generation²⁵. Before passing away from stomach cancer at 61, Francisco asked the poet and activist Odilia Galván Rodríguez to edit a special edition of *Snake Poems* for its 25th anniversary in 2017 (Galván Rodríguez xxi). Due to the additional support from the poets and translators David Bowles and Xánath Caraza, the new edition of *Snake Poems* translates Francisco's largely English lyrical responses to the *Treatise* into both Nahuatl and Spanish. Previously in the first edition, invocations were only included in English and Nahuatl but now also appear Spanish. The new edition also cuts and streamlines many of the paratextual symbols and images that can be found in the first edition, which according to Francisco, come from a variety of "Mesoamerican monuments and Indian codices" (first edition, xiii). The collective efforts of Francisco, translators and editors transform the 25th anniversary edition of *Snake Poems* into a fully trilingual text that is no longer burdened by decontextualized images from anonymized Indigenous sources (see figure 3 and 4).

The architectures of the *Treatise* and *Snake Poems* illustrate the three differently powered epistemological, linguistic, and temporal worlds that are revolving around one another (the oral tradition of the Nahua invocations, Alarcón's colonial inquiry, and Francisco's lyrical and translation project) as responses to the nauhualtocaitl. The invocations compel dynamic responses in each of these texts, demonstrating the vitality of the oral traditions intermingling, clashing, and in the

²⁵ I have personally benefited from the welcoming and inspiring kindness and support from these two writers. Through them and the many others he has left an impact on, I can hear Francisco despite never having met him.

process, generating a resurgence of material that has traces of the source Nahua orality and knowledges. Although Francisco died in 2016, the restive potential of the nauhualtocaitl continues to live through his work, reshaping the original incantations that are ultimately lost to us.

*

Francisco, I first found you in the kindness of others. The kindness that dilutes the despair of that copper loneliness. The one that swallows you like mud in the slow hours of morning, the slow hours for setting grammar to memory. It has always felt this familiar.

Francisco, I found poets who told me they were at your side. Was it in San Francisco? Santa Cruz or Los Angeles? These poets are getting older now, too, and some are even getting sick. We were in a city by a river. In a dark room, they told me stories about how lonely it can be to toil, even desperately, even when revered. They suggested that the only antidote to that loneliness is finding others, bringing them close so that you can hear them loud enough so you can't help but uplift their voices with your own.

Francisco, I'm anxious to admit that when I put my ears to *Snake Poems*, I can't tell for certain who I'm hearing. I want to hear more than the ecstatic throes of obsession or the impossibility of redemption. I want to hear the echo of something that's at once familiar and strange.

Francisco, I too have been to the Museum de Antropología in Mexico City. I have also seen the colossus calendar of the sun, the Olmec head that looks like my father.

Can I admit something to you, Francisco? What I didn't see was the ancient fields of maize on edge of lake Texcoco or the gorgeous águila shredding the serpent in two. What I did see was the Mexican grocery store calendar, with its dark, sexualized Indigenous hero carrying an unconscious light skinned woman against the dramatic theatre of the snowcapped volcano, Popocatepetl. And all of this was just a courtesy gift after a grocery run to help me remember when I had to turn in my math homework, when my father had to send money back to Mexico, when my mother had to pay the electric bill.

Francisco, what if the illusion is just an illusion? What if those invocations are not ours to utter. I get it, I've been afraid of that loneliness for most of my life, too. What if the tongue can't remember all kinds of things? What if the remembering is just a setting of the table where we can gather?

Translating and Responding the Orality of the Nauhualtocaatl

There exist two substantial critical translations of the *Treatise* into English (Coe and Whittaker 1982; Andrews and Hassig, 1984) both of which appear in Francisco's bibliography. In her book *Guardians of Idolatry: Gods, Demons, and Priests in Hernando Ruiz de Alarcón's Treatise on the Heathen Superstitions*, the scholar Viviana Díaz Balsera makes clear that the 1984 translation is the superior

critical edition thanks to its sharp introduction, use of a scholarly apparatus in its annotated translation, and nuanced linguistic analysis (22). In her book length analysis of the *Treatise*, Díaz Balsera primarily relies on this translation except for the few instances where she weaves in excerpts from the 1982 translation. This earlier translation sets itself apart in the way it presents the *nauhualtocaitl* as verse. In explaining her decision to toggle to this, to use her words, less “accomplished,” translation, she writes, “While I do not fully agree with [Coe and Whittaker’s] presentation of the *nauhualtocaitl* as ethnopoehty, I find the more reverential tone of their translations is often closer to the Nahuatl and Spanish originals than Andrews and Hassig’s straightforward, more direct style” (23). Where Díaz Balsera’s in-depth and illuminating investigation of the *Treatise* eschews the versification of the *nauhualtocaitl* in translation as an ethnic badge or sign posting, I want to consider it as a critical method for recognizing, honoring, and approaching the oral characteristics of the Nahua invocations in contemporary literary and poetic contexts.

In his 1921 essay on translation, “The Task of the Translator,” Walter Benjamin writes:

For in its afterlife—which could not be called that if it were not a transformation and a renewal of something living—the original undergoes a change ... While a poet’s words endure in his own language, even the greatest translation is destined to become part of the growth of its own language and eventually to perish with its renewal. Translation is so far removed from being the sterile equation of two dead languages that of all literary forms it is the one charged with the special mission of watching over the maturing process of the original language and the birth pangs of its own. (256)

Although Benjamin considers the translation of two textual languages, his framework for the “afterlife” of language in translation is useful for understanding how oral knowledge transcribed through Alarcón’s colonial inquiry and then translated again by Francisco “matures” throughout its continued life. Benjamin invites us to reimagine language in translation as a living and dynamic force that possesses a continued life that is responsive to the creative interventions of poets and translators. Although this framework allows us to trace languages evolving manifestations after its initial utterance, I want to caution against the reliance on a life and death binary in this context. Such binaries reinforce colonial perceptions of Indigeneity and fall apart quickly given that there are more than 1.7 million active speakers of Nahuatl in Mexico alone. Instead, I envision translation and lyrical responses to transcribed oral traditions as engaging in a dialogical relationship with those no longer occupying our terrestrial plane.

Francisco’s reframing of the invocations in a poetic context then allows for close readings to detect how what we can sense of the “original” *nauhualtocaitl* and its renewed forms in the various editions of *Snake Poems* can shift overtime. By leaning into Coe and Whittaker’s decision as translators to transform Alarcón’s transcriptions of the *nauhualtocaitl* into verse and situating them further in a larger poetic context, Francisco brings to the surface the orality of the invocations and its possibilities as an embodied form of knowledge designed to reshape the world and create linkages between humans and nonhuman subjectivities.

In his inclusion of a translation of the nahuatlacaitl, “Against Unruly Ants,” Alarcón brings to the forefront of his selection the orality surging throughout the *Treatise*. His translation of both the nahuatlacaitl and of Alarcón’s commentary appears in the third edition of *Snake Poems* trilingually:

Inhuicpa in azcameh ahcemeleh

Against Unruly Ants

Contra hormigas revoltosas

Ruiz de Alarcón (II:13)

If the ants do not respond to the conjurer's pleas by leaving, he carries out this threat, destroying their houses by pouring a quantity of water onto the anthill and sprinkling the outer edge and circumference with his so venerated piciete ("tobacco").

Si las hormigas no responden, a la súplica del conjurador, y no se van, él cumplirá su amenaza, destruirá sus casas regando agua en su hormiguero y salpicando en la orilla externa y la circunferencia su venerado piciete ("tabaco").

tla cuel
Chalchiuhcueye
tle in ai
in popotecatl?
tla xiquimpoploti
ahmo nechtlacamati

cuix nelhuayoticate?
ye cuahuitl tichuica
tictlaochtitiqiza
in hueca ixtlahuacan
teohixtlahuacan
nepantla toconxicahua
cuix annelhuayoticate?

tla cuel!
Xoxouqui Tlamacazqui
Xiuhpatlantzin
tle axtica?
tla xocontocati
in popotecatl

come now!
Mother Water
what are the ants
doing around?
wipe them out
they don't obey me

are they perhaps
rooted?
you uproot trees
quickly wash them
away to the far-off
dusty plains
are you perhaps
rooted?

come now!
Green Spirit
Tobacco
why delay more?
chase them away
close their town

¡ven ahora!
Madre Agua
¿qué hacen las
hormigas! por aquí?
bárrelas
no me obedecen

¿están quizá
enraizadas?
tú desarraigas árboles
rápidamente los
acarreas hasta las
lejanas planicies
polvosas ¿estás
quizá enraizado?

¡ven ahora!
Espíritu Verde
Tabaco
¿por qué tardarse más?
corretéalas
cierra su pueblo

(first edition, 58)

In Francisco's translation of the *nauhualtocaitl*, the speaker oscillates between the imperative and interrogative modes, framing the invocation as a dialogue between themselves and Mother Water. The insistence that Mother Water rescue the speaker through her repeated demands to "come now!" highlight the orality of the invocation. The *nauhualtocaitl* as an oral announcement and an utterance to a nonhuman subjectivity is reinforced through Francisco's careful reimagination and inscription of the invocation as a poem. His careful lineation enables the combination of end-stopped and enjambed lines to recreate a textual echo on the page, that when read aloud evokes the speech pattern that he's created in his translation and overlaid onto the *nauhualtocaitl*.

Unlike prose, the verse and its different kinds of line breakages allow Francisco to imbue into his translation control of and consideration for the human breath. In the instances where the line is end-stopped like in the interrogative moments ("what are the ants / doing around?," "are you perhaps rooted?," or "why delay more?"), the question mark at the end of the line halts the reader's breath, creating a pause in the reading for contemplation and further breathing. The end-stopped doubles down on this pause because the end of the line also corresponds with the conclusion of a unit of meaning. The enjambed lines provide a different kind of pause within the context of the invocation. In interviews after the publication of *Snake Poems*, which he identifies as one of the more important pieces of his work, Francisco struggles to put into language his relationship to Alarcón. As he gets older

and closer to the end of his life, he comments more firmly that believes that he is his distant ancestor and that *Snake Poems* is an attempt to redeem the colonial priest (*Día de los Muertos*)²⁶. Francisco inserts himself in defiance of Alarcón's colonial project by finding a way to use formal Western poetic conventions to textually reinscribe the human breath back onto the *nauhualtocaitl*. Where Alarcón uses writing to remove the Indigenous bodies from the *nauhualtocaitl*, Francisco brings the body back, albeit ghostly and only when mediated by a reader.

In the final stanza, the speaker's addressee shifts from Mother Water to the green spirit. She utters: "come now!/ Green Spirit/ Tobacco/ why delay more?/ chase them away/ close their town." Whereas the end-stopped line closes units of meaning, the enjambed line suspends it to allow the reader to linger in a brief place of wonderment and apprehension. The enjambment allows the line to unfurl slowly in its meaning as we learn that the addressee of the green spirit is also the tobacco referred to in Alarcón's preface of the *nauhualtocaitl*. The momentum of this unfurling is briefly dammed by, "why delay more?," a tender appeal to the green spirit that captures both the desperation of the speaker but also the reverence of the nonhuman

²⁶ The question of Francisco's relationship with Alarcón lies in both the poet's creative meditations and his biography. Although he openly refuted the religion, Francisco had significant connections to Catholicism: he was raised by a devout mother, previous generations of his family founded a Latino serving church in Wilmington, California, and his brother is an established Catholic priest (Leovy). Along with being immersed in the religion, sharing the same surname with Alarcón likely inspired Francisco's belief in their divine connection—and his responsibility to use his poetic labors to respond to Alarcón's colonial legacies.

entities. However, this dam ruptures over quickly into the final lines where the quick fell swoop of the enjambed duo of “chase them away/ close their town” concludes the invocation with a violent finality.

Ownership of translation decisions into the English from the Spanish and/or Nahuatl are difficult to trace across the various editions published between 1982 and 2019. In the second edition of *Snake Poems*, it’s worth noting that the English translations do not capture as much of the dynamic and energetic traces of orality present in the Spanish. In this invocation alone, “bárrelas” becomes “wipe them out” while “corretéalas” becomes “chase them away.” Although both are successful translations, by returning to the Spanish and reading it as an intermediary between the Nahuatl and the English, the vital and prominent presence of orality can be sensed in Francisco’s verse in English and even much more so in Spanish due to the voiced alveolar trill or rolling Rs and additional breathy vowels.

The oscillation between the end-stopped lines and the enjambed lines creates a contrast and interconnected web that allows us to imagine how the written text might echo the speech patterns of language. Given that Francisco’s grandmother and early language mentor spoke Nahuatl and that he spent time researching the language during his Fulbright in central Mexico, it’s likely that Francisco was cognizant of Nahuatl speech patterns. In light of this, Francisco ultimately inserted himself into his renewal of the *nauhualtocaitl* and thus any sensations of oral rhythms are a remanufacturing produced primarily from his imagination and prowess as a poet.

The orality surging within the text can also be detected through the distinct presentations of this *nauhualtocaitl*, first in the *Treatise* and then in the two versions of *Snake Poems*. When encountering Alarcón's *Treatise* in the original Spanish, what is most notable is the way that Alarcón interrupts the *nauhualtocaitl* with his own ethnographic explanations of Indigenous behavior happening around the utterance of the invocations. For example, where Francisco's second stanza ends, Alarcón writes:

Hecho este conjuro, hechaba vno y dos cantaros del agua conjurada, por la boca y entrada del hormiguero donde antes auia esparcido su venerado piçete, y con esto affirmaba que o se hundia de todo punto el hormiguero, o las hormigas mudaban su habitacion muy lejos de alli: para ynfalible efeto a su juicio conjura tambien el piçete (61)

Having made this incantation, he used to pour one or two pitchers of conjured water into the mouth and entrance of the anthill where earlier he had spread his venerated pisiete. And with this he claimed that either the anthill would totally collapse or the ants would move their dwelling very far from there. For an infallible effect (in his judgment) he conjures the piçiete (Andrews and Hassig 111)

The passage, which explains in more detail how Nahua people would drown the anthill and use tobacco as an ant repellent, interrupts the *nauhualtocaitl*. Alarcón's line of colonial inquiry materially severs the invocation into two distinct parts, using the prose sentence to push the oral characteristics of the *nauhualtocaitl* further into the distance. Alarcón's choice of the verb "conjura" also reinforces his colonial objectives while further distancing the invocations from their orality. "Conjura," as the verb form of conjurations pushes to the forefront his limited understandings of the intentions and functioning of the *nauhualtocaitl*. The Oxford English Dictionary provides a 1386 definition of conjuration as:

The effecting of something supernatural by the invocation of a sacred name or by the use of some spelling; *originally* the compelling of spirits or demons, by such means, to appear and do one's bidding.

“Conjura” or conjure connects the nauhualtocaitl with demonic activity in Eurocentric Christian archives and in the imagination of readers. This fact overshadows the nauhualtocaitl as an oral communicative tool for connecting with nonhuman subjectivities. In *Snake Poems*, the verb “conjure” is only used when Francisco brings back Alarcón’s commentary. Although the commentary does return, it is no longer allowed to intrude within the space of the nauhualtocaitl on the page and is reduced to an ironic epigraph. In this way, Francisco creates another contrast against Alarcón’s opening observations and the now reunited parts of the nauhualtocaitl. The expectation of conjurations stands face to face with the rehumanization captured in Francisco’s lyrical renditions of the invocations. What once was cast as satanic worship is uncloaked of its colonial lens to reveal an everyday oral tool for preserving subsistence from the attack of pests.

The Nauhualtocaitl Across Languages

The most notable difference in Francisco’s second edition of *Snake Poems* is the way it expands the translations of the nauhualtocaitl. The first edition of *Snake Poems* only presents translations of the invocations in English, but the second edition presents translations in Spanish as well. Honoring Francisco’s last wishes, the editor of the second edition, Odilia Galván Rodríguez, facilitates a comprehensive retranslation of *Snake Poems* that renders most of it in three languages: Nahuatl, English, and Spanish.

Francisco's commitment to multilingual writing is demonstrated throughout his prolific career, which includes multiple bilingual volumes of poetry, alongside edited and translated books of children's literature and anthologies of Latin American poetry. Francisco was first encouraged to translate children's literature by his friend, fellow editor, and colleague Gloria Anzaldúa (Aragón). Anzaldúa was similarly invested in using creative and critical writing and cultural productions to theorize the connections between Chicano identity and Indigeneity, primarily through her development of the term "mestiza consciousness" in *Borderlands: La Frontera: The New Mestiza*. In that multigenre and multilingual collection, Anzaldúa includes an essay reflecting on language and identity entitled "How to Tame a Wild Tongue." Within this essay, she opens a section entitled "Linguistic Terrorism," with the following lyrical epigraph:

Deslenguadas. Somos los del español deficiente. We are your linguistic nightmare, your linguistic aberration, your linguistic mestisaje, the subject of your burla. Because we speak with tongues of fire we are culturally crucified. Racially, culturally and linguistically somos huerfanos—we speak an orphan tongue. (80)

Anzaldúa's term *las deslenguadas*, or the foulmouthed, names the liminal position of some Chicano or Latino writers who navigate and wield the linguistic inheritances of the multiple identities present in *mestizaje*. Anzaldúa's term is useful because it places emphasis on spoken language as the operative signifier of identity. According to Anzaldúa, the position of the multilingual *deslenguada* is at once slippery and contentious, but also generative and vital. The various "parents" of the *deslenguada*'s languages abandon or are forcibly displaced by the colonial legacies of migration.

The deslenguadas aren't composed of the same fixed linguistic identity; Anzaldúa, for example, is referring to her identity as a speaker of Pachuco, Tex-Mex, and Chicano Spanish (77).

As a transborder and multilingual poet, translator, and grandson of a native Nahuatl speaking grandmother, Anzaldúa's term of the deslenguadas is a valuable lens for reading Francisco's *Snake Poems*. Like the deslenguadas, Francisco teases out meaning and finds a voice for himself across three layers of language in *Snake Poems*. He doesn't claim purity of knowledge or language in how it renders the nauhualtocaitl, but instead uses creative interventions to embrace the inherent "deficiency" and nightmarishness of generating expanded meaning from a colonial document that uses accusations of satanic activity to skew the original Indigenous oral tradition. Francisco's laborious searching for the proper form of *Snake Poems*, both in life and posthumously, underscores the melancholic search for the "parent" language. As a linguistic orphan, the deslenguada troubles, innovates, and experiments with their linguistic inheritance as both the simultaneous embracing of and searching for an identity. Alarcón's *Treatise* then symbolizes the colonial textual technology that severs but also connects Francisco to the nauhualtocaitl. In *Snake Poems*, the deslenguada is a perpetual linguistic contradiction that invokes the oral characteristics of the Nahua invocations while recognizing the impossibility of fully grasping them.

Francisco is also a prudent translator, mindful of the power dynamics embedded in his translations and writing. Notably absent from his translations into

Nahuatl is Alarcón's commentary which exist only in English and Spanish. By denying Alarcón permission to exist textually in Nahuatl, Francisco prevents his further meddling in Indigenous languages and bodies of knowledges. Whereas Francisco works through the Nahua language, translation, and his own poem making to engage in a dialogic relationship with both Alarcón and the nauhualtocaitl, Alarcón doesn't establish a reciprocal relationship. In refusing to further expand Alarcón's reach into the nauhualtocaitl beyond his colonial transcriptions and translations, Francisco puts a stop to his ethnographic reach.

Alarcón's efforts are also reappropriated by Francisco and his posthumous editors and translators. By using his transcriptions to produce modernized translations of the nauhualtocaitl into English and Spanish, they reintroduce and renew them into the Spanish language archive and body of knowledge. This works to trouble the legacy of the *Treatise* as a tool for alienating and persecuting speakers of the nauhualtocaitl. Instead, Alarcón's efforts build a body of language that inspires deslenguadas to generate ongoing meditations on the nauhualtocaitl and new forms in which they can define their identities. In "Linguistic Terrorism," Anzaldúa writes: "Ethnic identity is twin skin to linguistic identity—I am my language ... I will have my voice: Indian, Spanish, White. I will have my serpent's tongue—my woman's voice, my sexual voice, my poet's voice" (81). For Francisco and Anzaldúa, to write with an orphan tongue is to use language to recognize racial, sexual, and gender inequities and to counteract the homophobic, patriarchal, and sexist values of the Chicano Movement with a rebellious queer aesthetic (Mendoza & Angeles 15-16).

Francisco's multilingual translations then trouble both the colonial objectives of Alarcón and the male centered nationalistic legacy of Chicanidad. To invoke Juan Pablo Rivera's queer reading of *Snake Poems* as a "sexualized mystical fusion," the queerness in Francisco's poetry and translations occurs at the various levels of the text wherein multiple—often opposing voices—flirt, transform, consume, and give birth to new and old counterhegemonic affectual and metaphorical registers (99). *Snake Poems* then asserts a multilingual and multiethnic Chicanidad and mestizo Latin American literature that contains the voice of the deslenguada, a queer voice that is at once "Indian, Spanish, and White."

The insistence of multilingualism in both editions of *Snake Poems* brings to the forefront the utterance of named languages (Spanish, English, Nahuatl) but also undefined languages that are clearly operating in addressing nonhuman subjectivities. In the section entitled "Hunters," Francisco's editorialization of the *Treatise* highlights addresses to multiple nonhuman subjectivities like, Nanahuatzin (the sun), Earth, Trees, Olchipinque ("Ones-Dripping-With-Rubber" or birds), Chalchihcueye ("Jade-Skirt-Owner" or Goddess of Water), Tonacacihuatl ("Lady of our Flesh"), tobacco, and ants (Alarcón 151-157). The addresses to these nonhuman subjectivities create room for their voices. The inscription of English, Spanish, and even Nahuatl invites the readers to imagine the addresses as embodied and voiced utterances. Similarly, they invite us to imagine their voices as something echoing beyond the textual. The material impact of the imagined voices of nonhuman subjectivities and their reach onto contemporary listeners and readers is demonstrated by Francisco's

poetic responses to the addresses. In the final poem of the “Hunters” section, Francisco mirrors the nonhuman addresses of the *nauhualtocaitl* and engages with them in a dialogical relationship. In his poem “Spirits of the Forest,” he writes:

When the last
rain forests
become zoos

will there be
lines to the pond
of wild dreams?

who will dare
disturb
this order of lies?

must the last
eagle die
in a cage?

what will take
the place of
our spirits?

(first edition, 60)

Francisco converts the title of the poem into an opening address to the Spirits of the Forest. By addressing the spirits directly, Francisco borrows the rhetorical strategies of the *nauhualtocaitl* so that he too can engage in the larger discourse established by the invocations. In this process, Francisco participates in a conversation with both nonhuman subjectivities and those who modeled this mode of communication for him. In this way, Francisco retranslating and responding to Alarcón’s colonial translations enacts a kind of deep listening that provides him with the necessary instructions to join the conversation.

Similar to the *nauhualtocaitl*, “Against Unruly Ants,” Francisco’s speaker pleads with the Forest Spirits for an intervention as he works to understand the grim realities of contemporary environmental decay. In asking, “who will dare/ disturb/ this order of lies?” and “must the last/ eagle die/ in a cage?”, Francisco reaches into the possibility of human to nonhuman discourse modeled by the *nauhualtocaitl* in hopes of finding some kind of answer. Even if this speaker is unsuccessful in reaching out towards the nonhuman, the act of speaking to nonhuman subjectivities extends the effect of *nauhualtocaitl* through and beyond the *Treatise*. The lyrical responses, which were inspired by Francisco’s close translations, enact what Benjamin describes as “the special mission of watching over the maturing process of the original language and the birth pangs of its own” (256). “Spirits of the Forest” invokes the *nauhualtocaitl* by using it as a model to go beyond the typical nostalgic or confessional modes of Western poetry and to instead reengage with the logic of its utterance to facilitate a new relationship with spirit entities. The final poem in this section also becomes a type of mirror wherein Francisco uplifts the orality of the *nauhualtocaitl* by enacting a mournful yearning for a worldview where the invocations of language bridge humans with nonhuman subjectivities.

*

Francisco, we are not remembering. We are sifting through the wreckage stained in shadow, in the green shroud of erasure. I want to hear your grandmother in the stanzas. I want to hear my grandmother where the line breaks into the yellowing of the page. In the archive, the snake poem is volcanic, its logic sidwinding in the

sand, disrupting the orderliness of the written word, reiterating symbols and erasing them over and over again, until we're left with the fleshy ghosts of a different kind of afterlife. Unlike those ghosts, these ghosts have heat, these ghosts can press their bodies into another, can leave an echo wailing in the canyon it knows by name.

Francisco, if we're not remembering, what are we doing? Why does the wreckage call us back into itself? How does its aura eat at us in our sleep and in the dry hours of complete daylight?

Mirroring the Nauhualtocaitl

Snake Poems can be read as a polyvocal meditation on the nauhualtocaitl buried beneath the colonial apparatus of the *Treatise*. Francisco carefully weaves together moments where Alarcón, who Francisco positions as his colonial doppelgänger, rises to the surface of the text through retranslation and modernizations of his commentary. The deliberate resurfacing of Alarcón occurs primarily in prefaces to the nauhualtocaitl, where he provides contextual background to the invocations that are skewed by his colonial gaze. In other instances, Francisco invokes Alarcón and his ethnographic commentary to frame the thematic arcs throughout *Snake Poems*. The entire collection of translations and poetic responses begins with this epilogue by Alarcón:

What is certain is that most or almost all present-day forms of worship are idolatrous actions which we now come across (and, from what we can judge, they are the same ones their ancestors customarily used) have their roots and formal basis in their belief that the clouds are angels and gods worthy of worship. They think the same of the winds since they believe these forces live everywhere, in the hills, mountains, valleys, and ravines. They believe the

same of the rivers, lakes, and springs, since they offer wax and incense to all the above. (1)

Granting Alarcón the first voice in *Snake Poems* introduces the ethnographic framework and the colonial author as the principal mediators of the Indigenous epistemologies contained within the *Treatise*. In this new context, Alarcón's tone rings out as ironic, particularly given that Francisco's editorial impact arranges how the *nauhualtcaitl* enact utterance and bridge humans with nonhuman subjectivities. The epilogue also introduces Alarcón as a character that Francisco steps into and away from in a back-and-forth dance of distance and intimate proximity to interrogate the connective and also mirroring possibilities of the *nauhualtcaitl* in *Snake Poems*.

Early in the opening section of *Snake Poems*, Francisco includes a poem entitled "Hernando Ruiz de Alarcón: (1587 –1646)." The poem begins with the surprisingly intimate address, "it was you / you were looking for/ Hernando." At first, the reader is led to believe that the poem is in the voice of Francisco addressing Alarcón but quickly that notion becomes confused. Instead, we're in the presence of a voice speaking out onto a subject who is in search of the author of *Treatise*. The voice could belong to Alarcón himself noticing a probing researcher pouring over his work or it could even be the voice of the Nahuatl speakers that use the *nauhualtcaitl* to reach our present time through Francisco's writing. The confusion of the speaker sways back and forth between the different possibilities, especially later when the shifting speaker says "it was you/ whom you tricked/ and apprehended// it was you/ who both questioned and responded" (8). In this fourth and fifth stanza, the speaker occupies both the voice of Francisco and the voice of Alarcón. The project of this

poem, and of *Snake Poems* as a whole, undoes the colonial temporal linearity of Alarcón's ethnographic project. Alarcón's *Treatise* works to record a version of history where the *nauhualtocaítl* are historical relics from uncivilized Indigeneity located in the past. By rendering the invocations textually, Alarcón aims to expose and then eliminate what he reduces to demonic worshiping. In this process, the Indigenous sources of the *nauhualtocaítl* are forced to progress in colonial temporal linearity towards a modernized and Christian future.

The refrain, "it was you," triggers a switch in the subject. The "you" becomes both the victim of inquisition and the "interrogator." The switch occurs again in the eighth stanza reiterating the dueling voices: "you became/ a conquered/ conqueror" (8). After this moment the subject stabilizes, and it becomes clear that the addressee is Alarcón, and the speaker is a voice that is beholden to both the "apprehended" and the "questioner." As the subject begins to stabilize, the voice of the speaker becomes confessional in the last third of the poem. The speaker begins to sympathize with the colonizer and even provides Alarcón with an opportunity for redemption when they say, "you saved yourself/ by transcribing// maybe/ without knowing/ the heavens" (9). As the grandson of a Nahuatl speaking grandmother and a Chicano who shares the same last name as the author of the *Treatise*, Francisco's tenderness towards the priest appears as a reckoning with his own inherited complicity with the colonization of Indigenous communities in Mexico. Francisco appears to let Alarcón off the hook, inviting him to recognize the ironic turn of the *Treatise* and how it preserved epistemological material for Francisco's generative lyrical meditation on the

competing inheritances of both the Nahuatl language and his colonial surname. The poem concludes with:

I am
From your tree
From your dream

This *cenzontle* bird
in the wilderness:
Your tomorrow

(Alarcón, first edition, 9)

The final line of the poem is striking in how it responds directly to Alarcón, forcing him out of the position and agency of knower and organizer of knowledge. Through this lyrical response and the first appearance of the “I,” in a poem dominated by the second person pronoun, Francisco forces Alarcón to listen, to be told for once, where he is located in another’s organization of time.

Francisco brings himself directly into the poem adding his own poetic inquiry as a critical intervention that builds upon Alarcón’s translation and inscription of the *nauhualtocaitl*. He declares that he is from Alarcón’s lineage by invoking both the tree and the *cenzontle* or mockingbird. Francisco as the *cenzontle* is defiantly located in the same wilderness that Alarcón works to bring the *nauhualtocaitl* out from. The mockingbird, which in nature is more likely to survive and proliferate if it successfully develops and showcases an extensive repertoire or *memory* of songs, is the final image. Due to the use of the colon, the final image of the *cenzontle* is positioned as a correlative for “your tomorrow.” This tomorrow resonates as different from promises of a Christianized future. Instead, this “tomorrow” is, like the

cenzontle, vocal and reiterating through various familial lineages different renditions of original songs. Additionally, the promise of tomorrow is removed from the colonial logics of progress and instead is identified as a meeting point in time in *Snake Poems*, where Alarcón, Francisco, and the slippery legacies of *nauhualtocaatl*, can gather. The moment exemplifies a restive troubling of Alarcón's original objective for the *Treatise*. Instead of alienation, the legacy of the *Treatise* transports the materials necessary for Francisco to construct a linking between Chicano, colonial, and Indigenous subjectivities.

Francisco's lyrical and translation project's relationship with Indigeneity merits further investigation. In the foreword to the new edition, former poet laureate of the U.S. and friend of Francisco, Juan Felipe Herrera, writes:

Francisco Alarcón was intent on a Mexica "Aztec" poetics, a new self for all—in *open-air movement*—of deep healing and collective refiguring of the people's life-body. He wanted to reignite an ancient way of life and living—relevant, powerful, compassionate, and communal. Rather than resegregation, Alarcón envisioned *Totality*. (xi)

Herrera's sensitive reading identifies the reconfiguring and connecting possibilities of Francisco's writing with and through both the *nauhualtocaatl* and Alarcón. However, he also draws attention to the problematic restorative and reclaiming logic that burdens some of Francisco's pro-Chicano discourse. By suggesting that Francisco brings to life again a "dead" way of knowing the world, nearly two million Nahuatl speakers and cultural community members become sidelined by an English language and U.S.-centric perception of Indigeneity. I mention this not to undercut Francisco's contributions but to push for a reading of his literary strategies that don't recover a

“missing” Indigeneity but that instead extend the vital afterlife of the nauhualtocaitl. Two poems in the opening section of *Snake Poems* illuminate the possibilities of imagining Francisco using the nauhualtocaitl to extend Nahua epistemologies.

In the poem “Ollin/Movement,” Francisco writes, “I call myself” and then lists a series of Indigenous spirits, gods, and figures essential to Mesoamerican creation stories including Quetzalcoatl, Oxomoco, Cipactonal, Tlaloc, and others (21). This list echoes Herrera’s sentiment that Alarcón works to establish a poetic voice that creates a dynamic interconnectivity between himself and nonhuman entities from Nahua cosmologies. Francisco, however, goes beyond this and troubles the argument that would suggest that he’s universalizing Indigeneity and his ability to assume those subjectivities. He concludes the poem by writing:

I go on calling
names

keep hearing
my mirror (first edition, 21)

The final volta of the poem troubles the universalizing and connecting catalogue that occurs in the poem’s first eight stanzas. The image of the speaker of the poem calling names breaks down the ecstatic listing into a vulnerable admission where the speaker is echoing the nauhualtocaitl, working to invoke its powers but materially only engaging in a conversation with the mirror. The mirror reveals to Francisco reflections inflected by his relationships with Alarcón and the nauhualtocaitl. If we are the poem’s speaker, then the reflection is inflected by Francisco, too. However,

the reflection is only that, an illusion of light and matter, not material duplications of epistemologies and worldviews rendered alien by colonial texts. It's critical to note also that Alarcón invokes a synesthetic moment, where instead of seeing the mirror, the speaker is hearing the illusion of the reflection. This gesture honors the orality of the *nauhualtocaitl*, while reminding the reader of the impossibility of wholly receiving and understanding a body of knowledge that evades our understanding completely in the context of *Snake Poems*. The speaker utters the *nauhualtocaitl* into the mirror and the mirror speaks back to the speaker, creating an illusion that Francisco interprets as a feedback loop wherein his creative labors—like his translation, lyrical responses, and editorialization of the *Treatise*—result in a transtemporal dialogue. In this dialogue, Western conception of linear time is looped and flattened, so the future can both listen and speak back to the past.

The final poem of the opening section replicates this catalogue of self-identity but does so by firmly grounding it within Nahuatl epistemologies. In a poem entitled “*Nomatica Nehuatl*,” Alarcón begins:

I myself:
The mountain
the ocean
the breeze
the flame

the serpent
the feather
the moon
the sun (27)

and continues like this for eight quintets before concluding with:

the search

the face
the dream
the heart
the voice:

nomatca nehuatl! (first edition, 27)

The refrain *nomatca nehuatl*²⁷ is introduced in the final poem of the opening stanza but reoccurs throughout both the *Treatise* and *Snake Poems*. In this poem, we can observe Francisco both asserting his identity but more importantly working to define and contextualize it through an introduction of the invocations. All *nauhualtocaitl* included in *Snake Poems* appear in the section immediately following this poem and demonstrate how the utterance “*nomatca nehuatl*” is an opening utterance for many of the invocations.

The “*nomatca nehuatl*” establishes the conditions for communication between the speaker and nonhuman entities by asserting that the speaker can assume the qualities of the entity being invoked or occupy a position that grants them both access and intimacy. For example, in the invocation “Traveler’s Prayer,” the speaker states, “I myself/ I *Quetzalcoatl* ... come forth/ spirits/ from the sunset/ from the sunrise// from the four directions/ I call you” (35). Or in the invocation, “For Hunting Birds,”

²⁷ *Snake Poems* includes an exhaustive glossary in which Francisco defines *nomatca nehuatl*

as:

Nomatca nehuatl: I myself, magical formula for personal empowerment found in most Nahuatl spells in the *Tratado*; Ruiz de Alarcón translates it as a phrase, “I myself, in person” or “I, in person”; J. Richard Andrews and Ross Hassig translate it as a sentence, with *nehuatl* meaning “I am the one” or “it is I” and *nomatca* as an adverbial modifier, “in person.” (first edition, 154)

the speaker states “I, *Centeotl* ... I’ve come to seek/ my uncles/ the spirits/ the nobles of the sky” (50). In “Traveler’s Prayer” the speaker assumes the qualities of Quetzalcoatl, the plumed serpent god and central hero in Nahua mythology, to invoke the spirits needed to navigate a journey successfully, while in “For Hunting Birds” the speaker invokes a familial relationship with sky spirits to ensure favorable hunting conditions (154). By beginning the last poem of the opening section with “nomatca nehuatl,” Francisco echoes the structure of these and other *nauhualtocaitl* to introduce his retranslations and editorialization of the incantations.

Calling upon the utterance of “nomatca nehuatl,” as a framework, Francisco illuminates his renditions of the invocations as an extension of his identity. His renditions of the *nauhualtocaitl* constitute an extension of his body and identity. In the final stanza of his poem, “Nomatca Nehuatl,” he invokes the intimacy and transformative qualities of the Indigenous form to iterate that his very body is: “the search/ the face/ the dream/ the heart/ the voice// *nomatca nehuatl!*” (28). Furthermore, he uses this announcement to introduce the invocations, to frame his creative labor as being part of a larger investigation and commitment to the historical and cultural voices encountered within the *nauhualtocaitl*. The word “voice” here should reflect not only the Indigenous origins of the *nauhualtocaitl* but also the voice as an oral medium that facilitates the invocations and that lingers beneath the text of *Snake Poems*. By incorporating the refrain “nomatca nehuatl” in his own lyrical invocations, Francisco works to carry on the legacy of the *nauhualtocaitl* and to extend the reach of its form into his contemporary moment.

*

Francisco, is this how we talk back to the past? Is this how we use the tools we have now to invoke them in writing? I feel the strangely heavy paper of *Snake Poems* and find your voice between its letters. “Nomatca nehuatl,” over and over again feels like desperation—did you find yourself there? “I, myself,” does the poem announce you? Does the poem bridge you back? Does the bridge bring them forward? Or does “I, myself” bring me closer to the page, till I can hear it rumbling with your voice. Are we all just looking into the mirror, the mirror shifting, the mirror arcing its mouth open and springing open with the howls of another time, of another world that is and isn’t ours. That we did and didn’t create. Then, is “I, myself” culpability? Is, “I, myself” a sharing of the responsibility? There is a horror then, to be, as you mentioned, “both conqueror” and “conquered.” Our uttering, our using our orphan tongue to wrestle out a “nomatca nehuatl,” feels improbable, impossible even. It holds me back and pushes me at forward at once. Pulls me into the earthen ground, into the hollow caverns that cry out. All of it is sound, even the imaginary.

Witnessing the Nauhualtoacatl

In Johannes Göransson and Joyelle McSweeney’s translation manifesto *Deformation Zone*, they theorize translation as a kind of wound that:

makes impossible connections between languages, unsettling stable ideas of language, productive ideas of literatures ... [Translation is] both a thing, a substance, a material, and a conveyance, a way that one material is converted to another form, one substance de-, re-, and con-formed to a new legibility. It already has impossible properties doubleness, self saturation, impossible borders. (8, 24)

Translation as conveyance or as a dynamic creative method that works with the material of “impossible” connections between distinct languages, facilitates an understanding of the way both Francisco and Alarcón navigate their anxiety of using translation to build a textual object that reaches towards but never quite fully accesses a faithful or perfect understanding of the original. Translation as wound destabilizes the literary expectations of faithfulness or “best” translation, and instead, enables a kind of translation built on an understanding that accepts the messy and slippery possibilities of the *deslenguados*. Göransson and McSweeney continue to define the site of the wound of translation as:

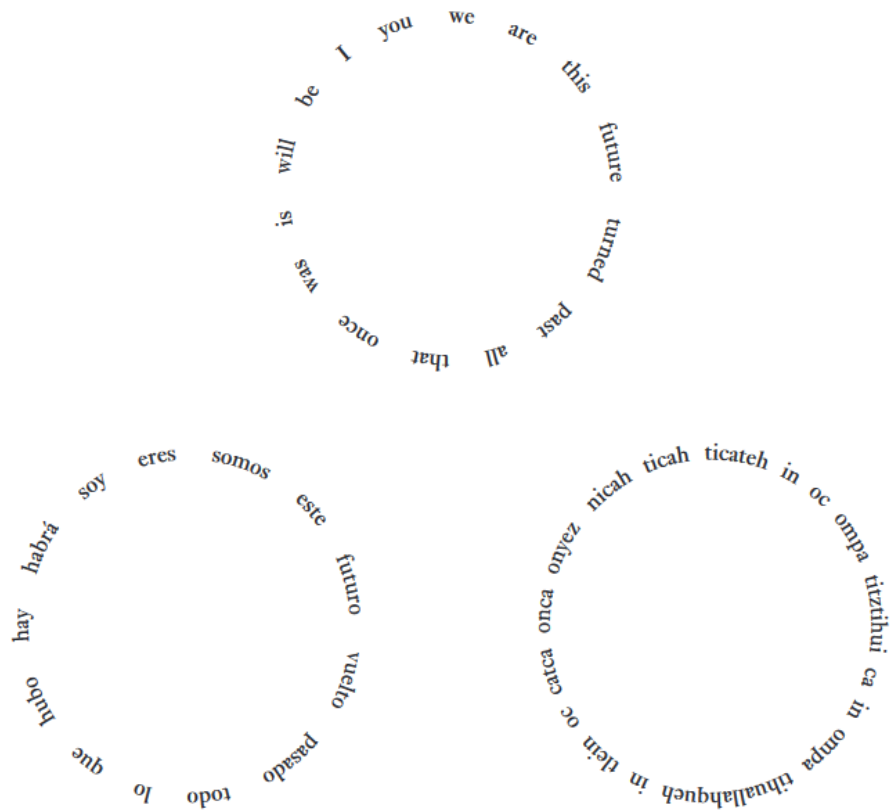
where inside becomes outside, outside becomes inside. And it might be here that the real danger of translation can be found: the inner and the outer are confused; we can no longer have simplistic notions of representation or “witness.” We no longer have inside or outside but ... an “in-between space”
(7)

Göransson and McSweeney invite us to consider translation as a kind of witnessing, where readers encounter the way bodies of knowledge are turned inside out in their movement from one linguistic world to another. Translation then opens a wound in the text where meaning pours out from: “Translation wounds both bring in and take out. The Distinction between inside and outside is destabilized” (16). In this framework, the act of translation is an opening of a body of knowledge and then the intimate crawling into it. The experience translating then is corporeal and marked by violence that affects all involved parties. Both Francisco and Alarcón are unable to open up the body of the *nauhualtocaítl*, consume its knowledge, and utter its power unscathed. Instead, I argue, both Francisco and Alarcón participate in a translation

that opens the nauhualtocaitl. Through their ethnographic commentating or poetic responding, the two witness what has become of the nauhualtocaitl, and in the process lay themselves exposed to its power. In working to control or extend the nauhualtocaitl, they expose themselves and their readers to contact with Indigenous epistemologies that push against, intermingle, and ultimately change who and what they are.

The lingering effects of this exposure can be detected in the lyrical responses of poems like “Snake Wheel.” Formally, the poem sets itself apart by appearing within the text in a nonlinear form. Instead, the poem appears as two circles in the first edition. One circle renders the poem in English and another in Spanish. Within the latest edition, the poem expands to include a third circle translating the poem into Nahuatl. Formally distinct from the rest of the narrow, short, lined poems that appear throughout *Snake Poems*, “Snake Wheel” formally enacts the way nauhualtocaitl engages in a reciprocal relationship with its reader and translator. This effect is also alluded to by the references to mirroring throughout the collection and is achieved here visually in a way that the parallel columns of the other poems are unable to accomplish.

Snake Wheel
Rueda víbora
Temalacacoatl



(Alarcón, second edition, 90)

Like in the poem “Nomatca Nehuatl,” the circular “Snake Wheel” begins with the announcement of “I” but instead of further situating the perspective of the speaker further onto itself, “myself” is replaced with “you,” and the next word becomes “we.” In the expression, “I you we,” the pronouns unfurl in the opening moments of the poem, removing the voice of the speaker into an omniscient position. From this

distant position, the speaker no longer possesses a limited perspective where they can only contain themselves. Instead, their voice becomes a choir interconnecting multiple points in time. The poem is only fifteen words long and English reading conventions push our gaze through it quickly, seemingly rotating the lyrics of the poem to the right and ahead in time. The following sequence of the poem that reads, “we are this future turned past” destabilizes the poem’s sense of temporality. The poem exists in an unusual future. In Eurocentric and Western conceptions of time, the “future” is located outwards and ahead and typically signaled towards with the definite article “the.” Instead of “the future,” *Snake Poems* invites us to consider “this future” as the future that we and the three spiraling poems in different languages are occupying. The characteristics of this temporality are further removed from Eurocentric conceptions of time when “this future” is turned away from further futurity and instead moves towards the past. This turning towards the past creates the conditions for the future to engage in dialogue with the past. It’s as if the *nauhualtocaitl* enable the bridging between different subjectivities and also allow for connections between different temporalities, collapsing the “I” and the “you” of the present and future, or present and past, into a collective “we.”

The following portion of the poem forgoes conventional punctuation and grammar to reiterate, “all that once was is will be.” This section of the wheel rings as a defiant refusal of the ethnographic linearity of Alarcón’s colonial project. Unlike the *Treatise*, this poem cannot end and instead it turns on itself over and over again, replicating textually a literal mirroring effect where “all that once was” is and will be

over and over again with each cyclical reading. The *Treatise* aimed to conclude with the further subjugation of Indigenous people in Central Mexico by defining the nauhualtocaitl as markers of a community doomed to the past. Instead, the “Snake Wheel” locates the nauhualtocaitl within Indigenous epistemologies in a temporal position that is an all interconnected and immediate past, present, and future.

Francisco also cleverly locates his creative intervention at the center of the section entitled “Farmers” in *Snake Poems* or “Supersticiones de labradores y sus conjuros” in the *Treatise*. According to Alarcón, in this section the symbol of the snake:

is always used in these incantations for corn, and it is either because of the tied bunches of the ears or because of the stalks of which it is produced, since they usually sow them and they are born seven by seven or because of the rows of kernels on the ear which usually resemble the snakes stretched out in different colors. (first edition, 66)

Francisco expands on this reading by organizing nauhualtocaitl, such as “For Planting Corn,” “For Storing Corn,” and “For Planting *Camotes*” around his own lyrical responses. This configuration highlights the regenerative capabilities of the subsistence farming of corn and its reverential position in Nahua cosmologies as deities capable of interacting with the human realm. Two key moments in the nauhualtocaitl highlight this regenerative relationship between subsistence farming and engagement with nonhuman subjectivities. First, in “For Planting Corn,” Francisco translates, “hear me *Tlalteuctli*/ Mother Earth// I want to see again/ the face of my elder sister/ Tonacacihuatl// let her stand/ on the ground” (first edition, 74). And second, in “For Storing Corn” when Francisco translates, “come forth/ elder

sister/ Lady of Our Flesh// soon I shall place you/ inside my jade jar/ ... you shall be my breath/ you shall be my cure” (first edition, 75). Francisco’s lyrical responses braid Alarcón’s reading along with his own understanding of the nauhualtocaitl and are synthesized in poems like “Calendar Keepers,” a brief poetic interlude that both provides a reading of the invocations as much as it expands on their meaning. In it, Francisco writes:

Calendar Keepers

rattlesnakes
renew
themselves
each year

by shedding
their skins
by adding
a new ring

they trace
the shining
path of our
rainy seasons (first edition, 70)

Alongside the poem “Snake Wheel,” Francisco uplifts the image of the snake as both a temporal marker that sheds its skins as a way to record time but also to record seasons of both survival and bounty. The metaphor of the snake also appears in the nauhualtocaitl as being connected to both the corn and to the deity Tonacacihuatl, which is from the prefix to-, “our,” nacatl, “flesh,” “sustenance,” and cihuatl, “woman” (Alarcón, first edition, 157). Francisco learns from the nauhualtocaitl and from Alarcón and builds lyrical responses that destabilize our expectations of form

and representations of time while echoing and mirroring Indigenous ways of knowing the world.

We can also experience these echoes materially in the way they exceed the space of a single text or linguistic space. The revolving “Snake Wheel,” matures, to use Benjamin’s term, over time in its reiteration and expansion in the second edition. The ongoing posthumous will of Francisco as the translator splits “Snake Wheel,” back open into the Nahuatl, in a gesture that brings it closer but not quite entirely into the world of the *nauhualtocaitl*. The circularity of the poems also destabilizes the language of the linear poem around it and allows us to remove ourselves from passive and comfortable reading relationships with the text. Instead, we’re moving into the language of the *nauhualtocaitl*, joining its complex network of referents and participants while witnessing how the language is turning over itself again and again, becoming an engine for connectivity and movement.

*

Francisco, we’re turning over again, transforming, demanding more. We’re still hungry. But like you, I’m called to it through you. If this is all just a wheel of sound, a hypnotic revolution of song in code, then is this hypnosis?

Francisco, here then. I found these instructions on how to soothe myself, how to hold my own hands and see how they bridge with one another. I’ve chased this sensation for years. I’ve felt relentlessly. Moving along the shelf as if haunted, I can feel your labor, sense the long hours in dust and darkness.

Francisco, do you mean to be a balancing act? I don't want you to be condemned to that, just as I don't want to condemn them to him, or to you, or to the text, to the formations of language, of sigils in the long thread. It's the end now and I have to admit that I don't hear the *nauhualtocaitl* as you might have.

Francisco, I do feel the presence of something bigger though and the way it pulls at time like a blackhole. Tugging at the unquestioned confidence at the center of all that darkness, the narrative of snakes everywhere.

*

Working with the *nauhualtocaitl* today requires a suspension of disbelief. As a body of knowledge that continues to be reshaped, its current readers have the most to gain from it when they approach it as an act of faith. Even in Alarcón's colonial translation, we can detect a tangible fear of its potential. So much fear that Alarcón buttressed his work with ethnographic commentary that in addition to discounting, also further fleshed out the possibilities of the original. Returning to Walter Benjamin's essay on translation, he writes:

It is the task of the translator to release in his own language that pure language which is exiled among alien tongues, to liberate the language imprisoned in a work in his re-creation of that work. For the sake of the pure language, he breaks through decayed barriers of his own language ... Just as a tangent touches a circle lightly and at but one point—establishing, with this touch rather than with the point, the law according to which it is to continue on its straight path to infinity—a translation touches the original lightly and only at the infinitely small point of the sense, thereupon pursuing its own course according to the laws of fidelity in the freedom of linguistic flux. (12)

Like Alarcón, Francisco becomes inspired by the *nauhualtocaitl* and produces *Snake Poems* as a testament to his belief of its world changing powers. Two editions of *Snake Poems*, which Francisco identifies as his most important work, enact Benjamin's translation as tangent. The lyrical responses and the immense labor of the first and second edition re-translations into Spanish, English, and Nahuatl work to capture even a little of the *nauhualtocaitl*'s evasive essence. Fueled by compassion and reverence for the source material, Francisco creates a body of work that connects us back to *nauhualtocaitl* so that even the responses it inspires within us can stand as a testament to the growing possibilities of the invocations' withstanding vitality.

Knowledges and Untimely Communities

Journey to Worlds Owed: Reclaiming Knowledge through Decolonial Performance, Space, and Lyric in Beatriz Cortez's *Memory Insertion Capsule* (2017)

The body is a capsule, between this tongue There is grief in its wail, shock of light the fluttering tuft of hair, evaporating into heat. I crane my neck my death. It's song	a porous border and that tongue. in the sudden that precedes the roar, the pearls of ivy In the night, into the stars and I see unfurling beyond
--	---

my offering.

The Memory Insertion Capsule

At first glance, Beatriz Cortez's (b. 1970, San Salvador, El Salvador) *Memory Insertion Capsule* (*Capsule* moving forward) is a space shuttle frozen as it might have been in a loading bay days before its voyage to another world. Marked by the scarring of metal work, welds and rivets fasten together the installation in an industrious assemblage. The physical enclosure, constructed from steel by Cortez and her assistants at a community metal shop in Los Angeles, imposes at the center of the white gallery room as part of the exhibit, *Mundos Alternos: Art and Science Fiction in the Americas* (2017) at UCR ARTS in Riverside, California. Although the exact dimensions are unknown, photos show that three to four grown adults can stand upright at once with approximately five feet between them and the open ceiling

above. The capsule has traveled nationally in exhibits at the Henry Art Gallery (2019) in Seattle and at the Queens Museum (2021) in New York City independently and as part of the *Mundos Alternos* exhibit.

Against the brilliant white walls of the gallery, the looming metallic structure pulls the viewer into itself through its doorways acting like a tractor beam that transforms museum goer into performance participant—into *Capsule* passenger. This transformation challenges passengers to ask themselves: “where are we going?” “what are we escaping from?” and perhaps most importantly, “how will we get there?” (see fig 5, Finkel). The space of the installation and the capsule constructs a performance-like configuration where passengers embark on their journey by passing through a carefully arranged constellation of visual symbols and references, eventually becoming “implanted” with archival memories. The capsule’s visual motifs, like the circular space observation windows and the visored helmet at its center are familiar to popular mainstream media and science fiction. At a closer glance, however, they also belong to another network of visual references from outside colonial visual representation, its cultural archive, and linear time. In their introduction to *Altermundos: Latin@ speculative literature, film, and popular culture*, editors Cathryn Josefina Merla-Watson and B. V. Olguín write:

Extending and diversifying Catherine S. Ramírez’s foundational prism of “Chicanofuturism” (2008), the broader Latin@ speculative arts continue to show how various forms of Latin@ cultural production obscure colonialist boundaries between self and other, between the technologically advanced and presumed “primitive,” between the human and nonhuman, and between the past and future. Perhaps most saliently, the Latin@ speculative arts remind us

that we cannot imagine our collective futures without reckoning with the hoary ghosts of colonialism and modernity that continue to exert force through globalization and neoliberal capitalism. (4)

As an example of Latinx speculative arts, the materiality of the *Capsule* installation, its implicit performance instructions, and audio and visual materials, render colonial epistemic boundaries porous, while creating “visions that are at once grounded in concrete realities while looking toward the decolonial and utopian” (Merla-Watson, 355). These visions become portals that arrange symbols from varying worlds and subjectivities to teach *Capsule* passengers how to access the knowledge of *altermundos*.

At the foot of the space capsule’s entry way, for example, you find metallic stones welded into the steel exterior, a recurring motif across the work of Cortez, but also present in the ancient building practices of Indigenous communities throughout Latin America. The motif can be found in places from Cortez’s home in San Salvador, El Salvador to Los Angeles, California, where she was a founding faculty member of the department of Central American and Transborder Studies at California State University, Northridge (see fig 6.). After moving past this threshold and entering the capsule through the geometric doorways anchored with the relief of stones that have traveled generations before your arrival, you find yourself in front of a hearth flanked by empty bookshelves and a desk with an accompanying chair (see fig 7). You lift your head, and you see the familiar shape of a tent (see fig 5). The tent signals safety but also displacement, two openings like ship portholes look in either

cardinal direction, suggesting one eye towards the past and another towards the future. Just below eye level, on the hearth mantle, you find the oval shaped visor. You place the visor over your eyes and the implantation commences. An eclectic collage of archival footage plays out in a continuous loop blurring notions of Western linear time and narrative. Archival materials include United Fruit Company advertisements agricultural tourism posters, and eugenics publicity materials (see fig 11-14). Some material, like a clip of a pro-eugenics television program, includes the audio of other human voices. The majority of the archival footage, however, is silent film where early typographical graphics communicate the bulk of the textual language. Despite the capsule's tent shaped crow's nest, which centers the ocular at the highest point of the installation, the implantation visor enables you to see, hear, feel—and perhaps, remember—across various zig zagging points of time. The symbols of the structure and the passenger's bodies become aligned through the multisensorial performance and enable the viewer to look beyond the artifice of the single worldview. The integrated totality of the experience allows passengers to encounter fragments of memory entrenched in the colonial and exploitative relationships to women, nature, and the bodies of Black, mestizo, and Indigenous peoples.

The Engineer

Cortez, who since her construction of the *Capsule* has become an associate professor of Visual Art at the University of California, Davis, is a self-described “nomad” from El Salvador who uses her installation practice to build linguistic and material worlds—or ways to transport to worlds—that ask us to imagine futures not

constrained by U.S.-Eurocentric epistemologies, forms, and relationships to language.

In a 2020 interview with Southern California Institute of Architecture, Cortez says:

Making art as a nomad means imagining other futures where categories and ideas of nationalism and national identities are not so relevant—and other worlds are

possible ... outside of not only that small provincial space of liberalism, but also of the

era of the humans. Imagining other eras where humans are not is a way to dismantle

the humanism that is linked to liberalism, enlightenment, and to Eurocentric thinking—and to see the world from other perspectives.²⁸

As a nomad, Cortez constructs worlds and vehicles to other worlds by resisting the singularity and fixity of colonial single worldviews, aesthetics, and relationships to

²⁸ During space travel, astronauts experience the “overview effect” and are said to be struck by an intense sadness after seeing the planet from their unique vantage point of at least some 250 miles above sea level. What of that sadness might also be found in ourselves after going where the *Memory Insertion Capsule* takes us? If we look away from the limits of our bodies, our time on earth, what might we find? Time, like a shallow pond, could spill into every direction until we lose sight of it, until we’re lost in a centerless expanse. So, the nomadic can move and be beyond a human earth or, at least, they are not saddened by its glimmering fringes. Outer space is then also a mediator, a field wherein the *Capsule* operates. It works as part of this humbling network of symbols that exist and will exist beyond our understanding.

When describing the “overview effect,” philosopher Frank White explains: “There are no borders or boundaries on our planet except those that we create in our minds or through human behaviors. All the ideas and concepts that divide us when we are on the surface begin to fade from orbit and the moon. The result is a shift in worldview, and in identity” (2014).

Writing Prompt: You have returned from a voyage to outer space. You’re left on your childhood bed. Everything, somehow, is in its right place and you haven’t seen it like this for many years. Think of the “overview effect,” specifically a sensation of connectedness with your surroundings and the subjectivities that occupy it, now and through time. Write two pages where you meditate on at least two childhood objects through this sensation of connectedness. Do not mention space travel explicitly. In one moment of your piece, actively “disconnect,” whatever you understand that to mean.

time. Moving forward, I develop an analysis of Cortez's *Memory Insertion Capsule* and its creative practices that are grounded in nomadic, Indigenous, and feminist relationships to representation.

The Blueprint

In this chapter, I dialogue with Linda Tuhiwai Smith's *Decolonizing Methodologies* to reconsider the way colonial archival materials are transformed once they're extracted from their defined colonial contexts. I also close read Mario Blaser and Marisol de La Cadena's introduction to their essay collection *A World of Many Worlds* to support an analysis that includes nonhuman subjectivities as loci of worlds and ways of knowing onto their own right. These methods allow me to conduct a close analysis of how Cortez's installation uses material symbols and video archives to facilitate an embodied performance that passengers participate in to remember worlds outside of colonial memory. By introducing *Capsule* passengers to these memories, they can encounter knowledges that allow for alternative ways of understanding nature, bodies, and futures. These alternative ways of knowing present flightpaths unburdened by the constraints of coloniality and that move towards epistemological liberation.

This chapter is divided into two parts. The first analyzes the material symbols of the capsule and the second tends to the archival film and the performance of the memory implantation. Despite this organizational distinction, the effects of the capsule and the performance it facilitates result from an integration of all its parts.

The materiality of the installation, the archival footage, and its implantation each constitute a meaningful component of the passenger performance. I will draw out these connections when they best characterize the effects of the *Capsule*.

In the first section of this chapter, my analysis demonstrates how Cortez's installation brings together multiple temporalities and subjectivities signaled by the symbols she deploys (stones, the visor, tent, capsule, Mayan sigil for zero, etc.). I argue that bringing together these various symbols forces passengers to work past a limited notion of human centered time and subjectivity and to imagine the Anthropocene as a single moment of imbalance in a larger history of life on earth. Passengers experience this through a performance of empathetic attention and a close sensing, akin to the readerly relationship established when experiencing the performance of a poem. Although not a text in the traditional sense, the multisensory construction of the capsule and the way it facilitates the movement of the body of an individual passenger and audiences of passengers, allows the capsule to be read as a poetry performance. By imagining the installation as a poetry performance, textual and spoken language, Mayan and Apache Mescalero epistemologies, and symbols of home (like the camping tent often used by refugees attempting to reach the West²⁹)

²⁹ I write West with a capital W to describe the power holding worldviews, physical locations, and institutions that exist to uphold and preserve the ongoing evolution of coloniality. The West is then an epistemological center that renders the "other" as being on the outside, in the past, and subject to control.

become poetic elements interconnected in the construction of a space travel capsule that activate movement across colonial temporalities and towards decolonial futures.³⁰

In the second section, I argue that Cortez enacts a reclamation project wherein she maps out an immersive poetry performance that deploys linguistic, visual, and spatial strategies that use the speculative to trouble colonial relationships to gender, migration, knowledge, and resources. The installation's performance equips the viewers with various types of knowledge like strategies for care that are key for survival during a critical moment in the planet's history, described by Jason W. Moore as, "the unpredictable but inevitable onset of terminal crisis ... not merely a transition from one phase of capitalism to another, but something more epochal: the breakdown of the strategies and relations that have sustained capital accumulation over the past five centuries" (2015, p.13). By thinking with time (the Capitalocene) and subjectivities (human *and* nonhuman) on this scale, the archival materials can tell stories other than those they were designed to tell. Instead, they become records of alternate histories of vitality and world building. Transforming colonial archival material through the speculative mode, Cortez invites the spectator to imagine non-

³⁰ On January 29, 1942, Arnaldo Tamayo Méndez became the first Afro-Latino in space aboard a Soviet Soyuz 7K-T. Since then, 12 other Latinos have gone to space. Yes, burdened by things like national and corporate interests, but briefly they left an earth reshaped by humans, one that for so long had insisted on where and when people like them could be. In that moment, they resonated with the stones that Cortez thinks with, those glacial things that crawl throughout tectonic plates over generations of time and whose movements are only perceptible by earth.

Western relationships to memory and site-specific materials to transport us to futures where other, more liberated relationships and worlds are possible.

My analysis relies on the key term *decolonial performance*. Borrowing from decolonial aesthetics scholars Pedro Pablo Gómez, Walter D. Mignolo, Gabriel Rockhill, and Jennifer Ponce De Leon, I define decolonial poetry performance as cultural productions that work to unravel colonial subjects from their entanglement in imperial epistemic and aesthetic paradigms. Epistemic and aesthetic paradigms here refer to the comprehensive systems of knowledge production through which coloniality proliferates worldviews built in service of systemic misapprehensions and effacements (Ponce de Leon 36). Through a decolonial aesthetics, the poetry performance becomes a counter process through which the conquered resist domination to break free from colonial powers, liberate the perceptive system, and build new social structures and spaces outside the reach of coloniality.

Analyzing the installation as a performance brings into focus the ways it impacts and reshapes the sensorium of individuals and publics alike through enaction. In this chapter, I think through the term “performance” according to Angela Marino’s understanding that “the term performative has been used as an adjective and a noun, shifting focus to that which *does* rather than that which *is*” (146). An analysis of the installation as a performance shifts my attention towards the action, movement, drama, and turning of the implantation process onto the bodies that become its passengers.

I aim to “read” the capsule as a “poetry performance” to trouble expectations of genre. The act of knowing the capsule is slippery and resists scholarly and artistic taxonomies. By instead forcing open the conversation of its form, the multimodal and multisensory construction of the capsule and its analysis becomes productively unmoored from the expectations of genre. In working to break colonial conceptions of knowledge and time, the space capsule also breaks away from the categories I’ve mentioned. This leap away from Western traditions necessitates alternative combinations of analytical tools that further shed light on the *Capsule* as a vital locus of remembering.

I would like to note that my own observations have been created without the privilege of seeing or being within the space of the capsule. I only know it through the archive that it left behind after its construction and the eventual closure of the Alter Mundos exhibit. Some may argue that to best understand and write about the capsule one should experience participating in its performance. I agree³¹. However, this isn’t to say that there isn’t value in imagining how others may have felt. This gesture is another act of imagining and feeling beyond a fixed position in space and time, an exercise central to the installation’s performance. This act decenters some forms of knowing as more important or successful than others, mirroring how the

³¹ All that I know of the capsule, all that I can use to base my descriptions of it, are mediated by the articles, photos, and museum materials that bring it close, yet still out of my reach. The archival materials describing the capsule are skewed by my imagination as it works to fit together the missing parts of the capsule, to look around edges that are occluded by the two-dimensional limitations of the medium. My labor of reassembling the assembly echoes the labor of the capsule. I build a looking glass to look at a looking glass.

capsule invites passengers to consider the experiences of historically oppressed populations that have been, and still are, ignored by generations of powerholders insisting that their way of knowing is insufficient or invalid. This is only one way that the capsule teaches us how to see, feel, and be with it. The installation renders change in both those who experienced it during its short time at the exhibition (the shortness of human time compared to planetary time again being recirculated as a key theme in Cortez’s work) and those who studied it afterwards. Perhaps equally important is that this counterhegemonic tool allows us to learn how to read and to sense the surging vitality that exists below layers of obstacles and institutions designed to uphold coloniality.

I

<p>Cherish me as I was, before the kaleidoscopic choking the kitchen cabinets. How, in time, the body caves in others, luffs in an ocean Was it memory, the static night, stringing us together with salt</p>	<p>before the cheapening, collection of discounted cans I know of the madness. in new places, billows pregnant with that deferred thing: that embraced us in the long encrusted lace as it towed us out</p>
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further to sea.

Reengineering the Science Fiction Space Shuttle

In popular science fiction, the space shuttle represents dominant culture’s crown scientific achievement in their quest to master nature as they explore new limits that they can know and where they—and others like them—can thrive. Or, in films like *Armageddon* (1998) and *Interstellar* (2014), the ship and its crew are the last hope of

salvation or all that is left of a world now destroyed. The success of the often white and often male led crew of explorers and their shuttle upholds hegemonic aesthetic practices and the dominant capitalistic and colonial social orders from which they come. Aesthetic productions that put forth these narratives as essential and undeniable imagine a singular world where the progress of humanity is linear and unbridled by its responsibilities to nonhuman subjectivities, particularly those identified as—or as being close to—nature. Hegemonic aesthetic productions reshape the sensorium so that white European male success, which in our case is symbolized by the seamless hull of their space exploring ships, appears desirable, or at least, like the only possible or even imaginable, reality (Ponce de León 5).

The *Capsule* troubles dominant culture's speculative fiction visual tropes. At its center, we do not find a sophisticated control panel, but the hearth of a home, luggage, a bookshelf, a desk, and a visored helmet wherein passengers can watch archival video memories from another time (see fig 7). The minimal steel empty desk, bookshelves, and single chair invoke images of scarcity, solitary reflection, and writing. These things occupy the space where the control panel might have been in a traditional spaceship, suggesting that the domestic and solitary activity of reflection is what controls the navigation of the *Capsule*. To move from one world to another, the passenger must not look ahead, but within. Across from the desk an old trunk for traveling rests below the open window (see fig 7). The lonely luggage invokes the travel of migrants across time while reminding *Capsule* passengers that their time within the capsule is precarious and fleeting. The invocation of the space capsule, not

as a marvel of technology, but as a home marked by travel, reflection, and scarcity, is critical to reframing the *Capsule*'s unique tack on its voyage to other worlds. The space capsule is both a mode of transportation and a brief home, a site of remembering and a laboratory designed for accessing decolonial futures. Whereas pop culture traditionally renders the advances of dominant capitalist and colonial social orders as high-tech, organized, and seamless, Cortez's capsule is a jarring juxtaposition of low-tech (the hearth, the tent, the rough and unsanded metallic bond from the welding process) and the high-tech (the visor, the steel panels) arranged so that we're hyper-aware of the structure's construction and the labor of its assembly.

The *Capsule* resists the fabricated naturalness and the opaque technology of its counterpart ships and highlights visibly the connective materials that hold it all together. Welders typically grind, chip, and sand away spatter or excess material that's left after the welding process (Rodriguez). Cortez, however, has decided to highlight the bonding as if to celebrate and invite passengers to consider the labor that makes their journey possible. Doing away with the seamless hull and blinking control panel of dominant science fiction, Cortez imagines a different kind of ship where the voyage into the future isn't piloted or engineered by the traditionally white male who moves his expedition forward and outwards in time and space as he works to civilize the inhospitable world in the exterior or save his in the interior. Instead, the control system is also replaced with a hearth, allowing the example of ubiquitous ancient technology to become both a terminus of the voyage itself and how we get to other worlds through collective labor and ourselves (see fig 7). Cleverly, Cortez builds a

steel version of fire at the center of the hearth with miniature steel panels as if to suggest that even the elements of nature can be manufactured for safe travel to other worlds. It is by and through fire where generations of humans have found safety from the dangers of nightfall; where digestion was made more efficient, releasing the additional calories needed to develop larger brains; and perhaps most importantly, where we historically gathered to make intimate connections and share of memories that reached across generations, passing on valuable and distinct ways of knowing and understanding the world (Wrangham). By braiding the capsule within this evolutionary lineage, Cortez suggests that the *Capsule*'s travel, is not miraculous but a continuum of humans' and nonhumans' connection to one another and to nature.

Cortez is intentional about the materials she deploys in her installation. She selects steel as the primary medium for many of her installations because of its intimate connections to colonial extractivism as a valuable metal and the primordial iron and carbon pulled from the earth and reshaped by humans throughout the Anthropocene (Longnecker). As passengers, we're made aware of the industrial marks that record the labor-intensive construction of the capsule. Within each indent, we can sense the weight of the bodies who came before us and exhausted themselves to secure our passage to another hopefully safer world³². The literal and implied

³² These marks are everywhere. Think of your own body or the homes you've lived in, the rooms you've built. How do we show care for ourselves and others? How do we reshape the world to transmit knowledge through its structures?

How do we sit by the fire? How do we tend to it? Why do we put it out?

My father opens a tube of pain killing cream in the middle of a grocery store and rubs his hands with it before buying it. I feel embarrassed at first. My father, in the middle of this

weight of each steel component, the—at first—empty visor, and the unscorched hearth, invite viewers to insert themselves into the configuration of the installation and the bodies whose labor made it possible. The materiality of the *Capsule* signals to its labor-intensive construction and suggests that other worlds and their promise of new hope in the face of planetary crisis aren't to be found ready-made in the stars but are already being collectively built within us, through our behaviors and social relations, throughout different parts of earth (Zibechi 89). In this installation and in her other works, Cortez invokes the revolutionary discourse of Marxists and the EZLN that “other possible worlds” are not to be found or created as the result of messianic transformation, but the result of the active and ongoing nurturing of the “new society with which old collapsing bourgeois society itself is pregnant” (Enlace Zapatista, Marx 42, Ponce De Leon 8).

Scholar Jennifer Ponce de León argues that these other possible “worlds-in-the-making” are made invisible within “the aesthetic-ideological coordinates the dominant social order imposes” (8). Social orders designed to further propagate coloniality aesthetically render other worlds invisible, impossible, or permanently deferred (Ponce de León 8). Cortez’s installation presents a valuable case study through which we can observe how dominant and decolonial aesthetics come to a

grocery store in the desert, behaves on his own terms. He does go on to buy the cream, but I’m embarrassed that I’m embarrassed. When in this place, I see the most of my father. Or when I see my father, I see this place. It’s in this light that, I think, I can see him the clearest. Not wandering the aisles but hunting like an aging animal, his gait shifting every year that passes, each time more marked and changed by the world he stacks together with cans or Saran Wrapped meat, for others. For me.

How do we sit by the fire? How do we tend to it? Why do we put it out?

head in the way they differently work to either strengthen or invalidate alternative worlds. As I've mentioned in previous chapters, I understand aesthetics broadly as the material and perceptual composition of a sensorium wherein the world's sensorial composition is a site of struggle built socially, especially in part by aesthetic productions (Ponce de León 4). These aesthetic productions are powerful as they reshape what worlds we come to know and how we interact with them, all while privileging some over others. Given this, aesthetic productions are fundamental to the creation and defense of both vital and burgeoning worlds that counter the hegemony established by dominant capitalistic and colonial social orders (Ponce de León 4).

The capsule as a spacefaring vehicle, with its ability to move great distances of space that manipulate our relationships to time, also demands that we imagine scales of time, space, and subjectivities that unsettle human centrality. In the introduction to *A World of Many Worlds*, Blaser and de la Cadena link runaway capitalism and its reliance on extractive processes with the destruction of the earth and final moments of the Anthropocene through a reimagining of the phrase *Terra Nullius* or no man's land. Here, it's critical to note the *Capitalocene* as another useful and more precise alternative for the term Anthropocene for this historical period on planet earth. Capitalocene helps us understand the root word of Anthropocene, *anthropos* (Greek for human), as not being solely responsible for climate change and our alarming proximity to irreversible planetary damage. Additionally, it allows us to shift away from laying blame on all humans. Instead, the responsibility for shifting and worsening conditions of the earth falls more on capitalism, not just as an

economic system but “as a way of organizing the relations between humans and the rest of nature” (Patel & Moore, p.16). Blaser and de la Cadena insist that the destruction of the environment is only one casualty of the Capitalocene: “extractivism continues the practice of *terra nullius*: it actively creates space for the tangible expansion of the one world by rendering empty the places it occupies and making absent the worlds that make those places” (3, italics my own). Cortez’s conflation of high- and low-tech symbols (space shuttle and hearth) invokes a playful interactivity that uses historical and science fiction exploration to unsettle the passenger and their understanding of who and how travel at this scale is conducted. This juxtaposing technology sets the stage for passengers to peer into the implantation visor that shows a loop of archival footage showcasing how extraction within the Capitalocene has destroyed realities in service of the one world. Here, passengers recognize multiple realities and temporalities coinciding in a difficult negotiation of being together. The installation, then, becomes a space capsule for reaching what Blaser and de la Cadena would describe as the pluriverse.³³ Within these worlds are distinct ways to imagine, create, and circulate ways of knowing and the aesthetic productions that help build their sensory compositions.

³³ I believe it’s useful to recognize the distinction between Blaser and de la Cadena’s concept of the pluriverse and EZLN’s revolutionary decree that an “other world” is possible. My aim is not to conflate these two distinct frameworks but to use their synergy to propel my argument forward. By bringing these two frameworks closely together, I hope that their mutual insistence that other worlds are possible, regardless of the number of worlds, advance my and Cortez’s argument of the *Memory Insertion Capsule* as a vehicle to such spaces. I also would argue on a separate note that these two ideas are not mutually exclusive, and that the “other world” that the EZLN argues for is in fact a site where the pluriverse can exist altogether and simultaneously.

Nonhuman Subjectivities, or Fellow Passengers

A key motif throughout the *Capsule* are steel reliefs of stones welded within the doorway, throughout the central hearth, and on the implantation visor. The Comunidad Kaqchikel de Investigación is a Maya Kaqchikel collective of artists and social scientists researching memory in the midWestern highlands of Guatemala and longtime collaborators of Cortez. They allow us to think alongside the stones embedded throughout the capsule, not as a mere decoration, but as signals to nonhuman subjectivities and other worlds. In her Longenecker-Roth Artist In Residence Guest Lecture at UC San Diego, Cortez explains that the research collective argues that ancient objects “are beings, they have wills, they decide when to show themselves, and when to hide, they rebel, they can punish, they can protect” (2021). Cortez insists to liberate ourselves from neoliberal capitalist social orders we must recognize the autonomy of nonhuman subjectivities and peel ourselves away from worldviews that deny their existence. Alternate worldviews instead allow for the recognition and honoring of relationality with nonhuman subjectivities but also with those “who have made them, held them, and cherished them.” In *Earth beings: ecologies of practice across Andean worlds*, Marisol de la Cadena reflects on her co-laboring with the late Nazario Turpo, an Andean peasant and shaman, and writes, “things (mountains, soil, water, and rocks) are not only things; they are earth-beings, and their names speak what they are” (Cadena, 2015, p.116). In this specific Indigenous cosmovision, stones like those used in the *Capsule* are not only things to be described with language but are subjectivities who speak with and possess their

own names. As such, Cortez invites us to imagine the relief of stones within her installation as fellow passengers on our journey to other worlds.

As a key feature of the *Capsule*, Cortez invokes the stones to push towards alternative knowledges that work to undo the harm of the Cartesian Nature/Society dualism which pervades the Capitalocene. Rene Descartes's 1664 doctrine which insists on the close proximity, but separation of mind and body emerged during a moment that Jason Moore describes as a "Cartesian Revolution." According to Moore:

This [Cartesian] revolution did three major things. It "imposed an ontological status upon entities (substance) as opposed to relationships (that is to say energy, matter, people, ideas and so on became things)." Second, "it imposed ... a line in which a logic of either/or (rather than both/and) predominated. And finally, it strongly favored the "idea of a purposive control over nature through applied science. (2015, p. 29)

The influence of this revolution can be observed today in philosophical and analytical worldviews that conceptualize society and nature as ontologically discrete. Perhaps most importantly, we can observe it in the five centuries long history of capitalism, where humans continue to pretend to exist outside of and upon a fixed, static, and ahistorical nature. Moore counters Cartesian dualism with a reimagination of capitalism in which it is a reality co-produced by nature and humans. "Historical and geographical specificity is called for at every step," writes Moore. These historically and geographically specific relationships emerge in a field described by

Moore as the “web of life,” where both nature and humans are renewing and evolving in a cyclical and cumulative fashion.

Although Moore’s framework of the “web of life” is useful in its clarity and its historicization through Western thought, models of interconnected flows of life between nature and humanity, although uncommon in many dominant schools of thought, are abundant and central to Indigenous schools of thought. Scholar Dwayne Donald (Papaschase Cree) offers only one example in his article, “From What Does Ethical Relationality flow? An “Indian” Act in Three Chapters.” In this article, he introduces readers to an articulation of relationality between living things that is not “fully circumscribed by colonial frontier logics.” The term “wahkohtowin,” which originates from Cree wisdom refers “to kinship relations and teaches us to extend our relational network so that it includes the nonhuman beings that live amongst us” (10). Like Moore’s model of the “web of life” embedded within his theorization of the Capitalocene, the Cree concept of wahkohtowin signals another kind of knowledge that embraces the mutually influential relationality between nature and human, unlike the dominating relationship defined by the Cartesian Revolution. Donald explicitly connects the human recognition of our relationality to nonhuman subjectivities to our vitality:

We are called to repeatedly acknowledge and honor the fact that the sun, the land, the wind, the water, the animals and the trees (just to name a few) are quite literally our relatives; we carry parts of each of them inside our own bodies. We are fully reliant on them for our survival, and so the wise person works to ensure that those more-than-human relatives are kept healthy and treated with the deep respect that they deserve. (10)

Then according to wahkohtowin, in choosing to control nature instead of acknowledging the mutually significant relationship between humans and nature, the Capitalocene blazes a trail towards destruction.

Cortez, citing Mayan Kaqchikel epistemologies and echoing Blaser and de la Cadena's investigation of the pluriverse, invites us to consider the stones as beings who conduct intergenerational and interworld migration. Fundamental to Indigenous living practices but also Indigenous cosmologies, the carefully arranged stones and their subjectivities are carriers of transgenerational memory and fellow passengers in the *Capsule* (see fig 9). The stones also document their migration in their construction and geology (Cortez 2021). Like Cortez's other welded sculptures of glacial stone embedded within modern diasporic metropolises like New York City, the stones invoke planetary migration, ancient movement, and formation critical to the development of humankind (see fig 10). As fellow passengers with subjectivities informed by generational histories, it's possible to imagine the stones as shepherds who, when centered as active and autonomous agents capable of their own knowledge, offer escape routes from the Capitalocene but also a means to continue building anew sustainable models of society. The stones decenter humanity as the source of knowledge and experience, and instead open a world where kinship relationships with nonhumans might be able to move us towards more sustainable futures.

The arrangement of the stones in the space capsule hearth also invokes the building style employed by the Indigenous master stonemason Dan Montelongo

(Apache Mescalero), whose influential practice (1923-1925) brought together an Indigenous way of building with river rock (LA Vernacular). His legacy can also be felt today throughout southern California, where his buildings shaped the popular and sought after Craftsman style. Today, these homes have been appropriated by the elite and are, ironically, prohibitively expensive, costing upwards of millions of dollars despite the Indigenous roots they've largely been severed from and that originally designated them to be accessible homes built from materials native to the region. Like the capsule itself, the arranged stones contribute to the physical enclosure that provides safety during travel, again invoking their generational travels through earth, outer space, and time. Meanwhile, the stones also function as mediators of more knowledges for survival built in collaboration with humanity. The stones, then, provide shelter but also a blueprint for surviving through sustainability and collaboration with nonhuman subjectivities that have been proven successful in the past. Within the context of the installation, the stones become carriers of Indigenous and nonhuman epistemologies that showcase more ethical and sustainable relationships to nonhuman beings and bodies.

Once the viewer has stepped into the capsule, they don a visor that invokes the Mayan sigil for zero, a technological and intellectual achievement largely ignored by dominant neoliberal society. The visor itself looks as if it's powered by steel cables that both encase and plug into the stones, suggesting that what the viewer sees is powered or at least explicitly mediated by the stones (see fig 8). To see both the other worlds and the ways in which we've been deceived by colonial archival materials, our vision

must be mediated by the nonhuman. Blaser and de la Cadena and the Comunidad Kaqchikel de Investigación permit us to recognize the subjectivity of the rocks as fellow passengers and performers—carriers of ancient histories of survival and knowledges for building sustainable futures—that join us as we work towards decoloniality.

II

And who besides me will remember The thick callous of your hands songs. Sand sculptures in relief, the material this parable will be different, gamble at the dock, the fisherman diamonds. That hard and listening stone	the weight of the things you lift. and their bloodless breaks are of space travel. I promise you this parable will not end with the begging open the oyster for I promised you when I was born.
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Care and The Video Archive as Memory

Linda Tuhiwai Smith offers a theoretical toolkit through Foucault and Stuart Hall that permits a decolonial methodology to analyze the *Capsule's* archival materials, specifically its use of lyric, imperial textual forms, and image. To push its passengers away from the gravitational pull of the single world view, the *Memory Insertion Capsule* (re)presents archival material to scramble the colonial logic that enables the West's cultural archive to:

(1) allow 'us' to characterize and classify societies into categories, (2) condense complex images of other societies through a system of representation, (3) provide a standard model of comparison, and (4) provide criteria of evaluation against which other societies can be ranked. (Smith 49)

By splicing together and (re)presenting the colonial archival materials into the eyes of viewers, Cortez alienates them from their single world context. With Smith, we can imagine the Western cultural archive that fuels a singular homogenous reality as a storehouse that contains differently powered ways of knowing and traditions that intersect reenacting, recontextualizing, and reframing colonial power structures—not a unitary system of knowledge (50). The *Capsule* reframes colonial materials that preserve coloniality so that it tells a different story but more importantly, reveals Indigenous and other non-Western beliefs that were once considered shocking, abhorrent, and barbaric, but that persist embedded in languages and stories and etched in colonial memories (Smith 50).

I understand the use of “memory” within the *Capsule* as a uniquely embodied and intimate phenomenon. The Oxford English Dictionary defines “memory” as “senses relating to the action or process of commemorating, recollecting, or remembering.” It comes from the French *memoire* and the Latin *memoria*, which connote “tradition preserved in writing” or “that which is retained in the mind” collectively and individually (“memory, n.”). At some points, the memory transmitted in the capsule is a textual preservation of knowledge from other worlds, yet it is also importantly, an other-than-textual sensual transmission of knowledge across space and time. The installation’s poetic praxis, wherein the distinct elements of the installation come together (text, sound, film, performance) to inspire emotional reactions in the viewer, make explicit the colonial histories on which our current

planetary crisis is built. By transmitting these memories directly and intimately with and within the viewers through their eyes and bodies, they are invited to reconsider colonial knowledge and the way it shapes what worlds we understand as inevitable. In this moment of reconsideration, the installation's passengers are challenged to doubt the fixed and singular realities that they have taken for granted. By centering these memories as both viable and long deferred sites of knowledge, the capsule conducts a decolonial performance by revealing "the monologic and universal subject of knowledge inscribed in the modern/colonial period" as only one—albeit powerful—option. For these reasons, the *Capsule* is one additional step towards decolonization. It enacts the refusal of the "denial of coevalness" or what Mignolo has described as the "denial of the denial of coevalness"^{34,35} (Mignolo 1998, p. 52).

³⁴ I understand the "denial of coevalness" as the systemic epistemological rejection of colonized people as possessing equal footing and equal access to the same human rights that their European counterparts possess, particularly in their relationship to nature and time. The denial of coevalness forces colonized subjectivities to an uncivilized and primitive past where they are less human and more an example of nature that can be exploited and rendered a resource to aid the expansion of capitalism. The "denial of the denial of coevalness" is then a refusal of colonial epistemological erasures, the insistence of one dominant European epistemological locus, and the modernity it works so hard to uphold.

³⁵ You might understand this as someone you know or have encountered recently on your trip to the grocery store. Perhaps it's the person behind the cash register, or the clerk stacking the incredibly cheap dehydrated potatoes, or the mother with the long and impossible list of groceries navigating the caged ship of her shopping cart through the aisles. These people, in some regards, are and will always be here. They are the décor in our imagination, like the Pepsi jingle over the speakers, or the immaculate steel frames that hold all our food forever, unquestioned. Perhaps, to you and me, they are timeless. As far as our relationship to time is concerned, they will never age but they will also never move forward. They never check out having accomplished the awesome feat of budgeting on a less than living wage, they never clock out of the 12 hour shift, they never make it back home to their family waiting at the dinner table.

The memory insertion loop begins with footage from a television program where the founder of the American Institute of Family Relations and fierce proponent of eugenics sterilization in California, Paul Popenoe, enacts for a public audience a session of couple's counseling. The subject of the marriage counseling is a young white woman who expresses frustration at her husband's absence from their marriage and the responsibilities of domestic life, especially those related to the taking care of their shared space (see fig 11). The film with its staged examination of couple dynamics appears as a predecessor to contemporary daytime television programs like *Maury* or even more extreme examples like *Jerry Springer*. The televised session of counseling is one part spectacle. As a viewer, I'm moved by the drama of the woman as she makes her case to her husband and to Popenoe, who stands in as pious enforcer of the U.S. nuclear family. The session is another part course correcting therapy. As the enforcer, Popenoe feigns an open and attentive ear, but it immediately becomes clear that as a counselor he is acting more as a judge holding a kangaroo court.

At one point the woman pleads with Popenoe, asserting, "He should have to help. He says he's busy, that he has to go to a friend's, or play cards, or he wants to watch the television set. I don't have a chance to do anything. I have to be quiet when he's there and the neighbors complain when I have to start washing at 12:00 o'clock at night when he's not there." The woman's experiences here can be identified as the "cheapening," of domestic and explicitly feminine labor historically understood as unpaid and exploitable. As Raj Patel and Jason W. Moore make abundantly clear, the current moment of crisis within the Capitalocene is dependent upon the *cheapening* of

key *things* including nature, money, work, care, food, and lives. Moore and Patel are careful to define *cheapening* as a specific set of strategies that the dominant social and cultural order deploys to gain control over a wider web of life. Cheapening of domestic labor and other care work is then an ongoing manifestation of coloniality within the Americas. In their manifesto, The Care Collective helps us understand the woman as experiencing and attempting to voice the humiliation of her devalued labor primarily due to its “association with women, the feminine and what have been seen as the ‘unproductive’ caring professions” (Hakim & Littler, et. al 7). When we connect this moment to our lived experience nearly 70 years later, we see that largely nothing has improved but instead “the dominant neoliberal model has merely drawn on these longer histories of devaluation, while twisting, reshaping and deepening inequality” (Hakim & Littler, et. al 7). Instead of calling the husband to listen or take up more responsibilities, Popenoe recommends washing at another time. The woman insists that the house isn’t even that dirty, to which the husband explodes, “Oh C’mon, it smells!”

The woman’s frustration is disregarded by both Popenoe and her husband as easily correctable through male-guided counseling. The husband glares and becomes irritated by her pleading. (Re)presented within the context of the capsule, Cortez invites the reader to examine the piece of misogynistic archival material as another manifestation of the colonial sensorium that insists on the appropriate behaviors of its subjects. In the understandable frustration, discomfort, and anger of the woman’s pleas, we can detect the insistence that another way of constructing society is

possible. As viewers, we're invited to consider the woman, a silenced and entrapped domestic care worker, as a vehicle for knowledge. Subtly, this rereading of colonial materials glimmers in the background as yet another pathway to free us from the carelessness of neoliberal social formations. As the fuel for escaping a single world view built on misogynistic frameworks that forces women into second class citizenship, the video material is given a new form that invites viewers to feel empathically.

The bind of the nuclear family, which Popenoe attempts to preserve with his marriage counseling and larger eugenics efforts, only further propagate unreliable and unjust caring arrangements, increasing the inequality of women who assume, as we see in this archival material, the bulk of the responsibilities in the household. The devaluation of women is another central concern for the *Capsule* and it blazes throughout and beyond this single piece of archival material. We also encounter this topic within the symbol of the tent that is placed atop of the womb-like capsule, inviting us to imagine the thousands of women (including transwomen) who experience violence as they migrate throughout Latin America (Hakim & Littler, et. al 9). As these various symbols come into sync, passengers attune their listening to the urgent contours of the woman's language and the tone and rhythm of her voice. Through (re)presenting the video in the visor, we attend to the woman's language like we might become attentive to the sonic and affective qualities of the lyrics of a poem. By tending to these details and listening carefully to the language of her plea, compassion fuels our escape from the misogynistic single worldview. Although the

woman isn't named, the space capsule allows us to participate in what Cortez calls an "untimely community" that tears away at linear time and enables us to provide care in the shape of attention.

In their manifesto, the Care Collective describes a vision of the world where profit making as the neoliberal organizing principle of society is replaced by a "model of universal care" (Hakim & Littler, et. al 17). In this model, care is centered in all realms ranging from kinship groups to the planetary. In the current mode, oppression and violence unto others is perceived as an essential as part of the banal of the everyday. By shifting towards a form of common sense where our collective inextricable interdependencies are honored and recognized through mutually dispersed care responsibilities, thinkers like the Care Collective, Cree knowledge, and Moore insist that we have a means to cultivate a more sustainable world. I argue that the *Capsule* makes a care centered intervention within the imaginary of the passengers who engage in its performance. To experience the Memory Insertion Capsule is to reckon with its layers of care labor, that which we can detect in the archival materials and those observed in the physical construction of the capsule itself. Affectively charged with the care labor of others, once we depart from the capsule and our mutual performance concludes, we are challenged to move through the world knowing these possibilities.

Through a process of unlearning mediated by the (re)presented material of colonial archival material, the *Capsule* creates conditions that allow passengers to encounter and enact a counter-hegemonic knowledge. In enacting this alternate

knowledge through performance, viewers are freed from a colonial understanding of the world that presents itself as objective and singular. Instead, they can construct a “real” outside of the previous locus of enunciation that was accepted as the authority. Walter Mignolo writes, “It is as much the *saying* (and the audience involved) as it is what is *said* (and the world referred to) that preserves or transforms the image of the real constructed by previous acts of saying” (Mignolo, p. 22). The *Memory Insertion Capsule* produces speakers who become cognizant of the fraught and limited linearity of colonial discourses present in the archive, and go on to become self-reflective speakers who are tolerant of the asymmetries between distinct cultures, notions of time, and worldviews (Mignolo, p. 23). Mignolo’s explanation of colonial semiosis as a field of study is valuable to my understanding of how the *Capsule* operates. The *Capsule* enables its viewers to recognize the:

coexistence of interactions among and cultural productions by members of radically different cultural traditions [and that] the very act of understanding traditions that are not ours (i.e., are not the one to which the understanding subject belongs) implies a comparative perspective between what is understood and the act of understanding itself. (Mignolo, p.9)

Imagining the engine of the *Memory Insertion Capsule* as being situated within the field of colonial semiosis contextualizes how viewers’ *knowing* shifts according to their contact with the worlds that coloniality works to oppress. Awareness of other kinds of knowledge challenges viewers to think and feel beyond the colonial singular worldview, and to hold as true that other, comparable worlds are possible.

“Miren la vaina que nos hemos buscado ... no mas por invitar un gringo a comer guineo” –

-coronel Aureliano Buendía

That tender vision, that untimely mist Where love rests above the canopy, spinning webs Sensing another in the kingdom being. ³⁶	that blue chicory of dawn, from treeshrroud on the threshold of an open palm, further, above clouded marble that take us, are us, flower in us. is that sacred realm of angel bees, of golden wasps, of
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Later, we encounter advertising materials from the United Fruit Company (UFC). The film is silent and English text is used to narrate an agricultural tourism journey to an anonymous “virgin shore” in Central America, or, as the film describes, “where our bananas come from” (see fig 12). The film is an example of one of many publicity and marketing campaigns by the UFC used to redefine how the U.S. public imagined the regions where the company operated including Cuba, Guatemala, Panama, Colombia, and Jamaica. Incorporated in 1899 and becoming the world’s largest agricultural enterprise in the 1920s, the UFC operated in Latin America as a U.S. corporate colony. At its height, it cultivated over one half million acres of land across seven nations using the cheap labor of over tens of thousands Indigenous, mestizo, Black, and West Indian men and women (Martin 38). Using tactics of labor exploitation and political coercion, the UFC transformed the region into a

³⁶ After C.K Williams

manufacturing hub for the cultivation of goods and ways of understanding the local region and those who inhabited it—that primarily served the U.S. and Western Europe. As the de facto power holders of what would become known as Banana Republics, the UFC transformed the banana from an uncommon luxury good to a dietary staple for mass consumption, priced right for working class budgets in the U.S. Such a mission resulted in the often researched “revolution in distribution and production associated with the rapidly growing distributive capacities of transportation technologies” (Martin 37). Parallel to the expansive development of this resource intensive multinational manufacturing apparatus was an equally violent epistemological apparatus that justified the UFC’s corporate-driven colonial project. What the UFC and its white banana cowboys heralded as the “conquest of the tropics,” was not exclusively the mastering of land, people, and fruit, but the controlling of knowledge that was produced of and by the region across its past, present, and future (Martin 192).

Cortez’s construction of the *Capsule* illuminates for us a less researched connection between the eugenics organization, the Human Betterment Foundation, and the UFC. Dr. Wilson Popenoe, chief agronomist for the UFC’s Research division and famed “agricultural explorer” was also the younger brother to Paul Popenoe, the previously mentioned influential marriage counselor and eugenicist who advocated for the destruction of “waste humanity” through segregation and sterilization (Popenoe 189). This connection is further resonant when considering how the UFC related to the land it cultivated, its Indigenous stewards, and to the Black, mestizo,

and West Indian laborers who had made the region their home. Spurred on by Wilson Popenoe and his wife, the archeologist Dorothy Popenoe's interest in exploration, the UFC also chartered several tourism, hunting, and amateur ethnographic expeditions throughout the region (Martin 160). Bolstered by their position as the well-protected³⁷ upper echelon members of the UFC, the Popenoes created the Ulua Society:

a club "along strictly unpretentious lines" dedicated to "the increase and dissemination of knowledge concerning the Ulua Valley, with special reference to its early inhabitants, its physical characteristics, its natural products and development." The founding declaration, probably penned by the Popenoes themselves, echoed with a racialized sense of scientific mission: "The pioneers are not all dead. Those who live and work on the Caribbean Coast are pioneers in a very real sense of the word, for they are struggling with a new environment—new not only to those born and bred in the Temperate Zone, but new also from a standpoint of science, which is nothing more than organized knowledge of one's surroundings." (Martin 161)

Aided by a company culture that rewarded employees who spent their off time attempting to master the "tropical frontier," the Popenoes had access to incredible influence and resources. In their journeys, they came across an abundance of Indigenous artifacts and directly participated in their delivery and sale to museums and institutions in the global north (Martin 160). While the UFC committed

³⁷ White members of the UFC lived in "American Zones" behind a "gallinero electrificado," or an electrified chicken fence that separated the verandahs, swimming pools, wide avenues, hospitals, laboratories, ice and power plants, commissaries, social clubs, athletic facilities, and bungalows of their company town from the "savage" frontier of the Banana Republics that they aimed to control (Martin, 2018, p. 2).

brutalities against the bodies of its Indigenous, Black, and mestizo laborers in their extraction of labor, its elite employees were also hard at work pillaging the local land for objects under the scientific doctrine of “salvage.” These objects were then gifted or sold to colonial institutions like Harvard’s Peabody Museum and elsewhere in the global north for the development of U.S.-Eurocentric knowledge on the region and its people. The corporate colonial project in Central America and the Caribbean by the UFC was twofold then. On one hand, there was the material destruction of bodies and land by a foreign corporation and its influence on local governments; and on the other hand, there was a proliferation of U.S.-Eurocentric epistemologies in the region in both space and time. The UFC’s and the Popenoes’ accumulation of Indigenous objects and the development of white supremacist knowledge did not protect them from the very thing that brought them there. After an archaeological dig at Playa de los Muertos in Honduras, a former Indigenous village from as early as 1100 B.C.E. known for its pottery and burial sites, Dorothy Popenoe died after eating an unripened and poisonous akee fruit in 1932 (R.A. 51).

In the UFC’s archival marketing footage in Cortez’s installation, our first encounter with Central America is through a map, where the region is made known to us through the organizing and ordering powers of cartography (see fig 13). The land, which killed one of its premier researchers with the very fruit that they had set out to cultivate, appears tamed, orderly, and knowable in the map. Through the film, the capsule viewer visually enters the space of the banana-bearing Central American countries from the deck of a ship. In the frame, we approach the shore, and we can

see outwards towards land, through and around the towering mast bobbing in the Caribbean Sea (see fig 14). Recontextualized, the approach to Indigenous lands through water evokes the colonial encounter and the first violent moments where the region's resources were exchanged for disease, death, and domination. The perspective never shifts. We never observe the ship from the land so to assume the perspective of the "other" and wonder from where these outsiders were arriving. Instead, our perspective supposes that of a universal gaze, onto an untamed tropical wilderness free for the taking. The universal gaze is the masculine gaze of explorers who venture to a land to master it and establish the ways we know it.

The final moment of this segment of film shows a stop motion glove of bananas from below as if they were still in their trees (see fig 15). An invisible hand plucks the banana, and it begins to blossom like a flower, unveiling its sweet fruit before the word "banana" appears and enlarges on screen. Language and the banana that appears to give itself to us, with no resistance or labor from others, is the spectacle here. The spectacle teaches its viewers that the fruit and the systems that make it possible have made it ours, not as a luxury for the elite, but as a good for mass consumption. Cortez reframes the English text and the stop motion animation within the context of the *Capsule*, and in the process illustrates how the archival material renders invisible the Indigenous, mestizo, and Black labor and knowledge that the UFC exploited in its imperial conquest of the region. In the intimate delivery of the footage, viewers attend to the visual elements differently. Like in the marriage counseling footage, where the focus shifted away from Paul Popenoe's diatribe on the

importance of a woman happily accepting and completing unpaid domestic labor, the focus shifts here, too. Instead, we're left to fixate on the shore that we never quite run aground. The land stays in the frame so where we're able to focus on it the most. We contemplate its space and its time, as if to not place our own meaning onto it, but to listen carefully to its independent subjectivity.

In the visor loop, we're always approaching the shore, but the distance is untraversable, as if in the retelling of the *Capsule*, the land and its people have a voice, have the means to keep the imperial steam ships at bay. Today, the technology of the scene of the stop motion banana invites the viewer to consider the labor of the animators who constructed it. The motion stutters, and between each frame we can imagine the hands of the UFC animators who worked to rotate the banana and then, after tearing away layer after layer of peel, reveal its fruit (See fig 15). Cortez utilizes that same attention to invite the viewer in the *Capsule* to consider the labor that brings this banana's real life analogue to our kitchen counters. The looking glass of the visor shifts our focus through the artifice of language and visual cues so that we can imagine the unsung bodies that render, to this day, bananas possible in the U.S. In the capsule, English text, colonial gazes, and dated animation are transformed into misleading signifiers that push us into new directions, towards the sensing and recognition of generational extraction of knowledge and bodies in the region.

Cortez also asks us to draw connections between the UFC's activity in the region and the role of gender and masculinity. Following U.S. colonial logics, the frontier was a masculine space, only survived and controlled by the strongest and

most tolerant of the tropical environment. Victor Cutter, the UFC company president from 1924-1933, was openly concerned with a crisis of white masculinity that he observed among his dwindling ranks. Fantasizing about his own time in the early years of the company, Cutter chided the “softer” newer generation of employee men, declaring at a company retreat in 1927 that “luxury easily gets in the blood” (Martin 128). Perhaps inspired by the Popenoes’ expertise in social engineering, the UFC understood that the company’s enterprise relied on the cultivation and celebration of a white masculine bravado that can serve its continued colonial expansion both geographically and epistemologically. Such anxieties and insecurities on masculinity are directly invoked by the phallic (re)presentation of the stop-motion banana in Cortez’s *Capsule*. Reframed, the overtly masculine marketing material appears impotent, yet still dangerous, particularly side-by-side the woman’s plea from the earlier marriage counseling clip. The carelessness of the UFC then also becomes critiqued as a failed masculine model for knowing and relating to a Caribbean world. Such disregard would lead to the building of masculine apparatuses for a kind of production and knowing that decenter care and that use methods such as influencing government coups, union busting, and violent labor strike attacks like the 1928 “Masacre de las bananeras,” which left at least a thousand organized banana laborers dead. This carelessness and violence towards laborers and the cultivation of Indigenous land created generational repercussions throughout the region, including the continued destabilization of welfare systems and high mortality rates.

Embodied Performances

If knowing this world, is to know the sound of its violence
I never thought to listen to the sweetness of its fruit.

In the implantation process, “memories” signal towards the imperial and extractive relationship of the U.S. with Central America (see fig 8). The capsule implanting its passengers with knowledge taken from another space and time echoes but also troubles coloniality’s extractive relationships with Indigenous materials, knowledges, and land. The act of implantation allows the passenger to experience the past in the present to reach another future, collapsing temporalities from a plurality of worlds, and in the process, enacting a type of resource extraction. However, Cortez’s engineering and literal welding rewires the extractive technique so that instead of enacting violence through erasure, the act of extraction is inverted into an implantation or, as Cortez herself says, an “impregnation” that educates future generations on the legacies of colonial harm to buy more time in an ever-destabilizing world (Cortez 2021). By rendering it an impregnation, Cortez highlights how an alternative relationship to the knowledge of colonial realities can create life. If imagined as an impregnation, the *Capsule* creates life and, in the process, sheds away the burden of colonial forgetting to bring back knowledge that serves the creation of more just and interconnected futures. Whether impregnation or implantation, Cortez’s engineering teaches future generations about the legacy of colonial harm.

Moreover, imagining the space capsule as a womb directly critiques masculinity as a failed and unsustainable model for worlding. This feels particularly

resonant during our current crisis where many seem to have accepted a future of capitalism that careens through and towards a bitter conclusion to the Capitalocene. Drawing a parallel between Capitalism and God in Nietzsche's *Parable of the Madman*,³⁸ Moore and Patel write, "The twenty-first century has an analogue: it's easier for most people to imagine the end of the planet than to imagine the end of capitalism. We need an intellectual state shift to accompany our new epoch" (15). Moore and Patel suggest here that before we can act to save the planet, we must first believe that another way of being and knowing the world is necessary. Cortez and her installation illustrate how Capitalism, engrained in masculine doctrines and social orders, has convinced us to accept its failure and the destruction of our planet as the inevitable terminus for the masses' time on earth. The *Capsule* then functions as a life raft in the form of a counter hegemonic rebuttal, where a move towards the feminine becomes a pathway for surviving the current crisis created by patriarchal and masculine society.

Cortez designs the visor so that it can reveal the scaffolding that upholds the one world perspective and its extractivist practices. By revealing the fraught but

³⁸ In Nietzsche's parable, a madman pleads to onlookers: "But how did we do this? How could we drink up the sea? Who gave us the sponge to wipe away the entire horizon? What were we doing when we unchained this earth from its sun? Whither is it moving now? Whither are we moving? Away from all suns? Are we not plunging continually? Backward, sideward, forward, in all directions? Is there still any up or down? Are we not straying, as through an infinite nothing? Do we not feel the breath of empty space? Has it not become colder? Is not night continually closing in on us? Do we not need to light lanterns in the morning? Do we hear nothing as yet of the noise of the gravediggers who are burying God? Do we smell nothing as yet of the divine decomposition? Gods, too, decompose. God is dead. God remains dead. And we have killed him." His onlookers are said to have just watched him in disbelief and astonishment to which he responded, "This tremendous event is still on its way, still wandering."

powerful conditions of the one world through footage of the UFC and Eugenics propaganda, this tool draws the reader's attention to the unknown that lies beyond its limit, troubling the colonial disconnect between Western and Indigenous epistemologies. By venturing into or at least positioning us towards what lies beyond the known one world, Cortez invokes the uncertainty but also the liberatory possibilities of unknown worlds and relationships between those worlds that might exist in decolonial futures.³⁹ Blaser and de la Cadena show how our current moment within the Capitalocene places us well within this unknown territory, invoking Paul J. Crutzen's term "Terra Incognita." They describe this moment as, "a new condition: now the colonizers are as threatened as the worlds they displaced and destroyed when they took over." By reworking extraction to highlight the precarity of the current historical moment within the Anthropocene, experiences of colonialism are taken from colonial pasts to sustain and produce decolonial futures, wherein memory fuels more just realities. Blaser and de la Cadena's theory of the pluriverse allows us to imagine the colonial archival footage presented through the visor as worlding tools. In their colonial contexts, the archival materials reinforce concepts that construct singular world views: women are presented as projects salvageable through marriage

³⁹It might be said that this installation employs logics of discovery that reframe decolonial futures as the very terra nullius that it works to critique. I would argue that Cortez problematizes these critiques because unlike the harm of voyages from the colonial ships that crossed the Atlantic, the *Memory Insertion Capsule* forces open the margins of the one world, not reinforces them, creating an uncommons: "the negotiated coming together of heterogeneous worlds (and their practices) as they strive for what makes each of them be what they are, which is also not without others" (Blaser and Cadena 4).

counseling so they can uphold the U.S. nuclear family, while Central America is presented as knowable through cartography, and its jungle and fruit are presented as pristine goods for our consumption despite our little knowledge about the ancient Indigenous agricultural practices that tended to the land for generations. Within the *Capsule*, the distinct fragments become estranged from their colonial contexts and transform into signifiers for the worlds of knowledges that lurk beneath.

At first glance, and most certainly in their original context, the archival footage creates worlds that invalidate others. Blaser and de la Cadena remind us that our knowledge practices reproduce themselves and the subjects they analyze, risking “epistemic and ontological invalidations—or absences—of the possibility of the multiplicity of worlds” (6). The form by which this archival material is presented to us challenges and disrupts the divides between both nature and culture, and the one world and the pluriverse. Like the physical structure of the capsule itself, the form of the archival footage is assembled in such a way that we’re made hyper-aware of the construction of the video. Seemingly disparate images and sounds are fused together in a video collage, making clear the remarkable reach of the colonial archival materials and their presence in varied and far-reaching issues and geographies across the world, from postcards and tourism photos of Palm Springs, California to dramatic panoramic views of jungles of Guatemala in Central America. The video collage’s rough cuts and edits make no attempt to soften or sanitize the materials. Instead, the video’s assembly creates a sensation of imbalance, inviting the viewer to draw their attention to the alternative narratives these materials begin to construct in their new

configuration. From this perspective, we begin to see past their artifice as only commercial advertisements for multinational agricultural companies, racist tourism infomercials, and passionate op-eds on the social benefits of eugenics. Past their artifice, we see the faint but ever-present traces of the alternative worlds that they work to efface.

After being subject to the video repeatedly through its loop, the passenger may begin to notice the anger, desperation, and humanity in the woman's voice as she's subjected to course-correcting marriage counseling; we might notice that the jungle in the fruit archival material flutters in the wind, disrupting the control of the director's frame. And yet, it's more than this, too. After stepping away from the collage loop, the viewer moves their body around the space of the capsule, walking through a vessel that has come to represent the careful divide between the various worlds through its varied symbols and the traumatic colonial legacies it forces us to reconsider. Like a poem, the experience braids together various elements to appeal to us not solely through language, but through a multisensorial experience, where our entire bodies become instruments to both sense and build other worlds.

These traces of other worlds become more and more apparent as the viewer watches the video and moves about the capsule. In the visor, the viewer encounters archival fragments that explicitly demonstrate the violence of coloniality and how it works to permanently defer other worlds where more liberated relationships to human and nonhuman beings are possible. The construction of the capsule and the symbols infused within it suggest escape and movement beyond our known Western world.

Thus, our attention is drawn to the pluriverse that exists within the images and structures that were meant to only remind us of the singular world. Blaser and de la Cadena write that:

“to open up the possibility of a world where many worlds fit ... the practices that render the Anthropocene visible—as well as the proposals for survival—must also disrupt such a divide. As a matter of planetary concern, the Anthropocene requires analyses and proposals that would reveal the inner workings of the one-world world so as to prevent their destructive capacity” (15).

Traces of other worlds become increasingly apparent as the viewer watches the video, drawing attention to the pluriverse pulsing within the colonial archive. The intimate delivery of this footage and the method by which it reaches the capsule passengers make explicit the faults in the world’s divides. Cortez’s reframing of the archival material allows it to function as a tool for survival inherited from somewhere beyond our single world view that reveals the inner workings of the one world. If we ask ourselves, “where did the *Capsule* come from?” we might begin to imagine the implantation as an act of intergenerational and perhaps interworld care.

The politics of care within the one world view of neoliberal and capitalistic social orders are a central concern for the *Capsule*. Cortez’s installation suggests that to breakdown the individualistic and selfish barriers that define the Capitalocene is to imagine the relationality between all subjectivities as a kind of kinship driven by care, respect, and survival. As neoliberal capitalism has become more efficient and sophisticated at prioritizing profit making as the organizing principle of life, care and

care related labor continue to be devalued and undermined. There is a connection between the widening chasms of inequality and the growth of neoliberal ideologies and our increasing tolerance of it all—Cortez invites us to imagine some part of that connection as the de-prioritization of care. In their Care Manifesto, The Care Collective defines care as “a social capacity and activity involving the nurturing of all that is necessary for the welfare and flourishing of life. Above all, to put care centre stage means recognizing and embracing our interdependencies” (Hakim & Littler, et. Al). In the *Memory Insertion Capsule*, the crisis of care and its continued devaluation can be detected on various scales of society and time, from the relationships between family members in a 1950’s pro-eugenics televised session of marriage counseling, to the agricultural land that is exploited by the United Fruit Company, to the nonhuman subjectivities of the stones used throughout the installation. The *Memory Insertion Capsule* then offers one way to hold together these various points of care in crisis and to illuminate possibilities of understanding them from perspectives outside the Capitalocene.

An Emergency Kit for Interworld Travel

Central to Cortez’s artistic intervention within colonial archival materials is an insistence that we tend to the epistemologies occluded by the singular worldviews. This insistence comes to us in the form of a pedagogy: by working through the *Memory Insertion Capsule*, we are trained how to attune our senses to what lies beyond what is in focus in the colonial archival materials. In this exercise, we are not instructed to disregard what’s in focus, what was initially presented as the central

argument of the cultural production, but are instead invited to explore how fraught the connective materials that sustain colonial worldviews really are.

By recognizing the failures of the colonial logic that binds these elements together, we can sense through and around them, and even move towards those other ways of relating to femininity, nonhuman subjectivities, labor from oppressed peoples, and Indigenous land. Scholars like Blaser, de la Cadena, and Smith provide us with the tools to understand what has been hidden by generations of seeing and conceptualizing the world as a singular unit, but it's artists like Cortez, who build the physical infrastructures that enable a public to escape from their world to another. Like fuel, which is converted into energy to move vehicles from one place to another, the *Capsule* uses an intricate network of symbols and archival materials to move its passengers beyond the colonial single worldview. Cortez provides us with an emergency kit that we can use to inch towards decolonial and more just futures and worlds. The invitation is not without its price of admission. We must use our whole bodies to fully engage in the performance of the *Capsule*, center care, and be attentive to the occluded knowledge surging beneath the colonial record.

Home

A Poetry Performance Manual

I am a paradigm of this society. This society's treatment of me shows me what I am, and in the products of my labor I reveal the nature of the society, whether I intend to or not.

—Adrian Piper

“Home” is a manual for a four-day poetry performance in which participants will be invited to critically engage with the ways labor, histories, tongues, knowledges, and bodies have been shaped by colonial systems of oppression, extraction, and exploitation—in hopes to resist and respond to these colonial paradigms. This poetry performance manual invites participants to reimagine these conceptual categories under the physical and theoretical enclosure of “home.” The manual is designed for groups of at least ten people who form a community, be it a neighborhood block, students from an 8th grade history class, or a cohort of workers. However, with modifications, this poetry manual can accommodate smaller or larger groups. “Home” should be organized by at least two facilitators who are familiar with the poetry performance manual but are first and foremost members of the community itself. As members of the community, facilitators can adjust the poetry performance manual in advance to ensure that participants feel reflected in the material and facilitation of the poetry performance. Each step of the poetry performance is meant as a recommendation that the facilitators should evaluate and modify in advance of

the poetry performance so that it meets the needs and interests of the community participants.

Each day of the poetry performance manual is built around key conceptual categories and a mentor text included here for reference. At the end of each of these mentor texts, facilitators can find specific writing and performance prompts designed to inspire discussions and the collective reimagining of the key conceptual categories of “Home.” The moment participants begin engaging with the material of this manual, they are engaging in the poetry performance. Facilitators and participants alike should work to document the poetry performance, perhaps by creating a music playlist at the start and end of each day, photographing group activities, or participating in journaling practices or video testimonies after each day of the poetry performance. Participants are encouraged to submit materials they’ve produced as part of this documentation to [Website TK]. As these documents are received, they will be uploaded to an open-access digital archive, where participants can connect with others who have built their own versions of “Home” in order to continue their reflection and learning alongside other communities.

Although the subject matter at the center of these reflections asks us to consider histories of genocide, forced generational forgetting, and the loss of language, this manual operates on the belief that collective participation offers a restorative, collective alternative to individual grief. This grief is necessary and inevitable when processing the enduring march towards decoloniality, yet it also presents an

opportunity to use a collective act of creativity as an exercise towards imagining and building more just worlds.

The following is an outline for each day of poetry performance:

- **Day 1: “Knowledges and Tongues: Rituals for the Extraction Site”**
 - “Rituals for the Extraction Site” is a bilingual poem wherein a speaker reflects on an extraction site as an impossible origin of home. Wrestling through melancholy, the performance prompts invite readers to reconsider how we perceive our relationship to the physical space of material and immaterial home(s) and the languages we use to describe it.
- **Day 2: “Bodies and Race: Welcome to the Show”**
 - Utilizing the game of baseball as a symbol of American assimilation, this poetry performance invites participants to reimagine how their bodies enable a unique relationship to U.S. ideals. This performance then becomes a formation of urgent and complex relationships to fraught symbols like the “American Pastime.” The mentor text is a triptych that models one speaker’s relationship to the sport and how it can be reframed as a ritual for negotiating questions of national belonging.
- **Day 3: “Histories: Ammo in the Water”**
 - In this poetry performance, participants are invited to bring a photo or relic that is either entirely or partly shrouded in the effects of generational forgetting. For example, this might be a photo of an unnamed relative or a home no longer accessible to the participants. By thinking alongside a performance prompt, the photo or relic will then be converted into a source of inspiration for a poetry performance that invites the participant

to long for what has been forgotten while imbuing the object with renewed meaning. The mentor text is a short essay wherein the speaker reflects on how a photo serves as an invitation to remember and recognize the collective suffering that connects generations across time.

- **Day 4: “Labor: Altar/ando”**

- This poetry performance serves as the culmination of “Home.” In this performance, participants are presented with a prompt to cook a meal together and to use the objects from that meal to construct an altar. In the final stage of this altar, participants are asked to collectively select a song that they will sing together. Participants will organize their collective labor to nurture themselves and meditate on the different ways their labor has been taken from them and how it might be able to return in an effort to fortify or construct new homes. The mentor text here are materials from a previous altar installation and performance that highlights how collective labor can be used to transform the extraction site into a collective dwelling for decolonial resurgence and vitality.

- **Conclusion: “Home”**

- During the conclusion of the poetry performance, participants are invited to reflect on what they have generated during the past four days—be it fragments from a poem they wrote, gestures from an interpretive dance, or objects from the altar. Participants are invited to plan three concrete community-facing strategies to share what they’ve constructed with the

larger community. During the conclusion and any time after, the poetry performances generated collectively are used as mentor texts in place of those provided here.

Knowledges and Tongues Mentor Texts: “Rituals for the Extraction Site”

Ritual for Crossing

In the extraction site, I’m told of home,
that it’s thousands of miles away,

a relic buried in another mountain top,
a strange song encoded in black rock,

a scent eradicated by invasive starlings.
I’ll never run my finger over its ridge,

never pull the blossom of it deep
into the length of me para nunca escuchar

u oler el silencio profundo de un pasado en niebla.

Ritual for the Campesino

For this you'll need a crate of oranges sold from a parking lot. You might need to drive through the artichoke capital of the world and then the garlic capital and so forth. When you arrive, a man will walk up to you, his face covered with a bandana heavy with sweat and dust. In this well you'll find: the sweetest fruit, tidepools of quiet, of uncertainty, of music. I collect all these things. Gathering them in my pockets till they overflow into the gutters. The Roman letters bursting with failure at their seams.

The ghost of our past knocks on the front door at 3:00 a.m., clenching tools and weapons, the essential building blocks of hard labor. The letter attempts to grind memory into paper, failing us over and over. In this ritual, pray for fire at the center of the mineshaft.

Ritual for the Descent

At the bottom of this well you can find it all. Everything we have ever been looking for. It flashes open like an SOS, whimpers in a groan, in a yell, in a grito. Today, I am afraid. But perhaps not forever, perhaps things can improve once we sink to its bottom. The language is weak in the mouth of the well, in print, the margins are steel walls, a container of unpaid labor.

When we've lost the light, the water ripples, swaying slightly. Smell the damp. I'm alone like that spec of obsidian caught in the center of the throat. When we leap into the well, I ask the councilman what he thinks of my math, if I've calculated correctly, and he assures me that I've got it all wrong.

Ritual for the Shore

I'm drawn to the cave

of the wound

the giant mine shaft and its abandoned

machinery

wherever I've awoken

I can hear

its song

like how the cold morning air

lifts the sounds

of waves

de una playa lejana

de una playa

en total oscuridad.

Ritual for Erasure

The extraction site is an omission: an archive of fingers missing in the machinery, of aerosols in the lungs of the campesino. This extraction site is the underwater sewage coursing through the city, the dust storm roiling outside of Barstow, copy language, the bureaucracy of an email, the eyes sucked dry of all their attention, the military base, and its poisoned water.

This extraction site is an omission of that which could, yet still cannot: the bruised phantom limbs and the prayer passed from mother to son. This extraction site is an omission. The omission of weaponry, ginger tools of secrecy, the underground muscle buried in debris and shrapnel, the student coaxed into the firing line, the mutt dragged by her collar into the ditch.

The festering extraction site draws in like the center of the universe, the riptide in the dawn hours, the center of the breathing giant, the molten core of the celestial object, the affect kept silent in a straight face, all the bodies ever kept in a metal cage. This extraction site is an altar, a cauldron, a constellation of motions, a collection of impossible objects, of affect swirling toward a great white room.

Ritual for the Implosion

If you hold it all in, you'll implode, not violently but slowly like the wrought iron vessel sinking into the underwater canyon of a deep well. The journey is a gradual decrescendo as the orchestra pit wails, its cellos pulling on their long bows in unison. From these depths, you can't taste salt, you can't hear the dizzying crush of your ears popping. On our way down, I show you how in one hand I can hold an entire archive. It sparkles in the snaking light that dices through the murky blue. In the other hand, I hold a raw flank of flesh.

This is where the metaphor ends. Where I refuse to be complicit in any more acts of violence. I was told to promise, to keep a secret, and instead, I told my version of the truth. I told them what it feels like to hear your mother sing for the first time. I told them what it feels like to learn her real name and why the tongue recognizes its deformations like kin.

I anticipate I will say a lot of things like this from the bottom of the well. Once I arrive, I will make so, so many wishes, and pray to anyone who will listen. When the hull crashes into the obsidian trench, I'll throw my head back, allow my tongue to become tentacle and crawl along the lapping waves of memory.

Ritual for Extraction

In this grave, I grab an old rusted shovel Papi gave me.
I'll sing it again for those of you new to listening: in this grave,
I grab an old, rusted shovel Papi gave me. In this grave,

I pierce the obsidian floor with the shovel and carve out a hueco.
I recognize that this grave in the grave might collect water,
winter, the stars and their snaking beams. En esta tumba hablo

una idioma bien quebrado, una tumba al inglés, al español, pero nunca
a las lenguas originales, las lenguas que cantan que no están mudas.
In this grave, I dig and I dig until I find the soft wooden box. I'm left with nothing

most mornings I spend at its side. Where is its light coming from?
Where is the sound in this grave? How far does it sink into the earth?
I keep reforming the grave, and its miniature graves, looking for a wisp of hope.

The relief of a body. I never meet the requirements.

Ritual for Aisle 9

I'm told that I'm most alive in the melody of the "Hispanic" food aisle,
the banners of cellophane wrappers gleaming as if to gritar
que en ellos puedo sentir el corazón turbulento de mis antepasados,
gritar que en ellos puedo sentir la mano callosa
de La Morena, de Abuelita, de mi padre que ritualmente trabaja los shelves.

Ritual for the Fig Wasp

The prospector says my practice is ultimately a failure. That the tools I'm using are all wrong, that I'm better off blanketed in silence. I sit to take a few pounds off my feet. I lift my arms to dance to a song Papi sang to Mami the day they met. I lift my arms to show you that from here I can embrace the sun.

I take out a pile of popsicle sticks from the 99-cent store that'll close in a week for the barrio's first and last organic grocery store. If I light them on fire, the smoke will shout emergency. It will send panic through the village out toward the megaplex with infinite screens turned on to the empty parking lots. The silver screens are turned on to an early memory of Papi telling me to lie, to muster up the courage to shake the rotting figs out of the wasp infested tree.

The tree is no longer there. Papi chopped it down and it took me a long while to forgive him, a long while to see past all the dust that replaced the moist soil where I used to bury my toes. When I was strong enough, he taught me how to cut down trees too, until the field was dry, alone, and barren. *Then and only then is when we dig!* he shouted out over the salt flats, his voice vibrating the faraway dunes.

The wasps' crinkled bodies roast in the oils of their own thoraxes. In this desert boneyard, collect all those that have ever stung you. Line them around you until you have no way out.

Ritual for Infrastructure

The iron wrought vessel doesn't crash. It doesn't disappear into the cloudy obsidian floor of the well, taking the lovers into the lie where they stay together. So many years later and the nightgown can stand on its own in a parking lot in Los Angeles. The other artifacts pulled from the well bob their heads in unison.

I look forward to the morning we can discuss how we feel like we're living someone else's life. The smell of leather and dusty dog fur caught in the museum vitrine. I don't think we can live with that. I don't think in this grave I can walk the dog down the center of the road, a confluence of pavement and storm drain, of ice and milk.

Ritual for the Beloved

Dear Extraction Site Tourist,

Find the pieces in the garage, find them in the unopened boxes in the pantry beneath the floorboards, in the walls, insulated with newspapers from 1962. Tear them out of the ground and out of the walls and build your altar. Do not build the altar with objects pulled from the riverbed. Find your sisters and your brothers lying on the hot main street and yank them up. Tease them about the impossibility of light, the impossibility of the hair behind their ears.

Be disappointed when the pedal touches the footwell to no effect. Embrace your sibling and tell them how they were the measure of your growth, how it feels to know someone that mirrors your own memory. At dawn I can hear the four chambers of the heart the loudest. Why not linger in the bed a little longer? The stench from the dog crate makes it rounds and the puppy nestles his nose in the crook of his legs.

I am at my best hungry and tired, overworked and begging for silence. The cathode television mumbles something about futurity, about survival, about the planets and their menacing rotations. It too is a performance, a desire for movement and masquerade. In the script, we're named a carnival, a wandering show of monstrosities. I wonder then if this is too much for them, if we're more palatable a vacant hole, an abandoned mine.

Ritual for the Circuit

El circuito todavía está roto y las luces de la máquina expendedora
no longer illuminate the break room. If I exhale in digits,
submit the proper form to the councilman on time,
the Martian lander still courses through outer space,
while the grave remains cold, mientras mi abuela y todas
sus abuelas todavía pierden el camino a casa,
el camino celestial vibrando con una canción desconocida.

Ritual for the Latchkeys

The boys play a card game in the elementary school parking lot, the sun at their shoulders, their skin darkening, curing itself according to solar rhythms, to palpitations in the bones of crow wings. At the day's end they lift their heads, fully understanding the gravity of their location, *desde aquí entendemos todo. Poco a poco se lo quitarán.*

Ritual for Ruins

In the warehouse, el paletero rings his bells to an audience of wooden planks and mouse droppings. The floor beneath it all was once the discoteca municipal where Mami and Papi met in another life. In this life the buildings aren't blown out, in this life the American ammunition doesn't make it to the village, in this life el paletero rings his bells to an audience of saplings.

Ritual for the Duende

Desde aquí se pueden escuchar las campanas que truenan en las montañas.

I write this on a postcard and send it first class to my antepasados.

I heard they were on life support but that they were getting better,
that they were looking forward to the day we'd escape the wound.

Poetry Performance Prompt: “Rituals for the Extraction Site”

After reading the included mentor text or an original mentor text, complete the following:

1. In this poetry performance, work in clusters of at least two people. Gather artifacts from your various homes that represent 1) the language you feel most at home in or 2) generational wisdom. These artifacts might include a spoon from your kitchen, a paint chip from a closet wall, a stone from your backyard, a page from a diary, a trinket from a shelf, or a tuft of shed hair from a family pet. Gather these artifacts in one place. Arrange them so that they are contact with one another. They may be encircled or placed atop one another like a mound. Directly to the right of this collection of artifacts, dig a hole or create some kind of crater. If possible, make sure each member extracts from the ground contributing to the crater. If you are unable to dig directly into the earth, add soil to the ground and then build a crater into the added soil. If this is not possible, a deep box or container may be placed near the collection of artifacts.
2. Let each participant share a story about why they chose their artifact. Facilitators should invite participants to articulate how the artifact represents language or generational wisdom. Participants do not have to tell their stories verbally. If they prefer, they can act, write, or sing them.
3. After these stories have been shared, participants should meditate on the collection of artifacts for at least five minutes. Invite the participants to

imagine the objects within the crater that they've collectively created. How might the participants reimagine these objects once they're contextualized as something removed from the earth? What knowledge or languages might still be embedded in the earth? What artifacts might have been removed from the earth and destroyed?

4. To conclude this performance, invite the participants to return their artifacts to the earth by burying them within the extraction site, or invite the participants to produce another type of performance wherein they reflect on language or generational wisdom and its connection to the extraction site.

Bodies and Race Mentor Text: “Welcome to the Show”

That is why it breaks my heart, that game ... It breaks my heart because it was meant to, because it was meant to foster in me again the illusion that there was something abiding, some pattern and some impulse that could come together to make a reality that would resist the corrosion; and because, after it had fostered again that most hungered-for illusion, the game was meant to stop, and betray precisely what it promised.

—A. Bartlett Giamatti, *Major League Baseball Commissioner 1988-1989*

I watch my brother fall asleep in the third inning
and wonder where the making of the game begins,
if it begins with the slow fill of the stadium and
its vast parking lots or with all the beer spilled in cars.

Their drivers knowing full well good fandom is measured
in face paint and jerseys embroidered overseas.
Or perhaps the game begins before all of that, before
the kiss-cams and thousand lumen lights, before the hijinks:

the cylindrical beak of the Philly Phanatic deflecting
our eyes from the sweltering employee at his heating core.
Maybe it begins at the center of the green diamond
and its pasture, brilliant with dew in the quiet hours

of morning, where the immigrant mother heaves the four
wheeled chalker across the Bandera Bermuda grass
to become an instrument for precision, transforming
space and time into the geometry that sets the stage

in motion. Her labor, the machinery that moves us all
from the bottom to the top of the inning, monastic like
the oil red beads of a rosary and faithful like an old friend
or the upswell of patriotism in an emergency,

in the tomahawk gesture of the Atlanta Braves
taken on in unison by thousands. Just like this,
like a communal act of violence, like the synchronized
crowing of that mother's son in the nosebleeds

and the family man with the season tickets
in a cruel dance of assimilation. The chanting guttural
and breaching that alien October humidity of the south,
the noise stirring my brother's exhausted head with revolutions

of breaking bats and the light pattering feet of anonymous
batboys and girls who lift the baseballs from the sandy warning
track to fork them over to the desperate children hungry
for more game, for more signs of life cracking from the bats

of their million-dollar heroes plucked from Cienfuegos
Cuba, Culiacán Mexico, from Incheon South Korea
to be All-American Stars. Or perhaps the game doesn't
even begin here in this stadium. Which now that I think

about it reader, is an extraction site, like in Los Angeles,

where the battle of Chavez Ravine was fought for ten years
till government promises for public housing razed
the neighborhoods of La Loma, Palo Verde, and Bishop

cratering the Elysian hills for diamond lust and American
sport, where the ghosts of Mexican American childhoods
forever play in the haunted night of Los Angeles. The game,
if not here, must be made some place further beyond

the offering of recent memory.

*

I inhale deeply to convince myself that the game
must begin in the awkward ache of adolescence,
in my high school parking lot before the fall classic
where the blond baseball jock, full of promise, flexes

to a ring of teenage girls all done up with varsity jackets
and thick ribbons in their hair. The *As Seen on T.V.*
ritual perfectly lit in the new blue of the streetlights
the city employees methodically installed by swapping each

of the burned-out bulbs for entire blocks, permanently
changing the color of the night, except in the city's archive
and our collective dreams. You know how they say
we are in it together and that moments before a sudden death

you are alive—well, reader, I feel alive right now
and I do hope *we are in it together*, misremembering,
mis-reminiscing or whatever word we've made up
for that feeling of saying I went to that back seat to pretend

I was going to make love how they do in the vintage pornos
we found in the mouth of our parent's VCRs—
when really nothing happened. The new blue light
reaching through the tinted window of my lover's

2010 Volkswagen beetle and us still imagining
the blond jock and the blood it must take
to flex at the center of a ring of teenage girls.
Maybe in our memory they're immaterial,

but I swear to God, if I close my eyes, I can feel them all
including the irony of those varsity jackets
thrown over their pale shoulders like capes
or the beautiful synthetic suit of an astronaut

which makes us wonder what power we really have
when we misremember muscle or the post-game cruise
to the In-N-Out drive thru and its cashier whose braveness
lets her reach into the lion's den

of our car to hand us a twenty-dollar order of animal fries

and again, we must wonder which side of this civilian
war are we on? Can we ever come back from this moment?
As we embrace in the cradle of our back seat or from within

the singed brush of the haunted amusement park
or in the marble atrium of the American hero's
mausoleum. His dust sparkling the casket, the backdrop
for our adolescent affection, the kind of affection that binds

us to these bleachers or maybe to a future cliff side
where a fleeting nuclear sun swallows the shadows
and burns our skin into the black tar of Domino sugar,
leaving us just bones, clacking away on the curved hood

of the Beetle, yelling a vibrato of jaw and teeth because
our tongues are gone, and we are gone. And now
we are on the side of the road looking in
on the high school parking lot, the blue light

illuminating the jock, aged hundreds of years old
and filthy, flexing to piles of dust.

*

During the seventh inning stretch my brother wakes
to the sound of *Let me root, root, root for the home team,*
if they don't win, it's a shame to ask me if I know

that the announcers sometimes call homeruns moonshots

and I look up out from the pit of the stadium and
into to the sky to find nothing, but the blaring flood lights
smothering the ghostly night I only remember in color;
it's miraculous bruise black and red washed away

by the Friday Night fireworks and American jubilation,
making obvious that we are contained like the water
in a well. A water, not riotous and revolving but
glass still, caught in the hypnosis of our own clockwork,

by the slow progression of players sprinting
from base to base till they complete the game
and return home, into our arms where we can embrace
them high and proudly, as if they were our very own.

Poetry Performance Prompt: “Welcome to the Show”

After reading the included mentor text or an original mentor text, complete the following:

1. In this poetry performance, participants will play a game of baseball. The baseball game does not have to be played according to any “official” rules. Instead, participants should collectively decide how to play the game and what rules they would like to use. At minimum, the facilitator should provide the participants with one baseball bat, a ball, and an open space to play the game.
2. Before the start of the game, each team should develop a grito that they will chant during specific moments of the game. This grito should also be accompanied by a physical gesture that incorporates the use of the participant’s bodies. An example of a grito and a gesture might be: “-OH -OH -OH CUERPO -OH -OH -OH” during which the participants punch the sky twice and then again towards the earth.
3. The chant should be shouted by each team simultaneously after each top or bottom of the inning.
4. Facilitators should open the game to a public audience made up of community members.
5. Facilitators and participants should collectively decide on a reimagination of the song “Take Me Out to The Ball Game.” This new version should be printed on flyers that are then handed out to the public audience watching the game.

6. During the seventh inning stretch players should sing this new version of the song alongside the audience members who are able to follow along with the flyers that have been handed out.
7. During the final inning, participants should prematurely exit the game and invite audience members to hit balls and run the bases. The game is never finished. To mark the conclusion of the game, have participants and audience members collectively shout their gritos until they are too tired to continue.
8. Conclude the performance by posing the following questions to the participants that they can either answer verbally, with their bodies, or in writing.
 - a. Before today's performance, what was their relationship to the game of baseball? Ask participants to close their eyes. Who do they see when they imagine a baseball player?
 - b. How did the repetition of their gritos during each inning half invite participants to return their attention to their bodies?
 - c. In what ways did the audience renew their interest in the baseball game? How did it feel to play a game where the only immediate objective was to sing, run, enjoy, and collaborate?
 - d. Invite participants to collectively write a poem wherein the centers are their bodies.

Histories Mentor Text: “Ammo in the Water”



(Fig. 16) Photo of my mother's baptism in Managua, Nicaragua, 1969

*“What are the tyrannies you swallow day by day
and attempt to make your own, until you will sicken
and die of them, still in silence?”*

-Audre Lorde

In our new apartment, I hand Mami a glass of water, she takes a sip, makes the face she makes when I’m annoying her. Her eyeliner has been tattooed on for as

long as I can remember, but she stopped dying her hair a few years ago, proudly showing me the creeping progress of her greys when we talk on Facetime. The move has been long and expensive, and without the help of my parents, Kristi and I would have probably had to take off more days of work than we could afford. Papi lifts a box too big for him. I rush over to make sure he doesn't topple over, injuring himself like he did when we moved to another apartment just a year ago.

Mami reaches into the fridge, breaks the seal on a bottle of water I keep on hand in case of emergencies, and tells me that the tap water tastes *funky*, that I should know better than to drink from the faucet. Maybe the taste reminded her of the water that came from the faucet in the homes we lived in when I was younger. I wondered if it was the water's metallic tang, like licking a battery, that reminded her of rusty water that spilled from the old pipes in our homes in South Central Los Angeles and then later in the San Fernando Valley. Or maybe it was from a memory further back, so entrenched in her memory that I couldn't call it my own. She looks at me suspiciously. I should trust her but I'm stubborn, insisting to her, Papi, and Kristi that it's okay—city water is great, the bottled water industry is a scam.

Kristi and I moved to California from New York City when I got into the PhD program at UC Santa Cruz, partly because we were tired of the loneliness of our city lives. I was moving back after a few years on the East coast and excited to be in the same state as my family and Kristi was moving out West for the first time. I had been working as a community organizer in the South Bronx, taking two trains and a bus to

the community center where I worked sixty-hour weeks. My shifts mostly included canvassing with immigrant parents who, with good reason, were too busy working to put food on the table and pay rent to have the bandwidth to sit in on meetings with apathetic local politicians and public education administrators who burned precious time by expertly talking in circles.

Many of the parents I worked with were young women in their late twenties, only a few years older than me, who had left their hometowns in places like the Dominican Republic, Oaxaca, and Puebla, Mexico for a better life in the United States. Their treks across the border had been similar to those that Papi and Mami had made 30 years earlier.

One mother told me about how when she was crossing the border, she had become responsible for an infant girl whose parents were already in the U.S. When they were crossing the Rio Grande in the cover of night, the border patrol had come near but hadn't noticed them. The young girl began to cry. Afraid that she and the girl would be detained by the patrol or separated from the rest of the group that hurried along, she nursed the baby quiet with a small plastic bottle of Coke that she had on her. She told me this story teary eyed but slightly proud of her inventiveness underneath the pressure of a situation that could have changed so many lives for the worse in a moment.

Despite being close to the women in age, I was distant from them in many ways. Even though we lived in the same city and some of them were even from the

same Mexican town Papi was from, I felt like we were living in distinct times and places. I wondered if I had been born in Mexico or Nicaragua, if we'd have been neighborhood friends, taking our kids to the same New York public schools we had left our country for, dealing with the same landlords who continued to threaten to evict us for sharing our home with other families who couldn't afford a place of their own. Or if they had grown up in the U.S. then maybe we would have gone to school together. We'd have hung out on weekends and shared stories about how our parents were so different from the ones we saw on T.V. or joke about how embarrassing our Spanish had become. One of the things that separated us most was the very decision that all Latino families inevitably make at one point or another in their lives. It's almost as if the decision to leave everything behind for the U.S. is not a matter of if but when. But apparently *when* that decision is made makes all the difference.

I'd eat my lunch at my desk and look at the storefront church I could see out the window of the multipurpose room whose corner had been reconfigured as my office space. Sunday was my only day off, so I never saw the church open for service. I only knew it by its two heavy rolling gates that were always shut and the small step where people who visited the methadone clinic next door would rest for entire afternoons, sometimes sprawled on their backs completely still, despite the thick, icy slush that fell in winter.

Back then, my days began and ended the same: on the train or bus standing or sitting alongside people who became familiar over time. Eventually, I memorized the

order the MTA would swallow and spit each of us out. I'd worry when the middle-aged woman in the tweed raincoat didn't get on at 190th Street, and when I got home, I'd tell Kristi, who would nod while balancing the herbal heating pad on her forehead for the migraines she'd been getting since we moved to our street level uptown apartment.

In the summer, we'd take off all our clothes and play board games in front of our window A.C. to stay cool, which made us feel more vulnerable to our environment. We shared our narrow apartment with cockroaches that Hank, the superintendent who lived in the basement, insisted were actually "water bugs." Kristi was good at many things, but her ability to spot rodents was supernatural. Our windows faced the inside of the apartment atrium where Hank sorted the trash and where we would occasionally see the racoons hoist their well-fed bellies over the hurricane fences to dine on our leftovers. One humid August night, we were watching TV in our nearly blacked out living room, and from the corner of her eye, Kristi saw a "water bug" about the size of an Oreo that I chased into the kitchen until it lifted itself like a dancer and hovered out towards our necks. We spent the rest of the night locked in our room, Kristi inspecting the darkness with her smartphone light, convinced that everything was crawling.

There is no one way to tell this story. When my mother was a young girl in Nicaragua, her mother was struck and killed by a drunk driver. After, her father left

her and her eight sisters and fled to the U.S. to start a new family. In some versions, when my grandfather arrives to the U.S., he hires a woman with a station wagon to shepherd my mom and my eight tias across Central America, into Mexico, and finally, across the border into San Diego where they hear Elton John's "Bennie and the Jets" for the first time. Here, they see, for the first time, the orange Union 76 ball lit up and rotating on its axis in some dry southern California season.

But I wonder: Did any of them cry at the border? And if so, did that woman beg the girls to keep quiet with a Coke? What became of that woman? If you shepherded, coyot-ed, smuggled, nine young girls, wouldn't you want to keep track of them? Wouldn't you be interested in learning if any of them would go on to have kids of their own once they finally settled? If any of those children would grow up to be women or men worthy of that journey? Would that woman ever tell a version of this story, maybe teary eyed, to someone else?

In other versions of the story, it never gets past the black and white photo of my grandmother's casket hauled by anonymous men down a street ruined by earthquakes and war. In another version, Mami and her sisters never forget the year their mother dies, or where her grave is, or the times she'd come back home from the pizzeria where she worked, her arms cradling a stack of pizza boxes, her hands dusty with flour.

By the time I was a teenager, Mami stopped inviting her sisters over for the holidays. My family on Mami's side had grown into an eclectic, volatile family tree.

Many of my tias had begun families with men from different racial backgrounds. When things were good, my cousins and I would joke that we were like a mini United Nations and we'd spray each other with 99 cent store water guns that one of the dads had bought in bulk. But when things were bad, my cousins would sling racial slurs at one another in the backyard at the Easter BBQ even though we all looked so much alike, despite the different colorings of our skin. There were so many of us that the individual relationships that kept typical families together were already tenuous. It felt as though as time passed everyone began wondering, why even bother trying to stay in contact? If we couldn't stand one another, what was the point?

At least this was the popular version of the story. My tias each dealt with the past in their own way. Some outright denied what happened in Nicaragua while others made impossible family trees with their children for school projects. Two sisters changed their last names and never spoke to the rest of us again while others collected photos of little girls with distended bellies in Central American plantain fields. One denied those photos were even real, while another eventually went back to Nicaragua for the first time in forty years.

At a family gathering one year right before everyone lost touch, one of the sisters unearthed a photo of their mother's funeral and it brought my oldest tia to tears. She was in the backyard sitting in a white plastic chair pushing the photo away from her. In my memory, I'm watching from some edge, trying to understand the scene: a group of orphan mothers, including my own, scrambling to make sense of

what their dead mother and “useless bastard” father left behind. My oldest tia continues to cry, begging someone to “take it away” until someone finally does.

After moving to California, we lived a year in a one-bedroom apartment in Santa Cruz where rent cost the same as it had back in Manhattan. We exchanged our MTA cards for parking passes, ambulance sirens for the muffled roar of ocean waves. We lived across from an older couple who had converted their living room into a storage space for their lifetime of things. The day we moved in, I left Papi in the hallway to get another box from the U-Haul and when I returned, I found our neighbor in his robe asking my father if he was the new handyman.

“Are you here to take a look at the faucet?” he asked, pulling at the belt on his robe. “I’ve been waiting for you to fix it for a week.”

Before Papi could say anything, I interrupted. “This is my dad. I’m your new neighbor. Nice to meet you.” He mumbled something under his breath, looked at Kristi and her green eyes, and shut his front door. I never got a chance to say that we weren’t here to work for him.

After Kristi and I had settled in, he would knock on our door and ask for change for the bus or for the laundry machine. One day, I heard a strange groan coming from the hallway and I pressed up against the door to look through the peephole. The neighbor was on the floor at the foot of his front door, conscious but

grimacing in pain. I hesitated before I opened the door to ask him if I should call an ambulance, but he insisted that he didn't need any medical attention and that he'd get back up eventually. I ran into another neighbor from down the hall on my way to catch the bus later that day, who joked that he didn't blame the guy, given all the money he saved on ambulance and emergency room fees.

Our Santa Cruz apartment was only a little bigger than the one we had in New York. Since we didn't know anyone in the area and the renter's market was brutal, we had decided to put a deposit down before we had seen the unit. It was a gamble but our housing experiences in New York had taught us that getting stuck living out of Kristi's bright yellow Volkswagen bug was a realistic possibility that we wanted to try our best to avoid. When we finally moved in, I remember looking at Kristi with a huge smile. We were so proud of our tiny balcony and the small living room that was directly attached to our kitchen, bathroom, and bedroom all at once. The balcony could only fit two adults at a time, but we planned parties that never happened. We imagined the festive lighting that we'd string up over the sliding glass door and I had even bought a beer shaped bottle opener from Goodwill that I hung on the wall that divided our balcony from our neighbors'. I used it three times before donating it back.

Kristi and I both taught classes so we decided to convert our dining nook into an office. We bought a green desk made of particle board from the internet and found a chair and file cabinet from the secondhand store that we visited to restock our kitchen cabinets with utensils and plates. On one of our most successful visits, we

found a set of worn porcelain plates with intricate floral arrangements painted on their edge that looked like they had once been the centerpiece for a few dinner parties. On the ride back from the store, Kristi joked that they were “shabby chic” and that if we had the time or were more entrepreneurial, we could sell them for more than we had bought them. We never did. Instead, we used them to eat our dinner on our coffee table in front of the T.V., cross legged and buzzed off a bottle of five-dollar wine from the local Rite Aid.

During our time at the Santa Cruz apartment, the area had been hit by a chain of small earthquakes. I was familiar with the generic earthquake preparedness videos that we watched on the rolling T.V. cart in dark classrooms as a kid. I can still remember the jingle reminding us to drop, cover, and hold on as the cartoon characters bunker below their individual desks, always walking out from them unscathed and chipper. Kristi, who was born in Florida, experienced her first earthquake while she was giving a lecture in front of 30 freshmen one afternoon. When she got home, we watched YouTube videos to get up to date tips on how to survive an earthquake, especially since the “big one” was reportedly on its way.

Despite our small apartment, we spent an afternoon practicing earthquake drills holding onto our couch, dropping to the side of our bed, and avoiding the doorways that were not safe despite my years of believing they were. We read that during a natural disaster, like an earthquake, the first thing to become unavailable is clean water. We learned about disaster preparedness kits that we could make from

home. The kits were more complex than we had anticipated and since we couldn't afford the ready-made ones from the internet, we decided to keep one shelf in our kitchen stocked with extra shoes, flashlights, and bottles of water that we collected from grocery stores for free with coupons we'd get in the mail.

When we realized we were being priced out of our apartment almost as quickly as we unpacked, we applied for the staff housing at the public university where Kristi had been teaching, and eight months later, we got off the waitlist and moved in. In our late 20s, the subsidized rent meant it was the nicest home either of us had ever independently lived in. Our windows looked out into the sun and the only bugs Kristi had managed to find were the tiny silver fish that wiggled across the counter when you turned on the lights and spiders of all shapes and sizes.

I sometimes let it all get the better of me. I get frustrated with how porous and malleable Mami and my tias' memories tend to be. I imagine how when the time comes for me to share my memories of Mami, it'll be easy. If memory was an object, mine would be solid and entirely still. I could hold it in my hand and turn it over, unsurprised by what each side revealed. Everything would be just as expected.

It would go something like this: when I was young, Mami would tell me that she was jealous of me, that she wished she could have been a boy. According to her,

being a woman was the hardest thing for anyone to have to be. If she was a man, she'd have done it all.

Or it would go like this: there were moments when she would look at me with her head resting on her hand and out of the blue, she would ask me if I knew who she was. It was always the beginning of an interesting conversation, but as an adult, I look back now and wonder what moves someone to ask their young boy a question like that.

Or maybe like this: one of Mami's favorite stories to share is when a coworker suggests that she doesn't speak proper English and my mom responds, "If you think my English is bad, you should hear my Spanish."

When asked to tell these stories, I could say that I've been stringing them together for as long as I can remember. I could say that I've been building out a composite of memories strong enough to hold my weight. Strong enough to make me feel anchored and sure of what came before me and where I was to go next.

In 1972, Mami had just turned ten when a 6.3 earthquake hit her home in Managua, Nicaragua. In our new apartment, I search the internet and look through scientific catalogues, old newspaper clippings in English and in Spanish and notice that no one can precisely say how many people died. A *BBC* article approximates 5,000 to 10,000 people, but the *Libre Prensa* reports approximately 20,000. Sitting

among a dozen unopened moving boxes, I wonder, how did thousands of people go missing so quickly?

I call Mami's phone to ask her what year her mother died to try to make sense of the timeline, to see if maybe she remembers her mom being with her on the day of the earthquake or if she had already died before it happened. Papi answers the phone instead. He asks if we've ordered a water filter yet, and tells me he's been stocking up on water bottles to bring the next time he visits. I look over at the coffee table that I'm working from and see the innocuous glass of water that has developed into a point of concern for my parents. The lip shaped smudge where I just drank is clearly visible in the fluorescent lightbulbs that landlords always give you when you first move in.

Through the phone, I can hear the soccer game on the T.V. in the background, Mami cheering on América, the football club from Mexico City that everyone hated in high school and that she adopted one summer without any explanation. Papi is a warm man whose favorite thing to do is to talk, sobremesa, for hours at the dinner table after a meal, but I hear his voice dip when I ask him about the grandmother I never met. He repeats my question out loud so as to ask my mom without actually having to ask her. Her cheering becomes yelling and my father gives up, realizing the tiny players in yellow have all her attention.

Papi is from Puebla which makes him a defacto Club Puebla fan. The notoriously bad football club is nicknamed Los Camoteros, or the sweet potatoes,

which Mami finds hilarious. My father is proud to root for a humble team from his home state, to have some pride in a thing that represents where he came from. When the games get intense and so loud that their neighbor begins to blast music to block out my family's yelling, Papi calls Mami "fresa," the Spanish equivalent of "bougie," for loving an upper-class soccer team with handsome movie star players that are too good to play for a smaller caliber team. After adopting her soccer club, she buys a set of the team's gear, including a neon yellow flag that hangs in her office but that she drapes on her shoulders like a cape during games. Papi tells me that there's a photo somewhere of my grandmother's grave that he can find if he looks. "Do you need it right away, hijo?" I tell him no, but I can sense his doubt in the silence.

I assure him that it isn't urgent at all, and that I'll call back tomorrow to see if he ever found it or if the year came back to him. Before I hang up, I can hear a crowd thousands of miles away cheering through the phone. Mami boos in response.

I wonder if there is more than one way to forget the story. If for her, it really doesn't make sense to chain the events together in a line, to say *my mother died before the earthquake, but after the Nicaraguan revolution, or she died after the earthquake and before my father fled*. She's never explained to me what happened, and I've thought that maybe it was because the grief had become unbearable, and that it's easier to pretend it never happened like some of my Tias do. But what if she's actually forgotten? What if after so many years, she's learned to shake those memories away, to make them disappear the way the earthquake made all those

people disappear, not in a straight line, but from one central epicenter and then out in waves over time?

After our first month in the new apartment, Kristi goes to a staff party at the house of one of her colleagues, a self-proclaimed anarchist who owns a bookstore in Monterey. There, she meets a visiting faculty member who insists, “No one should drink the water.” On the ride back home after picking her up, Kristi tells me that her coworker said the military base used the land our apartment sits on as a weapons range before handing it over to the university, and that the spent ammunition, hand grenades, and landmines seep into the groundwater when it rains, and that if we look at our lease, there’s a clause to let us know that we can’t ever say we didn’t know.

When we get home, we don’t get to bed till 3 AM. Instead of sleeping, we search the internet for proof. We learn that our home, along with 1,600 other sites across the country, are listed as superfunds on the National Priorities List, sites with “known releases or threatened releases of hazardous substances, pollutants, or contaminants.” We find a website called the Environmental Working Group that reports that our water is in fact poisoned. 706 times the amount of recommended arsenic, 2.9 times the amount of uranium. The website reads under both these chemicals: “Potential Effect: cancer.”

There's a big rusted patio in the back of our apartment that looks out over the low hills near the university staff housing. If you stick your head out and crane it to the right, you can see a low line of blue that marks the southern end of the Monterey Bay. If you look straight ahead, there's nothing but a row of electrical pylons and a sagging wire that links them together. From the low brush of oak trees and Spanish moss, you can hear the noise of birds that occasionally come up and perch on the balcony. I've never seen birds with such bright feathers. They come in all kinds of colors, blue, red, even a yellowish green, perching and cocking their heads as if to look into our apartment window—as if to discover if we've been drinking the water, too.

The university police arrest a young woman for delivering bottled water to the picket line. The strike began three days earlier, initially, as a result of an ongoing demand for a cost of living adjustment, a wage increase that would make possible living in a state whose renters market has become bloated and unaffordable due to surging inequity and the housing crisis. I'm below an oak tree with dozens of other graduate and undergraduate students, chanting "let her go," our camera phones recording the handful of police officers who keep their hands on the hilt of their batons and another who presses the student against the car, detaining her. As if tethered together by our voices, we slowly move towards the police, the chanting growing louder, and eventually, some of us are standing in a thick shaded brush: the

branches jutting into our bodies, the glowing lights of the phones showing us what others see from their vantage points.

The police back away to take the arrested student to an SUV police cruiser blocking the two-lane road leading up to campus. The crowd follows, circling the cruiser. I break away, step into to the center of the road to take a breath or maybe out of fear of the riot weapons: the dozens of pouches of unknown canisters, and ammunition, blades, tasers, and tangled webs of white zip ties hanging at the hips of the anonymous men, barrel chested, and cloaked by black ballistic helmets and sunglasses. As the crowd pulls away from the oak tree to fully wrap itself around the cruiser, the chanting becomes louder and bystanders begin to join the crowd from a nearby lawn until it doubles in size.

A dozen riot police form two parallel lines outside of the crowd and mow into the picketers with their batons. It happens in slow motion. The crowd is directly in front of me but I can make out the yelling of other's who are watching from a distance behind me. My breath escapes my body as the riot police force open enough room in the crowd so that the cruiser is able to tease itself out, its engine roaring into a less occupied parking lot nearby. It skirts around nervously like a caged animal before hopping the curb, driving across the lawn, and heading towards the road that leads downtown. From the crowd, a friend of mine, another Latino graduate student, emerges with his shirt torn open at the neck. He has scratch marks along his chest and he clutches his glasses.

“Do we know who that was? Do we know who they took?” he asks me, trying to catch his breath and rubbing his shoulders. “They tried to take me too.”

I don’t know her name, so I dumbly shake my head. Others begin pulling away from the knot of people where the cruiser once was. A young black woman is crying behind my friend and someone embraces her, walking her towards the lawn. Some run in different directions with a purpose, others record the leftovers of the scene trying to capture the electric red in the air. Some, like me, are standing completely still, while the police who roost in the hills watch over us—and the case of unopened water bottles, now misty and sweating in the open sun.

We ask around and all the locals in our neighborhood tell us to go to the same water store to buy clean water for cheap. The store is operated by a family that hires a rotating group of young people, presumably students who attend the local university, to operate the front counter. They’re really excited about the machine that removes the chemicals from the water. They show Kristi and me a laminated chart that lists all the chemicals they cleaned out and use words like, “particulate matter,” “Maxi Cure,” and “post-carbon filters” to sell us their service. We buy three five-gallon bottles and a ceramic crock painted with red chilis to dispense the water.

When we get back home, I call Mami to give her the update I know she’s been waiting for. She answers and before I can say anything, she tells me that she found

some photos that might interest me since I was asking Papi about Nicaragua the other day. She texts me an old photo of three little girls with big bellies. One of the girls has blond shoulder length hair. They're standing in what looks like a lawn in front of a barn and a man that looks out towards the camera.

I'm looking at the photo and when I realize that I haven't said anything she says, "You know why they have big bellies like that, don't you?" Sometimes I can hear Mami's attention sharpening. I can feel her voice, her curiosity, homing in on me, as if she's waiting to see if I've caught on.

"I don't know. I didn't even notice, to be honest." I'm disappointed and can tell I'm already failing this test.

"It's because the water we were drinking was dirty and it gave us tapeworms. The tape worms made us bloat and gave us bellies." Her voice is matter of fact as though this never gave her pause or made her skin tingle from the idea of the pale worms eating away at her digestive tract. "And don't ask me why your tia's hair is so blond. That's just how we came out I guess."

The one thing I'm certain of is that Mami has always been proud of how strong her sisters have been. On the phone, she tells me new details about the photo that I'd never heard before. Details I'm unsure how to process, how to record on the page, in my version of our story, even now. When I hang up, I decide maybe I won't share them. I wonder if instead of writing it down or braiding it into the versions of

the story I'll tell, I'll leave it out like an artifact in the photo that gets miscataloged and lost, or cut out, revoked from the collective memory. Maybe I'm a lot more like Mami and her sisters than I had originally thought, maybe not every version of every story deserves to be told.

After I fall asleep, I have a dream that I'm walking to campus from my old apartment in Santa Cruz. The walk is long and I'm barefoot. By the time I get to the base of campus the sun has begun to set and all the police have left for the night. There are still no birds, no signs of life, except the full-throated hum of a police drone hanging in the air above me. Its red eye is homed in on me, its curiosity piercing. I look down to my belly and it's grown swollen beneath my shirt. I feel an itch on my foot and I look to find a fine hair pricking out from my heel. I tug at it, and although it resists a little, it eventually gives way. I begin pulling at it, and like a magician pulling scarves from his wrist, I pull spools and spools of pale worms from my heel. I can feel them run the length of my body as I pull them out, until everything around me is crawling away.



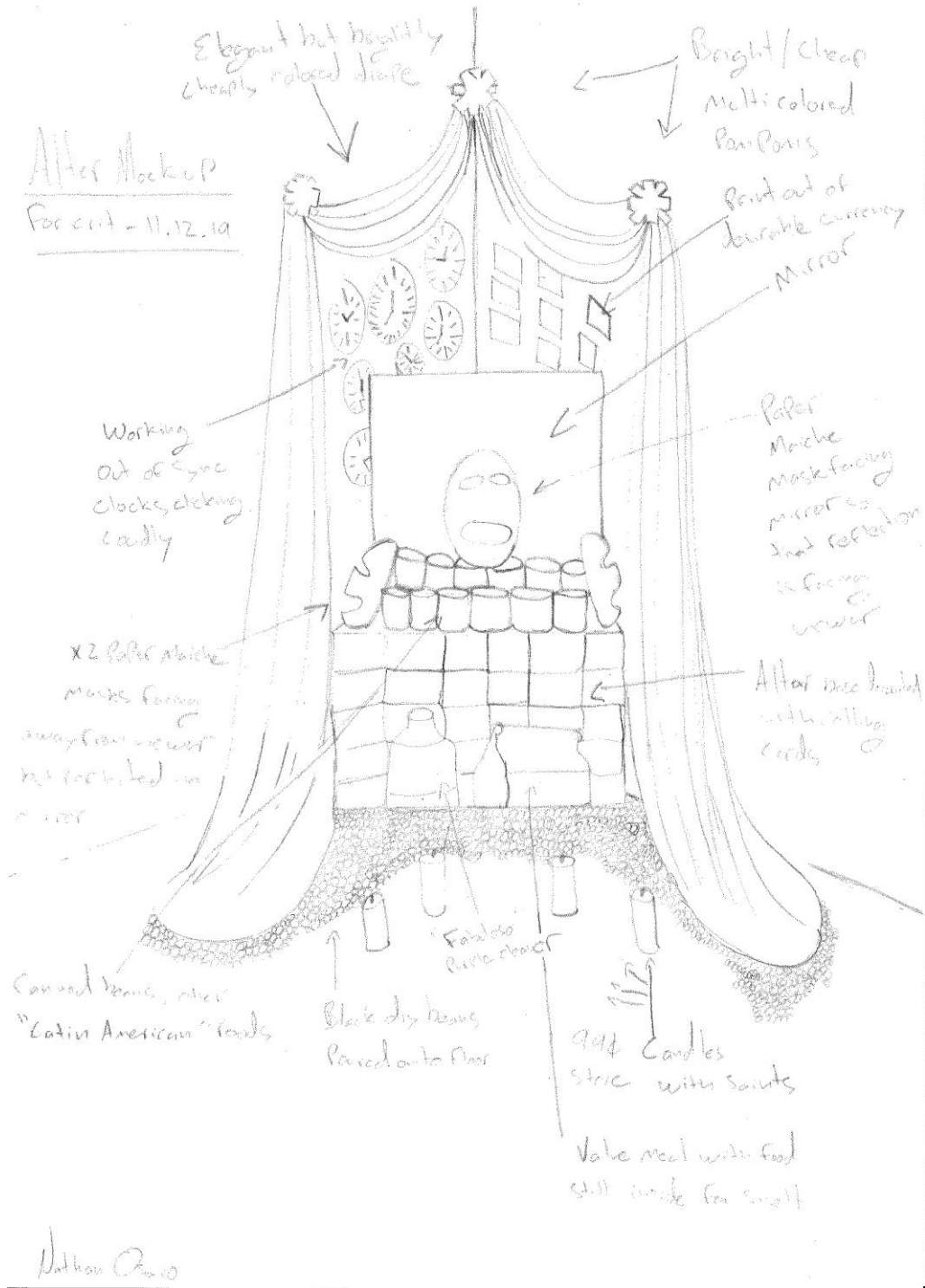
(Fig 17) Photo of my aunts and unknown family members in Managua, Nicaragua, circa 1970

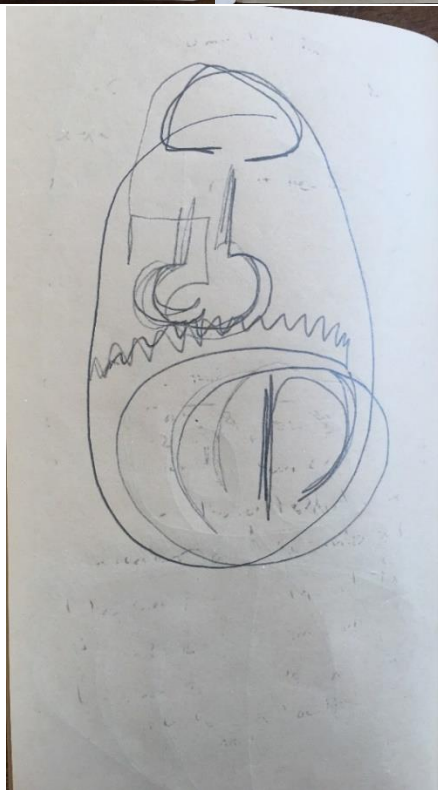
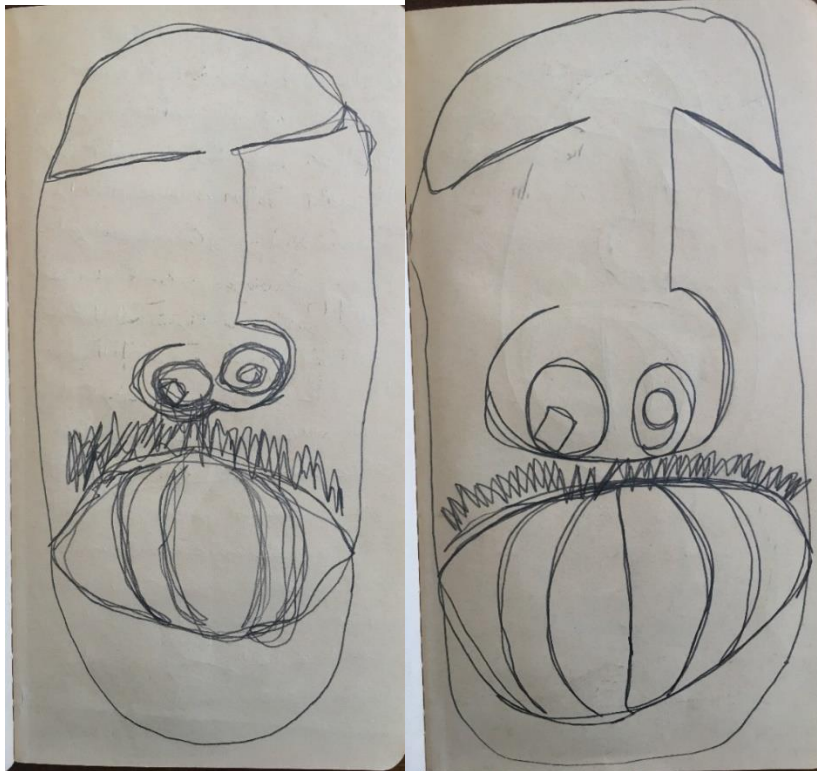
“Ammo in the Water”: Poetry Performance Prompt

After reading the included mentor text or an original mentor text, complete the following:

1. Invite participants to select an image from their familial archive that has been largely severed from its original context. Bring all the images side by side either on a cork board or projected on a screen.
2. Once the images are gathered in one place, invite the participants to interpret the collection either in writing, movement, or storytelling. The activity can be described as an ekphrastic reinterpretation but does not have to be exclusively written in lyrical poetry. The reinterpretation of these images should aim to recontextualize them within a missing history.
3. Once these reinterpretations have been shared, invite the writers to build a performance wherein they reflect on the impossibility of that missing history and the value of using creative productions to build something in its place. This performance should somehow allude to the images submitted by participants and the collective histories that have been created through discussion.

Labor Mentor Text: "Altar/ando"





The spectacular thing about monsters is what spills out,
the monarchs and the bile over forked tongues. I can never think
about the check stand and not think of complimentary calendars.
I can never think of complimentary calendars and not think
of the white princess and the macho Aztec and his golden arms
thrown around her fainted body. The chain link of chorizo
is a gorgeous boa of intestines, a crown of monster meat
for the shoulders of royalty. The spectacular thing about monsters
is how their mouths make the perfect garment, how the syrup pours
over forked tongues and waterlogs our ears. I can never see
an empty freezer and not wonder where the body went.



True story: the monsters came pouring out
from the aqueducts True story: they had face tattoos
and banners that read:

WE ARE HERE
TO STEAL ALL YOUR WORDS:
like *eucalyptus*
or *there's an English shrieking England*
or a *Spanish crying Spain* or *Nahuatl bellowing*

BLANK



True story: before my grandfather became a monster

I asked him where we came from

True story: he said right here

from between these two hills and nowhere else

I begged him to elaborate



and he said this was his final answer:

this is where my mother came from

and where my mother's mother came from

and where all my different fathers came from

and all their anonymous fathers

and so on

and so on

and so on



When he finished he looked over his shoulder
at the throat of the chivo
he had hung
to make sure it was draining
as planned



I lift the lid from the hueco and find a pile of wrinkled receipts
and the shrunken head of Pancho Villa. I hold him in my arms and whisper:
Pancho villa, at this time the cycle of your life may be bringing disappointment
and famine. The long-legged hummingbirds swarm in groups of fifty-one.
A swarm of these monsters is called a daze, a disaster, a cloud of salt.
Pancho Villa be prepared. Know that this will change for the better,
know that even the ocelot can escape the pod of cacti unscathed by prickly pears,
its purple pulp oozing from her black gums. Pancho Villa breath,
the cycle of time is expanding to include the tiled roof of the cosmos,
the tiled roof of the Mexican restaurant. Its papel picado is tattered
and flowing to the cumbia of the air vents.

I

The councilmember commemorated the site of excavation
with the great wall of Los Angeles.

He paid the day laborers in expired coupons
and asked them all to promise to come back.

II

The spectacular thing about monsters are all the tunnels
they leave behind.

The spectacular thing about their red scales
are their red scales.

When I lifted the lid

what I really found was darkness

what I really found was the heft

of an empty cage.

III

The monster said the altar is a cauldron.

It arranges our belongings after we've gone missing,
after we're consumed in the bigness of the desert.

It decides which things do not belong in its miniature constellation,
which things are best kept hanging illuminated in the meat locker.



IV

The X marks loss. The complimentary calendar does not mark time
but what has gone missing. It opens its plumed jaws and cries:
there's nothing here but a golden palm cupped to carry the weight of BLANK.
Drawn by the glow, I trespass into the mine and its eroding metal.

V

The councilmember tries to convince me that
their testimony is slippery, that it changes all the time,
that they've written the perfect algorithm of deceit,
autofilling our mouths with stock images of desert
cages. It fits all our metrics and matches what the
census prophesized. The councilmember says
he has seen this coming: The open star is dead
and here is its last whimper of light.



VI

BLANK is on the autopsy table
as a tiny framed photo of an eye.
Hear how loud it is when its fired.

It's just a narrow bridge. It's just a narrow
bridge

where the monsters can cross over.

VII

I went four days alone without anyone noticing.
I woke up to the councilmember throwing up
lightning bolts outside my window,
whittling bullets from gold.



VIII

I had my
morning
can of
rations
breathing is
combustion
a slow
controlled
burn
this site
is not a site
of honor
but a pile
of minerals
a pile of seeds
a pile of
well-cut
claws

IX

The geothermal vents flush out the monsters
with smokestacks three thousand feet in the air.
Those with wings come tumbling back down
to Earth. The pumpjacks bob their heads nodding
in favor of the oil fields before bursting into pillars of fire.
From the top you can see the great wall of Los Angeles

and how it glimmers like a chain of positive data.

X

The councilmember goes door-to-door peeling off our electrodes.

He tells us to flatten ourselves on the hot freeway and to look out

onto the shower of meteorites. He points—*Look at how beautiful they've become.*



“Altar/ando”: Poetry Performance Prompt

After reading the included mentor text or an original mentor text, complete the following:

- In this final poetry performance, invite participants to build an altar. The altar should be constructed in part using materials that will be repurposed for a collective meal to celebrate the end of the performance. Additional materials that can be used for the altar include any relics, soil, gritos, or images used in the earlier performances. In this way, the altar commemorates their performances and creative meditations, while also providing direct sustenance from their collective labors.
- Once the altar has been constructed, the participants should collectively sing a preexisting song selected by the group or a song created collaboratively. This song should be sung in front of the altar and in commemoration of everyone’s collective efforts.
- Once the song has been sung, participants should proceed to dismantle the altar and cook their meal with its parts.
- After the meal, the participants should be invited to engage in a discussion using the following questions:
 - How did the experience of constructing the altar and then performing alongside it reshape your relationship to the preparation and consumption of this meal?

- What people or communities were invoked during this performance that cannot be here? Why can't they be here? How might we honor them and their contributions to this meal?
- In what ways did the different objects from the past four performances coalesce or clash during the creation and performance of the altar?
- After these questions, have the participants meditate in silence for five minutes. Afterwards, invite them to write or perform an individual or collective closing poem.

Conclusion

- During a final gathering that should occur at least one day, but no longer than one month, after the performance, invite participants to discuss what they collectively generated during the four-day poetry performance. Conversations might begin by reflecting on what was physically produced or the experience of reflecting on these conceptual categories in community.
- After these conversations have been held, facilitators should ask the participants to identify three primary experiences that illuminate how collective creative labor, both on and off the page, can inspire deep reflection on the key conceptual categories explored by the performances.
- Once these three experiences have been identified, ask participants to think how these experiences might be used to serve the community at large engage in similar reflection or towards communal restoration. Using these ideas, create three concrete plans that can be incorporated in the larger community in the coming year. Some of these plans might include an open mic night where community members are invited to share a space and connect with one another through poetry; or a plan to collectively prepare and share a meal in a local community center; or to play a monthly game of baseball where community members gather for enjoyment.

- During the conclusion and any following activities that may occur, the poetry performances generated collectively during the four days are used as mentor texts.

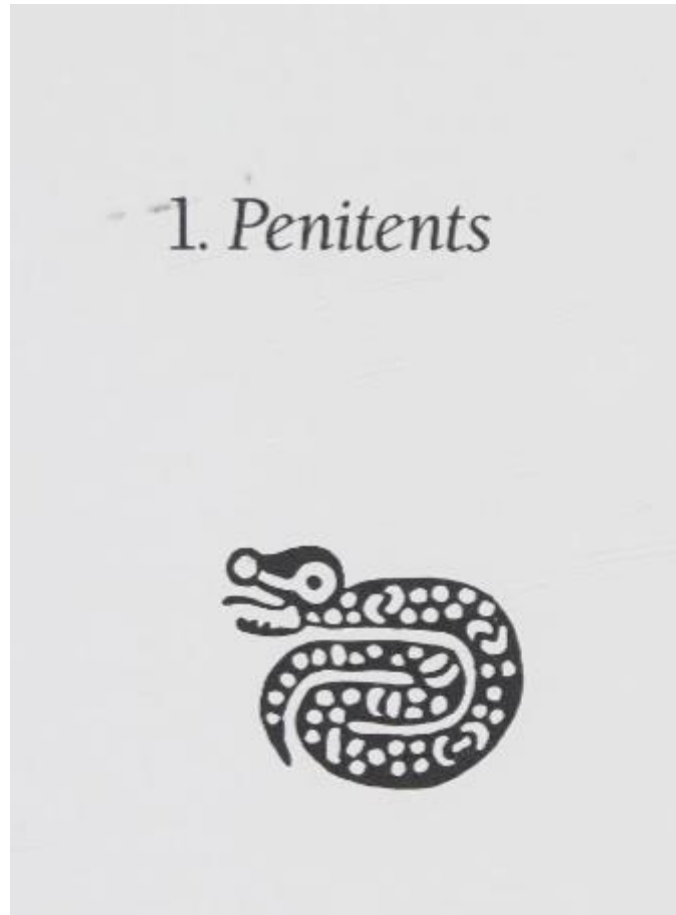
Appendix



(Fig 1.) Polaroid of my mother taken by my father at the Food4Less where they both worked, 1995



(Fig 2.) Photo of my father's hand at 59. It should be noted that he was too embarrassed to let me take a photo of the other side of his hand. I'm grateful for his cooperation.



(Fig 3.) Section heading in first edition of *Snake Poems* with anonymous snake illustration.

1. PENITENTS
PENITENTES
IN TLAMAHCEUHQUEH

(Fig 4.) Trilingual (English, Spanish, Nahuatl) section heading in second edition of *Snake Poems*. Anonymous snake illustration has been removed.



(Fig. 5.) The *Memory Insertion Capsule* with artist Beatriz Cortez. Photo: Nathaniel Wood / New York Times.



(Fig. 6.) River stones, a reoccurring motif in Cortez's work, at the entry way of the capsule. Photos by Nikolay Maslov / UCR ARTSblock.



(Fig. 7.) The Capsule interior with the visor resting above the hearth. Photo: Nathaniel Wood / New York Times.



(Fig. 8.) Cortez wearing the implantation helmet. Note the stone motif and the metallic cables connecting the viewer to the stones. Photo: Nathaniel Wood / New York Times.



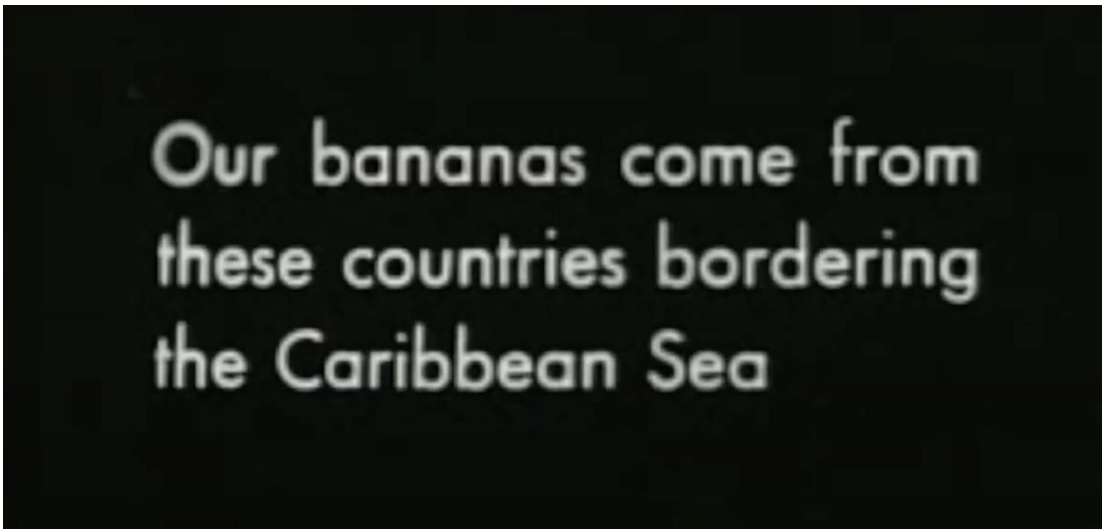
(Fig. 9.) The capsule interior with the carefully arranged stones echoing craftsman architecture in southern California. Photos by Nikolay Maslov / UCR ARTSblock.



(Fig. 10.) Beatriz Cortez, *Glacial Erratic*, 2020. Commissioned by the Frieze LIFEWTR Sculpture Prize. Steel. Photo: Casey Kelbaugh / Frieze.



(Fig. 11.) Woman listening to but not being heard by marriage counselor. Screenshot of archival material.



(Fig. 12.) Textual narration of publicity film. Screenshot of archival material.



(Fig. 13.) Map of Central America. Screenshot of archival material.



(Fig 14) Opening scene before arriving to the Central American shore. Screenshot of archival material.



(Fig 15) Stop motion Banana being peeled on its own volition.

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