

INTIMACIES OF UN-BECOMING: ORAL HISTORY PERFORMANCES AND MUJERES
AFRODESCENDIENTES IN SAN CRISTÓBAL DE LAS CASAS, CHIAPAS, MÉXICO

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ABSTRACT

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Intimacies of Un-becoming: Oral History Performances and Mujeres Afrodescendientes in San
Cristóbal de las Casas, Chiapas, México
(Under the direction of Della Pollock)

This dissertation explores some possibilities for performing black diasporic subjectivity for women in San Cristóbal de las Casas, Chiapas, México. Engaging three Afro-descendant women's narrative histories, this critical-ethnographic and oral history-based project addresses the complexities of socio-historical, political, and personal memory-making and subject formation. I ask: How do women in San Cristóbal understand themselves as black subjects when they do not and have not ever existed in a community of black people in México? What does it mean to perform blackness in the context of San Cristóbal de las Casas? What is the role of oral history in shaping meaning-making across black lives and histories? My aim is to animate theoretical contingencies in and implications of each woman's narrative performance, focusing on reflexive engagement of their respective genealogies and discoveries; the difficulty of finding ways to name their lived experiences given the dominant claims of Mexican *mestizaje* and coastal narratives on Afro-Mexicanness; the heterogeneous nature of each of their life trajectories and communities of affiliation; colonial legacies that shape the violences that cross black women and how they wrestle with them; and what I will call processual "un-becomings" as the intimate and lifelong work of performing blackness in San Cristobal.

Each of the dissertation's three core chapters focuses on the life narrative of one woman. In Chapter Two, I consider how oral history performance and live performance come into

conversation to enliven critical intercultural subjectivity and ancestral longings. In Chapter Three, I imagine what a Mexican double consciousness might be and how one can be racially and corporeally interpellated as a black subject. In Chapter Four, I contemplate how resignification practices work against the operation of the sociogenic principle as a defining force in racialized identity for black women. The final chapter forwards the idea of “affective encounters” of oral history performance work, imagining future possibilities made in dialogue, performance, and community in San Cristóbal de las Casas.

Through the study of individual lives, oral history performances, and the performance of the oral history encounter, this dissertation explores what is, or what could be, a more just vision for black diasporic subjectivity for Afro-descendant women.

To many ancestors. If you had not survived the Middle Passage and the subsequent conditions under which you were held captive, I would not be here today. This is for you. For *all* of you.
For lighting the path ... onward I walk.

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Finally, while writing in a time where intellectual freedom is being challenged like never before, this dissertation is indebted to those struggles. Among them, the insistence in the United

Nation's Academic Impact Principles, that advocates for: "A commitment to human rights, among them freedom of inquiry, opinion, and speech." May we always value and defend intellectual freedom.

OVERTURE

On Being a *Nepantlera*

Many versions of this dissertation could have been written. As a semi-rebel, somewhat of an anarchist ethnographer, a devotee of oral history-as-listening method and life methodology, I remain suspicious of power structures that police thought and action and those who enact them, even when the goals are publicly noble. Unexpected changes are all that's guaranteed; continuing to put ink to paper is my only response. Remaining authentic to my intellectual and artistic integrity while finding my ground in activism and community has meant negotiating my capacity for endless *transformation* and reinvention, not taking anything too personally, and finding a sense of belonging throughout this process. My sense of belonging is born of discomfort but ultimately breeds a sense of peace—never being allowed or able to belong to any *one* community unless it consists of other outsiders who share similar positions, albeit from a place of agency. I will always be speaking from an insider/outsider voice. When I begin to lose sense of this—to think I have or would truly *want* admission into a community that does *not* consist of outsiders—I lose my ground entirely. *Me engaño*: I betrayed myself. I find myself re-articulating a position that was also crucial in my Master's work: that of the *nepantlera* (Chávez, 2011). When I ran away from her—my *nepantlera* self—she returned and hit me in the face. She is the space from which I write and live.

Ana Louise Keating (2009) describes Anzaldúa's *nepantlera* as:

[...] a unique type of mediator, one who “facilitate[s] passages between worlds” (“(Un)natural bridges”). *Nepantleras* live within and among multiple worlds and, often through painful negotiations, develop what Anzaldúa describes as “a perspective from the cracks”; they use these transformed perspectives to invent holistic, relational theories and tactics enabling them to reconceive or in other ways transform the various worlds in which they exist. (p. 322)

A *nepantlera* perspective from the cracks is the place I occupy with ethical coherence in my desire to make a useful and critical intellectual contribution. When I do not occupy a *nepantlera* perspective, I run the risk of being accused of appropriating struggle. Respecting trajectories and very real power structures is crucial, as is self-care and challenging norms. My *nepantlera* self allows me to see this careful negotiation and co-existence.

My age, nationality, and most importantly, my gender identification, create certain limits on the kind of entry I can have and the kind of leadership I have/can take on. I am learning what this means as I move in and amongst countries and communities. Ramon Grosfoguel (2006) describes this phenomenon, saying, “no one escapes the hierarchies of class, race, sex, of gender, linguistic, geographic and spiritual of the Euro/North American capitalist/patriarchal modern/colonial world system” (p. 21). If we are always individuals in-relation, then having a critically reflective positionality at entry is important; simultaneously, our various subject positions can represent larger structures that are beyond our control in the Euro/North American capitalist/patriarchal modern/colonial world system in which we live. While challenging and sometimes unsettling, I respect these differences and refuse to become paralyzed by them. Surely, I will fall short of any sort of perfect coherence and agree vehemently with Linda Alcoff (1991) that, “it is both morally and politically objectionable to structure one’s actions around the

desire to avoid criticism, especially if this outweighs other questions of effectivity” (p. 22). I have entered into a deeper relationship within my place as a *nepantlera* and desire to create and stimulate an ethics of relationality between multiple worlds, however faulty and complex.

Radical Tenderness

Coupled with existing as a *nepantlera*, I work from a space of radical tenderness, which means that where certain political positions require cutting others off or minimizing their locations in order to dismiss all that they are or do—a plague of many activist communities—I consider this positionality unnecessarily violent and simply not useful. Radical tenderness is a term that came from some of the founding members of *La Pocha Nostra* that Dani d’Emilia and I began to theorize, in the form of a manifesto, beginning in 2015. Rather than simply allowing it to exist as a beautiful term thrown around in workshops, we decided to take on identifying some of its basic premises, asking that it remain open to reinvention and new definitions, never concluding in fixed meanings or enclosed form.¹

At its core, radical tenderness works in direct syncopation with a *nepantlera* existence. A few lines from the manifesto emphasize the location from which I aim to write and to live, writ large, and hope to embody in the entry into this work:

radical tenderness is to be critical and loving, at the same time

radical tenderness is to understand how to use strength as a caress

radical tenderness is to know to when to say “no”

radical tenderness is to allow yourself to be seen; to allow yourself to be taken

¹ Radical tenderness was first written in Spanish as a live Google Doc when I was in Chiapas and Dani in Barcelona. It has since been translated into Portuguese, English, Catalan, French, German and now Turkish, with circulation beyond what we could have imagined. Each translation was taken on by a volunteer who felt identified with the text and wanted it to be available to readers of other languages. These free form circulation and possibility for reinvention across languages and cultural contexts is an intellectual-artistic gesture I have learned a lot from with cross and intercultural dialogue, finding relation across difference.

radical tenderness is to not collapse in the face of our contradictions

radical tenderness is to not allow our existential demons to become permanent cynicisms

is to have peripheral vision; to believe in what cannot be seen.

(d'Emilia & Chávez, 2015)

Radical tenderness, as we see it, is to allow ourselves to exist, live, and sit with seemingly opposing and/or contradictory forces and to not let ourselves crumble underneath or be frozen by them. It is a political impulsion motivated by much of what we had seen, felt, and lived within many of our radical and politically outsider activist and performance communities. In many of these spaces, the idea of being radical, rather than honoring Angela Davis's (2006) contention—"Radical simply means grasping things at the root"—was met with what I would call *irreconcilable contradictions* (retrieved from her lecture in Women's Studies at Gustavus Adolphus College). Such contradictions become irreconcilable when shutting down dialogue becomes a norm for dissent, and collective care and listening are replaced with putting the self before all others.

Radical tenderness is a humble manifesto meant to direct a path towards living *with* difference rather than insisting on sameness as the only means to acceptance and community formation. Without radical tenderness, I would have had to give up on any semblance of community work and intercultural negotiations a long time ago. Radical tenderness has allowed this process to breathe and transform in ways that honor the necessary fissures and tensions that make up a fundamental component of this project.

Oral History and Decentering Ocularcentrism

Questioning and coming to terms with the difficulties of community work for minority populations working toward aims like liberation and taking their rightful place in social

history—in this case, the place of Afro-Mexicans in México—I have increasingly tightened my grip on oral history’s greatest strengths. The selection of oral histories that I engage with for the purposes of this dissertation have required that I listen to what gets silenced within the desire for community, and that I remain vigilant about not re-centering ocularcentric activism, even while acknowledging its often-necessary position in activist work. Remaining neutral in my position would be negatively problematic, even if it is not siding with the oppressor.

I allowed the work to be guided by a diasporic and unfixed identity space. I simultaneously and very quickly realized the dangers of protagonism in community work—a painful reality that I have seen time and again even in projects that have espoused the term “horizontality” while practicing a very different ethos. I had become idolatrous in my vision of “who’s who” of the activist work, briefly losing my oral historian’s voice. I quickly came back to the reality that it is, *of course*, not only leaders or major figures who need to be heard, even in small places or where they are big fish in small ponds, but that I needed to bracket the most visible voices in order to hear the ones less audible. These voices began to scream in my ears. I began to notice that a number of the people I had done oral history interviews with were considered useless antagonists to black political work, not “really” black since their blackness is not a primary focus in their public life, and because they are not activists as others expect them to be, they were not considered helpful for community formation. Inconsistency in showing up to and supporting events on Afro-descendancy in Chiapas (many of the people I interviewed simply *do not* have the same investment in activist work), was creating enormous tensions and divisions. I could not reconcile the beauty of the oral history encounters with the division. I also realized that community formation was not happening. I realized the limits to giving all my work to

community activism on these terms and the value of intellectual activism and community through interpersonal relationship building.

In the same form, I had seen other minority efforts for collective work collapse in the face of the public image when the dynamics of the private reality are something else entirely. I witnessed this begin to play out in the same way in the community work in Chiapas. While I understand that sometimes reusing the master's tools becomes useful and strategic for public recognition, there are times when I cannot side with this position for the compromises that either become necessary or that end up occurring, because they often lead to symbolic and interpersonal violence. Having sat down with eight different individuals in the community in oral history encounters, I found it completely impossible and irresponsible for me to dismiss anyone for the sake of public image or activist appeal. Any gesture of dismissal would, in turn, replicate divisive politics and absolutisms, moving in opposition to the ethics of radical tenderness. In time, I have come to understand my role as a critical insider/outsider *nepantlera* voice and take this on with radical tenderness that does not shy away from a critique of community; rather, it *insists* why healthy critique is *absolutely essential* and an ethical prerogative.

I begin this dissertation from the silences that exist and/or are created even in small and local community efforts being conducted or led by minority figures. I argue that oral history turns purported silences into multiple voices speaking at once, undoing barriers to amplified vision, possible without the eyes. My desire is not to “visibilize” or “give voice” to black women in Chiapas (they do not need that and that is not my place), but rather to invite others *with* me into deep listening *with* and *of* the nuances of a *few* black voices in Chiapas. The women I speak with are active agents of their un-becomings. What follows is first a thought experiment, which

hopes that listening practices can be built more seriously into our communities and their desires for social change, and can create more tenderness, rather than more division.

In an age of hyper-mediation and excessive interruption, slowing down and listening becomes increasingly political. I resist the notion of perfectly fixed identity patterns and instead invite fluid subjectivity practices and slippery claims to identity. Rather than be a work about identity politics, I am instead invested in subjectivity-in-relation and showing up for oneself and one's complex histories as essential sociopolitical and personal work, always already in-relation. As such, I resist the idea that all black people should be activists in order to receive social legitimization and to be “truly” black. Crucial work happens in vicissitudes of seeming “silences.”

In an era where a tweet, a Facebook post, or the amount of your life you are willing to put on display for others seems to be a major barometer of political activity—“wokeness,” or a way to “prove” your activism—I instead want to move in a different direction. I want to challenge how other modes of resisting become obscured in these taken-for-granted presuppositions. Such visibility creates a new underside of political work and reifies certain essentialisms that allow minorities to also police one another's identities. Far from being a retreat or a demonstration of defeat, I insist that the humility of pausing to listen makes room for deep relationality and the co-existence of pluriversal subjectivities. I understand relationality not simply as a seeing of oneself in the other, but also as a deeper listening/seeing that allows us to challenge our own truths and to make way for new understanding, even and particularly in dissensus. Relationality allows for black subjectivities to exist legitimately *far outside* the bounds of nationalism and patriarchy, which would otherwise collapse or commodify these subjectivities. The commodification of subjectivity sometimes looks like an investment in the creation of sound bites and beautiful

images for circulation: this might unknowingly and/or purposefully create multiple levels of gate-keeping of who belongs and who does not belong, reinforcing the power structures that delegitimized these identities in the first place.

Quiet resistances, daily performances, and words not generated for the public eye are the intimacies opened with oral history performances: intimacies of un-becoming. Oral history creates intimate possibilities for conversing with the humility of resistance for those whose subjectivities and understandings of self are at times too slippery and/or too quiet for the public eye. I am lured in by identities always in the process of construction that are not easily-consumable for political campaigns or activist goals. It is my fundamental belief that these subjectivities and identities are *no less important* and *no less political*. When listening to such nuance, shared in deep reverence for story and for each memory's trial of recollection, dismissal becomes a dangerous and violent act of denying the other's right to exist, to name and embody their existence on their own terms.

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CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION: ENTRY INTO CONVERSATIONS ON AFRO-DESCENDANCY, BLACKNESS & ORAL HISTORY AS PERFORMANCE IN SAN CRISTOBAL DE LAS CASAS, CHIAPAS, MÉXICO

Arrival(s) in San Cristóbal, the Problem, and Narrative of Research

This dissertation is concerned with the daily life performances of Afro-descendant women in San Cristóbal de las Casas, Chiapas, México, against erasure and homogenous constructions of community and belonging. It addresses the isolation of blackness in México to coastal towns as a limiting narrative of black subjectivity and family histories that are buried in favor of nationalistic fervor. These realities exclude black women in San Cristóbal from belonging to Afro-descendancy as a community struggle, and distances them from the fullness of their subjectivities. Rather than simply exposing this quandary, I aim to listen to performances of oral history in which three women in particular struggle to articulate emerging claims to black diasporic descendancy with their current social, political, regional, and familial contexts. In so doing, I hope to track and advance the power of oral history, as I have witnessed it, to recover and redeem black ancestry as an intimate and political process of un-becoming.

Arrival(s)

When I first arrived in San Cristóbal de las Casas, Chiapas, México, in 2007, as an undergraduate on a human rights exchange trip, I was taken. I saw: multi-colored palates dance across beautiful colonial architecture, even in the contradictory agony of this delight. I

tasted: moist corn tamales with *pollo* and *pasas* wrapped in banana leaves.¹ I felt: the cool breeze of the 2300-meter altitude *pueblo* cut through my hair. I heard: *Marimba* and *vendedores* in sonic competition in the *Zócalo*.² I touched: the impossibly blue, untainted waters in the Zapatista territory of *Caracól Morelia*, while we bathed and the local children giggled at us. I went to Chiapas for the first time with my hair in corn rows in an attempt to manage my curly mane under different conditions of daily body maintenance. My body moved and shifted with my initial two weeks in this place. I knew I would return.

In the summer of 2013, with the course “Art and Resistance” taught by Diana Taylor, I was back in San Cristóbal de las Casas, Chiapas. I clung to every sight, smell, sound, taste, and touch as if I would never experience them again. Sensorial memories came flooding back to me and new sensuous archives made their way into my nervous system. Little did I know, San Cris would seduce me time and time again. I entered into my sense of ethnographic erotics and rapaciously felt and documented every sensorial experience of every day through writing, photography, recordings, drawings, and conversations. What was it about this place that kept me coming back for more, that made my whole being vibrate?

Over the duration of the summer course, my relationship with San Cristóbal changed. I performed and organized against feminicide and began to accompany family members. I started to develop a relationship to the people, causes, and the political situation around art and activism beyond the motivations of the course (see Chávez and Difarnecio, 2014). I did not want this time to come to an end. I stayed four days beyond the course, deepening new relationships and spending time. A gravitational force was pulling me here. I had to acquiesce.

¹ “Pollo” is chicken and “pasas” are raisins.

² “Marimba” is a music indigenous to Chiapas that comes from Afro-descendant people. “Vendedores” are people who work as sellers. “Zócalo” means “main square,” and they are common in most large and small towns and cities in México.

In December 2013, during a trip to the coast of Oaxaca with my partner at the time, she explained we would be traveling to an Afro-*mestizo* town: a spiritual gift for us as African American and Afro-Colombian people, respectively. Chacahua is a place where sweet water *lagunas* meet up with the Pacific Coast. Our trip threw my identity, longing, and connection to this geopolitical landscape into stark relief. Over a twelve-year affective relationship to México, I have wrestled to make sense of why I am *so* powerfully drawn here. Now I was able to articulate my connection to México through a sense of shared diasporic blackness. I also began to name and make sense of the “problem” of blackness in México and the longevity of anti-black racism.

An hour by lake from any of the main roads, sitting under a *palapa* in the Afro-*mestizo* community of Chacahua, I was engrossed by all we were experiencing and seeing. During daily *almuerzos* of fried fish and plantains, I read Claudia Milian’s (2013) book, *Latining America: Black-Brown Passages and the Coloring of Latino/a Studies*, and began to discuss and consider lines of interconnection between black and brown communities in the US-South and the Global South.³ I wrote, mapped, and unquenchably ruminated over the webs of connectivity as I sipped *mezcal*, smoked, and every two hours frolicked in the waves: my idea of a perfect vacation. *Yemayá* seemed to dance through the *olas* with me. There was an inexplicable familiarity I felt in Chacahua, from the elderly woman selling *tamales de mejillón* under the blistering sun to the young children with Afros like my father’s walking the beach talking to imaginary friends.⁴

Coastal towns in Oaxaca and Guerrero make up the “Costa Chica,” where the great majority of research on Afro-Mexican identity and history has been undertaken. I was deeply

³ “Almuerzos” are brunches.

⁴ *Tamales de mejillón* are tamales (corn cakes that in this region are wrapped in banana leaves) made with sea mussels. Sea mussels are a delicacy quite commonly found in the black populations of coastal regions throughout Latin America.

unsettled by the drastic poverty and the geopolitical isolation in Chacahua and the neighboring town, Collantes. The parasites writhing in my intestines at the end of the ten-day trip were a visceral reminder of how sick the ostracization made me feel and the conditions under which generations and generations of Afro-Mexicans have lived. I knew this was not an isolated example.

Just after New Year's 2014, after leaving Oaxaca and returning to San Cristóbal de las Casas, Chiapas, I started putting feelers out for direct connections to people in the coastal communities of Oaxaca. I began to consider how I might also work in coastal communities in Chiapas, to be closer to San Cristóbal (San Cristóbal to Chacahua is full day trip by bus, taxi, and motor boat). My initial plan was to find a way to contribute as another scholar and activist working in the *Costa Chica* and in Chiapas. I then headed back to North Carolina to finish doctoral coursework. My head was spinning. I returned four times to San Cristóbal over the 2013-2014 school year, participating in political, artistic, and scholarly projects, remaining intertwined and present, to the extent possible, with local life.

In spring of 2014, during the course, “Decolonizing Research: Methodologies / Epistemologies / Pedagogies in Decolonial Perspective,” at Duke University with Catherine Walsh, I decided I wanted to live in Chiapas and to pursue all of my inquietudes around gender, race, and belonging, up close.⁵ In May 2014, I uprooted my life, driven by the Eros of living with coherence to my personal lines of accountability and research seedlings. When I moved to live in Chiapas full-time, my idea was to touch base at home in San Cristóbal whenever I left my field sites. At this point, I was also consumed by burgeoning alliances and

⁵ It was one particular conversation/life coaching moment with Dr. Alexis Pauline Gumbs, sitting across from one another at Mad Hatter Cafe in Durham, North Carolina that solidified my decision. She told me a number of things that freed me and brought me here (physical and philosophical locations): (1) It is okay to have one primary community of accountability. (2) When we're specific, we're accountable. (3) Align with yourself: Live what you have to embody. (4) We have a commitment to our ancestors. These were key points I have held sacred with me from that day, onward. They serve as spiritual guiding forces behind my dissertation work and life practice.

work around art and activism in San Cristóbal. In particular, I was invested in struggles against violence against women and artistic responses to the normalization of femicide. None of the work I was involved in at that point centered around Afro-descendancy, but rather, all that intersected it. I started feeling torn about the idea of not remaining consistently in San Cristóbal now that I could.

What the Literature Taught Me

By summer of 2014, I had read an extensive amount of Afro-Mexican history trying to get a grasp on the panorama I was walking into. An in-depth historiography of Afro-Mexicanness and Afro-descendancy is far outside the scope of my study. The terrain that has been laid by the tremendous scholarly work already done is the bedrock of my work (Aguirre Beltran, 1958, 1985; Bennett, 2009; Chávez-Hita, 1987, 1996; Cruz-Carretero, 2006; González, 2011; González Esponda, 2002; Hernández-Cuevas, 2004; Louis Gates Jr., 2011; Sue, 2007, 2013; Vaughn, 2001a, 2001b, 2005a, 2005b; Velásquez & Correa, 2005; Velásquez & Iturralde, 2012). A majority of the scholarship has predominately focused on historiographical narratives of the arrival of enslaved people, *cimarronaje* (maroonage), free black men and women who aided Spanish colonizers, and influxes of Cuban immigration. The more recent scholarship centers around the lives and traditions held by the descendants of each of these groups. The existing scholarship is primarily located in coastal communities, where, after being refused jobs in large cities in México, Afro-Mexicans returned have remained concentrated there for hundreds of years. Generation upon generation have remained in many of these places – fertile ground for ethnographic work as it is classically conceived.

By the sixteenth century, México had the largest population of Africans and free blacks in the Americas (Aguirre Beltran, 1958; Bennett 2009; González Esponda, 2002; Louis Gates Jr., 2011). It is now common knowledge for scholars that Africans in New Spain

(what is now México) far outnumbered the Spaniards. The slave trade began in Veracruz in 1519 and no diaspora out of México followed the subsequent manumissions. It is historically indisputable that blackness has been mixed into Mexican blood for centuries. In responding to these historical realities, one of the primary questions that has caused a strong uprise in Afro-Mexican Studies is, “what happened to the black population of México after the colonial period and how has this historical reality been successfully obscured for so long”?

Afro-Mexican History is tethered to contemporary race relations. During the rule of President Porfirio Díaz (1876-1911) and the period of the Mexican revolution (1910-1920), *mestizaje* became one of the laws of the land. It is the hegemonic force of racial and ethnic formation in México in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. There are fifty-six known ethnic groups in México, most of which are indigenous populations. *Mestizaje*, however, is *the* gate-keeping ideology which undermines ethnic diversity by shaping who can and cannot be considered “Mexican.” *Mestizaje* was a racial project ushered in by the Minister of Education during the Mexican revolution, Jose Vasconcelos. I and others insist that *mestizaje* is *far from* a thing of the past (Moreno Figueroa and Saldívar, 2015, p. 2). *Mestizaje* was a political strategy for whitening México. It considered those with indigenous and Spanish blood mixes legitimate members of the “Mexican race” or the “cosmic race.” The lighter the skin color and physical make up, or, the more you clung to the ideology of *mestizaje* even if your phenotype did not match, the closer you were/are to “Mexicanness.” The ongoing legacy of *mestizaje* has had dire and long-winded effects on Afro-descendant and indigenous populations and anyone who does not fit this prototype: most people in México. *Mestizaje* works in great service to the fallacious post-racial ideology that Mexican society upholds (Moreno Figueroa and Saldívar, 2015). With this information, I had come to grips with walking into an *incredibly* complex social and national situation and craved areas of deeper nuance to which I could devote myself.

Locating a Different Point of Entry

I was existing in amoeba-like form between stacks of books on Afro-Mexican History and performance studies, rainy days, and dog children, paired alongside long conversations, activist interventions, and life in general in San Cristóbal. I was hoping that my acquisition of book knowledge would miraculously allow my fieldwork plan to come to fruition. Early into 2015, I found myself standing in front of a black woman right in San Cristóbal de las Casas at my Saturday market: Maritea Daehlin (featured in Chapter Two). I realized that by insisting on doing work in the *Costa Chica* and in coastal towns in Chiapas, I was complicit in what I quickly learned were historically limited biases about where black people live in México and what Afro-descendancy means. I caught myself in a performance of an attempt of normative anthropological-ethnographic study.

From the beginning of this project, I have been invested in going-about-seeking an understanding of blackness and Afro-descendancy from México: a country to which I am deeply connected through chosen family and social-political work. I had been entrenched in community justice struggles for women and LGBTQ people through art, organizing, and feminist practice in Guanajuato, Yucatán, México City, and now Chiapas. My interest in blackness in México was anchored within these lines of intersection, but I had not yet developed my ideas. Many doubts continued to stir within me, including: How was I going to ethically go about seeking entry into communities with incredibly sparse resources like Chacahua or Collantes? Who was I to do so? To what aims and ends? Who was my audience?

I had read *onto* these sites the same scholarly logics that preceded me and that, ultimately, provide a very partial account of Afro-descendancy and blackness in México. At the same time, my ideas about Afro-descendancy and blackness were quite consistent with

what I gathered from my trip to Chacahua and all I continued to find in the literature: (1) Black people live in the coastal regions of states like Oaxaca, Chiapas, Guerrero and Veracruz, México, and most are descendants of people who were enslaved. They then created maroon villages and remained there for hundreds of years;⁶ (2) Most of the Mexican population does not know that Afro-Mexicans have lived in these coastal towns over hundreds of years; (3) Further, most Afro-Mexicans talk about themselves as *moreno* (of dark skin) rather than *negro* (black, an ontological-existential and phenotypical identity category): marking a legacy of coloniality that makes evident the success of the whitening project of *mestizaje*. In my approach to what would become my research, I had been encouraged to perhaps *bracket* the question and/or explicit languaging of "blackness" as an identity category all together. I had all of this clear but began to ask myself: What contribution would/could I be making both to Afro-Mexican people's lives *and* to the scholarly work already being done or that had already been done in these communities?

The longer I stayed in San Cristóbal, the more questions emerged: What would it mean for me to come into a community like Chacahua where daily life had clearly not benefited from either foreign or local scholars' work? What did "benefit" mean outside a model of intervention/philanthropy? Where did/could decolonial imperatives exist? Starting from the question of the decolonial option (Mignolo, 2011), further inquietudes arose: How was I going to actively move *against* extractivist scholarship toward which decolonial

⁶ Maroon villages were the villages formed by *cimarrones*. *Cimarrones* have been traditionally defined as Africans who escaped from their Spanish masters (and now the word is also being used for their descendants as a term of reclamation of their heritage).

methodologies and intellectual activism strive?⁷ How would I use decolonial logics as an important framing for every step of my work: methodology (the *how* and *from where* of the research and the writing); epistemology (from *which* sites of knowledge production); pedagogy (learning *from* political moments); and aesthetics (questioning the ocularcentrism of colonial history and activism, and engaging sensing-knowing-feeling as part of the process)?

I found myself facing one glaring oversight: if we bring in the question of black diaspora and contemporary movements, how does the historiography of Afro-Mexican and Afro-descendancy in México multiply and destabilize? In response to this question, I began to come to terms with my antiquated, however commonplace, notion and definition of Afro-descendancy and blackness in México. This implies that we cannot isolate Afro-descendancy to coastal towns in México without replicating current ideological formations and exclusions, even as they are replicated in scholarship. That is, to go to the coast would have been to reiterate presumptions about homogenous location. I recognized that inland locations like San Cristóbal, where I already was – with all of its hybridity, heterogeneities and sites of struggle – could offer a complex and nuanced location for contending with intersections of blackness and diasporic belonging. San Cristóbal became my field site.

Finally, perhaps *more* important than focusing on what scholars from outside of these communities have done, we must also ask what Afro-Mexicans and Afro-descendants are already doing and continue to do. My time in Chiapas helped me to develop a much more nuanced understanding of the *luchas* occurring in the *Costa Chica* by those living them. Not

⁷ Walter D. Mignolo (2011) defines the decolonial option (and epistemic disobedience) as, "a set of projects that have in common the effects *experienced* by all the inhabitants of the globe that were at the receiving end of global designs to colonize the economy (appropriation of land and natural resources), authority (management by the Monarch, the State, or the Church), and police and military enforcement (coloniality of power), to colonize knowledges (languages, categories of thoughts, belief systems, etc.) and beings (subjectivity)" (p. 46). The decolonial option is a series of projects (producers of *other* epistemes) that do not rely on previous systems and oppressions for their validation or development. They fall under the basic premise, as the Zapatistas might say, that "*otros mundos son posibles*" (other worlds are possible).

all groups of Afro-mestizos and Afro-Mexicans on the *Costa Chica* live in denial of their heritage, though their resources are still far scarcer than they should be. There is, in many ways, an active revolution in black consciousness happening in many towns in the *Costa Chica*. It has been going on as long as black people have been in México, with a more recent upsurge in community organizations. They do not need anyone to come in and help them organize—such ideas reinforce many problems of colonialism, paternalism, and imperialism: things I was worried about reproducing and had no desire to participate in. The people living there and defending their heritage are wary of intellectuals who want to come in and reproduce research that is purely extractivist, even if the participation in the community is nice while it lasts.

There are numerous organized groups throughout México that have made and continue to make tremendous headway in securing rights, advancing black consciousness, mobilizing collective organization, developing Afro-Mexican scholarship, and promoting the arts. Their work is important, necessary, path-breaking and powerful. Many of these organizations are led by women. Groups like these are emerging in different parts of México, not just in coastal towns. Two of the major groups in Chiapas are: Red de Mujeres Indígenas y Afrodescendientes de Chiapas (REMIAC, the Network of Indigenous and Afro-descendant Women of Chiapas) in Tuxtla Gutierrez, Chiapas (the capital of Chiapas), and Afrodescendencia México (Afro-descendancy México) based in San Cristóbal de las Casas. REMIAC is invested in building alliances between indigenous, Afro-descendant, and Afro-indigenous women from Chiapas and Afrodescendencia México is devoted to building a platform for academic contributions from scholars in México and South America through annual congresses. I am particularly indebted to the work of these groups insofar as each has encouraged Afro-Mexicans and Afro-descendants to question and come closer to their roots. Simultaneously, what I quickly understood as I began to reorient the direction of my work, is

that there are diasporic subjects, like the women I feature here, who do not identify with established organizations in part because of the pluriversality of their histories and in part because they practice activism in the intimate resistances of their daily lives. It is within these tensions that I uplift their stories and situate my contribution.⁸

The Problem & Foundational Premise

The problem of injustice that scholars of Afro-México have devoted their careers responding to—the erasure of Afro-descendants in México’s history and culture—underlies my research. The problem of erasure is complicated by internalized denial of blackness and Afro-descendancy by Afro-Mexicans and Afro-descendants throughout the country. I value the groundwork that has been laid responding to these conundrums and the lack of socio-political recognition. My research is based on the following social justice problem, with historic and personal erasure as underlying problems: there is a *total* absence of rigorous engagement with the black diaspora as a performative matrix from which to work, think, and be with Afro-descendants in Chiapas (and in México writ large). Accordingly, many Afro-descendants and Afro-Mexicans struggle to name their lived experiences and to delve into their histories. When their histories are expected to fit within the linear constructs of homogenous coastal zones, their histories find no place. Then, what happens with Afro-Mexicans and Afro-descendants in heterogeneous city centers, like San Cristóbal de las Casas, where there is no “black community”? Subjectivities and nuances of Afro-descendant histories become flattened, static, essentialized, and repetitive if we do not contend with the diaspora. My dissertation is devoted to beginning to address this gap in knowledge.

Historical and anthropological/sociological work simply has not yet accounted for the fullness of the black diaspora in México in spatializing practices and in everyday life. I

⁸ Pluriversality begins from refusing the idea of universality as a point of departure. I will explore this in more depth in Chapter Two.

choose to include both Afro-Mexicans and Afro-descendants as necessary partners in re-thinking the black diaspora and black geographies from San Cristóbal de las Casas, Chiapas, México. It is essential to think of space along black geographic lines that are not limited to any one Nation State so that we can account for racialized histories and find other ways of doing and being in the world. Boyce Davies and M'Bow (as cited in McKittrick & Woods, 2007) sift blackness through diaspora in order "to understand the geopolitics of diaspora" and locate blackness and Afro-descendancy in more expansive and accurate terms (p. 8). I find the *geopolitics of diaspora* to be a poignant and timely site of vindication for Afro-descendant peoples' lives and histories in San Cristóbal.

McKittrick and Woods' (2007) version of a *geopolitics of diaspora*, read in the context of San Cristóbal, provides new terms of engagement. Regarding the *geopolitics of diaspora*, McKittrick and Woods say:

It refers to the dispersal of Africans through *voluntary* migrations (pre-Columbian Atlantic and Indian Ocean trade and exploratory journeys), *forced* migrations (Indian Ocean and transatlantic slavery over at least four centuries in the modern period), and *induced* migrations (the more recent dispersal of African peoples based on world economic imbalances in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries). (2007, p. 14)

I add to their definition of *voluntary*, *forced*, and *induced* migrations (emphasis theirs), an extended temporality to each—*voluntary* and *induced* in particular—to locate these possibilities *within* the last century. Including contemporary concerns, we must take full (or a fuller) account of aftershocks of historical longevities of dispersal and how necessities of movement and migration continue to shift Afro-descendants around the globe.

Afro-Mexicans and Afro-descendants (slippery terms I will address in full later) are co-partners in a matrix of identity-formation under *this* form of diasporic subjecthood. I echo what McKittrick and Woods (2007), ask: "In what ways can induced human scatterings

indicate new forms of citizenship wherein the links between ethnicity and place are not essentially bound to one another?” (pp. 8-9). In settings where nationalism reigns, this question is paramount. Nationalism is particularly strong in México. New forms of citizenship are not limited to passports and nationalist identity formations and projects of subjecthood. I endeavor to crack open nationalist characteristics in favor of a vision that includes the *geopolitics of diaspora*.

From these starting points, the foundational hypothesis and premise of this dissertation is: In the social, political, and historical context of Chiapas, México, claiming and performing blackness through Afro-descendancy, even and *particularly* as a response to illegibility, is *intimate justice work* that is *profoundly political* and *necessary*. Claiming and performing blackness is an *essential* part of resituating blackness within the Mexican social imaginary, in the context of a larger black diaspora. Contending with this premise, and in concert with diasporic thinking, I hold myself accountable to not re-inscribing geographic, epistemological, or theoretical provinciality, even as this project is geopolitically specific in its enunciation from San Cristóbal. Foregrounding this hypothesis, I continue to leave my research questions open to interrogation and elaboration as I learn new information.

Primary and Subordinate Questions

Primary Questions

My primary research questions are driven by the possibility of forms of self-description, meaning-making, and subjective identification-in-diasporic relation for Afro-descendants and Afro-Mexicans living in San Cristóbal de las Casas, Chiapas, México. I am driven by the following primary questions: (1) How do Afro-descendants in San Cristóbal come to understand themselves as black people within a cultural context that denies both Afro-descendant lineage and black identity? (2) What strategies of subjectivity-as-resistance do people use in order to understand their blackness and create their own *referentes*? (3)

How is blackness a personal, existential, ontological, performative, and *diasporic* articulation for Chiapanecxs?⁹ (4) What are the intersections, tensions, and complexities that arise in and around black identity in Chiapas that are not limited to black identity? (5) Can/does blackness exist within the pervasive context of Mexican nationalism when in most cases it is always already diasporic? (6) How is justice work as *an intimate practice* animated by deep listening and story? I leave these questions as open reference points that allow us to challenge the problem of limiting blackness to geography and visibility. Simultaneously, I want to situate the contexts that *produce* certain readings of Afro-descendancy, blackness, and belonging even as these enclosures are challenged by diasporic forms of relation.

Subordinate Questions Driving the Chapters

Subordinate questions to my primary research questions arose in conversation with the two major modifiers and intersections of my project: gender and performance. Gender and performance destabilize essentialized notions of “women” or “womanhood” as I think about three oral history performances of *mujeres afrodescendientes* in San Cristóbal de las Casas. The performative natures of oral history and the process of reflexive identity-formation produce varied possibilities and renderings. The following questions, linking black diaspora, gender, and performance, are open provocations that illuminate nuanced understandings of both Afro-descendancy and blackness for diasporic women in San Cristóbal de las Casas, Chiapas, México.

Thinking with Maritea Daehlin Xichet Kanda, in Chapter Two I ask the following questions: (1) What does/can it mean to belong/seek belonging in San Cristóbal de las Casas for black women who do not have Mexican citizenship but have spent the majority of their lives in San Cristóbal? (2) How are static notions of geography reconfigured through

⁹ I use the gender neutral “x” in “Chiapanecxs” (pronounced “Chiapa-neques”) to honor plural genders rather than posit Chiapanencas and Chiapanecos as the only options.

contending with black diaspora and black geographies? (3) What are the politics of relationality when alliances stretch across nations, colors, continents, and oceans? (4) What role does ancestrality play in life and art-making practices? (5) With what kind of ontological gathering do Afro-descendant women in México find themselves faced?

Thinking with Jalila Gómez, in Chapter Three, I ask the following questions:

(1) What is a performative *doing of* blackness in the context of San Cristóbal? (2) What kinds of black double consciousness and cognitive dissonance present themselves for women in San Cristóbal, specifically, and what are the larger implications of these two forces in México? (3) What does performing blackness, vis-a-vis Afro-descendancy, look like, sound like, and feel like? (4) What possibilities for re-signification exist with daily performances of blackness? (5) What is the role of black feminism in the formation of subjectivity through un-becoming?

Thinking with Berenice Aguilar Vera, in Chapter Four, I ask the following questions:

(1) How do operations of race and power affect women's relationships to their blackness over time and space? (2) What social-historical-political forces of racialization underlie a lifetime of denial? (3) How *must* we think about "silence" differently in order to listen to oral history performances with clarity and precision? (4) How and what is the work of reconciling black identity once it comes full force into women's lives in Chiapas? (5) What signification practices are enabled by connecting black identity and performance?

I want to highlight a few of the provocations and implications of these sub-questions within the context of performances of diasporic blackness in the lives of women in San Cristóbal de las Casas, Chiapas, México.¹⁰

¹⁰ It is crucial to note that the three women I interviewed are of a class and professional background that positions them in positions of power and agency over their lives. None of these women could be considered lower or working class. That is to say that discrimination and vulnerabilities of violence do not cross Maritea, Jalila, or Berenice's lives like they might for lower-income women.

Implications of Research Questions

Three major implications surface with my initial questions. One of the implications is: racial justice can be an *intimate process* of un-becoming for Afro-descendant and black women in México. Intimacy works against the nihilism common in both activist work and defenses of “citizenship.” Moving away from nihilism and into intimate spaces of resistance implies nurturing an ethos of rigor and privacy through diasporic black subjectivity. Intimate processes—quodidian modes of activism—unsettle activist ideas of progress and public resistance as the *only* forms of resistance. Intimate processes also challenge hierarchies of what it means to be active in historical processes by asking what internal processes do for transformative justice.

Another implication that arises by entering the conversation from a black diasporic perspective is: we are allowed/must give ourselves permission to think extra-territorially by imagining further possibilities *with* Afro-descendancy and Afro-Mexicanness. Geography and relations can be reconfigured and reimagined through temporally and physically distended axes of belonging. Black diasporic subjects can name the terms of their engagement with black subjectivity, without the need to signal an authenticating original example upon which to posit their existence. They may even name their existence *outside of* hegemonic and legitimizing discourses of History and nationality.

A final implication I would like to name here is: racial reconciliation could be possible through the active *doing* and *performing of* subjectivities-in-relation. The work of reconciliation with racial heritage provoked by deep storying allows Afro-descendants to both witness their own processes and invite outside witnesses. Inherent contradictions and tensions born in meaning-making practices rise to the surface and can be reckoned with as open life practices of subjectivities always-in-construction.

In order to engage a robust exploration of my research questions and their implications—always refusing conclusive and closed answers—I turn to critical/performance ethnography and oral history performance as methods that chart the path.

Methodological Matrix/Modes of Walking and Listening

Critical/Performance Ethnography & Ethics

Critical/performance ethnography “begins with an ethical responsibility to address processes of unfairness or injustice within a particular lived domain,” which above, I have begun to outline (Madison, 2012, p. 5). Madison (2012) asks that the critical ethnographer acknowledge the conditions in the particular lived reality that he/she is interested in, particularly when these conditions are not as they *could* be. I see that Afro-descendant populations and people in Chiapas *could be* seen as part of the full community for the contributions they and their Afro-descendant predecessors have made to Chiapas and to México, *in the context of the black diaspora*. In my particular project, as a subset to what *could be*, I witness Afro-descendants who are *not* part of homogenous coastal communities and who instead exist in the urban center San Cristóbal de las Casas.

Critical/performance ethnography *insists* that we be accountable to the consequences of our representations and the implications of our messages. It invites an “ethics of accountability” and stresses that we remain critical of our own subject positions and how such positions influence our research location and interpretations (Madison, 2012, p. 9). Our accountability also applies to the terminology and theory we use in our analyses of primary material. I remain accountable to my communities and to my commitment to produce knowledge from non-canonical centers.

Critical/performance ethnography consists of deep listening (with the entire body) and rigorous observation of a particular field site. My fieldwork period occurred between May of 2014 and July of 2015, living alongside and with community members in San Cristóbal de las

Casas, Chiapas. Listening is complemented by the collection, recording, and coding of live interviews, with correct permissions. Observation is complemented by archiving what is seen, witnessed, felt, and experienced. The research work included a total of eight oral history interviews and numerous informal conversations and encounters. Throughout this time, I continued to participate in daily life practices and community events, within and beyond the context of the dissertation, slowly building relationships and gaining trust as I became a community member of San Cristóbal de las Casas, Chiapas, México.

I introduce a slash between critical and performance (critical/performance) in ethnographic practice borrowing from what I learned in Professor Renee Alexander Craft's methods course, Critical/Performance Ethnography. I see this slash as an acknowledgment of how critical and performance are constitutive practices of analysis. I would also argue that critical/performance ethnography is a decolonizing method. We are not only asked to be self-reflexive and positioned, but also how ethnography can actually *participate in* and *be accountable to* unjust local realities in the context of global problematics. Performance does the work of decolonizing ethnographic method by requiring heightened awareness and intentionality behind where and how we perform in the field and how our work circulates in the world and for whom.

Community observation and participation in an “interpretive community” has meant dialoguing with and taking in the richness and painful contradictions of the historical site of San Cristóbal de las Casas. San Cristóbal is an internationally renowned site of political insurgence. It has become an international destination for leftist, socialist, radical, and anarchist activists and intellectuals, largely due to the Zapatista movement and its ongoing success and world-wide influence as a model of indigenous revolt (full context on this later).

The co-existence of Zapatismo and Afro-descendancy continues to add an endlessly-tense layer to my analysis. I have had to deepen my understanding of indigenous autonomy

and racism since my first human rights trip to Chiapas in 2007. Afro-descendancy, in many ways, has different battlefronts and struggles than indigeneity does. I hold these complexities and tensions together, in the face of the mutual threat of México's narco-terror government, while striving to honor each of these struggles in their various intersecting and overlapping lines. Critical/performance ethnography allows me to do so.

Critical/performance ethnography requires an ethical contribution (in symbolic or other ways) of the researcher to the community in which we research and participate in as interlocutors. As an ongoing community member, artist, and activist in San Cristóbal, I gained the trust of many through my work as an active and visible participant in political, artistic, and everyday life. I have and continue to participate in community work far beyond the bounds of the dissertation project. I did not integrate myself in the community with professional goals or ideals only, but out of conviction and commitment to the political life of San Cristóbal.

Within the work, I situate myself as a "co-performative witness" which means that as a critical/performance ethnographer, I am directly engaged in the production of the performances that I researched and documented (Conquergood, 2002, p. 149). My ethical role is one of an active and engaged devoted receiver, always co-creating knowledge and intentionally nurturing ongoing dialogues in the community.

As an active community member and co-performative witness, I simultaneously acknowledge my position as a privileged doctoral researcher from a United States institution with a U.S. passport. I also acknowledge that my trilingual knowledge ability (English, Spanish, and Portuguese) places me in the position to communicate across languages and cultures. It has been a privilege to have the educational and travel access to acquire these languages. It is my responsibility to honor the languages and cultures that appear in this work in multiple iterations and in acts of ethical translation. I engage with my institutional and

linguistic privileges from a place of gratitude and abundance, meant to be outwardly shared. Such tools allow me to do the work in communities in which I want to be doing the work. I do not represent the homogenized fallacy of “the academy” of the United States, as if it were ever a cohesive entity, nor do I reject all institutional support for the purposes of making a political point. I insist that an insider/outsider position is both possible and *necessary*. In this sense, I again honor my *nepantlera* self.

Critical/performance ethnography proposes different possibilities for interview encounters. For the purposes of my study, I turn to oral history performance for what it allows me to hear and see. I choose to elaborate upon three of the eight oral history interviews I conducted with community members in San Cristóbal de las Casas, Chiapas. I interviewed five women and three men between the ages of twenty-nine and fifty-five, in total. Here, I focus on three of these interviews with women between the ages of thirty and thirty-six that serve as the primary material of this dissertation project. Each self-identify as Afro-descendant. I refer to them throughout as my *compañeras*: comrades. None of my interlocutors were approached based on phenotype, citizenship status, or political activism. I chose my interlocutors based on their identification with their Afro-descendancy as residents in México alone, regardless of when they started to identify as such or how far into this process they have gone.

I remain optimistic and inspired by the role of oral history performance and the storying that people perform to shape their life-worlds. I am particularly interested in what happens when these stories are put in relation. With the inevitable tensions and challenges that arise between quotidian modes of resistance/existence and the differential temporalities and prerogatives of systemic change, I sustain that oral history performance is a necessary political intervention. It has the potential for significant pedagogical repercussions in reworking social imaginaries. In this case, oral history performances elucidate intimate

encounters with individuals' Afro-descendancy and heritages that have led them to particular performances of blackness. I also insist that oral history makes significant headway in elaborating life practices, sharing and enlivening layers of personal memories that make dismissal of particular individuals uncouth, even as these divisions in activist work happen. Given these observations, I have chosen to make center oral history work an intellectual and relational contribution to San Cristóbal de las Casas.

Oral History Performance: Primary Material and *Cosmoaudiciones* of Listening

The Oral History Encounter as Performance

I begin each chapter asking, “what does this oral history perform and how does each *compañera* perform her oral history?” I focus on these three histories for the purpose of an in-depth analysis of the performances of blackness that unfold. The performances exist beyond the focus of black subjectivity alone and are constituted by a larger panorama of black women’s lives. I emphasize women’s voices to begin to situate the many modifiers of black subjectivity as they intersect with gender, ethnicity, artistry, and other *material* layers. My role as an interlocutor with these *compañeras* and their oral histories is not to place value judgments on what they have told, to speak for them, or to fact-check their memories. Rather, it is my desire to open up—vis-a-vis their oral history performances—intimate portraits of black lives and to provide a cultural-theoretical reading of the implications of their stories and performances.

I am invested in the performances of the oral history encounters themselves *and* their poetic engaged re-telling through reading/listening with the oral histories as-performance texts. My readings and analyses are inductive to these encounters. Della Pollock (2005) explains how many use oral histories in similar projects, saying, “Oral historians and performance scholars/practitioners are increasingly discovering shared and complementary investments in orality, dialogue, life stories, and community-building or what might more

generally be called *living history*” (p. xiii, emphasis hers). The life stories that were generously shared with me, and that I share here, serve as living histories that I hope provide a sensuous landscape to the ever-growing archive of Afro-Mexican histories. As a performance artist and oral historian, I wish to bring a particular sensibility to embodied listening as a praxis given my experiences across these ways of knowing. I turn again to Pollock's work in particular—my greatest scholarly inspiration for approaching research via oral history and intellectual-activism—to chart the path.

Pollock (1999) explicates how oral history performs through birth stories. I want to briefly animate some particularities of her method that inspire and guide my considerations for reading and dialoguing with these performances of Afro-descendancy. Wrestling with how to turn her oral history work into a coherent narrative of storytelling for her book, Pollock (1999) explains, “I have reread these stories through my own memory, body, and imagination, trying at every turn to find what, if anything, was illuminating in my response, what I could return to the story and the reader” (p. 23). She grapples with the researcher's position of power in being able to “shape, tame, appropriate, and control the worlds he or she investigates” while feeling “unnerved and overwhelmed” (1999, p. 23). At the same time, always reflexively engaged, she insists upon “the integrity of my own perspectives, my own theoretical and critical sensibilities, without which a dialogue, in the hardest and most meaningful sense of the word, could not have occurred” (1999, p. 23). Similarly, I have had to continually grapple, in a necessarily never-ending process, with multiply-privileged positions of power as a researcher, performance artist, and oral historian. I never take for granted the potentials and possibilities I have for responsible witnessing. I choose to go into this territory of co-constructive world-making through oral history performance, in a constantly reflexive mode, rather than shy away from such engagements. Through this

ongoing work, I trust that the readings that come out of my memory, body, and sensibilities will also have a basis in dialogic encounter and sound engagement.

With these considerations and forms of reflexivity present, I share and return to Pollock's (2005) explication of the performance of the oral history encounter:

The interview involves its participants in a heightened encounter with each other and with the past, even as each participant and the past seem to be called toward a future that suddenly seems open before them, a future to be made in talk, in the mutual embedding of one's vision of the world in the other's. The interviewer is her/himself a symbolic presence, standing in for other, unseen audiences and invoke a social compact: a tacit agreement that what is heard will be integrated into public memory and social knowledge in such a way that, directly or indirectly, it will make a material difference. (p 3)

The “heightened encounter” that generates “a future made in talk” with the “tacit agreement” that the interviewee's words will “make it into public memory” and have “a direct or indirect material difference” is the ambiance of the performance of the oral history encounter. The oral history performances, guided by my *compañeras*, and my cultural readings of particular realities they animate and unfold, intend to contribute to public knowledge production firstly *by* and *for* black people in México and in the diaspora. In ongoing dialogic knowledge production, the oral histories and readings secondarily desire to perform out to the world and bring greater awareness of the complexities of diasporic subjectivities in San Cristóbal.

In order to hold the oral history performances from a space of embodied listening, and to understand oral history *as* performance, I have approached listening practices from a very particular space.

Developing a Listening Practice in Chiapas

Living in San Cristóbal, I quickly became invested in studying a non-European language. All indigenous groups are descendants of Mayans who, over time, divided into different ethnic groups with their own languages and traditions. I took a number of courses in Tsotsil, one of the most prominent indigenous groups *and* languages spoken in Chiapas. I was struck by the integration of their entire world view in the linguistic form. I was also struck by how much more of the body (lungs, diaphragm, throat) is required to produce the sounds used in each utterance. For example, “How are you?” or “¿como estás?” in Spanish is “K'uch elan avonton,” in Tsotsil. This translated to, “How is your heart today?” In-built in the language is not just a quick “How are you?” (with a sometimes-underlying hope that that the respondent will not give a long-winded answer). Rather, the question seems to be, “What is your emotional state in this present day and moment and how is your heart doing?” as my teacher explained. Indigenous world views cross all afro-diasporic identities here, given Chiapas's racial and ethnic compositions. Afro-descendant, in a great majority of cases—also true of two of the three *compañeras* cited here—almost *always* means afro-indigenous. Even for those whom this is not the case, their life and political practices are bound-up in the daily indigenous worldviews, including social and thought-life landscapes, present throughout this region.

Tojolabales are another of the major Mayan-descendant ethnic groups in Chiapas. In tojolabal *cosmovisión* (world view), you cannot speak and listen at the same time.¹¹ While this seems like a straightforward formulation for all communication practices, it is not embedded nor embodied in Western language practices in the same manner. Arguably, it is scripted out of many of the Romance languages from the beginning. For example, as

¹¹ Unlike the idea of “world views” espoused in the title of racist tale after racist mythological tale of particular members of Mayan ethnic groups (as I will explain in the section on context), I also find it important to highlight powerful elements of the actual world views in conversation with afro-descendancy. Posing such groups against one another is surely unproductive if not also dismissive and reductive.

exemplified in the work of Carlos Lenkersdorf (2008), after having lived and worked with Tojolabales for many years, he elaborates a useful comparison between Spanish and Tojolabal. In Spanish you would say, “yo te dije,” or “I told you” (Lenkersdorf, 2008, p. 13). The equivalent in Tojolabal is “yo te dije, tú escuchaste” or “I told you, you listened” (Lenkersdorf, 2008, p. 13). The emphasis here is language's dialogic nature, making each side of the exchange indispensable. The listening exchange is not limited to two individuals conversing, but rather, all the people and experiences each individual brings with them.

The fundamental difference in the Tojolabal language, and other indigenous languages in this region, is the shift from *cosmovisión*, or world view, to *cosmoaudición*, or view of the world embedded in holding space for listening “audición,” or “hearing.” *Audición* moves beyond an occidental definition of the passivity of what is “heard” and instead invokes a hearing that is part of a world view of *active listening* (Lenkersdorf, 2008, p. 17). Lenkersdorf (2008) explains that the problem lies in the structure and teaching of Western world views: listening is not a productive action; instead, *Tojolabal cosmoaudiciones* teach the “receptive act of listening” that “transforms us even when we do not expect it to” (p. 18). This praxis of listening requires an openness to witness and to receive what we are being told. It is a subject-subject relation so that intersubjectivity is possible. In such practice, we cannot format our response while we are being spoken to since our response is an embodied listening practice, rather than a prefabricated verbal reaction.

I insist that other world views of listening are active performance practices in oral history performance. Oral history performances animate realms unseen and arguably unseeable by traditional constructs of visibility and singular world views. Listening becomes the capacity to actively hold space for the person who is speaking. I consider this a similar method and question to what the incomparable Dwight Conquergood (1985) coined as “dialogic performance,” or “a way of having an intimate conversation with other people and

cultures” (p.10). He said, "Instead of speaking about them, one speaks to and with them. The sensuous immediacy and empathic leap demanded by performance is an occasion for orchestrating two voices, for bringing together two sensibilities" (1985, p. 10). Performance, for Conquergood (1985), was the way two voices could come together ethically and each have their “own integrity” (p. 10). In the context of Chiapas, México, these situated *cosmoaudiciones* keep oral history performance as a method contextually accountable and holistically present. *Cosmoaudiciones* allow me to read and listen to oral histories *as* performance anew.

Oral History *as* Performance

Oral history *as* performance is the core of this study. Speaking alongside and with a brilliant group of interlocutors, *compañeras*, teachers and friends, endless information and knowledge transfer becomes available to dialogue with and to witness. In sharing some of the primary contentions of the *compañeras* in this study, there is much to learn about diasporic blackness in San Cristóbal from the women who have lived it. Learning starts from the performance of the oral history encounter. I bear witness and listen to the performances embedded in and brought forth through the oral histories of my *compañeras*.

Oral histories *as* performance are meanings made, storied and shared in exaltations, laughter, pauses, doubts, word choice, genealogical digging, song, intonation, gestures, embodiment and decisions about *how* to story. Some of these decisions are intentional and others come out in the moment of storying or even after the performance. Oral history *as* performance is heightened telling brought forth in relation to a devoted witness. It enlivens lived experience and facilitates the creation of memory synapses. I listen to my *compañeras* words and to the instincts behind what they share as each stories her own story.

Oral histories *as* performances are poetic justice. Poetry maps the sinews that build the ligaments of new histories wrought in telling. In the struggle to name the unnamable and to say the unsayable, the poetry of oral history performance guides our praxis.

Positioning Myself as a Black Transfeminist Performance Artist

Interpellation: Beyond Compartmentalization

As ethical praxis of listening to and dialoguing with women's voices in San Cristóbal de las Casas means, I cannot take a single aspect of my positionality for granted. Shannon Rose Riley (2009) proposes considering the field through the practice of performance to emphasize the power dynamics at play and the moments of intercultural contact that occur (pp. 214-215). Dwight Conquergood's (1985) contribution to performance ethnography is consistent with Riley's, insisting, "Dialogical performance celebrates the paradox of how the 'deeply different can be deeply known without becoming any less different'" (p. 10). Rather than take on a performative characterization of myself, as with Riley's (2009) "Miss Translation," I depart slightly from her formulation. I go into field work in the performance of myself in-transition, with different afro-diasporic geographies crossing my body as a biracial and transmasculine African American person.¹² In San Cristóbal, I perform *into* my blackness. I have come into conversation with my shifting feelings and approximations that have ultimately also made me think of myself as a diasporic subject. By performing *into* my sense of diasporic agency and subjectivity, I expose my intimate wrestling with a complex and multi-centered body and being.

Why claim my blackness as central as a biracial person? I do not wish to assume the dichotomous logics of the one drop rule or whitening projects. Instead, through this work, I

¹² Coleman is my father's family name. Chávez is an acquisition of a chosen family name and one I have decided to honor and keep. This decision is coupled by anthropological digging in my own roots that lead me to lines of *latinidad* that I desire a deeper reckoning with in the coming years. As a temporary resident in México, my desire one day is to have dual belonging and live my life as a bridge between black and brown lives between the Global North and Global South.

have been interpellated to center my blackness like never before. Rather than performing anyone's stories back to them, I perform *with* them through the interpellative forces of their telling. They have sunk into the very fiber of my ancestral memories and called forth my will to existence as someone who moves and lives between the US-South and the Mexican South.

As a performance artist doing field work, I continually resignified my back as a site for re-writing my black history—a history that takes into account my enslaved ancestors as third generation post-slavery. Since San Cristóbal has been the home of my performance work, intellectual processes, and transitions the last three years, these performative creations are intimately bound up in my black subjectivity and ancestry. The inverted tattooed map of the Americas on the skin-canvas of my back was one of the many performance actions developed in this *pueblo* in a community of performance interlocutors. My back has become a site I continually re-situate and reappropriate so that it is no longer a space of punishment—an ancestral memory I have sensed profoundly with/in me—but a site of agency. I resonate with Aimee Carrillo Rowe's (2008) assertion: "the color line is my spine" (p. xix). I know this spine carries stories of lives undone by coloniality's blaze. I bring my history, subjectivity, and performing body to bear on my entrance into and engagement with all of this work and all of my *compañeras*.

Transfeminism and Anti-Patriarchal Urgencies

Transfeminism has also allowed me to position myself in relation to black feminism and black femininity, as I began a major gender transition as a non-binary transmasculine person very early on in fieldwork in Chiapas. Transfeminism as political movement, theory, and discourse, I argue, brings together the goals and ideals of particular genealogies of black feminism with an expanded notion of non-binary gender politics and a greater militancy of intersectional feminism. (I say this acknowledging that much of transfeminism has not yet done the full work of decentering whiteness as center.) As a political practice, transfeminism

stands on the frontlines for all subjectivities that suffer violence (its imminent and omnipresent threat) in the context of patriarchy. I feel an *urgency* to constantly create coalitions against patriarchy. Transfeminism is not limited to binary, biological, or stereotyped definitions of gender formation nor does it create exclusive clubs of belonging. Trans is a prefix meant in motion as in “across,” “beyond,” “through,” or “changing thoroughly.” It is not meant to simply be inclusive of transgender or transsexual identities. To define it as such would revoke and misuse its power as a modifier and practice in motion.

Transfeminism permits me to position myself in response to the question: “who am I to write a dissertation that focuses on stories of cisgender women as someone who has chosen to honor their transmasculinity?” Rather than forefront having lived most of my life as woman of color as a privileged place of enunciation, “justify” my position by my rejection of the rhetoric of having been “born in the wrong body,” *or* feel “legitimated” by my rejection of the term “man,” I refuse all self-righteous assertions. I do not claim to represent non-binary transmasculinity. Instead, I want to challenge the overly-simplified and sanitized notions of “justification” and “legitimacy.”¹³ I also wish to complicate the category of “woman” as a singly-definable location in-relation. Transfeminism helps me do all of this and to live a transition that is both non-binary and feminist at its core.

In scholarly work and in this project, I actively choose to center the experiences of black women in conversation with the experiences of other minority sub-groups whose lives are infiltrated by the constant risk of patriarchy’s blows. Rather than assume a patriarchal masculinity that is the very site of the worst violences and atrocities humanity has committed, it is part of my life project to radically inhabit and live a re-writing of masculinity from

¹³ It is also crucial to note that I will not speak of my field partners as “women of color” because this is a term with a particular trajectory in the United States. While I lived as a woman of color, my *compañeras* have not because “woman of color” is very particular to the geopolitical reality of the United States.

someone assigned female at birth who has chosen to honor a multi-gendered self. My gender is a palimpsest: traces of all that my gender has been remain present in my becomings.¹⁴ Rather than a rejection of my femininity, my gender performance is a *yes, and* gesture towards a spiritual and ancestral transition in-motion that desires to dis-identify from all of the worst forms of masculinity, so as to render it unrecognizable. Without feminism, none of this is possible. As poetic positionality, I proudly assert that there is a large part of me that will always be a black woman. These hands—hands my family has called my grandmother’s hands—move across this keyboard and write this dissertation.¹⁵ In my writing practice and life praxis, feminism is my point of departure.

Rationale and Contributions to the Field(s)

I center *thought practices* rather than locate scholarly work strictly under the auspices of “studies.” Thought practices are not mutually exclusive from my location as a performance studies, black diaspora studies, cultural studies, and Latin American studies scholar. Working from this perspective, I hope to avoid falling into the traps of disciplinary decadence.¹⁶ Similar to Lewis Gordon (2011), rather than beginning with disciplinary constraints and asking how to operate from within them, I have asked what my subject matter requires and from there decided what was needed to approach my research questions.

¹⁴ I am invested in the palimpsest as it relates to both gender and race. In the theoretical section on Afro-descendancy, I will attend to the genealogy of scholarly influence that has shaped my attention to the palimpsest as a layering of race and gender.

¹⁵ Positioning myself from this black woman inside of me has also been inspired by the work of friend and colleague Isaac Esau Carrillo Can. Carrillo Can is a queer Yucatecan Maya poet, artist, and scholar residing in Mérida. In his brilliant chapter, “El erotismo andrógeno en la cosmovisión y lenguaje maya,” Carrillo Can (2015) discusses the woman who resides within himself from a Mayan *cosmovisión* in his novel, *Danzas de la noche*. I am walking with him by bringing back my own Cherokee heritage as a sexually dissident person.

¹⁶ Disciplinary decadence is a phrase coined by Africana philosopher Lewis Gordon (2011). The term was created to question the capacity of a single discipline to name the world and to instead understand and attend to multiple worlds. Falling into decadence would be to believe that from the discipline of history or the discipline of literature, etc. all can be named and explained.

The stakes in this work include moving beyond and not re-inscribing the historical narrations already written about Afro-descendancy and blackness in México nor claiming to fully represent anyone or any history. I respond to this call by centering the voices of Afro-descendant women in Chiapas for the purposes of offering an elaborate engagement with the complexity of diaspora that each woman offers. This project is the first of its kind to respond to diasporic subjectivities through the lens of performance from San Cristóbal de las Casas, Chiapas, México. It is also the first to center oral history performances from this place. I hope my work will contribute to a diasporic understanding of blackness in México, outside the bounds of the histories constrained by the nation-state.

By listening intensively to a small selection of oral histories, this project limits its qualitative scope. I do not desire to make any universalizations or to draw patterns and conclusions. Rather, I wish to enliven possibilities for seeing and being open to the existence of more complex diasporic subjects in México than cleaner narratives have suggested. Performative possibilities allow for excess to be the *modus operandi* against neatly definable subjectivities.

In what follows, I will give a more in-depth history of Afro-descendancy and blackness as a social imaginary in México more broadly and in Chiapas, specifically. I wish to provide slightly more extensive locations through which to read the oral histories.

Context Matters/Contextual Matters: Grounding Socio-Historical Realities of Afro-descendancy and Blackness in Larger México and in Chiapas

Social Imaginaries and Anti-black Racism in México vis-à-vis Memín Pinguín

A contradiction I continually come up against that drives me to resituate scholarship's role in these disputes is: Afro-Mexican and Afro-descendant lives do not seem to be positively affected nor rendered in their full complexity, even as scholarly work on the topic exponentially increases. I would venture to say that this is partially due to treating such issues

as “topics” rather than dealing with concrete lives and daily existences. I also experience that the everyday social imaginary of citizens in their conceptions of blackness in México remains mostly unaffected. When using the term social imaginary, I am borrowing from Daniel H. Cabrera (2004) who understands the "image" component of the "social imaginary" as the condition of possibility and capacity for an image to come into existence as an "image of..." (p. 7). In this case, I am curious about the conditions of possibility for an image of blackness in the Mexican imaginary. Social imaginaries certainly exist as both negative and positive constructs. However, in the case of blackness in México, the conditions of possibility for blackness to even come *into* the social imaginary, and therefore into existence, are already excessively racist and highly negating.

Blackness in the mainstream Mexican imagination has nothing to do with black people. I emphasize this because of repeated citations by my *compañeras*, largely in informal conversations, of how this imagination and its mainstream caricatures, representations, and in this case, cartoons, have consistently affected their daily lives. Such images are used and cited as justifications for what many Mexicans call *racismo de baja intensidad* or "low intensity racism" (if such a thing really exists). These images are strengthened given that simultaneously, most people outside of academic circles do not read academic publications about Afro-México. I wonder how Afro-Mexican history has remained somewhat too insular an endeavor and instead how we might understand racism in conversation with diasporic relations socially. I also wonder how we might contend with what fuels racism's fire and the ongoing repercussions in México for Afro-descendants today. I also wonder how might we begin to re-form these ever-present images of blackness in many of the social imaginaries of Mexican people in order to allow new “cultural imaginaries” to emerge that include positive images of Afro-Mexicans and Afro-descendants (S. Hall, 1994, p. 226).

It is essential to situate mainstream racism in México—made for consumption—to elucidate the more recent construction of anti-blackness within the social imaginary. These representations perpetuate negative and violent images of Afro-Mexicans and Afro-descendants as well as of blackness. All point to the profound need and desire to demonize and dehumanize black bodies and histories, rendering them dismissible, ignorable, and inexistent. The images created to proliferate this mentality have been repeatedly produced for mainstream consumption and reinforced by their distribution, repetition, and uncritical reinforcement. The quintessential image is Memín Pinguín.

Memín Pinguín, or, Guillermo Pinguín, is a Mexican comic that began in 1943. Memín is a well-known and beloved cartoon character that Mexicans of all social classes of certain generations know and love. Most of the comic books have now been digitalized and are available in PDF for free download. There is a crucial detail in Memín and his mother's appearances and behaviors that make the extreme popularity of this comic both frightening and upsetting: Memín is a dark brown monkey and his mother is the quintessential image of Aunt Jemimah, Eurfrosina, whom he calls his "ma' linda."¹⁷

Moreno Figueroa and Saldivar (2015) explain that on the website, Memín is described as "...imprudent and funny, impetuous and smug; he is also lazy, ignorant, naïve, nosy, selfish although accessible and kind with his friends (who are always hitting him on the head, but consider him their most loyal friend)" (p. 3). Memín Pinguín is, without a doubt, one of the most proliferated symbols and representations of blackness in the Mexican social imaginary.

Memín was brought back to the attention of México and the U.S. in 2005 when commemorative stamps were re-printed throughout the Republic, selling out within hours (Moreno Figueroa and Saldivar, 2015, p. 4). African Americans in the United States publicly

¹⁷ Images of Memín and his mother can be found with a simple Google search.

shamed México's decision to create these commemorative stamps, but México proudly responded with retorts that make the current life of the ideological stronghold of *mestizaje* in México blatantly apparent. For example, renowned Mexican scholar and writer Elena Poniatowska was quoted saying:

In our country the image of the Blacks awakens a huge sympathy, which is reflected not only in characters like *Memín Pinguín*, but also in popular songs. Even *Cri Cri* [a famous Mexican children's song-writer] created his "little Black watermelon boy" song. In Mexico, in contrast to what happens in the United States, we have treated Blacks in a kinder way (quoted in Palapa Quijas et al., 2005). (Moreno Figueroa and Saldívar, 2015, p. 5)

Such words from Poniatowska, given her academic prestige and the vastness of her readers, are upsetting to say the very least. As an academic elite, whose novels are taught at many grade levels (novels and short stories I was also assigned in my literary education as an undergraduate in Latin American Studies), her words tend to be listened to and held in high regard. However, her posture exposes that elite education in México reinforces the idea of a México that is not racist because of its *mestizaje*, strengthening the ignorance of *mestizaje*'s foundations as an intellectual project. Pinned against the U.S., México sees itself as having superior treatment of Afro-descendants. When we look, (even from a distance), at the images that have formed the social imaginary, it does not take a magnifying glass to see how blackness has been constructed as animalistic, stereotyped, less than human, un-intelligent, subservient and otherwise completely degraded.

Social Imaginaries and the Demonization of Black Masculinity in Chiapas

The reality in Chiapas is not much different. Chiapanecan scholar Baltazár Ramos Martínez (2007) compiled a collection of short stories, told in different indigenous groups throughout Chiapas, about black men. The title of his collection *El negro en la cosmovisión*

maya: Mitos-historias con Presencia Maya (The Black Man in Mayan Cosmovision: Myth-histories with Mayan Presence) is highly misleading. The title suggests that the stories that have been shared about African and Afro-descendant men stem from the world-view, writ large, of Mayan populations. If such were the case, it would suggest a universalizing racist world-view of Mayan populations, which is simply inaccurate. What the title gets right are the historical myths that were the heirs to the conception of the idea of blackness and black men, in particular, by indigenous populations.

The text is a difficult read, however short, because it is short story after short story of black men—framed as devils—who come and steal indigenous women from their families. They tended to strike when women left their homes after dark by themselves. Black men are said to take these women to their caves, rape and impregnate them; then, the children they bear, who reach full adult size by two days old, have to help their own mothers escape. In each story, it is "El Negrito" that is the reason that families do not go out after dark.¹⁸ These stories all exist/ed in and around San Cristóbal de las Casas. One of the stories relates, "The black people were very bad; they murdered all of the people they found on their paths" (Ramos Martínez, 2007, p. 92). In story after story, black people, with the emphasis on men, are portrayed in this way, with exclamations of how *San Cristobalenses*, or the people of San Cristóbal, always feared for their lives because of the "Negritos." These myths have existed for Tseltales, Tsotsiles, Tojolabales and other Mayan ethnic groups of Chiapas since colonial times. These myths, making up a particular Chiapanecan social imaginary, continue to affect how indigenous and other populations see black men, in particular, and black people in general.

¹⁸ "El Negrito" translates to "the little black [masculine] person." However, the diminutive here is deceiving. *Negrito*, when referring to black men, is not necessarily meant out of respect but, as I read it, is meant to be a form of belittlement.

I bring up the examples of Memín Pinguín in México and folk tales from indigenous groups in Chiapas because they make manifest that part of the construction of social imaginaries in México revolves around the demonization of black masculinity. Black men, as I have learned through my study, are often the initial site of the negation of blackness in Afro-descendant families in México. If black men are represented as animals and demons, the last thing a family wants to do is side with this image and lineage. It is also the case for my three *compañeras* that their Afro-descendancy comes from their fathers and paternal families. Blackness and gender work together to dehumanize Afro-descendants in Chiapas and in México country-over. At the intersection of indigeneity, this reality is further complicated.

Black-Indigenous Relations in Chiapas & A Shifting Political Landscape

Chiapas is the poorest state in México. It also has the highest mortality index (Zebadúa, 2010, p. 16), a reality that co-exists with Chiapas's location on the international political map with the success of the Zapatista uprising in 1994—an indigenous revolt against NAFTA that resulted in the successful take-over (reclamation) of a great majority of the territory by Mayan ethnic groups in the region. It was a human rights trip with the organization Global Exchange in 2007 that first placed me in Chiapas—when I first became passionately invested in this land and its people, struggles, and history. With a small group of peers from my undergraduate class, we went into Zapatista territories to interview different members of two Zapatista communities about threats and human rights abuses. We then shared our interviews with a human rights organization to denounce the illegal abuses that were still being committed by military and paramilitary groups who more interested in turning their lands into state parks than respecting the *Acuerdos de San Andrés* or the San Andrés Accords. The San Andrés Accords were legal agreements made between the Zapatistas and the Mexican government in 1996 (two years after the uprising) that included both recognizing indigenous communities in México in the Constitution and in the peace

agreements with the Zapatistas. The accords were made to peacefully grant the Zapatistas sovereignty over their lands. For the most part, the accords have been respected, but on particular occasions since in the insurrection, paramilitary groups have infiltrated and murdered some key leaders and community members.

The Zapatistas' bold and internationally-renowned indigenous uprising, which put Chiapas on the world map, is sharply juxtaposed with the myths that have circulated in the indigenous communities about Afro-descendants, creating a fascinating and painful paradox—one I hope to understand more fully over the course of my ongoing community work in San Cristóbal. While indigenous and Afro-descendant communities face extreme racism in México, they do not always fight on the same side of the line. In Article Two of the Mexican Constitution, it claims México to be a “pluricultural nation.” However, indigenous people were only considered part of this pluriculturality with the San Andrés Accords and Afro-descendants have yet to gain federal recognition (though in the last few years the state constitutions of places like Oaxaca and the municipality of México City have achieved legal recognition) (See Folio 143 in the virtual library of Koman Iel). We must *celebrate* instead of romanticizing indigenous and Afro-descendant movements. We must ask what recognition does and for whom. For a great majority of indigenous people in México (including many, if not *most* communities in Chiapas), a life of sovereignty without poverty is still an unachievable goal due to the ongoing systemic oppression and social ostracization that legal recognition does and will not change.

Within the landscape of Zapatismo's relationship to blackness, I make note of two more glaring connections, historic and present: (1) Zapatismo takes its name from Emiliano Zapata, who was a poor peasant and one of the leading figures of the Mexican Revolution in the twentieth century. He is also known for having declared himself the “perfect *mestizo*” because he was European, indigenous and Afro-descendant. Zapatismo's founding father, so

to speak, was Afro-Mexican. (see Castro, 2013, citing Eduardo Añorve). 2) Beginning in 2013, Emory Douglas (former Minister of Culture for the Black Panther Party), and artist Caleb Duarte began a creative laboratory with Zapatista artists to explore lines of artistic identification between the Black Panther and Zapatista movements. They call this collaboration “Zapantera Negra.” What are the implications of these two lines of connectivity between Mexican blackness and African American freedom struggles as they cross Zapatismo?

Zapatismo, I argue, has not fully accounted for the blackness of its history, even though its name and lineage carry Mexican Afro-descendancy. Secondly, within the panorama of indigenous hostility towards Afro-descendants in Chiapas, I find the collaboration between the Black Panther Party and Zapatismo both fascinating and curious. *Zapantera Negra* has created incredible tapestries and murals that cross the aesthetics of Zapatismo and the Black Panther Party. I have to wonder if this artistically beautiful collaboration was only possible because the Zapatista’s engagement with blackness was coming from *outside of* México and no Afro-descendants from México have been involved in the project thus far. The *Zapantera Negra* project, as beautiful the artwork and collaboration is, *cannot* and *should not* become representative of the Zapatistas’ relationship to blackness within the bounds of México. These questions and implications warrant another dissertation, but they are crucial in setting up the panorama in Chiapas. Zapatismo and indigenous relations to blackness in Chiapas’s history, and the current shifting political landscape, make Chiapas a complex place for this work. When we locate the southern geopolitics of Chiapas, further historic and current complexities arise.

Chiapas is the southernmost state of the Republic, what is called the *frontera sur* or the southern border because it shares its border with Guatemala. The territory that is now Chiapas belonged to Guatemala until the year 1842. Chiapas feels a bit like an odd child of

México. The history and energy of the place often feel more similar to Central America than other parts of the country. It is often said that Chiapas is the forgotten state of México because it is so far South. One of its southern border cities, Tapachula, is currently home to thousands of African asylum-seekers from various countries, who are awaiting their asylum permissions from the United States. Case after case of extreme violence from immigration officials travels via word of mouth and human rights workers living and working in Tapachula. Meanwhile, the news reports on babies born of Congolese parents in Chiapas while they wait to receive their asylum permissions.¹⁹ The ongoing human rights abuses that African asylum seekers experience at the hands of the National Immigration Institute (INM) are extreme and exacerbated by the Mexican social imaginary of blackness. In many cases, asylum is not granted or it is interrupted by the corrupt interventions of Mexican immigration. The result is a new wave of African presence in Chiapas that is not going anywhere anytime soon. Given this very present human rights challenge, blackness in Chiapas is being written into the present at a rapid rate, creating subjectivities that further complicate what we think of as histories of Afro-descendancy in México.

A brief recent history of Chiapas exposes some of the tensions in the territory around blackness, indigeneity, and asylum, helping to situate an increasingly-complex terrain for any project on Afro-descendancy. It is amongst and in conversation with these striking realities and myths that I situate this work. Chiapas was a state largely forgotten by the rest of México and the world at large before Zapatismo arose. Since this time, Chiapas has become a hub for leftist, anarchist, and decolonial academics, scholars, activists, and artists from around the world. Yet, living and working here provides a less romanticized reality, even amongst the very real magic. Though gains and increased quality of life through indigenous sovereignty

¹⁹ A recent report on such a story came out in the online news portal *Minuto Chiapas*, with a smiling mother holding her baby in a pink blanket. Retrieved from: <http://www.minutochiapas.com/nace-hija-africanos-tapachula/>.

have been a reality for *some* people, the injustices (part of field work witnessing) continue: African refugees in shanty towns in Tapachula, child laborers selling toys before they can form sentences, human trafficking of underage indigenous women to *mestizo* men in exchange for food, increasing feminicide rates every year. Social justice work, for anyone with a political conscience, becomes crucial and urgent component of living life here. By way of a final contextualization, I now turn to one of the initiatives in Chiapas that has been a major player in carving out a landscape for Afro-descendancy to be seen and heard in San Cristóbal.

I ground the theoretical contentions and terminology of my project within the fullness of all aforementioned contextual, historical, and local frameworks.

Defining Terminology and Theoretical Panorama

Afro-descendants and Afro-descendancy

I come to the terminology Afro-descendant and afro-descendancy through its use in activist work within an international historical context. Afro-descendancy was only recently introduced as terminology in México, connecting Mexicans to macro-level imperatives for peoples of African descent around the globe. The terminology appeared on the international stage beginning with the 2001 World Conference Against Racism, Racial Discrimination, Xenophobia and Related Intolerance held in Durban, South Africa (Davis, 2006, p. 72). Afro-descendancy is recovered as a political marker of subjectivity that identifies people with African heritage along multiple rungs of descendancy (whether first generation or fifth, the same term is used), regardless of physical appearance or nation of origin. Afro-descendancy, as Davis (2006) points out, is also used for people of mixed-racial and ethnic backgrounds.

The Durban conference took place between August thirty-first and September eighth of 2001, bringing together an international community that was dissatisfied with efforts to combat racial discrimination, xenophobia, violence and injustices continually perpetuated

around the globe (see the full United Nations report on the Durban Conference for more detailed information).²⁰ The delegations desired to address common challenges to humanity, to guarantee access to equality, and to affirm the commitments of the United Nations Declaration of Human Rights and their implementation on local and global levels. The conference also acknowledged the historical sources of ongoing violent and discriminatory practices and the processes of globalization that contradictorily worked to obscure the ongoing manifestations of historical impacts. These issues, among many others, are what were addressed at this internationally historical conference.

Within the context of the Durban conference and what it did for Latin America, I argue in favor of centering Afro-descendancy as a marker of heritage, not at the expense of or as a form of negating the mixes often included within it, but rather as a political move against endless and incessant nationalist and imperialist whitening projects. These projects have been undertaken throughout the Americas in favor of racist Nation-State solidifications under purposeful operations and regimes of fascist whiteness (like *mestizaje*). Afro-descendancy, for the purposes of this dissertation, is always inclusive of and accounting for mixed indigenous and/or European descendancy. Purity of descendancy, in this case, simply does not exist.

According to Davis (2006), in Latin America the shift to acknowledging Afro-descendancy was historic. Davis says:

This new consciousness resulted in the historic commitment by some 20 Latin American governments to the idea that peoples of African descent: 'should be treated with fairness and respect for their dignity and should not suffer discrimination of any kind based on origin, culture, skin color, or social condition.'" (2006, p. 72)

²⁰ This report can be retrieved at <http://www.un.org/WCAR/durban.pdf>.

The decision of the twenty Latin American governments included a clause on gender, "to incorporate a gender perspective in all programmes [sic] of action against racism, racial discrimination, xenophobia, and racial intolerance..." (Davis, 2006, p. 72). The coming together of NGOs and governments from twenty countries of the thirty-three countries that make up Latin America (according to the United Nation's definition) is not an insignificant gathering.

Davis (2006) also names Afro-descendant "problematic" as a term in the English language. This is important given the international context of the Durban Conference and English's language's broad-sweeping monopoly as the international language of capitalism and global hegemony. Within these complexities, I would rescue Afro-descendancy as a necessary term given its widespread use in México and its circulation in the Spanish and Portuguese languages (*afrodescendencia*). I would also emphasize its role as an operational term for the purposes of political work and self and collective recognition for peoples of African descent. It allows for, I would argue, diasporic possibilities of collective action and for individual decisions for self-determination as black people across nations.

Afro-descendancy, as I understand it on a theoretical level, moves in the direction of what Carole Boyce Davies and Babacar M'Bow (2007) have called an "African diaspora citizenship" (p. 14). African diaspora citizenship, informed by a Pan-African perspective intends "to create an international network of ideas and practices that can then be positioned as a usable political body for the benefit of common yet separate and dispersed communities" (Boyce Davies & M'Bow, 2007, p. 15). This perspective of citizenship is not meant as a generalizing force or one that erases complexity. It is a call for relation.

Numerous thinkers from throughout the diaspora began participating in Pan-African Congresses beginning in 1919, with decolonial goals of ridding African countries from colonial rule (Boyce Davies and M'Bow, 2007, pp. 15-16). The definition of African peoples,

developed by these international thinkers is considered a "progressive advancement in the sense that it allows space for a definition of African peoples in both the broad continental and African meanings" (Boyce Davies and M'Bow, 2007, p. 16). Given the processes of free and forced migration that dispersed African peoples throughout the Americas, Europe, and Asia, Boyce Davies and M'Bow (2007) argue that this makes "Africans essentially a global people" (p. 18). The legacy of reworking African and diasporic citizenship to reconfigure the relationship to nation-state and fixed geography, makes it our responsibility, I argue, to treat Afro-descendancy in its light.

An expansive notion of citizenship is particularly relevant in the case of México given that Afro-descendants are *still* not included in the country's federal constitution. This requires a nuanced discussion in regards to nationality, migration, citizenship and diaspora. Boyce Davies and M'Bow (2007) give language to what such denials of citizenship have meant for African Americans in the United States. However, I feel their ideas also give language to what I have seen to be the case for Afro-descendants in México. They say, "...this sense of statelessness can have the effect of creating not only a sense of alienation from the nation-state but also an international African identity in the diaspora" (2007, p. 19). Some Afro-descendants in México may hold a Mexican passport but they remain extra-legal by effect of the nation-state's denial of their heritage under the auspices of the Constitution. I have witnessed a common striving for and coming-into subjectivity through an identification with the African diaspora. Statelessness in the eyes of the nation-state, then, produces a diasporic subject as is the case with each of my *compañeras*.

Though Davis (2006) marks Afro-descendant, Afro-Latin American and black as interchangeable, I will make two important distinctions. Firstly, I will not be using Afro-Latin American because in México, Afro-descendancy in a larger African diaspora has roots beyond continental locations in the Americas. Secondly, I find it very important to mark

some distinctions between Afro-descendant and black at their historical, existential, social, and political junctures as a point of analysis for diasporic possibilities. I see blackness as a grammar of Afro-descendancy where performative potentials arise. Next, then, I will define how I see blackness and what role it plays in these various analyses and political imperatives.

Strategic Essentialism

Afro-descendancy's broad reach as a recuperative term for fighting for collective justice can be considered within what Spivak (1988) called "strategic essentialism." Spivak has since revoked use of this term because of the way it has been mobilized to *promote* essentialism. I take this revocation to be an important call to read strategic essentialism in the context of its use. In a 1986 interview with Walter Adamson, Spivak explains:

In deconstructive critical practice, you have to be aware that you are going to essentialize anyway. So then strategically you can look at essentialisms, not as descriptions of the way things are, but as something that one must adopt to produce a critique of anything. (p. 51)

Essentialisms, then, according to Spivak (1986) are strategic when we recognize their inability to name the ontology of any given thing while simultaneously staking claim to definitions in order to create a productive critique. Rather than reinforce uncritical and ahistorical essentialisms, strategic essentialism provides a platform from which to critically think and organize. I am indebted to the postcolonial work of strategic essentialism for thinking about Afro-descendancy and blackness in the context of San Cristóbal.

Blackness in México and Appropriation/Re-Appropriation

Reiterating the "non-uniqueness of blackness in México" (Vaughn, 2013) from a diasporic consciousness, I want to reclaim the right and the necessity to think of blackness on transnational and in multi-lingual terms. In this sense, I see blackness, for the purposes of my project, as a modifier of Afro-descendancy. Blackness has a geopolitical debt to its

circulation within national imaginaries that must be contextualized as particular to national contexts. Yet, as a colonial maker of otherness, geographic specificity has clear limitations because of the ways that black cultural and popular performances circulate and become *referentes* for people in different parts of the globe. I understand the reclamation of blackness and calling oneself "black" as a site of historical and subjective agency, even and *also* as it is a problematic term. Like other historical terms have been used to posit certain sexual, gender, ethnic, racial, and other groups as inferior, I want to emphasize the important performance of reclaiming one's blackness as a re-appropriative and resituating strategy for using the oppressors' discourse against them.

One powerful example of re-situation from which I locate my understanding of blackness is the performance of Afro-Peruvian Victoria Santa Cruz's famous choreopoem "¡Me Gritaron Negra!" (or "they screamed 'black' at me").²¹ In the poem, Santa Cruz explains that at five years old, she first discovered that she was black because it was being screamed at her. "Y yo no sabía la triste verdad que aquello escondía" (And I did not know the sad reality that that hid). "Y me sentí negra...como ellos decían" (And I felt black, as they said). Santa Cruz goes on to express how upon learning this, she withdrew, "como ellos querían" (as they wanted), and began to straighten her hair and put powder on her face. One day she reached the point of withdrawing so much that "iba a caer" (I was going to fall). At this pivotal moment, her attitude became one of "¿Y qué?" (And what?), as the refrain "¡Negra! ¡Negra! ¡Negra!" repeats itself in unison with the chorus of black voices that accompany her. After this "And what?" moment, she explains how she stopped modifying her physical appearance and instead learned to laugh at her oppressor. Being a black woman is now about, "qué lindo

²¹ I was first introduced to Victoria Santa Cruz by colleagues in my Decolonizing Methodologies course Spring semester 2014 at Duke University. I am using the original version of the choreopoem that was more recently digitized and made available on YouTube. One of the original recordings of the poem of Santa Cruz and her poetic team can be seen on You Tube here: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bZBHvMaTiuU>. In 2015, in the Afro-Ecuadorian town of Esmeraldas, a young girl of five years re-performed this piece to international acclaim as can be seen here: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vqiB4Z4Uo1M>.

sueña" and "qué ritmo tiene" or "how lovely it sounds" and "what a rhythm it has." She expresses that she now understands, "¡ya tengo la llave!" (Now I have the key!) The choreopoem culminates in a collective crescendo of ¡NEGRO, NEGRO, NEGRO...! (BLACK, BLACK, BLACK...!) and a final collective scream, through gyrating ribs to the beat of a drum that culminates in an exhale of "¡Negro soy!" or "Black I am."

Victoria Santa Cruz's poem has become a powerful counter-interpellating force used against the colonial desire for dismissal and inferiority at the initial interpellating moment of, "¡the screamed black at!" This is the poetic value I see in claiming oneself as "black," in *many spaces and* in the context of México. I understand blackness and claiming oneself as "black" to be a counter-interpellating force of the colonial logics of racial inferiority when one re-performs themselves *as* black in response to interpellation. Blackness is a resistive cultural performance of self that does not serve as a repetition of coloniality across one's body and within one's psyche, but rather as a strategy for self-recognition, reclamation, and relocation.

In addition, I do not believe in a universal fixity of a black subject nor do I see blackness as located solely within phenotypical markers of skin color, hair, or other seemingly "obvious" physical defining features. Blackness's only authentication to be found is within Afro-descendancy. As such, I understand blackness as always already an appropriation (Johnson, 2003).

Simultaneously, I acknowledge that what our corporealities signify can oftentimes be beyond our control. These signifiers *do* change depending upon national social imaginaries and power structures. As they change, levels of privilege and risk also change. Claiming blackness both within *and* beyond social legibility is a crucial political position in México. Claiming blackness both within *and* beyond social legibility is a crucial political position in México. However, claiming blackness does not relinquish the privilege of passing as

nonblack in everyday life. In other words, geographical context matters in how we think about and are hailed or not hailed into blackness. For instance, blackness's active expendability via an ongoing police genocide met with impunity in Brazil is not comparable to the social reality of México. I believe it would be dangerous to not emphasize particular socio-historical gravities. At the same time, México's socio-historical erasure, should also be read as another form of extreme violence based in anti-blackness. In the case of México, such behavior is particular to its colonial projects of whitening. Both symbolic violence (México) and physical violence (Brazil) have grave ongoing effects.

For the purposes of my work, I understand blackness-as-performance in order to position its role in the various oral history performances and in daily life. While it is important not to collapse the drastically different historical landscapes which produced African Americanness and Afro-descendancy in the United States and México, respectively, I will emphasize that bringing the "question of blackness" to the fore requires thinking *with* some of the black scholars located in the North. We must recognize that México and the United States share the geopolitical continent of North America due to historical and political intertwining. We need only look at the signing of NAFTA (or the North American Free Trade Agreement) that connected Canada, the United States and México to understand this reality. Given that the date of the enactment of NAFTA was a strategic detonation date for the Zapatista uprising, Chiapas's place as part of North America, *and* as the *frontera sur*, is paramount. The history of North America brings together countries bound up in one another's histories and provides a crucial entrance into thinking about blackness across borders.

For this, I turn to African American performance studies scholar E. Patrick Johnson's definition of "appropriating blackness" via performance from his book *Appropriating Blackness: Performance and the Politics of Authenticity* (2003). Johnson begins his analysis

on the confluence of blackness and performance by comparing the ways in which both defy categorization (2003, p. 2). He asserts, “Blackness, too, is slippery—ever beyond the reach of one’s grasp. Once you think you have a hold on it, it transforms into something and travels in another direction” (2003, p. 2). Built into his framing is the double bind that blackness and performance share. The elusiveness of each should not discourage us from trying to “nail” them down. Johnson (2003) is interested in the dialectics of constructing/deconstructing, avowing/disavowing, and expanding/delimiting that occur in productions of blackness and how blackness, like performance, is an “elusive signifier” (p. 2).

Blackness, for Johnson, is always appropriated because of the over-determination of black authenticity, which is highly contingent on the “historical, social, political, and cultural terms of its production” (2003, p. 3). At the same time, he does not place a value judgment on desires for authenticity, claiming that when oppressed groups use authenticating discourses that enable them to go against oppressive situations, they can exert agency (2003, p. 3). Johnson (2003) and Victoria Santa Cruz are making similar gestures here.

Blackness, both within and outside of the context of the United States, according to Johnson (2003), is constructed based on the historical moment and our subject positions (p. 4). He re-signifies appropriation to pull away from its usual ascription to negative and violent colonial mimicry and subjugation. Instead, we can think of “belonging” to a group as contingent upon performing the “appropriative” actions through linguistic and corporeal citations. Blackness, for Johnson, is *always* a performance of appropriation. He says, “the trope that I believe facilitates the appropriation of blackness is performance” (2003, p. 6). Performance, then, is a modifier of blackness.

Performance is how the other is seen and what makes the other impossible to see: “a dynamic display that ricochets between hypervisibility and oblivion” (Johnson, 2003, pp. 7-8). Performance is what makes blackness visible and yet what can render blackness utterly

impossible to read in the wrong context. Johnson (2003) explains that sometimes blackness *exceeds* performance, and that Black performance emerges in the praxis of cultural and social articulations constrained by legitimizing powers. Legitimizing powers shift with cultural contexts and in relationship to expression of black representation. Breaking out of representation or bringing awareness to the forces of representation at work requires performance. Ultimately, Johnson says “performance provides a portal for *doing* blackness” (2003, p. 16). Blackness is enacted and materialized through its performance.

If we take blackness as a performance of appropriation, and performance as the portal that allows blackness to be *done*, we must then ask, what is it exactly that is being appropriated? Blackness, for my purposes, is how one strives for and creates cultural and social belonging by re-appropriating and performing themselves *into* subjectivity in order to gain a sense of existence as a black person.

Performances/Blackness and Performances of Blackness

In large part, this dissertation is concerned with performances of *everyday life*. Emphasizing this type of reading and analysis, we must understand how blackness modifies the nature of theory in order to understand performance's role in this modification. I am most informed by D. Soyini Madison's (2014), and Tomas DeFrantz and Anita González's (2014), understanding of blackness *as* performance through their theorization of "BPT" or black performance theory. Madison (2014) understands BPT as "an oppositional move within a matrix of disciplinary powers reigning over the black body" (p. vii). Blackness is modified by theory, theory is modified by blackness, and both are modified through performance. Madison (2014) insists how blackness complicates theorization, saying, "Blackness makes theorizing even more complicated, because it makes theory expand and reach into histories and economies that are layered by abjection and subjugated spaces" (p. ix). Theorizing with

blackness requires a reckoning with the fullness of history that has produced the conditions under which it must be performed.

Then, following DeFrantz and González's (2014) leads, "Theory, in this formation, is the mobilization of praxis towards analysis" (p. 6). In my conversations with these theorists, I ask how theory can be an analysis of the practice of black lives as blackness gets performed. Blackness is always already a *praxis*. DeFrantz and González (2014) reiterate that "Black performance is not static, contained, or geographically specific"; rather, black performance is seen "largely as an ever-present feature of human exchange" (p. 9). Black performance is contingent on relationships and, by default, cannot exist in self-referentiality or absent of connection and examples from which to appropriate.²² Following this, if black performance is emergent and not fixed but rather located in human interaction, what is black performance?

I understand black performance as the processes and doings embodied, articulated, and/or mobilized in un-becoming black. A number of meanings and definitions are included in this: social markers that connect one to *referentes* of blackness; forms of speech; cultural practices (including food, clothing, and the like); spiritual practices connecting diasporic heritages; journeys of familial discovery through geography, encounters, written records, or other accounts; artistic practices that imagine connections to intangible memories; practices of ancestral memory; and commitments of any kind to individual and/or social struggles for Afro-descendant subjectivity. I understand these performances as quotidian spaces and self-constitutions that allow people to un/become black in-relation. These practices can happen individually as different forms of understanding and un-becoming into one's blackness and/or they can appear in multiply different configurations with others. I will contend with these cultural readings and analyses in the oral history performances.

²² On this note, I find it crucial to insert a critique of the notion of self-referentiality as a critique wielded against certain practices (often one generation posited against another). Though we can create new configurations for identity and expression, there are tropes and examples that make up our mental landscapes making us always-in-relation even when references appear "individual." Arguably, this is one of the bases of performativity.

When referencing black performance practices in everyday life, I use the term un-becoming as poetic mistranslation of the verb "devenir." Devenir in Spanish means "to become" but if the word is separated etymologically, you get "venir" which is "to come" and "de" or "un/not." In my poetic mistranslation, becoming simultaneously signifies that unbecoming as negation is an inevitable constituent of full identification under the modern/colonial world system that has constituted blackness as something "other than." As such, black performance transforms over time as one comes to know and integrate or comes closer to and/or further away from diasporic connections, longings, affirmations, disengagements, and other juxtapositions that constitute blackness. I understand black performance also as a palimpsestual unfolding.²³

Becoming/un-becoming black in the diaspora often occurs in the absence of positive *referentes* to feel proudly and unapologetically black. Blackness is a tango: during some years (or days or hours) we love our skin, and during others we want to exchange it for hegemony's notion of beauty, even when we know this betrays our deepest principles. Sometimes looking outward and into mainstream media or other toxic examples muddies our vision and we lose ourselves to unrealistic and fictional notions of personhood. These negations, I would argue, do not make us any "less" black, they simply make our blackness palimpsestual. Palimpsests, a metaphor for simultaneously coming and un-becoming black with the traces of this wrestling always present, require negotiations between disavowal and self, and/or collective affirmation. If we understand the historical difficulty of claiming and embodying blackness, we can place less value judgments on authenticity and negation. Here I

²³ I was first introduced to the notion of palimpsest as it crosses race relations in conversations in 2010 with one of my mentors, Shannon Rose Riley. Now, in her book, *Performing Race and Erasure: Cuba, Haiti, and US Culture 1898-1940*, Riley (2016), uses the palimpsest as a metaphor for understanding two of the most popular plays on the Haitian Revolution, "Black Empire" and "Haiti." She says, "In a sense, the plays are biracial palimpsests wherein each layer contests and obscures others and wherein racing and erasure along lines of black and white is not only a matter of historical fact (i.e. the reification of pan-blackness and pan-whiteness) but also of ongoing production" (pp. 211-212). I echo and expand part of Riley's (2016) understanding of palimpsest.

find black performance. The performance of blackness emerges and is produced by these negotiations and contradictions as we come to know ourselves-in-relation. We cannot become without un-becoming. Here, we also need performativity to guide the path.

Ontology and Performativity

Ontology and performativity are part of the same conversation, for my purposes. I want to parse out just who I put into conversation to define ontology and performativity. I am invested in grounding these theories as sources for understanding complexities of belonging and being in the world for black people. An extensive conversation is needed between “the coloniality of Being,” rigorously explained in Nelson Maldonado-Torres’s (2007) work, and “posthumanist performativity” contended with in the work of Karen Barad (2003). By putting these two theorists and their claims into conversation, I insist that the coloniality of Being, ontology, and posthumanist performativity constitute a *major* foundational landscape for black performativity and subjectivity.

Maldonado-Torres (2007) begins by distancing himself from Heidegger’s fundamental ontology. He insists we must understand what Heidegger’s propositions were in order to move away from them. Inbuilt in Heidegger’s fundamental ontology is Being as an essence of beings-towards-death—a death drive that is possible for people like himself: European white, male, of a certain class, and heterosexual. In order to be-towards-death, you have to first live a fullness of life. Maldonado-Torres (2007) asks what Heidegger’s fundamental ontology obscures in this formulation. He begins to answer this question with Lévinas’s critique of Heidegger—a Jewish scholar who survived Nazi concentration camps, while Heidegger supported the Nazi regime that made this genocide possible. Lévinas demanded that Heidegger’s fundamental ontology could not be philosophically separated or read from outside the bounds of his support of the Nazi regime; namely, that within his fundamental ontology was a hierarchy of who can and cannot be human (Maldonado-Torres,

2007, p. 241). Lévinas, according to Maldonado-Torres (2007), saw Heidegger's ontology as a philosophy of power. Under the auspices of power, Heidegger's fundamental ontology did not take account of the colonial project, even as it benefited from it.

The coloniality of Being follows. Beginning with the work of Dussel and Mignolo, Maldonado-Torres (2007) explains that the coloniality of Being, "raises the challenges of connecting the genetic, the existential, and the historical dimensions where being shows most evidentially its colonial side and its fractures" (p. 243). Being cannot exist without the coloniality of beings. Being is always already colonized in Heidegger's fundamental ontology. Maldonado-Torres (2007) defines coloniality as the "[...] long-standing patterns of power that emerged as a result of colonialism, but that define culture, labor, intersubjective relations, and knowledge production well beyond the strict limits of colonial administrations" (p. 243). Ontology, then, is *not* an abstract universal and should not be treated as such for all forms of being in the world.

If we take the colonial project and its ongoing repercussions seriously, Heidegger's ontological difference must be understood through what Maldonado-Torres calls (2007) "misanthropic skepticism." (p. 252). Misanthropic skepticism, according to Maldonado-Torres's (2007), is the skepticism wielded against colonized subjects in response to the possibility of their approximation to humanity, and therefore to Being, by those in positions of power. Misanthropic skepticism and racism work together for the ontological exclusion of racialized and colonized subjects. Maldonado-Torres (2007) takes both Descartes and Heidegger to task to understand how misanthropic skepticism came to be, citing and emphasizing, "I THINK, therefore I am," and "I think, therefore I AM," respectively. Within these Cartesian and Heideggarian postulates, Maldonado-Torres (2007) explains, "Cartesian epistemology and Heideggarian ontology presuppose the coloniality of knowledge and the coloniality of being" (p. 252). Thinking as the condition of possibility for subjectivity for

being in the world (Descartes), and being in the world, therefore having the capacity to think about ones “beingness” (Heidegger), does not include colonial subjects in their ontological presuppositions. Misanthropic skepticism is the non-contemplation of these subjects by virtue of the non-recognition of their humanity.

Maldonado-Torres (2007) further explains that *damné* is to the coloniality of Being what Dasein is for fundamental ontology (p. 253). *Damn  *, from Frantz Fanon, is “a life that has no flowering development, but the struggle against omnipresent death” (Maldonado-Torres, 2007, p. 254-255). *Damn  * is the subject that is produced by the coloniality of Being. It is the subject that fundamental ontologies seek to obliterate, whether this obliteration be physical, epistemological, ontological, material, spiritual, combinations of or in other forms. The *damn  * have no access to Dasein, or the “being there” of humanness. In Being-towards-death, colonized subjects have no fundamental ontology because death is bound up in existence—there is no chance to get to strive-towards death because death is always already an omnipresent quotidian reality. Race, within this form of ontology, “implies both inferiority and dispensability” and “legitimizes dynamics of possession rather than exchange” (Maldonado-Torres, 2007, p. 259). War, rape, and death are the driving forces that obliterate colonized and racialized people’s fundamental ontology—it is therefore not just an epistemological concern. Following Maldonado-Torres’s (2007) lead, I will denaturalize Heideggarian ontology as fundamental. I want to suggest that performativity and materiality are needed for that.

Karen Barad (2003) also questions Cartesian thinking, but from the limitations of language and materiality. Barad (2003) challenges the restrictions of citational performativity and performativity that gives too much power to language to determine what is real (p. 802). We must further question the excessive power we give to discourse and equating discourse to language. She explains, “A performative understanding of discursive practices challenges the

representationalist belief in the power of words to represent preexisting things” (2003, p. 802). Discourse, understood through performativity, does not rely on words to represent things that already exist. It is performativity, then, that grants us our ontology since it “questions the inner workings of our mind that grant language too much power in determining our ontologies” (Barad, 2003, p. 802). Moving away from social construction, Cartesian dualisms of body and mind, and representationalist practices, Barad (2003) argues for a materialist, embodied, and relational understanding and moves in the direction of the performative, material, and fluid nature of our ontologies.

Barad (2003) challenges Butler’s insistence on our discursive constitution in language, in which we, as subjects, are re-scripted into the very political systems that impede our emancipation (Barad, 2003, p. 804). Discursive constitution is not performative emancipation. Barad (2003) claims that, “the presumption that we know what we mean or what our verbal performances say is a legacy of Cartesianism” (p. 806). Representationalism—one form of thinking we know what we mean when we say it—does not create any possibilities for existing outside the bounds of strict linguistic formations. Barad (2003) insists instead that we maintain a healthy skepticism towards Cartesian doubt (the gateway to questioning misanthropic skepticism) so that we do not hold more faith in representations than in things themselves and the material possibilities for novel constitutions.

Bringing Barad (2003) and Maldonado-Torres’s (2007) contentions into further conversation, the Cartesian legacies of coloniality obstruct materiality and meaning-making for colonized subjects. In Barad’s performativity, matter is not a passive object to be acted upon by a naming subject, but rather, an *active participant* in the production of its materialization (2003, p. 809). Matter has agency. Matter is inherently performative and nonspecific in its relationship to subjectivity. Matter, then, is also about relation and does not require a colonial power to imbue it with meaning.

For Barad (2003), relational ontology is the basis of her “posthumanist performative account” of the production of material bodies (p. 814). I claim that her posthumanist account is crucial for thinking about race because it decenters the colonality of Being by insisting that we question the “givenness” of humanity’s unique ontology over other living beings. We have to question humanity’s uniqueness because of our capacity for a particular kind of language practice. The posthuman opens space for the emergence of non-hegemonic ontologies because it challenges the very foundations of a universal human subject, which was never a universal signifier to begin with, due to the fact that modern/colonial structures have determined who has access to “humanness.”

Barad (2003) refuses the separation between “words” and “things,” advocating for “relation”: [...] *a causal relationship between specific exclusionary practices embodied as specific material configurations of the world* (i.e., discursive practices/(con)figurations rather than “words”) *and specific material phenomena* (i.e. relations rather than “things”) (Barad, 2003, p. 814, emphasis hers). Ontology is indeterminacy granted by the relational effects of performativity. Performativity becomes relational as beings interact in the world through acts of materialization—the production of bodies. Ontology is in-flux, an unstable idea of Being; it relies on being in relation to materiality. Barad (2003) draws a relationship between the material powers of discourse for creating constraints upon our subjectivities and the specific materialities of our existence. I draw upon Barad’s (2003) idea of performativity as a relational ontology constructed by and through material bodies in order to consider how subjectivities materialize in relation.

Finally, Barad’s (2003) relational ontology occurs through what she calls agential realism. Agential realism is a relational ontology insofar as the future is open to enactment by intra-active bodily relations. Relational ontology understands that, “[...] matter is a substance in its intra-active becoming – not a thing, but a doing, a congealing of agency” (Barad, 2003,

p. 822). Barad (2003) proposes a re-imbrication of the mutual constitution of materiality and discourse so that matter is the *materialization of phenomena* and not a kind of citationality (p. 822, emphasis mine). Performativity, for Barad (2003), is an enactment that negotiates with the world's constant intra-activity. The body is "material-discursive phenomena" acting in full agency and responding to the world it is produced by and always producing (Barad, 2003, p. 823). Agency is being in the world and "intervening in the world's becoming" (Barad, 2003, p. 824).

I do not use or consider the term ontology without performativity. When I speak of ontology, I am invested in the performativity of *relational ontology* performed through the production of material bodies as bodies use their agency to materialize in the world. When I speak of performativity, I mean the material enactment of agency in relation to other bodies - where bodies are produced in the fullness and slipperiness of their ontologies. Writing with Afro-descendant subjectivities, I *insist* that questioning the very foundations of claims to humanity that have subjugated and continue to violate colonized and racialized bodies and existences is a moral and ethical obligation. Performativity is the materialization of bodies through their un-becomings as they exceed discursive and linguistic formations and co-construct their worlds. In the performativity of bodies and material lives, Afro-descendant people are able to rewrite their existence and in so doing, shape their ontological life-worlds.

The Animative

Diana Taylor (2013), a foundational theorist of performance studies in the Hemispheric Americas, makes a move towards the animative as an opening of performativity that offers a unique analysis located in México. She explains that performatives and animatives work together: "The terms call attention to different political acts, uptakes, and positionalities encompassed by the broader word, performance" (2013, para. 13). While Taylor is interested in animatives as affective gestures that often rise in relation to political

movement, regularly performed *en masse* in street action, I would not limit her definition to these constraints. I ask how the animative can work in performances of everyday life, given that daily life in places like San Cristóbal de las Casas is always a site of animative gestures and performances. Taylor (2013) claims:

Animatives, as I define them, are grounded in bodies: the becoming of "one body" exceeds discursive formulation. Animatives are part movement as in animation, part identity, being, or soul as in anima or life. The term captures the fundamental movement that is life (breathe life into) or that animates embodied practice. Its affective dimensions include being lively, engaged, and 'moved.' (para. 13)

Animatives gesture towards open subjectivities that are, in fact, *animated* by daily life and whose movements happen in the excess of discursive formulations. Born *in situ* of blackness as both a crisis of visibility in México *and* as an excess of discursive formulations of Mexicanness, animatives consider how lived practices of un-becoming gesture towards new personhoods and subjectivities in-relation. Animatives cite becoming and un-becoming as being "moved." For my purposes, I ask how my *compañeras* might be animated to un/become.

Referentes

Throughout the text, I have chosen not to translate the word *referentes*. *Referentes* has an apparent cognate ("references" or "referent") in English, but to translate it as such betrays its meaning. The closest phrase for *referentes* I would give is "examples one can *model themselves after*" which, for me, goes a step beyond "to reference" and does not quite denote "citationality." The search for *referentes* is a repeated motif throughout all performances of blackness I have encountered thus far in Chiapas. When I refer to *referentes*, I mean to say the search for modeling that is ultimately very performative.

On Decoloniality

There are multiply-divergent ideas on how decoloniality and decolonial thought are to be defined and used. I turn towards decolonial *walking* and *doing* as measures of and definitions for accountability to a decolonial life practice. Consistent with the tonality of this project, I take after Catherine Walsh (2013) who insists, "For me, decoloniality is not a theory to be followed but a project to be assumed. It is an actional process to pedagogically walk" (p. 67). For me, there is no truer statement on decoloniality. I structure my continually active and transformative process of decoloniality on this premise.

Secondly, I echo the Decolonial Aesthetics Manifesto (2011), that many dear colleagues helped construct, which decenters ocularcentrism in the development of intercultural identities. I find the application of the manifesto in artistic and daily life worlds—as I refuse to uphold this dichotomy in my life—paramount for what oral history performances unveil. They (Lockward, et al.) say: "The decolonial metaphor 'a world in which many worlds would co-exist' implies pluriversality as a planetary project and demands the contribution of different notions of how an emerging global political society should feel, smell and look like" (Decolonial Aesthetics (I), 2011, para. 8). Pluriversality as a "planetary project," is born in light of what has now become a world-wide slogan: "a world in which many worlds would co-exist" (2011, para. 8). This slogan is a translation of "un mundo donde quepan muchos mundos," an emblem of the Zapatista movement. (It is noteworthy that in much decolonial thought, Zapatismo and Chiapas are endlessly considered exemplary.) In decolonial aesthetics, engaging the senses allows us to liberate aesthesis or new ways of sensing/feeling the world and knowledge production. I find decolonial work in this light in direct *sintonía* with my methodological proposals for *cosmoaudiciones* of listening.

Thirdly, I echo Nelson Maldonado-Torres (2007), who gives a very straightforward definition of decolonization: "This is the precise meaning of decolonization: restoration of

the logic of the gift” (p. 261). Maldonado-Torres’s gift is a citation from Lévinas, who argued that gift giving and reception are fundamental traits of the self in relation (2007, p. 257).

Maldonado-Torres defines decolonization as an openness to a receptive dialogue and exchange that centers love, ethics, and justice in concerted moves against the non-ethics of war (2007, p. 260). The non-ethics of war are colonialism’s imperatives of destruction and dehumanization in favour of hierarchical constructions of humanness. Decoloniality, then, requires dynamic praxis of giving and receiving. Giving and receiving requires the *desire for exchange* (Maldonado-Torres, 2007, p. 261). That is to say, gift giving and receiving cannot happen under coercion or obligation. In order for the desire for exchange to occur, both parties need to meet each other with fullness of being: a decolonial proposition.

In decolonial thinking, walking, and doing, I understand theory only through praxis. Decoloniality is only theoretical insofar as it is a *doing*: decoloniality is inherently performative. Decoloniality is a praxis with the potential to undo and rewrite historical processes of racialization, dehumanization, and violence. There is *no arrival at* decoloniality. It is a lifelong practice that must continually be chosen. I insist that decoloniality continues to be a source of hope in socio-political realities sick with institutional diseases. Decoloniality requires that we understand social movements and moments as our greatest pedagogical processes and teachers. In order to walk decolonially, our time and energy must be invested in these processes fully. Decoloniality insists on wrestling social struggle away from colonial-patriarchal-capitalist-imperialist power structures in order to return decision making that affects quotidian realities into the hands of those who live them. It also asks that knowledge production respond to all of this work. These struggles and the knowledge earned through them are wisdom and knowledge worthy of decolonial accountability.

Critical Interculturality

Critical interculturality, another decolonial proposition, is a mechanism for the interruption of neoliberal logics that tolerate difference insofar as it can be used for capitalist measures, without making any fundamental structural changes in attitudes, behaviors, or treatment. Multiculturalism and diversity are two symptoms of the dis-ease espoused by neoliberal logics of personhood that I disavow. In addition to the linguistic pitfalls of multiculturalism and diversity, I consider the notion of tolerance to be diametrically opposed to that of acceptance. Tolerance is a method of just barely putting up with what is different rather than embracing a pluriversal logic of co-existence. The latter begins to get at the goals of a critical interculturality.

It is my belief that *critical* interculturality (in opposition to *functional* interculturality) moves beyond logics that subsume difference in favor of assimilation politics. Critical interculturality is, in part, the co-existence of difference and multiply-existing parts as opposed to the erasure of them and a false sense of harmony. I tune in to work of critical interculturality from indigenous struggles in Ecuador as exemplar of the benefits of intercultural thought and activism. Critical interculturality, as defined in this sense, cannot be separated from the geopolitical realities of Latin America (even as it is not limited to Latin American projects). Catherine Walsh (2013), a chief practitioner and ally of critical intercultural work and dialogue, says:

We remember that critical interculturality has its roots and antecedents not in the State (nor in academia) but rather in political discussion put on the main stage by social movements, that makes its counter-hegemonic sensibility, its orientation to the relation of structural-colonial-capitalism, and its actions of transformation and creation stand out. (p. 10)

Walsh (2013) adds that critical interculturality is concerned with "people and knowledges of resistance, insurgence, and opposition, those who persist in spite of dehumanization and subordination" (p. 11). Critical interculturality, by these measures, is a fundamental intervention in hegemonic notions of difference, acceptance, liberation and social struggle where pluriversal methods interrupt coloniality and abandon multicultural neoliberal projects.

Necropolitics in México & Decolonial Feminism

Since decolonial work cannot be disarticulated from its separation with patriarchal-capitalist-imperialist power structures, feminist thought and praxis is indispensable. Violence, in its multiple colonial forms and figurations, is a force to be historically and socially understood within this context as the biggest symptom of all aforementioned structures. While black lives in México are not met with the same genocidal tactics as those of its northern neighbor the United States, or its southern neighbor Brazil, an important necropolitical line of connectivity still needs to be made.

By certain estimates, in the last six years in México over 100,000 people have disappeared and/or been murdered due to government corruption, exacerbated by Peña Nieto's rise to power. México is a non-declared war zone, even as certain areas are livable and "safe." Although Afro-Mexicans and Afro-descendants are not being murdered at the rate African Americans or Brazilians are, Mexicans and anyone who lives in México are bearing witness to this eternal and extremely violent necropolitical reality.

Sayak Valencia (2010), Mexican scholar and transfeminist, has called this reality "gore capitalism." Valencia (2010) calls the growth of capitalist power that supports the elites in México and their "First World" accomplices, "necroempowerment" (p. 15). Large government and drug bodies (working together) achieve and maintain their tremendous wealth and power through disposing of human life to such an extreme degree that certain social realities now resemble snuff films. Violent realities present in México create what she

has also called "sujetos endriagos," or monster subjects, produced by violent colonial masculinities endlessly replicated by neoliberal capitalism, or what we could call neocolonialism (Valencia, 2010, p. 19). Decolonial feminism is one place from which to respond to such violences.

Decolonial feminism is, firstly, an acknowledgement of the intersection of race and gender within the modern/colonial matrix of power that delineates and polices modes of being, thinking, and doing. Decolonial feminism acknowledges coloniality's creation of the fictions of race and gender while working towards the autonomy of individuals and communities who have suffered the very real implications and violences of the social implementations of these fictions. Understanding multiple social realities of discrimination, for women in particular, creates the possibility of creating *otros mundos posibles*.

Scholar Diana Marcela Gómez Correal (2014) has outlined a few principles of decolonial feminism and its concerns. Decolonial feminism is an emergent field in Abya Yala and one of the most ambitious avenues of critical scholarly and activist endeavors.²⁴ Outlining some of its major tenants is a tall and necessary order. Gómez Correal (2014) parses out some major sites of emphasis, saying:

Tentatively, collecting some of the central topics of what could be conceptualized as decolonial feminism includes: 1.) The problematization of the experience of colonialism and coloniality by women, including the creation of subjects, bodies, sexualities, and notions of beauty that are intersected by race [...] 2.) The reproduction of racism and classism [...] including within feminism, 3.) The problematization [...] of the power of men within communities [indigenous and Afro-

²⁴ Abya Yala is a Kuna term for land "land in its full maturity." It has become a decolonial replacement for the terminology of "Latin American" as a forced imposition that homogenizes the idea of a flattened "America" named by colonizers and imperialists.

descendant], of nationalisms, the politics of cultural identity (Hernández 2008); and of the way that they have been represented [women] [...] in [these] cultures. (p. 359)

Decolonial feminism is a further enunciation beyond the limited scope of largely white and middle class feminism that coercively served as a basis for feminism in the Global South and the interior souths of Global Norths. One of the main concerns of decolonial feminism is coloniality's ongoing maintenance of inequalities that reduce women to positions of servitude within modern/colonial patriarchy. Decolonial feminism insists on resituating women's subjectivities from their voices.

Decolonial feminism, as Gómez Correal (2014) makes clear here, also represents a decentering of men within indigenous and Afro-descendant communities. While this is not meant to recreate feminisms that are exclusive of any and all types forms masculinity, it *is* a re-centering of women's places as major leaders and players in indigenous, Afro-descendant, and otherwise marginalized or racialized communities. While racialized men certainly face tremendous violences within the modern/colonial matrix, women, at the intersection of race, gender and class, always receive the shorter end of the stick. Given this reality, decolonial feminism is invested in how women fashion their lives despite the ways these violences always threaten to suppress, violate, or, eradicate their existence.

Coming Together

As we walk together on this path, we come to understand that Afro-México is not limited to a single geographical space. Spiritual and ancestral alliances and openings are being threaded and webbed far beyond the confinement of colonial cartographies. We are engaging Afro-diasporic ancestrality in a way that demands long-term paths of determined work and internal seeking. Quiet, spiritual, ontological, existential, metaphorical, pedagogical, performative-animative, and deeply personal journeys are always forging community, even when these communities are intangible or illegible to traditional fields of

activism and recognition. Can we recognize one another even before we fully know ourselves? As I bring my body and histories into this place, I transparently and humbly enter into dialogue with all whose paths are hard-won and all who would seek to be fully known to themselves, first, and then extend out to the world.

Epistemological Paradigm: Epistemologies of Absent Knowledges, Epistemologies of the South, and Ecologies of Knowing

Lastly, by way of remaining consistent and robust with my theory-method nexus, two fundamental premises guide my epistemological paradigm. Taking after the work of sociologist Boaventura de Sousa Santos (2014): (1) “...there is no global social justice without global cognitive justice” and (2) “A critical theory is premised on the idea that there is no way of knowing the world better than by anticipating a better world” (p. viii). Social justice in everyday life needs to go hand-in-hand with justice on the level of knowledge production and cognitive practices. Coupled with that, critical theory needs to be *replanteado* or replanted so that it involves transformative justice and imagines other possibilities rather than serving as an analysis of the status quo for a hegemonic notion of personhood.²⁵ Santos (2014) explains that we need this approach so that we are not using “weak” answers for all of the “strong” questions our societies currently face (p. 20). Strong answers, according to Santos, can only be given by questioning the paradigms with which we approach the strong questions.

Cognitive justice is produced by the kind of critical theory Santos (2014) defends. Santos further elaborates this type of a critical theory as coming from an “epistemology of absent knowledges” that “aspires to an expanded conception of realism that includes suppressed, silenced, or marginalized realities, as well as emergent and imagined realities”

²⁵ *Replantear* is another word I have a very difficult time finding the proper translation between Spanish and English. In discourse around knowledge production, every time I have heard this word used, I find it incredibly powerful when re-thinking situatedness in knowledge. For this reason, I have chosen to not translate it.

(2014, p. 157). Absent knowledges are forms of knowing that get suppressed by upholding hegemonic knowledge practices. He continues, saying, “The epistemology of absent knowledges starts from the premise that social practices are social knowledge” (2014, p. 157). Social practices are the sites of the production of knowledge itself, even when these knowledges are absented by virtue of not having space in more readily-seen or canonical knowledge practices, *or* simply that they have not yet come into existence.

Constructing such knowledge must also take into account divisions between North and South, so frequently over-simplified, even in the desire for decolonized knowledge. For this, Santos (2011) argues for “epistemologies of the South,” which are:

[...] a *set of epistemologies*, not just one, that depart from a premise and from a South that is *not geographic but metaphorical*: the anti-imperial South. It is the metaphor of systemic suffering produced by capitalism and colonialism, like other methods that have been supported by these, like patriarchy. It is also the South that exists in the North, what we used to call the Third World, interior, or Fourth World: oppressed and marginalized groups of North America and Europe. There also exists a Global North in the South; they are the local elites that benefit from global capitalism. This is why we speak of an anti-imperialist South. (p. 16, emphasis mine)

Epistemologies of the South make easy dismissal—by constructing a binary logic—of anything coming from the North as evil and anything coming from the South as good: a dangerous division that lacks crucial nuance and does not aid in the construction of critical knowledge practices. We can de-center US-centric and Eurocentric knowledge practices coined as universal while also foregrounding knowledge coming from many geographic regions which re-center or center for the first-time absent epistemologies. We are not required to reject any and all knowledge from these centers. This paradigm moves against all essentialisms, in search of the production of a critical knowledge practice that understands

critical theory as knowledge produced from absent knowledges in conversation with ethical knowledge practices, in the service of cognitive justice.

Finally, derivative of these first two concepts and concerns, Santos (2014) elaborates on what he calls “ecologies of knowledge” (p. 188). Ecologies of knowledge are one part of epistemologies of the South. Ecologies of knowledge desire to consider all kinds of knowledge as either equally valid or as equally invalid (Santos, 2011, p. 190). He continues, “The ecology of knowledges lies in the idea of radical copresence [...] Radical copresence means equating simultaneity with contemporaneity, which can only be accomplished if a linear conception of time is abandoned” (2014, p. 191). The recognition of pluriversality amongst people must come together with different epistemologies without hierarchizing their significance. Herein we create an eco-system that erases the idea of universalisms and particularities and rather considers many different *cosmovisiones* (world views) and knowledge systems. These aspects of this paradigm form another aspect of the bedrock from which I write and think with each oral history.

Oral History Encounters: The Pedagogization of Orality and Engaging Oral Histories of My *Compañeras*

Framing of Oral History Performances as Pedagogy

It is important to note that none of my *compañeras* live in extreme marginal or peripheral conditions, even as their complex heritages are not recognized by Mexican society. This is significantly different from much of the work done with Afro-Mexican populations, particularly in coastal regions. I find these voices equally as important in that they help create greater nuances in the narratives of Afro-descendancy in México, not only in regards to who is seen as Afro-descendant and what their heritage is, but also under what conditions they live. If we continue to understand Afro-Mexicans and Afro-descendant in México only in terms of abjection, what might be reproduced? In other words, certainly not all Afro-

descendants in México live in dire poverty and in marginal conditions. Continually reinscribing this narrative may gesture towards paternalism. The encounters with my *compañeras* attest to the multi-faceted realities of blackness in México that we must hold together.

Each interview lasted between one hour and fifteen minutes and two hours. Two took place in my *compañera*'s homes and one in a coffee shop. The interviews centered on their life histories, beginning with family backgrounds and upbringing, extending to how they each have come to understand both Afro-descendancy and blackness in their lives through their vocations and experiences. The questions and provocations I posed to them served as guides rather than impositions. Each *compañera* was left to elaborate upon the provocations and to take them wherever their memories and imaginations led. Each interview opened up an incredibly vast geographic, philosophical, spiritual, racial, ethnic, personal, existential, ontological, ancestral and transnational panorama which asks that we entertain an incredibly complex understanding of blackness in México. The oral histories are not meant to be representative of diasporic blackness in México, but rather to serve as what I hope are *detonantes* or detonators for dialogue about seeing and listening with diasporic blackness in México. It is my desire that these encounters move conversations about the pluriversality of black identity in México forward.

The oral histories took place within a panorama of a critical historical moment in Chiapas, where there are many people thinking about and reclaiming spaces for Afro-descendancy and blackness from a variety of perspectives. The oral histories do not make up part of the center of the activist work taking place but rather, exist somewhat peripherally to that work. In naming their peripheral location, I by no means desire to situate them as less than; quite the opposite. I insist on oral history's necessary location in the center and/or heart of desires for a radical revisioning of personhood in an anti-black world. In so doing, and in

choosing to think about some of the interviews I conducted with women in Chiapas, I wish to also destabilize the androcentrism of much of the world's major historical moments and their documentation.²⁶ I also wish, in an ongoing destabilization of “woman” as a singular category, to consider *mujer/woman* as a multiple and endlessly-definable doing not limited to biological sex constrictions or patriarchal normativities.

I have chosen to have in-depth conversations and to conduct extensive cultural readings with just three of the interviews, not as a prescriptive or diagnostic turn nor as a full-contention with the breadth or diversity of Afro-descendancy in Chiapas. Rather, I will listen closely to these three interviews as a qualitative analysis of possibilities for thinking *with* blackness from three incredibly different Afro-descendant women. I want to invite the witnessing of new performative, animative, and diasporic subjectivities that might elucidate possibilities and visions for quiet and intimate re-existences.²⁷ The re-performances of the oral histories that make up the heart of this dissertation will be engaged through and with the aforementioned methodological, theory-praxis and epistemological considerations in dialogic fashion.

First, I will comment on the pedagogical nature of the interviews. Then, I will introduce my *compañeras*, in the order of appearance, and some of the major claims of each chapter.

²⁶ I am not using the word “herstory” because *historia* in Spanish does not stem from the same androcentric logic of “his”—the etymology of which is even questionable in English, as clever as this play on words is.

²⁷ I was introduced to the term re-existence, (*re-existencia*), in the context of Abya Yala, from Catherine Walsh who is re-citing Adolfo Albán. Albán (2014) explains re-existence in the context of Afro-descendant communities in Colombia, saying that re-existence means, “the mechanisms that communities create and develop to invent themselves and their lives daily and in this way to be able to confront the established by the hegemonic project” since the time of colonization (p. 455). I borrow from his idea of the daily invention of self as re-existence throughout.

Pedagogical Imperatives of Oral History

What became clear in both the performances of the interviews and in the continual deep-listening processes, through transcription and further listening, is the pedagogical weight of the living archive of these histories. In the pedagogical force inbuilt across each chapter, I continue to learn new things every time I talk to and I listen with, or laugh alongside Maritea, Jalila, and Berenice. Each of these women would want their lives and their stories to performatively *do something* in the world by virtue of their presence here. By putting them in dialogue, it is my desire to perform the pedagogical lessons these conversations welcome.

When I speak of pedagogy, I borrow from Villa and Villa's (2010) notion of "la pedagogización de la oralidad," or "the pedagogization of orality." They speak from what they have coined as the "Caribe seco" of Colombia, or the "dry Caribbean" of Colombia—the name they coined for a place in the *interior* of Colombia largely inhabited by Afro-descendants, countering another popular narrative of black people existing only along the coasts of Colombia (2010, p. 74). To understand the particular histories of Afro-Colombians, they argue that they [Afro-Colombians of the Caribe seco] "require new readings that are much more open that consider regional specificities that are not naturalized, essentialized, or homogenized from the speculative desires of those in search of regional legitimacy" (2010 p. 74). I find the *planteamientos* or questions planted by Villa and Villa (2010) particularly useful to my study so much so that I could wonder what it would mean to think of a Chiapas *profundo* or a Chiapas *seco* (deep Chiapas or dry Chiapas). However, I am most invested in their distancing from hegemonic notions of community and their drive towards diasporic blackness via orality and regional knowledge production.

Villa and Villa (2010) understand the pedagogization of orality as a political strategy of Afro-descendants who orally narrate and share the realities of their existence in ways that

generate a "politics of place" (resonating with the word of Arturo Escobar), that "consists in the 'recuperation of abilities to make history' that will allow for the construction of local *referentes* for the affirmation of life" (p. 81). Orality is a pedagogical practice that allows for the creation of new *referentes* for black diasporic subjectivity by taking regional realities seriously and not foreclosing on black diasporic place-making, and therefore, *extraterritorial* possibilities of belonging. Oral practices offer up space for affirmations of life and heritage while simultaneously generating a "politics of place."

Chapter Outlines

In Chapter Two, I think with Maritea Daehlin's oral history and one-woman performance, "Me Dan Envidia Los Canguros/I Envy the Kangaroos." Maritea is a Cameroonian/Norwegian/Chiapanecan of thirty years of age. In this chapter, I contend with Maritea's upbringing in San Cristóbal from her multiple heritages coming up at the time of the greatest revolution Chiapas has ever seen. I think about coloniality of gender and race as they have crossed her body and life experiences and consider how she has created specific poetic resistances to what her subjectivities represent in the world. Then, having watched Maritea perform her one-woman play "Me Dan Envidia los Canguros" Or "I Envy the Kangaroos" on different occasions leading up to our interview, I found it increasingly impossible to not read her artistic practice and oral history alongside one another for the insights each provide. I conclude with a close reading of the script of her play to consider how Maritea has found creative and erotic resistance and ancestral practices as a black woman in México through critical intercultural belonging.

In Chapter Three, I think with Jalila Gómez's oral history. Jalila is an Afro-Chiapanecan woman of thirty-five years of age. In this chapter, I propose the possibility for seeing a "Mexican double consciousness" read through W.E.B. Du Bois's (1903/1994) initial theorization at the turn of the twentieth century, read through Jalila's narrative. I wonder

what this double consciousness could mean in México when used to think about how Mexican people, through the ideology of *mestizaje*, only know how to read themselves through whiteness. I also consider a particular moment of interpellation where Jalila is corporeally hailed into being, and, in her words, how she then “comes out of the closet,” and performs herself *into* her subjectivity.

In Chapter Four, I think with Berenice Vera Aguilar’s oral history. Berenice is an Afro-Mexican woman and long-time resident in Chiapas of thirty-five years of age. I read Berenice’s interview alongside Wynter’s (1999) sociogenic principle as well as in relation to Frantz Fanon’s *Black Skin, White Masks* (1967/2008). Through an extensive interaction with the details of her life story that have unfolded over the last two years, I consider how Berenice’s evolving genealogical landscape demonstrate the ways she was trapped under the throws of *mestizaje*’s sociogenic principle for most her life. Then, I argue in favour of a black feminist decolonial performativity of silence in Berenice’s performance of agency as she privately and quietly reckons with the dialectics of finally having come to know her history and the devastation the time passed has caused.

In Chapter Five, I will begin by resuming and meditating with what my *compañeras* have offered in their oral history performances and the various implications that they animate. I then look towards future possibilities, as they continually unfold, imagining this document as a performance and in collective conversation on black diaspora from San Cristóbal de las Casas.

As an addendum to Chapter Five, I include a brief Afterword that explores the tangible difficulties that I viscerally experienced during all of this work. I wish to poetically encourage an attentiveness to our internal processes that invites deep listening with our bodily responses and trusts our intuitive voices.

In what follows, though never conclusive, I seek to deeply listen and to see with my *compañeras*. Unraveling multiple levels of translation on linguistic, cultural, social, national, historical, intellectual, political, and interpersonal levels, I do hope, in fact, to be doing what I am saying and saying what I am doing.

CHAPTER TWO

“ME DAN ENVIDIA LOS CANGUROS”: RECKONINGS WITH DIASPORA-HOME, BELONGING, AND BLACK GEOGRAPHIES OF EROTIC POWER²⁸

“Cultural identity, in this second sense, is a matter of ‘becoming’ as well as ‘being’. It belongs to the future as much as to the past. It is not something which already exists, transcending place, time, history, and culture. Cultural identities come from somewhere, have histories. But, like everything which is historical, they undergo constant transformation. Far from being eternally fixed in some essentialized past, they are subject to the continuous ‘play’ of history, culture, and power” (Stuart Hall, 1993, p. 225).

i lost a whole continent.
a whole continent from my memory.
unlike all other hyphenated americans
my hyphen is made of blood. feces. bone.
when africa says hello
my mouth is a heartbreak.
because i have nothing in my tongue
to answer her.
i do not know how to say hello to my mother
-african american ii
(nayyirah waheed, 2013).

Introduction

Performance and Relation

Echoing D. Soyini Madison (1999), “performance helps me see” (p. 109). I turn to performance as a guide for reading, feeling, and acting in-relation to many subjectivities, desiring that those whose shoes I do not walk in are honored (Soyini, 1999, pp. 108). Maritea Daehlin marks the beginning of this desire for seeing through oral history performance. Our coming together is incited by affective encounters and conversations with people whose life-worlds cross Maritea’s and my own. We are fortunate to have these life-worlds move across performance as an optic and a life practice. We experience an exchange of giving and

²⁸ “Me Dan Envidia los Canguros” means “I Envy the Kangaroos” (Daehlin, 2015).

receiving a particular gift: a gift not to be squandered nor coveted. I am not yet sure how to name this gift because it feels ungraspable and unquantifiable. Part of it, I feel, is one of relation. A sensing-feeling-being together in the world through multiple communities of contact and complicity. A call to hold and to release. A call to understand through deeply listening.

Encounters and Personal Introduction to Maritea

I first met Maritea at the tianguis, or the locally-sourced agro-ecological market that happens every Wednesday and Saturday mornings in San Cristóbal. Maritea first approached me, asking about a performance collaborator, Dani d'Emilia, whom she had met at Dartington College of the Arts in the United Kingdom. I was floored at the multiple nodes of connection occurring over a daily Saturday food frenzy that came seemingly from the most unexpected place. We quickly burst into a full-scale conversation. Maritea had decided to study at Dartington after having seen Dani's large-scale devised theatre production. Artistic-affective lines pulled us together. I was immediately enraptured by our encounter.

Throughout the duration of our first conversation, Maritea had her son Rio attached to her hip. Every time she put him down, he wandered about, requiring that she follow after him. I was struck by how calm and happy Rio was and felt strongly drawn to his clearly complex racial and ethnic composition and old soul. Rio is three years old, understands Japanese (his father Soh is from Japan and has also lived in San Cris most of his adult life) and Norwegian and responds to both in Spanish. Rio has long semi-curly hair that ends in brown ringlets with blonde highlights peeking through. He talks about his past as “when I was a little girl.” Maritea and her family challenge the limitations of words like “diversity,” bursting out of any and *all* easy categorizations. Maritea and Soh encourage Rio’s multiple languages and gender expressions with ease and delight. I knew they were people to whom I could become very close.

Maritea is a tall black woman, with very gentle energy; she always bears a huge smile. She is around six feet tall—a stature you essentially *never* see among those who live San Cristóbal. You would think that standing out in the way that she does would present constant challenges to her safety, but in San Cris, the reality is quite different. Racism is not so blatant and physically antagonistic, but subtler and passive aggressive. Maritea has been based in San Cris most of her life, with the exceptions of her travels and summers spent in Norway to remain close to and part of her maternal side of the family. Maritea is a networker and connector. She is an exceptional artist of our generation in her capacity for organizing gathering-points across multiple generations of artists living and coming through San Cristóbal. She does this principally through the two bases of her artist-in-residence platform *Trenza Negra*.²⁹

In the year of my field work, Maritea decided to return to a solo theatre/performance practice and wrote and produced her play, "Me Dan Envidia los Canguros/I Envy the Kangaroos." This was the first major work she had done since the birth of Rio and the death of her mother—almost overlapping processes of transition. It is also a play that she continues to perform in different festivals in other parts of the world. She has now performed it multiple times in San Cristóbal when she decides to re-open the play as a process-driven project. I first went to see the play in its initial iterations in April of 2015 in Kinoki Theatre in San Cristóbal. I then went to see it again on June 18, 2015 in *Teatro Zebadúa*, also in San Cris. I did not sit down for the oral history interview with Maritea until after these performances due to Maritea's travel schedule and performance and touring schedules. After witnessing Maritea perform, I was increasingly exhilarated and excited to sit down with her and to learn

²⁹ *Trenza Negra* translates to "The Black Braid." There is a lot that can be read onto this title, but braiding in Chiapas and Oaxaca says a lot about the embroidered history of a place and of an ethnic community. Patterns of embroidery give stories of that community's heritage. "Black" in this sense can refer to the blackness of many indigenous and black women's hair or a racial category. Seeing this work in action, it is my belief that Maritea means all of this and more with this artistic platform.

more about her life, especially through our many connective tissues. I was curious as to all that I felt she was channeling and bringing to a live audience on multiple ancestral plains. I was also curious about how she might have come to this work. It was then impossible *not* to see the diasporic longings and fractures inherent in her story and her art practice and not to read them through her experience and lens as a black woman in San Cristóbal.

Maritea and I sat down for our interview during a torrential downpour of rain at a coffee shop that many of us frequent: *El Carajillo*. We were both a bit giddy to sit down with one another. It is July, which, on normal years, is the peak of the rainy season in Chiapas. It is also a rare moment to catch Maritea on her own, so I try to maximize our time together. We both sip on very strong coffees and try to speak loud enough into the recorder so as not to lose our conversation. Rain in San Cristóbal, during the rainy season, is like bathing under a light waterfall. The sound competition is fierce. I have never known Maritea to have a negative or pessimistic disposition, and this day is no exception, despite the weather. Maritea is always measured and thoughtful and is both generous with her time and artistry and protective of her energy and space. She is driven by an internal sense of purpose, projects, family, and finding other forms of existing in the world. She is not someone you would locate as particularly vocal in terms of “causes” nor are her politics centered on street activism or organizing. Maritea is like a visceral volcano—in our lifetimes she will never create a spew-eruption but she always burns at melting point degrees from within. Speaking with her is easy, and I feel reassured by her presence and our budding friendship.

I begin with Maritea’s voice and the questions that, through the bold ignorance of strangers, formed Maritea’s understanding of the *geographic impossibility* of her existence. These questions, like incessant flies over a picnic, do not just come during spring and summer weather, but persist as universally warranted.

MARITEA: E incluso a mí como si hubiera estado en Noruega a casi por principio diría “Yo soy noruega,” no. *Todos* los días me preguntan ¿De dónde eres? Yo digo "De Noruega." Me dicen, ¿Pero *realmente* de dónde eres?

DANIEL: Yea.

MARITEA: Entonces digo, "Ah, vivo en México" y me dicen "Ah bueno." Or, "Mi papá es de Cameroon." Como que no importa la respuesta, con que satisfaga su necesidad de verme de fuera o que y tengo que darles una explicación que de hecho es lo mismo en México, eh.

DANIEL: Claro.

MARITEA: *Todo el mundo*, “¿De dónde eres?” Y digo igual por principio digo, "De por aquí. De Chiapas." O, "¿No, pero dónde naciste?" "Nací en Noruega." "Ah, eres noruega." Entonces sí es como...no se si es racismo directamente o o [sic] no sé pero sí es el de no aceptar, o sea, ni en Noruega ni en México me aceptan como de ahí.

DANIEL: Claro.

MARITEA: Y más porque mi físico no es mexicano. Pero si en Noruega digo, “Ah, vivo en México,” dicen "Ah." Como que ya no preguntan más. Solo quieren que les diga como un, como *otro* lugar.

MARITEA: And including for me, like, if I had been in Norway, almost by principle I would say, “I am Norwegian,” no. *Every* day they ask me, “Where are you from?” And I say, “From Norway.” And they say, “But where are you *really* from?”

DANIEL: Yea.

MARITEA: So then I say, “Ah, I live in México” and they say, “Oh, okay.” Or, “My father is from Cameroon.” It’s like they don’t care what I answer as long as it satisfies

their need to see me from outside and I have to give them an explanation that, in fact, is the same in México, huh.

DANIEL: Of course.

MARITEA: Everyone, “Where are you from?” And the same way, by principle I say, “I am from here. From Chiapas.” Or, “No, but where where you born?” “Norway.”

“Ah, you are Norwegian.” So yes it is like ... I don’t know if it’s direct racism or or [sic] I don’t know but it is that not accepting, I mean neither in Norway nor in México do they accept me as from there.

DANIEL: Of course.

MARITEA: And it’s more because my appearance is not Mexican. But if in Norway I say, “Ah, I live in México,” they say, “Ah.” Then they don’t ask anything else. They just want me to tell them a, like *another* place.

(M. Daehlin, personal communication, July 29, 2015)

“But where are you *really* from?” marks the audacity of the nationalist presupposition of appearances projected onto Maritea, whether in México or Norway. She was born in Norway and explains that her father is from Cameroon, trying to provide caveats so her explanations will be met with acceptance. On principle, Maritea explains in Norway, “I am Norwegian,” and in México, “I am from here. From Chiapas,” weaving a complex tapestry of *being from* and belonging. Maritea, as a black woman, can only be challenged in the contexts of Norway and México. “They just want me to tell them a, like *another* place” situates Maritea as a geographic and phenotypical anomaly for the social imaginations in which she lives. I sculpt the chapter around these incessant provocations, as I watch and consider how Maritea crafts various types of spaces for herself as a woman, artist, mother, community leader, and partner.

Chapter Breakdown and Theoretical Frameworks

A breadth of theoretical frameworks guide and shape how I read and think with Maritea's oral history and her performance work. I will outline these below and provide specific theoretical junctures within these throughout the chapter. Some of these I began to outline in the Introduction as bases on which the entire dissertation rests. For the purposes of this chapter, I will be more specific about their uptakes in relation to Maritea. Seven frameworks shape this chapter: (1) Nadine George-Grave's (2013) "diasporic spidering," or the weaving of genealogical and/or performative webs that Afro-diasporic people do throughout their lives in order to bring together what feels like disparate parts of themselves; (2) Black geographies, a term used by McKittrick and Woods (2007) to signify the expansive possibility for defining what geography is in relation to the African diaspora; (3) Critical interculturality, borrowing from Catherine Walsh's (2014) work with those who have constructed subjectivities in the face of the colonial racialization of difference; (4) Decolonial feminism, in the context of Abya Yala, as the practice of centering racialized women's voices and concerns as emancipatory projects, understood through historical constructs of the racialization of gender; (5) Diasporic ancestrality, looking towards the practices and accompaniments as Walsh and Leon (2006) have done with communities in the Andes, understood as ancestral practices outside the bounds of folklore and cohesion to understand how African diasporic people use creative practices to name their lives and rituals; (6) Glissant's (1990/1997) poetics of relation, or the ability to touch and be touched by other humans without touching or seeing them, an expanded sensory perception that allows us to know and feel when others are with us (p. 27); and (7) Audre Lorde's (1984/2007) "erotic as power": a form of push-back against patriarchy's demonization of women's fullness of being and enjoyment as expressed by the ecstasy of sensory and feeling perception in the world. Working across thought practices, I honor these ways of seeing and use them as launch pads

for trans-diasporic thinking with the aim of doing justice by the profound intricacy of Maritea's life and practice.

Chapter Breakdown

In what follows, I will dialogue with Maritea's articulations as a young artist who does not identify her experience of Afro-descendancy in México by racism alone, but rather, through all the contingencies of her existence. Maritea has a very particular diasporic identity that is a minority within the minority of Afro-descendancy in México. My fundamental conviction is that stories like Maritea's cannot be ignored, even as I resist the model of "inclusion/exclusion." Only recently Maritea connected her artistic work to questions of ancestrality and blackness, even as her audiences (myself included) have read both as major emphases of her work. I will engage with Maritea's oral history, primarily, and use the script of her one-woman play, "Me Dan Envidia Los Canguros/I Envy the Kangaroos," secondarily, to enter a conversation about diasporic ancestrality that is ever-present in the webs she has woven for her life and arts practice. I will contend with the complexities of home, belonging, and place that Maritea makes manifest in her life and her life's work. Thinking with Maritea's words, I grapple with three major arguments that the diasporic spidering of Maritea's life and her subtle ancestral performances have led to.

Firstly, I argue that Maritea's subjectivity of local foreigner is *figured by* Maritea's black geographic landscape, both beyond the borders of mappable space *and* planted within the bounds of San Cristóbal de las Casas. I read this as the beginnings of a webbing practice that diasporic spidering offers. I used the notion of "local foreigner," an artistic concept in-development used by Brazilian artist Pedro Díaz, to understand Maritea's situated subjectivity. I argue that this optic and position is useful for understanding how Maritea's belonging developed and solidified during her childhood *alongside* and *within* the context of growing up in a community of children of other insider/outsideers. In a very local and unique

reality—one inherent to San Cristóbal de las Casas during the time she was growing up—Maritea was able to fashion a black geographic landscape particular to her story. In fashioning black geography from this insider/outsider space, I do not wish to reify Maritea's already contentious relationship with space, always located as *outside of* belonging. Rather, I understand the position of local foreigner as an alternative geography—a black geographic and specializing practice, unique to and beyond this place.

Secondly, I argue that Maritea came into her subjectivity as a black woman through the animative powers of un-becoming-as-resistance to the effects of racialized gender in her life. These dynamics were unveiled through her vexed relationship with Cameroon, Africa held in fluid relation to her relationships to México and Norway. Her vexed relationship to Cameroon was born out of of cultural sexism, gendered racism, and geographic distance with African culture. Maritea's history came to a head for her during her first extended trip to Cameroon—a pivotal life moment. Her memories of Cameroon left indelible markers on her mind, body, and Spirit.³⁰ I read Maritea's process of un-becoming through critical interculturality and decolonial feminism as she performs herself out of the expected scripts of blackness and womanhood, after coming up-close with Cameroon/family. Claiming multiple sites of belonging, Maritea, rather than have her life's work centered around a naturalized and foreclosing (even essentialist) notion of "womanhood," outright rejects racialized gender formations. In these productive ruptures and rescripting, Maritea composes what black life means for her.

³⁰ I use Spirit with capital "S" here invoking Jacqui Alexander's (2005) "Sacred." I am particularly interested in her use of the Sacred's presence in quotidian life. She insists, "Indeed, the Divine knits together the quotidian in a way that compels attunement to its vagaries, making this the very process through which we come to know its existence" (Alexander, 2004, p. 293). Spirits, following quotidian encounters with the Divine, are the presences of the Sacred as they present themselves in our lives. It is also important to make clear that Alexander is pulling from Afro-diasporic Sacred traditions and spiritualities. I was first introduced to Alexander's (2004) in the same Spring 2014 seminar on decolonizing methodologies with Catherine Walsh.

The third argument has two parts. The first part frames Maritea's artistic practice as a revindication that allows her to perform what I call an *intangible relational poetry* as she again creates webs of storying and relationality through her creative being in the world. By emphasizing *intangibility*, I am bordering on a hyperbolic connection to what is already present in poetics of relation in order to further imagine the productive capacities of archives of "disappearance." I use Maritea's oral history as an entry into her artistic practice. I consider the percolations and resonances from which she has begun to think of ancestry, hailed into this ancestral space by audience members and witnesses of her practice. From my experience of her performance, I also ask these questions of her and of her work, desiring a deep engagement with process and an approximation to the spiritual and ancestral planes of her words and embodiment.

In the second part of the chapter, I examine Maritea's performance script in conversation with her oral history performance. In "Me Dan Envidia Los Cangüros," I argue that Maritea performs and embodies what Audre Lorde (1984/2007) once called "the erotic as power." Through harnessing this erotic as power, Maritea comes into the fullness of her self through her artistic practice. Her performance script operates as orchestrated musical staves that complement her oral history. As staves create specific notations for shifts in tone in a broader musical score, I will interweave citations of her performance script in the latter half of this oral history dialogue to steep us in the interconnectedness of her life story and her artistic practice. I understand this interconnectedness though the colonial baggage I see Maritea wrestling with.

Integrating the performance text, I conclude by pulling these two arguments together: Maritea's artistic and transnational life path has allowed her to live her blackness through intangible relational poetry in a critical intercultural erotic of power. When I bring in Maritea's script, it is my intention to frame a thorough landscape through which I see Maritea

negotiate and ever-elaborate her own sense of self from notions of home, diaspora, gender, blackness, ancestry, and belonging. Maritea's script tethers these many layers of encounter to her own history, always partial but never incomplete. Prior to jumping into the chapter, I will briefly explicate the theoretical contentions that shape the analyses.

Theoretical Frameworks

An interesting phenomenon of species-proliferation inhabits the the ecology of San Cristóbal de las Casas. Spiders far outnumber the human population. They incite absolute fear in some and wonderment in others and come in many different sizes and colors within this geographic region. The air-breathing arthropods, otherwise known as *arañas*, beyond their capacity to ignite terror, hold symbolic weight in the African diaspora. Living in the mountainous forest of San Cristóbal de las Casas, walking the trails and working the land, even just in the act of bathing, one finds these gentle creatures are constant companions. At times, they need to be ushered out of the house. At other times, I simply let them be. I take every sighting of them as both a reminder of the stories *que me atraviesan* and as a spiritual reminder of Ashé or life force.³¹

With spiders as my guide, diasporic spidering and ancestral memory are the tissues of connection I'll explore in dialogue with the oral history interview and creative practice of Maritea Daehlin Daehlin. Maritea's life story and creative endeavors represent the fractured nature of diasporic subjectivity and the danger of nation-state belongings. Linear history must be troubled as the only veritable axis of belonging, or subjectivities like Maritea's are again relegated to inexistence. Harnessing the power of the personification of animal spirits and energy that Maritea pulls so powerfully into her work, I call upon the spider as a first guide to

³¹ *Que me atraviesan*, if translated literally means, "that cross me." However, opposed to being a "crossing" that means "to make angry" it instead signifies anything that causes our implication.

listen with her words and then continue with an outline of the other guiding theoretical frameworks for this conversation.

Diasporic Spidering

Listening to what the spiders running throughout this region spindle, I take diasporic spidering (George-Graves, 2014) as a primary point of departure and as a locus for Maritea's story and practice. Diasporic spidering, as defined by George-Graves (2014), is, "The multidirectional process by which people of African descent define their lives. The lifelong ontological gathering of information by going out into the world and coming back to the self" (p. 33). It is inspired by the many versions of the Anansi stories that have traveled and remained throughout the African Diaspora.³² Anansi allowed knowledge into the world through a fatal flaw. The message, however, is clear: no one has all the wisdom, so it must be sought in multiple places. Also, no one should deny or be denied knowledge (George-Graves, 2014, p. 34). Anansi is a creature that lives in a liminal space between a spider and a wo/man and has powers that denote both trickster and a hero. The complex character of Anansi offers space for novel and citational forms of thinking about diasporic communities, individuals, and gender cosmologies, opening a canvas for temporalities and histories of multiplicity.³³

³² In the Ghanaian folktale version of the Anansi spider tale, the story goes as follows: The god Nyame lived up in the sky and kept all the wisdom of the world safe in a clay pot. Nyame decided that he would give the pot to Anansi. Anansi was overjoyed because every time he looked at the pot, he learned something new. He decided he wanted to keep the pot safe only for himself, so he wound the pot around his stomach with a thread he has spun and began to climb to the top of a tall tree. The entire time his son watched him struggle to the top as the pot kept bumping the tree and his knees. His son suggested that he tie the pot to his back. He took his son's advice, and the climbing was much easier. When he reached the top of the tree, he realized that he should have been the one with all of the wisdom, but that his son had given him a wise piece of advice. He became so angry that he threw the clay pot down out of the tree where it crashed into pieces. The wisdom then dispersed everywhere so that everyone was able to share in it, freely.

³³ I hold the idea of multiplicity in social relations in tension with how it is often presented, honoring the critique of C. Riley Snorton (2017), who says, "As scholars of black gender and sexuality, we might consider reframing from celebrations of multiplicity, as if difference, itself, indexes social progress or transformation" (p. 92). I do not celebrate multiplicity as social progress but instead, returning to my initial contentions of oral history's role in listening with the silencing that happens in mainstream activist circles, I honor the multiplicities that people hold, despite lack of social progress.

Diasporic spidering is at once about how wisdom goes out into the world through people of the African Diaspora, and about a search for self when a point of origination is not readily available or understood. Sometimes it is simply that the idea of an actual point of origination is impossible because of the complexities of biographical lineages. While part of the “spidering” is the web Anansi weaves, the other part acknowledges a phenomenon of the current era, in which a web crawler or web spider searches the world-wide web for the most recent internet data, constantly adding information as it is found. George-Graves (2014) explains that this phenomenon makes this matrix both “never static and never entirely reliable” (p. 37). The inter-webs that are created are expansive networks for the uncertainties of belonging.

George-Graves (2014) continues, “Rather than describing a fixed moment in time, African diaspora (and black identity) in this sense becomes also a contemporary active process [...]” (p. 37). This means that the process is continual and that it can change over time. Diasporic spidering allows the individual (or group) agency over what defines their diasporic experience (George-Graves, 2014, p. 37). It also “allows for intercultural complexities of ethnic identities, validating the retentions as well as the new information” (37). Diasporic spidering is non-essentialist in its nature and instead weaves subjectivity and belonging into the African diaspora as a path of dispersals and ruptures, even and especially in a context like México. Accordingly, I acknowledge that an individualized/decontextualized approach to Maritea’s history could be dangerous. It could: (1) Re-inscribe Maritea’s experience within the confines of citizenship, locating her story and practice outside of the implications of blackness and Afro-descendancy and México; (2) Position Maritea as an individual entity detached from her histories, cultures, languages, and geopolitical tensions rather than a person in relation to a multiplicity of places and beings; or (3) Dislocate the context of Chiapas as a unique site of enunciation because of its complexities. Instead, I

respond to the expansive possibilities for understanding and being with Maritea's history and artistry.

I engage with diaspora as a necessary response to temporalities of ancestral, intangible, and multi-national heritages that make up Maritea's senses of belonging.

Black Geographies

Here, I draw on McKittrick and Wood's (2007) introduction to the edited collection *Black Geographies and the Politics of Place*. While McKittrick and Woods (2007) are invested in particularly subaltern and precarious groups of black people's erasure from spatial and cultural geography, their formulations are pertinent to forms of black erasure in spatial and cultural geographies as epistemic, including for black people who do not exist in extreme physical marginality. I am in conversation with the dialectical tension that they pose through this very real erasure. McKittrick and Woods (2007) argue that, "Black geographies expose how the racialized production of space is made possible in the explicit demarcations of the spaces of *les damnés* as invisible/forgettable at the same time as the invisible/forgettable is producing space—always, and in all sorts of ways" (p. 4). They position Fanon's *les damnés*, or those damned to sub-humanity by colonial/racializing powers, in a landscape that reveals the logics of exile and abjection. The tension they call forth through this landscape or geography is not static, but is dialectically produced *through* practices of invisibilization/forgetting for certain black subjects and communities.

I respond to their call for bringing black geographies into the fold of knowledge production in order to understand the dynamics of erasure-space making: "Inserting black geographies into our worldview and our understanding of spatial liberation and other emancipatory strategies can perhaps move us away from territoriality, the normative practice of staking claim to a place" (McKittrick and Woods, 2007, p. 5). If territoriality is the normative practice of saying, "I am/we are from here," it is also the ability to insist, therefore

“You/they cannot be from here.” Black geographies respond to those who take the power to name here-ness and there-ness, exposing various strategies for liberation that black people around the world have and continue to use. I find this consideration indispensable to Maritea’s practice of space-making far beyond the insinuations of frigid and policing territoriality.

Critical Interculturality

Critical interculturality is one of the sites where pluriversal subjectivities can perform. That is to say, subjectivities that oppose domestication and individualism can connect to both the specific and broad transnational movements of people and geographies that hold them, enacting a *doing* of their relations. Pluriversality, according to Mignolo (2002), was a term first introduced by the Zapatistas, in what he calls their “theoretical revolution.” Pluriversality takes the “universality” of Western cosmology to task. Then, the universal can only be pluriversal (Mignolo, 2013, para. 4). Mignolo continues, saying, “Pluriversality is not cultural relativism, but entanglement of several cosmologies connected today in a power differential. That power differential is the logic of coloniality covered up by the rhetorical narrative of modernity” (2013, para. 5). Pluriversality removes the idea of particularities from the picture by asking us to take account of the multiplicities of world cosmologies, and therefore subjectivities and forms of knowledge production. Power gets in the way of pluriversal subjectivities and knowledges.

Walsh’s (2014) work further articulates critical interculturality relation to power. Critical interculturality “departs from the problem of power, its pattern of racialization and difference (colonial and not only cultural) that has been constructed as a function of it [power]” (p. 9). Then it is certainly the case that it is also “a construction of and by people who have suffered a history of submission and subalternization” (2014, p. 9). Although submission and subalternization, as they are normatively understood, do not define the

entirety of Maritea's life experience, they *do* mark social groups to which she is affiliated and whose lived reality echoes with colonialism. I find critical interculturality to be the closest approximation to pluriversal lives like Maritea's without falling into the inclusionary logics of diversity, difference, multiculturalism, and hybridity.

Performance is a further destabilizing force. Performance destabilizes attempts at fixing critical interculturality into another form of organizational conformity. If critical interculturality is what allows pluriversal subjectivities to perform, performance resituates the conditions of possibility for becoming: offering diasporic pluriversal subjectivity as an option in-motion. I will develop these openings throughout.

Decolonial Feminism

I have come to understand decolonial feminism through practices in Abya Yala as the intersection of intellectual and activist projects that reconfigure women's liberation from theories and practices that resound in their own experiences. It is in part a project of decentering European-centric and European-descendant feminism from the Global North and also a more robust contention with histories of coloniality as they relate to the Global South and Third World feminists in the Global North. I join with these goals in what they decenter and challenge and remain committed to fluid borders of subjectivity and recognition within disciplinary and formalized activist claims. As such, my foundational commitment to decolonial feminism as a theoretical tool is to parse out the problematics of racist and sexist practices of legitimacy and non-belonging, making way for repellent and resistant subjectivities like Maritea's.

Diasporic Ancestrality

The ancestral is part and parcel of diasporic spidering. Diasporic spidering and diasporic ancestrality work in tandem with one another. Diasporic ancestrality is a term I am borrowing from Walsh and Leon's (2006) work in the Andes. They define diasporic

ancestrality as that which extends beyond “tradition” to include recent memories and references *and* that which is less tangible and more spiritual in nature (Walsh and Leon, 2006, p. 215). This type of ancestrality—enunciating itself from the position of afro-indigenous groups in Ecuador—more broadly responds to the:

[...] fragmentation, dispersion, discontinuity, and disarticulation brought by the African diaspora and is intended to, “rearticulate these identities in new historical, social, cultural, and spatial contexts but also to reconstruct the histories and spiritual ties that have been hidden and silenced; to cultivate a source as well as a sense of belonging in order to culturally live on and survive.” (Walsh & Leon, 2006, p. 215)

Diasporic ancestrality, as I understand its potentialities, is a re-articulation of multiple selves within and by any given individual as they make sense of the discontinuities and fractures presented by diasporic dispersals. Ancestrality, in this form, is not limited to the Andes. It reveals the hidden sides of historical and spiritual ties that get lost or severed through diasporic journeys.

I have witnessed diasporic ancestrality take root in Maritea’s soul as part of her artistic practice and as part of her existential quest. In the fractures generated by the impossibility of belonging perfectly to any geographic location, I see Maritea ground herself in diasporic ancestrality *as* a site of belonging. A diasporically-ancestral site of belonging can be located in artistic practice and poetic renderings of home, as Maritea learns to create, and always reinvents, home for herself. Home is always molding and moving through space as an internal cartography.

Poetics of Relation

Poetics of relation, a primary intellectual contribution of Edouard Glissant (1990/1997), is a concept and landscape I open up here and then carry as an undergirding force in the remainder of the dissertation. Glissant (1990/1997) offers relation as a non-

totalizing force that does not require the question, “relation between what?” (p. 27). In relation’s original formulation in the French language, it functions as an intransitive verb and is not in direct correspondence to the English word “relationship” (Glissant, 2000, p. 27). Glissant’s relation is totality *only* insofar as it takes account of all that is relative or that can come into relation; then, relation’s poetics exist in the underbelly and working against putting words together in the function of empire (2000, p. 28). Poetics work in the function of a more livable world and make peripheries center in their position against hegemonic forces of meaning-making and naming (Glissant, 2000, p. 29).

I harness these nodes of Glissant’s (2000) poetics of relation to continue an ongoing meditation through poetries of diasporic relation. I ask how diasporic subjects like Maritea use their senses, networks, and artistic and life projects to feel and nurture connective tissue beyond the bounds of communities of sameness. When poetics and relation become central, what happens? I continue to mediate upon this question with Maritea and others.

The Erotic as Power

I return time and again to Audre Lorde’s (1984/2007) teachings on the erotic. For Lorde, the erotic signals a depth of feeling that she identifies with a kind of power to which we are obliged. I read the erotic in conversation with Maritea’s strength and resistance through performance:

The erotic is a measure between the beginnings of our sense of self and the chaos of our strongest feelings. It is an internal sense of satisfaction to which, once we have experienced it, we know we can aspire. For having experienced the fullness of this depth of feeling and recognizing its power, in honor and self-respect we can require no less of ourselves. (Lorde, 1978, p. 54)

In performance, the “chaos of our strongest feelings” can be channeled and released like few other avenues I have experience or witnessed. Within the chaos of these feelings and, I would

add, sensations and sense, the erotic is a fullness and depth that, once we have felt, we cannot return to or embody less of. Once we have tasted its juices, to feel fullness, we require the sensations they provoke on a consistent basis. When we do not have this, we seem to exist in a constant state of longing until the next taste.

I experience the erotic as power to a maximal degree when I witness Maritea perform. Its power lends itself to carving critical intercultural belonging vis-à-vis performance. In the particular web of Eros, power, and performance, Maritea creates intercultural belonging. Although seemingly demure in her daily life interactions and behavior, in performance Maritea assumes the wild presence of mythical characters. Her corporeality draws us in like a magnetic channel. Sounds and movement ooze out of every pore of her being and her embodiment sends energetic dart rays as if a force field. Feeling her vibrate and watching her soar far outside of any theatre or black box space, I see Maritea erotically full in these moments. I think with her fullness of being and the implications of the erotic as power in her work.

Gathering Together

Through Maritea's oral history performance and performance script, read with each of the aforementioned theoretical contentions, I understand critical intercultural belonging as a decolonial and diasporic performance for crafting black subjectivity. In full erotic sensuousness, Maritea *enjoys* her pluriversal and multiplicitous belongings. I honor this joy—black joy, if you will—and the intentionality of Maritea's life and arts practice.

Honing in on the driving questions stated in the Introduction in conversation with these theoretical frameworks, the specific central questions I ask are: (1) How can we think about Maritea as an afro-descendant woman in México when her nationality does not claim "Mexicanness"? (2) What does diasporic spidering do for the production of Maritea's black geography? (3) What are the discursive formulations that Maritea exceeds in her

performances of race and gender? (4) What is the role of embodied diasporic ancestry in Maritea's ongoing un-becoming? These questions remain open and moving in the performance of our oral history encounter, in Maritea's performance of her oral history, and in her performance script.

Conversations and Dialogues with Maritea

Becoming a Local Foreigner³⁴

Unlike anyone else I have met in San Cristóbal, perhaps with the exception of one other woman who is Eritrean and Mexican, Maritea has an immediate and first generational connection to the African continent through her paternal and extended family, some of whom still live in Cameroon. She is also not a citizen of México but only recently has been granted permanent residency through her husband Soh's familial ties, via migration, to San Cristóbal over an extended period of time. As a mixed African and European woman who has permanent residency through her Japanese husband, her very existence in México questions all absolutisms. Maritea's ties destabilize easy historical trajectories of Afro-descendancy in Chiapas because they are legitimized by her passport. Still, Maritea has lived the most of her life in San Cristóbal and for her, it is her primary home.

I first ask about her lineage on both sides, wondering how, as a child, she navigated between multiple homes and multiple countries. In the sediments that constituted Maritea's earlier and formative life years, I argue that it is *precisely* this movement between places and spaces—pluriversal belongings—that lessened her experiences, or rather *perceptions*, of racism and violence by belonging to a larger community.

³⁴ I was introduced to the term "local foreigner" by Dani d'Emilia, who worked with the performance artist Pedro Díaz (Brazil) during a residency in the United Kingdom. Díaz uses this term as an artistic push-back as a Brazilian living in the UK. Though he has not theorized it yet, I find use for its application as an important concept here and elsewhere and wish to dialogue with a rough thought experiment of his as I consider the term's incredible potential for mobilizing belonging in anti-nationalist formations. In this initial thought experiment, Díaz asks, "Local to whom? Foreigner to whom? In relation to what? The land? The humans? The fabricated nation? The neighborhood? The neighbor? The animals? The plants? The moon? The sun?"

DANIEL: Este, bueno si me podrías contar un poquito de de [sic] hmm, de tu familia, eh, tu descendencia por los dos lados y hmm, donde creciste.

MARITEA: Mi descendencia es muy mezclada de que, o sea, digamos de sangre. Mi mamá era o mis abuelos de lado materno era mi abuela danesa y mi abuelo noruego. Mi mamá siempre creció con esa dualidad de ser noruega/danesa que ahora se podría decir que es como el mismo país pero por ejemplo la generación de mi abuela pues sí era dejar un país e ir a un nuevo lugar y ser la la [sic] extranjera. Y de ahí mi papá es de Cameroon, de Africa. Y crecí con mi mamá, solo las dos, principalmente en Chiapas. Toda mi infancia pasó aquí en Chiapas en San Cristóbal pero yendo cada año a Noruega y de repente, sí me quedé unos meses o medio año un año allá y después de los quince me fui a Oaxaca unos años y luego otra vez a Europa y luego regresando a a [sic] Chiapas. Desde siempre ese movimiento entre México y Europa.

DANIEL: Wow, wow. [lxs dos se ríen].³⁵ Y entonces ¿Creciste con tu mamá?

MARITEA: Sí, mi noruega, mm hmm.

DANIEL: Wow, y ¿cuántas veces regresaste a a Noruega?

MARITEA: Fuimos cada año. Como tenia mis abuelos allá era cómo *muy* importante para ellos...

DANIEL: Yea.

MARITEA: Y yo era la única nieta entonces fui *cada* verano de *toda* mi infancia fui a Noruega. O sea, nunca estuve más de un año sin ir.

DANIEL: Ok, well, so if you could tell me a little bit of of [sic] um, of your family, uh, of your descendancy on both sides and um, where you grew up.

³⁵ Like my use of “Chiapanecxs” in the introduction, I use “lxs” throughout the dissertation. Lxs is non-binary word for them, instead of using “los” or “las.”

MARITEA: My descendency is very mixed of what, or well, of blood. My mom was, or my grandparents on the maternal side, my grandmother was Danish and my grandfather was Norwegian. My mom always grew up with this duality of being Norwegian/Danish that now you can say that it is almost the same country but for example the generation of my grandfather well yes it was leaving one country and going to a new place and being the the [sic] foreigner. And from there my father is from Cameroon, from Africa. And I grew up with my mom, the two of us alone, mostly in Chiapas. All of my childhood I spent here in Chiapas, in San Cristóbal, but going every year to Norway and all of a sudden I spent a few months or a half a year there and after I was fifteen years old I went to Oaxaca for a few years and then again to Europe and then returning to to [sic] Chiapas. I have always done this movement between México and Europe.

DANIEL: Wow, wow. [both laugh] And so, you grew up with your mother?

MARITEA: Yes, my Norwegian, mm hmm.

DANIEL: Wow, and how many times did you return to Norway?

MARITEA: We went every year. Since I had my grandparents there, it was like *very* important for them...

DANIEL: Yea.

MARITEA: And I was the only grandchild so I went *every* summer of *all* my childhood I went to Norway. Or well I was never more than a year without going.

(Daehlin, 2015)

As Maritea sews together the various trails of her life geographies, her speech is riddled with staccato-like movements. Spiders only need a single thread to begin their web; the complexity of pulling the first silken strand to begin this web makes Maritea's storytelling uneasy: "My mom was, or my grandparents on my maternal side, my grandfather was..." She

is evidently piecing together the myriad of details that made up her family movements as she performs them into being. “Norway and all of the sudden I spent a few months or a half a year there and after I was fifteen years old I went to Oaxaca for a few years and then again to Europe and then returning to to [sic] Chiapas” As she shifts from one location to another, she writes a *moving* history—a history defined by movement in the very process of performing/telling it. Strand-by-strand, her web begins. When she notes that “My father is from Cameroon, from Africa,” anything like a linear narrative is undone again. Her self-narrative cannot be pinned to a location or perfect sequence: it is lacework.

In this initial moment of performing and spidering the first part of her life, Maritea attempts a succinct orientation of her location in space, geography, and time. Her movements and initial spindles make me recall the large maps painted onto the playground in elementary school; I am watching Maritea play leap frog across countries and colors. As complex as the elements of her story are, Maritea’s embodiment and the format in which she stories and performs her life suggests a level of ease that reminds me of skilled cooking: she has learned the ingredients and measures by heart and can add a cup here and pinch there without looking at precise instructions. The result is an array of colors, aromas, and textures that invite all in to taste. I am fascinated by the plurality of Maritea’s existence and the normalization of the complexity of both her daily life with her son and spouse and now of her family history and upbringing. The humility and ease with which she shares and performs these complexities unfold as she continues.

Confirming Maritea’s geopolitical belonging, I reiterate her answer to me, both to cement the knowledge in my brain and to digest the information I am learning about her: a complexity for which I have few previous *referentes*. As Maritea performs spidering, I witness her, through story, enter a diasporic process of ontological gathering: it is an active process that gives Maritea agency over defining her experience.

DANIEL: Naciste en Noruega...

MARITEA: Y o sea mi mamá llegó a México en los setentas cuando ella tenía veinte y un años y de ahí ella se se [sic] fue a Noruega y conoció a mi papá y yo nací entonces decidió quedarse hasta que yo tenía dos años/dos años y medio antes de regresar a México.

DANIEL: Wow, wow. ¿Y tu papá quedó dónde?

MARITEA: En Noruega.

DANIEL: En Noruega. ¿Y sigue ahí?

MARITEA: Sí.

DANIEL: Wow.

MARITEA: Hace mucho que no lo veo, pero sí ahí sigue. Ahí tengo un medio hermano tres años más grande...

DANIEL: Ah huh.

MARITEA: ...eh, y él se vino a Noruega digamos con su ex-mujer...de la mamá de mi hermano y luego cuando se separaron, ya conoció a mi mamá.

DANIEL: Wow. ¿Y qué es lo que trajo tu mamá a México?

MARITEA: Eh, pues ella era artista, escultora. Y pues ella nunca supo realmente que fue pero creo que ganó un premio de de [sic] arte y era justo como la cantidad con que pudo pagar un boleto de ida a México.

DANIEL: Wow.

MARITEA: Llegó a México y se quedó por varios años. Decidió que no iba a hablar inglés y que iba a a [sic] no regresar a Noruega hasta que hablara español.

DANIEL: Wow.

MARITEA: O algo así y sí, llegó y se quedó.

DANIEL: You were born in Norway...

MARITEA: And or, well, my mom arrived in México in the seventies when she was twenty-one years old and from there she went to Norway and met my dad and I was then born and so she decided to stay until I was two years/two and a half years old until she returned to México.

DANIEL: Wow, wow. And your dad, where did he stay?

MARITEA: In Norway.

DANIEL: In Norway. And he is still there?

MARITEA: Yes.

DANIEL: Wow.

MARITEA: It has been a long time that I have not seen him but yes, he is still there. And there I have a half-brother who is three years older.

DANIEL: Ah huh.

MARITEA: ...uh, and he came to Norway, we can say with his ex-wife, my brother's mother, and when they separated, he met my mom.

DANIEL: Wow. And what is it that brought your mom to México?

MARITEA: Um, well she was an artist, a sculptor. And well, she never really knew what it was, but I believe that she won an an [sic] art prize and it was precisely the, like the quantity that could pay a one-way ticket to México.

DANIEL: Wow.

MARITEA: She arrived in México and she stayed for various years. She decided that she was not going to speak English and that she was not going to to [sic] return to Norway until she spoke Spanish.

DANIEL: Wow.

MARITEA: Or something like this, and yes, she arrived and she stayed. (Daehlin, 2015)

Gitte, Maritea's late mother, had a long and prestigious career as a sculptor and later as a videographer and installation artist. Gitte created the familial connection with México, or seemingly so. The prize that paid her one-way ticket to México created a rootedness in San Cristóbal. "She arrived in México and she stayed for various years. She decided that she was not going to speak English and that she was not going to return to to [sic] Norway until she spoke Spanish." The ability to come with a one-way ticket is tell-tale sign of the time she was traveling in. Now, for immigration officials, if you come into México without a student or work visa, you must provide evidence of a return ticket. Maritea's mother took advantage of her artistic life and possibilities, not knowing just how deep this connection would go.

Maritea's entire body smiles as she shares her mother's story of arrival. Every time she mentions Gitte, I see Maritea's center of gravity shift from her chest to her lumbar spine. Gitte seems to perform out of Maritea, and I begin to understand how Maritea, though fully herself, is always walking along stones that Gitte laid so she could cross the pond. Maritea is pensive and blissful, spindling silken strands between her and her mother with greater ease than the initial threads. She now has enough framing threads of her web (structural support) to begin threading the radial threads (internal structure).

Gitte's own convictions on belonging and language are a discursive entry into an entire culture that created the grounds for a lifetime of being an insider/outsider for Maritea. The matrilineal artistic life did not start with Gitte, however. It goes further back.

MARITEA: Mi abuela era ceramista. Creo que ella vino a México como en los un viaje con otras ceramistas en los sesentas o cincuentas, no sesentas yo creo...

DANIEL: Uh huh.

MARITEA: *Antes* de mi mamá. Yo creo que esto hizo también que ella quiso venir.

MARITEA: My grandmother was a ceramist. I believe she came to México like in the ... on a trip with other ceramists in the sixties or fifties, no the sixties I think...

DANIEL: Uh huh.

MARITEA: *Before* my mom. I believe that this made it so she wanted to come too.

(Daehlin, 2015)

As the story becomes more elaborate, Maritea remembers just *how far* back this artistic longing for and in México goes in her family. She has interwebs of performative relation to México, and I begin to understand more profoundly her inextricable connection to San Cristóbal. Maritea's matrilineal and artistic connection to México goes two generations back. Her emphasis on *antes/before* when relating her grandmother's decision to come here prior creates a deeper layer of positioned enunciation of place. The web she is drawing has enough support that she can move across and within it now.

I become increasingly curious about what it was like growing up in San Cristóbal, given Maritea's age and what the scenery (political and social in particular) of San Cristóbal was during the time of her childhood. At the time of Maritea's grandmother's and mother's arrival, there were much lower stakes for travel and arrival. Maritea marks these movements as sense of self in the movements and motions that constitute her existence.

San Cristóbal has certainly—in the span of the last thirty years— been a location for extremely problematic and extractivist tourism. Some of the people who have and continue to travel through San Cristóbal consume the culture, food, clothes, folklore, and environment without engaging in the history of this place. That is to say, staying in one of the awkwardly-placed five-star luxury hotels and having indigenous child laborers shine your shoes and then leaving is, to me, an unethical relationship for anyone to have to San Cristóbal. At the same time, the radicalism of social movement(s) that are represented via neozapatismo and various

other movements surrounding or part of this area (lesbian feminism, indigenous feminism, anarchist thought, decolonial gatherings and thinkers, among others) has created a desire to breathe in insurgency that this history has made possible. Another side of people who come to breathe in and share insurgency is founded. These movements and struggles have made for a fascinating mix of humans in such a small place.³⁶

These juxtapositions have also created a series of encounters/dis-encounters and romanticizations/disillusionments with the “revolution” of Zapatismo and neozapatismo. Part of this, I argue, is a mistaken purity reading of what Zapatismo was intended to mean, absenting the theoretical revolution that Mignolo (2002) accounts for. Zapatismo created an epistemic break with the idea of the capabilities of indigenous and mestizo leaders, turning many hierarchies of where knowledge comes from on their heads.

Accordingly, Maritea’s own history sites are as multi-layered and overlapping as San Cristóbal’s. Maritea, fielding my curiosity, relates what it meant to grow up here. The spidering nature of her life allows for “intercultural complexities” (George-Graves, 2014, p. 37). Maritea’s process of diasporic spidering is multi-directional:

DANIEL: Wow. ¿Entonces creciste, pues, mayormente en Chiapas, luego Noruega?

MARITEA: Sí, así es.

DANIEL: ¿Y cómo era en Chiapas creciendo en ese entonces?

MARITEA: Eh, pues yo creo que era en San Cristóbal era un lugar *es* pero era más un lugar ideal, no.

DANIEL: Hmm, yea.

³⁶ I make a shift to the term “neozapatismo” here instead of Zapatismo, following the work of Xochitl Leyva Solano (2000) to make sense of the ongoing indigenous independence from the Mexican government after the formation of the EZLN, or the Ejército Zapatista de Liberación Nacional (National Zapatista Liberation Army). Indigenous people in the highlands of Chiapas were organizing as Zapatistas from 1983–1994. However, it is a common misconception that Zapatismo began in 1994. While January 1, 1994 was a moment of becoming public and taking the city of San Cristóbal de las Casas, this was not when the organizing or collective living began. Neozapatismo, then, also marks a plurality of desires within land autonomy for indigenous Chiapanecans, as well as the fissures and divisions that the public decisions then created amongst communities.

MARITEA: Porque era *muy* chiquito y con poca gente y a demás había como toda una comunidad de, o éramos como los hijos de los papás medio hippies que llegaron en los setentas.

DANIEL: Yea.

MARITEA: Entonces, mucha una comunidad, no solo gente extranjera, sí había varios europeos, pero también gente de México de otros eh, de otros estados.

DANIEL: Yea.

MARITEA: Y eh, pues era una comunidad muy bonita porque pues *todos* los papás eran mejores amigos y los hijos también, no. *Todavía* nos seguimos reuniéndonos.

DANIEL: Wow.

MARITEA: Y además que nos tocó todo el movimiento Zapatista, así que eh, pues también hacia como otra realidad, no.

DANIEL: Sí.

MARITEA: Crecí yendo mucha a las comunidades y sí ahora de leer he perdido un poco pero mi mamá era corresponsal para la tele noruega...

DANIEL: Wow.

MARITEA: ...cuando fue todos los zapatismos.

DANIEL: Wow.

MARITEA: Entonces, sí.

DANIEL: Wow...entonces...

MARITEA: Fue muy buen... ¿Sí?

DANIEL: ¿Fue muy que...?

MARITEA: Fue muy bonito la infancia acá.

DANIEL: Wow, so you grew up predominately in Chiapas, then Norway?

MARITEA: Yes, that's right.

DANIEL: And how was it like growing up in Chiapas during this time?

MARITEA: Um, well I believe in San Cristóbal it was, it was a place...it *is* but it was even more so an ideal place, no.

DANIEL: Hmm, yea.

MARITEA: Because it was *very* small and with few people and apart from that there was an entire community of, or we were like the children of the semi-hippy parents that arrived in the seventies.

DANIEL: Yea.

MARITEA: So, there was a lot of community, not only of foreigners, yes, there were a lot of Europeans, but there were also people from México from other, um, from other states.

DANIEL: Yea.

MARITEA: And um, well it was a very beautiful community because *all* of the parents were best friends and the children too, no. *Still* we continue to get together.

DANIEL: Wow.

MARITEA: And apart from this, we also got to experience the Zapatista movement, so that um, well, it made like another reality, no.

DANIEL: Yes.

MARITEA: I grew up going to a lot of the communities and yes, now that I have read up on things I have lost a bit but my mom was a correspondent for Norwegian television.

DANIEL: Wow.

MARITEA: When all of the Zapatismos were going on.

DANIEL: Wow.

MARITEA: So, yes.

DANIEL: Wow...so...

MARITEA: It was really ni-...yes?

DANIEL: It was really, what?

MARITEA: It was a very beautiful childhood here. (Daehlin, 2015)

Several significant details in Maritea's account of growing up in San Cristóbal during Zapatismo respond to and ignite questions of both belonging and internationalism. Maritea ends with "it was a very beautiful childhood here," offering a welcome counter-narrative to much of the griping that can go on about San Cristóbal due in part to often sporadically- and inconsistently-available resources than can be found in larger cities in México. It is easy to get lost in the difficulties of this place and miss all that it *also* is. Maritea confirms a past and a present reality, remembering her childhood, saying, "I believe in San Cristóbal it was, it was a place...it *is* but it was even more so and ideal place, no." San Cristóbal both *was* and *is* an ideal place, in her lived reality. Though Maritea has lost touch with much of the more recent occurrences around neozapatismo, she explains that she "grew up going to a lot of the communities," which means that she got to travel to and experience some of the indigenous communities that are part of the autonomous zones in the Chiapas Highlands. These communities have limited resources and practice absolute autonomy from the Mexican government. When you physically enter these zones, you are no longer considered to be in the country of México. Such spatial practices create a politics of dislocation that are shared by both indigenous communities and those who are invited into them, regardless of nationality. In this sense, Maritea performs a spatializing practice that already enacts a destabilization of boundaries and borders. Maritea is able to sit in the center of her web at this point and through its silken sensitivity and stickiness, sense local vibrations that alert her to

movements. The experiences of spatiality and vibration create very real effects on notions of belonging and physical location, and even, open space for subjectivities like Maritea's.

In turn, these practices create new scripts alternative to those espoused and demarcated by the Mexican nation-state, including: (1) There are belongings to and in México that exist outside the boundaries of passports and papers; (2) Places like San Cristóbal, with histories of its kind, even in the context of Mexican nationalism, have allowed for the construction of pluriversal subjectivities that mainstream representations of who lives and works in México do not "represent"; (3) San Cristóbal attracts different kinds of migrations and itinerancy that have become characteristic elements and compositional textures. It is not difficult to understand why outsiders of all kinds would flock to and be inspired by participating in Zapatismo and in San Cristóbal's political life and culture.

Maritea was part of a community of children of hippies who were drawn to what was a much smaller San Cristóbal. Their arrival preceded neozapatismo. The children were raised during Zapatismo and neozapatismo. Many of their parents chose to stay through San Cristóbal's zenith and its launch into international history. Maritea's upbringing is marked by the very real tension between two (of the many) co-existing subjectivities in this place that makes for both very specific and broad diasporic subjects: (1) indigenous Mexicans (the only people historically native to his land) who created the neozapatista uprising in order to reclaim their ancestral lands and (2) their followers and allies (largely European, other foreign-born people, and Mexicans from other states) who have become indispensable to the movement's longevity and ongoing maintenance of autonomy. Long-term autonomy for neozapatismo has required the financial, moral, and political support of donors, organizations, and supporters from around the world. While many have become quite disillusioned with this reality and judgmental of the neozapatistas relying on foreign aid rather than muscling out one hundred percent autonomy (so to speak), longevity has required

certain negotiations some might call compromises. Siding with the former, I wonder how the influx of foreign support, largely from people who have been international journalists, “hippies,” anarchists, and the like, has created a long-term migratory patterns and influxes and how these patterns and influxes have globalized this place called San Cristóbal, even as they have made it *un lugar de paso*, or an itinerant space. It is also crucial to stress that many indigenous people never desired to and never chose to enter neozapatismo, and many people who come to San Cristóbal, even those who immigrate here, are drawn here for *other* historical, cultural, geographic, and political reasons.

I wonder, as in Maritea’s case and in the case of many others, how and when what could be called placelessness, constituted by having many “places” and therefore not having any *one* place, is not necessarily negative, extractivist, nor neoliberal in its politics. Rather, how can alternative physical and social geographies attract people whose sense of placelessness is also born out of circumstance, choice, and socially-committed life praxis? This is to say that in cases like those of local foreigners, even when the migrations were chosen and/or privileged, they do not always constitute toxicity nor do they necessarily do harm to the place. It is precisely these incredibly complex and multi-matrixed identities and webs that have contributed to the production of San Cristóbal.

Within this historical and political terrain—a complex web now spun that Maritea is sitting in the center of—how might Maritea’s life and movements *figure* very particular black geographies or *her* black geography? If black diaspora and black geographies also include voluntary migrations, Maritea’s diasporic subjectivity is constituted *by* and *in* non-singular and non-hegemonic spaces and places, over generations of multiple migrations and multiple racial subjectivities.

McKittrick and Woods (2007) signal that, while often ignored, “human geographies—both real and imagined—are integral to black ways of life” (p. 6). They

observe in turn how, if/when these geographies are ignored, “a black sense of place and black geographic knowledges are both undermined by hegemonic spatial practices (of, say segregation and neglect) and seemingly unavailable as a worldview” (McKittrick and Woods, 2007, p. 7). As a black woman of mixed descent, Maritea’s movements, beginning in childhood, are black geographies. Hegemonic spatial practices would render movements and geographies like those of Maritea’s family illegible. In the context of individual subjectivities like Maritea’s, is it possible to consider such movements and multiple senses of belonging *generative* and *integral* spaces for constituting black life?

Similarly, I wondered about the nature of Maritea’s school experience—given that she and her peers made up part of this group of local foreigners—and whether she had experienced some earlier moments of racism in her childhood years. Adult and children have told me that bullying and discrimination in childhood years is a characteristic challenge for Afro-Mexicans and Afro-descendants. Given that children can be some of the biggest perpetrators of bullying and racism—often, if not always *learned* discriminatory practices—I imagined Maritea must have faced earlier experiences with racial discrimination that marked her understanding of belonging as well. I also imagined that the community she was involved in was not her only reality. I share that I have not heard of many instances of having had a “beautiful” childhood here and wonder if she can elaborate on why and how, or rather *if*, race played a part for her.

DANIEL: ¿Y cómo era en cuestiones de...claro, por eso creo que hay como una diferencia generacional también como de gente que nos lleva como una generación o dos generaciones?

MARITEA: Uh huh.

DANIEL: Hablan como del racismo en la en la escuela.

MARITEA: Hmm.

DANIEL: Pero no sé ¿Cómo era esto para tí?

MARITEA: Para mí en lo general o sea en México creo que nunca he sentido ese racismo como por ser morena o algo así, no. Como que siempre acá el racismo está mucho más dirigido hacia ... los indígenas.

DANIEL: Mm hmm. Yea.

MARITEA: Como esa esa [sic] cuestión de de [sic], hasta de la misma gente que es morena pero que tienen descendencia indígena que no la quiere aceptar.

DANIEL: Yea.

MARITEA: Y y [sic] más creo que en ese entonces yo era la...o sea, no había gente con descendencia africana.

DANIEL: Yea.

MARITEA: Entonces más bien yo era como algo exótico.

DANIEL: Claro.

MARITEA: Y también como soy muy alta...

DANIEL: Sí.

MARITEA: ...hasta ahora no he vivido como un racismo negativo digamos, no.

DANIEL: Yea.

MARITEA: En Chiapas.

DANIEL: Yea, yea.

MARITEA: Yo creo. Pero sí, creo que sí va más hacia como esa auto-negación de lo indígena de la gente, no.

DANIEL: And how was it in terms of...of course because of this I think that there's like a generational difference too like of people that are like a generation or two ahead of us?

MARITEA: Uh huh.

DANIEL: Like, they speak of racism in school.

MARITEA: Hmm.

DANIEL: But I don't know, how was this for you?

MARITEA: For me in general or well in México I think I've never felt this racism for being brown or something like this, no. Like here the racism is much more directed towards... the indigenous.

DANIEL: Mm hmm. Yea.

MARITEA: Like this question of of [sic], like even brown people themselves who have indigenous descendancy that do not want to accept it.

DANIEL: Yea.

MARITEA: And and [sic] more so I believe that at that time I was the... or well, there wasn't anyone with African descendancy.

DANIEL: Yea.

MARITEA: So I think I was really like something exotic.

DANIEL: Of course.

MARITEA: And I am also very tall.

DANIEL: Yes.

MARITEA: ...up until now, I have not lived like a negative racism we could say.

DANIEL: Yea.

MARITEA: In Chiapas.

DANIEL: Yea, yea.

MARITEA: I think. But yes, I believe that yes, it goes more towards this self-denial of indigeneity from people, no. (Daehlin, 2015)

Maritea was the only African descendant in the only school in San Cristóbal that had multiple ages of children learning together. It was called “El Pequeño Sol” or The Little Sun. It seems that the name of the school, “The Little Sun,” lived up to its title: it was a kind of refuge for a wildly if not fully diverse group of children. Maritea went to school with many of these same children whose parents had first arrived in Chiapas in the seventies. As a result, she did not feel a direct experience of racism: “I think I’ve never felt this racism for being brown or something like this, no.” She emphasizes the word “morena” or brown instead of speaking of black identity in relation to childhood and racism, while positing her own experience as quite different from the racism indigenous people have more often faced in this region. She explains, “Like here the racism is much more directed towards... the indigenous [...] Like this question of of [sic], like even brown people themselves who have indigenous descendancy that do not want to accept it.” Here a line of coalition is drawn between indigeneity and blackness in Chiapas: a contrast to the problematics and tensions expressed in the introduction.

Firstly, “morena” is a word that is used historically in the context of Chiapas, specifically, and in México broadly, as a word certain Afro-descendant populations use to negate their own blackness and to assert their Mexican identity over their racial heritage and/or descendancy (see Gallaga, 2014.) However, Maritea uses the term quite differently: it is not a denial of her Afro-descendancy. She is using the term “morena” in the context of speaking about her childhood, relating her experience to that of many indigenous people in this region. In the same conversation, she names being the *only* person with African descendancy in her school. Rather than negation, Maritea is contextualizing her subjectivity as a subjectivity in-relation by performing this relation in context to her peer. By performance here, I mean the enactment of coalitional lines between indigeneity and blackness that Maritea ushers in by her choice of the term *morena*. The term *morena* is a learned term that

says more about skin color than about negation. Instead, Maritea is using *morena* as a basis of skin color that Afro-descendants and indigenous share—in this case, “brownness”—a physical marker that is often posited as the basis from which to discriminate and to see as “less than...”. *Morena*, for Maritea, is a term that comes much closer to embracing the entirety of her complexity without negating any part of herself.

Secondly, Maritea makes a fascinating gesture saying that racism is oftentimes more directed towards the indigenous while, in the next breath, explains that indigenous people themselves partake in self-negation. Maritea is signaling internalized racism. Before parsing out what this internalized racism might be, it is crucial to note that we must then understand how racism is defined in the context of Chiapas when used against ethnic minorities (indigenous) and racial minorities (Afro-descendants), and *especially* what this means for someone of mixed ancestry. While there are some local particularities, the definitions are also founded upon and borrow from global understandings in knowledge production practices in Chiapas.

Chiapanecan scholar Margarita de Jesús Gutiérrez Narváez (2014) claims that “racism implies practices of exclusion, discriminatory acts, negative attitudes towards the other, being considered different, verbal aggressions...” (p. 54). She then borrows from UNESCO’s 1978 Declaration on Race and Racial Prejudice, saying, “racism is all theories that impose an intrinsic superiority or inferiority over racial or ethnic groups that give some the right to dominate or eliminate others, or that make value judgments based on racial difference” (2014, pp. 54–55). Ethnic minorities, read from the framework of coloniality, are considered a racialized group based on skin color and other phenotypical markers posed against a norm of “white” or European descent that allows those in power to feel they are justified in their

discrimination and/or domination.³⁷ Such practices are part of a particularly harsh reality in San Cristóbal given that before the neozapatista movement, *coletos*, (a term for upper class “white” Mexicans in Chiapas who like to believe there are “white” but most are just as brown as the rest in color), expected indigenous people to do things like take a step down off the curb to allow *coletos* to walk past.

Maritea reiterates that she did not experience racism as a child but rather states, “I think I was really like something exotic,” and then punctuates this with, “And I am also very tall.” Maritea is re-performing what feels like a generous reception to the behaviors towards her physical being in the world, shifting means and locations of her dissent from such projections. Exotification, however, read as the intersection of discriminatory practices based on racial and gender difference, is an exercise in what may look like mere stereotyping but that can often be based in prejudice. Though subtler, feelings of otherness and difference via exotification are what can be called quotidian forms of racism and can even lead to violence. Racism that, in fact, does not always get read as such because it is considered a form of “appreciation” of difference. It can often be, in fact, a vocalization of hyper-awareness of difference.

Maritea proclaims that “Up until now, I have not lived like a negative racism we could say [...] in *Chiapas*,” it seems that a lack of experiencing negative racism is inseparable from the spatializing practices that constituted her childhood and the foundation of her life: a black geography that the vicissitudes of childhood allowed her to amalgamate, even as those around her did not experience place-making in the same racialized manner. Making place, for Maritea, is a geography practice rooted in a community of local foreigners.

³⁷ Another very important scholar on racism in México, Emiko Saldívar (2014), makes an important distinction about how racial and ethnic difference are perceived in México, saying: “At the core of Mexico’s racial politics is the assumption that race refers to biology, descent and phenotype, while ethnicity refers to shared cultural and social elements that give some sense of belonging” (p.91). Ethnicity is the basis upon which a tremendous amount of racism takes place in México. Marking the definitions in this way is an easy dismissal for racism practices, attitudes, and behaviors.

It is born out of the specific political moments that formed Chiapas as a transnational space. The politics of Chiapas shift and change with state, country, and global political realities; the specificity of history-time-space is always in flux. We might consider Maritea's life and existence more on par with these fluctuations rather than exceptional, even as she continues to be challenged about belonging. Maritea's life and existence echo these fluctuations. It is an example, rather than an exception. Accordingly, Maritea's life teaches us that place making is not always constituted by violence and abjection.

Diasporic spidering allows us to think with possibilities for understanding beyond worn out narratives of exceptionalism and assimilation. It also allows us to witness Maritea's life process for what it is, not only for what it is in relation to pushing back. In this vein, diasporic spidering, for Maritea, is also what she did *not* get to choose as a child either in terms of who her parents are or the countries in which she was raised. Her subjective belonging is not bound by any one nation, even as it is locally specific and contextual. George-Graves (2014) affirms this radical fluidity as spidering: "Spidering embraces the complex colored contradictions of contemporary negotiations. It is being and becoming and a fluid, ever-changing act of survival. At the end of the day (or life) the meaning of it all is infinitely contingent" (p. 43). Maritea's life honors this survival, in the contradictions and negotiations her multiple homes require of her.³⁸ She spins the auxiliary spiral of her web—the non-sticking connector between the center and the periphery—that allows her to maneuver throughout. The movements she can do along this web allow her to live within it.

Maritea, as a local foreigner, is able to figure a black geography that is uniquely her own, in the context of San Cristóbal de las Casas. Maritea's story, unique, but not stand-alone, is a significant instance of spidering a life of belonging, part of and beyond San

³⁸ I understand survival as an "excess of life," echoing C. Riley Snorton's insistence in a talk at Duke University on February 8, 2017. He offered this other definition of survival, rather than survival based on abjection.

Cristóbal. Maritea spindles the webs of her family history to understand how she has come to “where” she is, knowing that location is like a floating soapy bubble in front of the eyes of child: they either want to pop it or sustain its presence as long as possible. Black geography, for Maritea, is a mobile landscape, contained only within storying and movement. Given these groundings, it is important to understand and consider the expansiveness of Maritea’s belongings and the racial and gendered considerations that come with it.

Animatives of Gender & Race

At a young age, another movement and geographic layer was added to Maritea’s life when she first spent time with her family in Africa. In this increasing complexity of belonging, I consider how animatives of race and gender are deeply implicated in Maritea’s un-becomings and how she has come to understand her history and herself. Reiterating Taylor (2013), I highlight the body and embodiment as central to animatives. Taylor (2013) argues that, “the becoming of ‘one body’ *exceeds discursive formulation*” (para. 14, emphasis mine). “One body” cannot be contained by discourse alone because is already *citing, being, and materializing in relation to* many bodies and social formations. Trying to contain bodies is like trying to contain a one-liter smoothie on a small plate: the only guarantee is spillage. Animations are the embodiment of these excesses, rupturing beyond containment. In the spirit of this excess, I call for animatives.

I turn then to the animative to consider its possible value in personal and intimate performances of resistance through un-becoming. In so doing, I am also responding to a cultural intonation in my own experience of life and culture in México: life in México is a reencounter with all of your senses, ready or not. It is like being flung into a vortex of water color paints—the centrifugal force of the vortex can only be quelled by integrating the colors into your skin. If animatives also, “encompass embodied, at times boisterous, contradictory and vexed behaviors, experiences and relationships,” then the animative is an important

analytical tool for understanding the *messiness* of difficult affective and embodied gestures, markers, and interactions that constitute un-becomings of daily life (Taylor, 2013, para. 14).

By animatives of gender and race, I mean the complexly embodied racial and gender subjectivities performed in response to processes of racialized gender. Animatives create tensions, frictions, and affirmations for performing into un-becoming, without having to announce their existence. Un-becoming is a performance of interacting with the non-compartmentalization of life. Animatives help destroy these borders.

I started to see animative possibilities in Maritea's life narrative when she began explaining her relationship to her father and father's family—ultimately, her direct connection to her black diaspora heritage. Her tone shifts when we enter this part of the conversation. However subtle, I notice how her words tighten: she goes from leaping in a field to attempting to run in water. There is a viscosity to her performance now. Her description of the time she last saw her father is tense but reflects a desire for deeper understanding of ancestral lines and familial bonds.

DANIEL: ¿Entonces hace mucho tiempo que no, no has visto tu papá?

MARITEA: Sí, como cinco años [se ríe].

DANIEL: Wow.

MARITEA: Ahorita, sí como cinco años.

DANIEL: Sí. ¿Y ustedes sí mantienen una relación o es como mas...?

MARITEA: Hmm, *muy* complicado como que, o sea, mi mamá me tuvo a mí y así y siempre intentó como que tuviera una relación con él pero él, eh, pues no, como que no fue tan fácil para él ser papá de esa manera, no.

DANIEL: Hmm.

MARITEA: Porque mi mamá nunca se quiso casar y nunca, así era muy independiente.

DANIEL: So, it has been a long time that you don't, that you haven't seen your dad?

MARITEA: Yes, like five years [she laughs].

DANIEL: Wow.

MARITEA: Right now, yes like five years.

DANIEL: Yes. And you two do maintain a relationship or it is more...?

MARITEA: Hmmm, *very* complicated like or well my mom had me and then she always attempted for there to be a relationship with him but he, uh, well, no, like it was not so easy to be a father in this way.

DANIEL: Hmm.

MARITEA: Because my mom never wanted to get married and never, she was very independent in this way. (Daehlin, 2015)

Maritea laughs at the fact that it has been five years since she last saw her father. Her laughter does not carry a tone of either discomfort nor incredulity. Rather, I hear more reticence and relief at the many distances this reality has entailed. Necessary distance, it appears. Just after this passage, Maritea further shares that “living together ... this never happened,” explaining that no type of coexistence with her father has been a part of her life. Maritea drives home the distance that has always been maintained/been present between her and her father—a distance that was synchronous with a desire for connection and understanding.

The synchronicity of these seemingly contradictory realities of distance and the desire for coming close resonate with what the relationship to her father signifies. Resounding tensions of distance and desire for closeness come together like oil and vinegar. Maritea is determined to understand these distances, and does not desire to close off the possibility of knowing. The gap is the animative. In her description of the animative, Taylor (2013) borrows from the Spanish word “ánimo,” which “emphasizes another dimension of the Latin

'animatus': courage, resolve, and perseverance” (para. 14). Animatives work, then, as spaces of resistance. Maritea learns to resist the erasure of this part of her, even in the difficulty of what coming up close means. In the space held open by the tension of physical and emotional distance, I see that Maritea’s life instilled within her is a resolve for coming up close as an active resistance to the evisceration of her complexities. Distance forges a desire to come closer to this sanguineous line for Maritea, in animative power.

Maritea shares that her father’s family consists of eleven brothers and sisters, almost all of whom immigrated to France in the 1960’s given that Cameroon was a French colony. Her closest relationship from her paternal side is with her half-brother from her father. He is three years older than Maritea; they lived close during summers in Norway. At the age of twelve, Maritea spent two months with her father’s family in Cameroon—an important blood and affective line of connection. Maritea took the trip with her mother and biological brother from her father’s side. They were also accompanied by her brother’s mother. This trip set the tone, in certain ways, for Maritea’s understanding of herself as a black woman raised by a single Norwegian mother in México. Maritea stories and performs these experiences with supreme calm, even through the very real difficulties these lessons present.

I feel deeply invested in the breadth of implications of what Maritea shares with me and try to draw out a bit more how this experience resonated in her affective tissue, then and now:

DANIEL: ¿Y cómo estuvo esta experiencia para tí?

MARITEA: Oh, pues, fue creo que era algo muy importante para hacer, no. Porque tenía la curiosidad. A mí tenía muchos inquietudes del lado también africano mío y eso... Como que creo que ir a un país así y una cosa es ir y luego visitar y verlo de fuera pero ir y que de repente seas parte es muy intenso...además cuando tienes doce años. Pero que nunca o no sé mucho de África, no conozco así pues sí era como

importante, como, ir y también ver que es, como es ahí y y [sic] eh, y cómo tengo tanta familia también allá, no [...] O la raíz. No sé cómo cambió pero sí ver a como que era algo que si no lo hubiera hecho, siempre hubiera tenido el pendiente de ir, no.

DANIEL: And how was this experience for you?

MARITEA: Well I think that it was something that was really important to do, no. Because I had the curiosity. I had a lot of uncertainties about my African side and these sorts of things... Like I think going to a country and things like this and one thing is to go and then visit and to see it from the outside but to go and then all of a sudden you become a part is very intense...especially when you are twelve years old. But that I never, or I don't know much about Africa, I don't know like well yes it was something that was very important to to [sic] do and also to see that it is, like that it is there and that I have so much family there, no [...] Or the root. I'm not sure how it changed things but I do see that if it were something I wouldn't have done, I always would have had it pending to go, no. (Sitchet-Kanda, 2015)

“Well I think that is was something really important to do, no.” Maritea speaks these words inflected with doubt—I hear a slight hint of internal questioning. At the same time, she is making a definitive assertion of this trip’s relevance in her life for understanding her roots. Reticence and assertion need not be painted as mutually exclusive in such utterances. Maritea continues her line of thought casually. When speaking about Africa as a place of belonging, she expresses more doubt: “And also to see that it is, like that it is there [sic] and that I have so much family there, no [...] Or the root.” Maritea’s line of thought, when seen in written form, appears choppy. However, in listening to her speech pattern, she is processing and sifting this information as she is speaking it. She is *animating* the significance of this trip to herself and solidifying its meaning through her performance.

As Maritea speaks, I hear her wrestling with the exact articulation of what she wants to convey: “Like, that it is there...and that I have so much family there.” Together we pause and ask, what is *it* that is *there*? Family is there and there is something else... “the root”? Perhaps seeing Cameroon up-close was not necessary, *per se*, yet at the same time, it did an indelible “something” for Maritea’s sense of self and for truly feeling and living her Afro-descendancy. Maritea assures me, “I’m not *sure* how it changed things but I *do* see that if it were something I wouldn’t have done, I always would have had it pending to go, no.” Had this travel not happened, Maritea would have been left with the question of “what if.” Yet, as this trip created racial and genealogical meanings for her, it left other meanings in the space meant for un-becoming. This left room for *Maritea* to do meaning-making in her life and work.

Maritea mentions feeling quite alienated in Cameroon both because of the language barrier (not speaking French) and because of the gendered expectations that fell into stereotypical notions of what role she was supposed to play as an albeit twelve-year-old woman. Since she was raised by a strong, independent woman who refused to marry Maritea’s father, this was quite a shock for her. Just at the thought of what she was expected to perform, Maritea’s face contorts slightly. This is the first time that Maritea overtly mentions feeling a major gendered difference in treatment in any aspect of her life. Maritea recalls how the time in Cameroon was a first moment of both learning what it feels like to belong to an expanded notion of family *and* that, along with this belonging, came unaccustomed, yet expected gender roles:

MARITEA: Pero eso era tener una familia *muy* grande y, eh, y también como que los roles, no. Como iba mi hermano... toda la familia de mi papá casi todos los hombres son músicos.

DANIEL: Wow.

MARITEA: Y a mí me llamaba...mi papá también es músico y, eh, mi hermano podía estar más, como, tocando tambor con ellos y cosas así y yo, querían que entrara a la cocina y a mí no me interesaba mucho, no.

DANIEL: Yea.

Maritea: Pero con los roles de las mujeres, sí me costó un poco pero a la vez muy bonito como el, conocernos.

DANIEL: Yea.

MARITEA: Pero sí fue como un poco como demasiado intenso a la vez. Estuvimos como dos meses, creo.

MARITEA: But this was what it was like to have a *really* big family, and um, and also the roles, no. And since my brother was there...all of my father's family, almost all of the men are musicians.

DANIEL: Wow.

MARITEA: And that drew my attention...My father is also a musician and, um, and my brother was allowed to be more like playing the drum with them and things like that and with me, they wanted me to be in the kitchen and I was not really interested in that, no.

DANIEL: Yea.

MARITEA: But with women's roles. Yes, it was a bit hard for me but at the same time, it was nice to get to meet them.

DANIEL: Yea.

MARITEA: But it was also a bit too intense at the same time. We were there for about two months, I believe. (Sitchet-Kanda, 2015)

Maritea makes explicit that learning these traditional expectations at a very young age came into sharp contrast with all she had been used to. The traditional gender roles reproduced by her Cameroonian family were not those with which she was either accustomed or comfortable with, and yet it was lovely to meet the women on that side of her family. “But it was also a bit too intense at the same time,” she says, signaling the beauty and inherent contradiction that returning to historic family grounds can include. I sense in Maritea’s tone that she never felt any need to nor did she romanticize such encounters with history, bloodlines, and roots. “Yes, it was a bit hard for me but at the same time it was nice to meet them,” allows for this apparent dialectic of family and home to coexist. Maritea constructs of subjectivity in-relation, even when relational un-becoming happens in opposition to or in contrast with multiple worlds.

“Racialized gender” figures prominently in space-making for Maritea. Racialized gender, a central tenet of Black feminist critical race theory, has been defined as “the ongoing process by which race creates and defines gender, and gender creates and defines race in order to create and maintain a system of subordination” (Hall, 2007, p. 4). In the ongoing troubles of feminism to account for black women’s experience, I find racialized gender a crucial paradigm through which to think about Maritea’s experiences. Beyond mere problematization, decolonial feminism is an active way to respond to it. Racialized gender, even in its violent enunciation, has served as an apparatus through which Maritea has come to locate herself in space and in relation to her life worlds within expectations of comportment and life trajectory. As such, I regard racialized gender to be a disciplining practice within hegemonic space and time. It is an omnipresent social power reinforced by interpersonal, interfamilial, and public relations.

When Maritea traveled to Cameroon, she experienced her first major confrontations with racialized gender practices. Maritea’s understanding of racialized gender is intimately

contingent on this chapter of her life, framing her understanding of African culture and blackness. Maritea is at odds with the gendering to which she is called: “my brother was allowed to be more like playing the drum with them and things like that and with me, they wanted me to be in the kitchen and I was not really interested in that, no.” For Maritea, it was less about expectations than it was about interest, even as she states the coexistence of both. She was wanted in the kitchen but she was *not interested*. Rather than see this as not having learned specific gendered codes that she would assimilate and conform to like the other women in her family, she is clear that this is not what she is about, nor how she desires to engage her time. Maritea performs against expectation, pluralizing her blackness as it ruptures with norms in her Cameroonian family.

I found that engaging with gender was an entrance into thinking about blackness with Maritea. I was admittedly cautious at first as to how to appropriately approach Maritea about her relationship to black identity, and perhaps more so after getting a glimpse of the experience in Cameroon. I was cautious to not read *onto* her too much loaded information without getting to know her first and to see the angles from which she understands her life and art practice. I admire Maritea’s subtleties, her careful titration of her energy and projects, and the intentionality of her relationships and work. I was curious as to how she had come to understand her self and history after the Cameroon trip, given that it took place when she was quite young and yet old enough to absorb this information as body memory. Learning more about these initial stages of her life, I see how questions of blackness and gender are inseparable and that my initial hesitations were quickly undone by this intersection. I wondered how, upon returning to México and in the context of her summers in Norway, gendered racism presented itself in her life and, as she got older, these how realities were exacerbated or not.

Though Maritea claims she has not directly experienced racism in Chiapas, the interwoven realities of race and gender policing are lived experiences that have been very present for her life in both México and Norway. I find the realities in both places crucial to her un-becoming as a gendered and raced subject. These further tensions proved no easier for Maritea than learning the frictions presented by her African family. These tensions create an *emergent* and *moving* black subjectivity and animative gestures of resistance.

Working and living between multiple nations and cultural milieus, Maritea explains that in Norway, she lacked language for her mixed-race identity, while when traveling in major airports in México, her physical appearance was cause for detention and questioning. These realities seem to exist side-by-side with authority's inability to locate that which exceeds power's understanding. In Norway, it came down to naming:

MARITEA: Y también que en Noruega algo muy peculiar es como el idioma porque tienes blanco y tienes negro pero no tienes "morena."

DANIEL: Hmm, yea.

MARITEA: Entonces yo, por ejemplo, soy...en Noruega se dice "negra." Y para mí...yo sé que hay gente también que está en contra de este término pero yo crecí con algo muy positivo el termino de "mulata."

DANIEL: Yea.

MARITEA: Que es la mezcla, no. La unión de los dos. Y siempre yo me identifiqué con eso.

DANIEL: Claro.

MARITEA: O sea a mí se me costó que Noruega me clasifican, digamos, sólo como una negra porque es como si no ven toda mi otra parte también de blanca.

DANIEL: Yea.

MARITEA: Tengo las dos.

DANIEL: Claro.

MARITEA: Pero no *existe* esa palabra.

DANIEL: Hmm.

MARITEA: O puedes decir 'café' pero no es como un color de piel que se di- que se usa.

DANIEL: Wow.

MARITEA: Entonces todos los morenos son “negros.”

MARITEA: And in Norway, something very peculiar is that in the language you have white and you have black but you do not have brown.

DANIEL: Hmm, yea.

MARITEA: And me, for example I am...in Norway you say “black.” And for me, I know that there are people that are also against this term but I grew up with something very positive about the term “mulatta.”

DANIEL: Yea.

MARITEA: That is a mix, no. The union of the two. And I always identified with this.

DANIEL: Claro.

MARITEA: I have them both.

DANIEL: Yea.

MARITEA: But this word doesn't *exist*.

DANIEL: Hmm.

MARITEA: Or you can say “brown” but this is not like a skin color that you sa- that you use.

DANIEL: Wow.

MARITEA: So, brown people are “black.” (Daehlin, 2015)

Here, Maritea’s positive identification with the term “mulatta,” even as she admits, “I know that there are people that are also against this term,” forces us to wrestle with the sometimes-peculiar realities between personal identification and the historical-political situations, particularly considering what this word has meant for female corporealities. “Mulatta” has at once been used as a term for “racial ambiguity” as it has been connected to making the violence of white supremacy, “spectacularly visible and yet disturbingly contiguous with blackness” (Brooks, 2006, p. 19). Since Maritea has European mother and African father, wedding this term to historical absolutisms is not the point. The uncertain location of racial ambiguity within racial mixing is a historical wound throughout the black diaspora, particularly as such realities have often been played out across women’s bodies. In Maritea’s case, she posits her use of the term “mulatta” with positive identification reinforcing “I have them both”—“them” meaning whiteness and blackness.

Yet, then we have Maritea’s unfulfilled desire for non-traditional color palettes as a way of expressing skin color in Norway—a lack without an answer or discursive retort. “Or you can say brown but this is not like a skin color that you sa- that you use.” Maritea cuts herself off before she can utter the word “say” and instead opts for the word “use”: This is not a word that you *use*. Thinking through the possibilities for naming what she embodies and carries in her blood in the context of Norway, Maritea construes herself as brown—a history that might not provoke the same emotions as the word “mulatta,” but that might also signal parts of a troubling racial history of enforced labor and violated bodies given that “brown” is the translation of “café” or “coffee.”

Citing the difficulties of languaging herself as a mixed-raced black person, I consider these discursive limitations to incite animatives with affective repercussions. Un-becoming also occurs in discursive lack. This lack forges a type of *mis*identification with historical

discourses. I understand discourse following the lead of Karan Barad (2003), who says: “Discourse is not a synonym for language [...] Discourse is not what is said; it is that which constrains and enables what can be said” (p. 819). Sharing this definition of discourse, I make the distinction between discourse and naming. Here again, we are faced with a lack of *referentes* for positively naming oneself without having to give up any part of yourself or side with one socio-political identity. These namings, “morena,” “mulatta,” and “brown” are never outside of the problematics of recognition for gendered belonging.

Maritea recounts instances in which sexism and racism crossed in the figure of the prostitute in surprisingly similar ways in Norway and México:

MARITEA: Y otro que sí sentía mucho en Noruega es que están, llegan- hay mucha prostitución, no, y hay una prostitución visible en Oslo...de mujeres africanas...creo que de Nigeria principalmente...

DANIEL: Wow.

MARITEA: ...y sí me ha tocado en... dos ocasiones no o tres de que que [sic] piensan que que [sic] traigo ropa totalmente aburrida lo que *sí* que piensan que soy prostituta.

DANIEL: Wow.

MARITEA: Y también haciendo teatro o sea ya me...dos veces me dicen porque no sabía porque era como algo que hacían siempre...hacía de extra de tele en las películas de prostituta...

DANIEL: Hmm.

MARITEA: Y después resulta que es algo que hacen a o sea que hay como un colectivo de mujeres, eh, mulatas que algunos de sus principios o su manifiesto de ellas era de no ser de puta de extra porque para todas las películas “ay queremos una morena que sea prostituta” es como...eso sí está muy fuerte allá.

MARITEA: And another thing that I did feel very strongly in Norway is that they are arriv- is that there is a lot of prostitution, no. And there is visible prostitution in Oslo...of African women...I think from Nigeria principally.

DANIEL: Wow.

MARITEA: And yes it has happened to me that on...two occasions no on three that that [sic] they think that that [sic] I have totally boring clothing but what they do think is that I am a prostitute.

DANIEL: Wow.

MARITEA: And also doing theatre or well they already...two times they told me that because I did not know that it was like something they always did...they were extras on television in movies on prostitution.

DANIEL: Hmm.

MARITEA: And after that it turns out that it is something they do to, well there's like a collective of women, um, mulattas, that some of their principles or their manifesto was to not be prostitutes as extras because in all of the movies "oh, well we want a brown woman to be a prostitute" ... it's like this is really strong there.

(Daehlin, 2015)

As a mixed-race black woman and theatre performer in Norway, Maritea is asked if she is a prostitute because that is the only possibility for her in some social imaginaries. The collective Maritea is referring to consists of African women migrants choose to *not* portray prostitutes for television programs because this is one of the only options for work offered to them. Maritea finds resonance in their manifesto as a mixed-African theatre artist. She does not want to be type cast and learns that she can be read as a prostitute because of these stereotypes, regardless of what she does. Maritea expresses, "I have totally boring clothing

on” in the present tense calling forth that moment and really, how she sees herself on any given occasion—someone whose dress code does not tend to ignite stereotypes.

These experiences are brought into greater relief when read alongside travel prejudices she has faced, particularly on occasions while traveling to and through México City. She relates another occasion where she was coming back from Europe on her way to México:

MARITEA: Y a, llegando al aeropuerto en D.F. saliendo del avión pero antes del control de migración del D.F. entrando al aeropuerto, *agarraron* toda la gente morena y asiática y nos pus- nos quitaron los pasaportes.

DANIEL: Wow.

Maritea: Y dejaron ir a *todos* los que se veían más europeos. Y los metieron a un cuartito y que estábamos horas y horas y horas. Había como una raya roja así en la entrada [...] no podíamos dar un paso afuera. Y hasta y no nos explicaban y no podíamos hacer ninguna llamada...ya le dije que por favor llamaran para avisar que estábamos ahí arriba y no...decían que lo iban a hacer pero nada... nada de información.

MARITEA: And when arriving in the airport in D.F. coming out of the plane but before immigration control of D.F., entering the airport they *grabbed* all of the brown and Asian people and they put- they took our passports away.

DANIEL: Wow.

MARITEA: And they let *all* of the people go who looked more European. And they shoved us all in a room and we were there for hours and hours and hours. There was like a red line in the entrance [...] we couldn't even take one step outside. And even and they didn't even explain and we couldn't make a single call and I asked them if

they could please call to let them know that we were there just above and no...they said they weren't going to do anything...no kind of information. (Daehlin, 2015)

Maritea explains that almost everyone detained in that room in the airport of México City had European passports, but in the eyes of Mexican officials, how could an Afro-descendant or Asian person coming into México from Europe be traveling within the bounds of legality? For Maritea, this event is emphatically representative of a type of gatekeeping that she has experienced repeatedly as a black mixed-race woman and in identification with other brown/Asian people including her husband and her son. Talking with immigration officials, racialized gender enforcement evaporated her significance as a person with rights. Restrictions of language, movement, gendered expectations, and closely maneuvered check-off boxes demonstrate how Maritea is perceived in the world, even as she lives her life to resist.

Maritea emphasizes “grabbed” in how “they *grabbed* all of the brown and Asian people and they put- they took our passports away,” to be clear about the aggression and violence that was felt and lived in that moment alongside many others also frozen by fear. By Maritea’s account, everyone who was detained experienced the Mexican officials’ inability to understand heterogeneous belonging, much less allow them into their nationalist country space. Spaces of movement and borders always seem to police the bodies that Empire never wanted to survive in the first place, rendering speech and the right to know their rights null. They “let *all* of the people go who looked more European.” Maritea performs exasperation by generalizing “all” in letting all European-looking people go, even as she is erased from this “all.” “European” is a marker of whiteness and therefore access to rights of choice and of naming, even as whiteness is an extraordinarily limited view of Europeans.

Maritea names the ways she is able/not able to move through borders, on these two separate occasions. She is careful to not make these anecdotes broad sweeping descriptors for

all of her existence. Rather, she marks these as *occasions* that expose what the confluence of race and gender have meant in her life in face of the multiplicity of her belongings and social inability to comprehend them.

Maritea's experience of racialized gender opens way for critical intercultural un-becoming. Her lived reality as a mixed-race woman who, on the one hand, phenotypically only ever passes as black, and, on the other, identifies as "mulatta" and "morena," is not paradoxical. These categories and labels are always at risk of detonating, as if walking in an old mine field where not all of the levers have been disarmed. Maritea performs passionate animatives and critical interculturality as active response processes to these constant and incessant interpellations. Critical interculturality is performed in Maritea's position and in embracing and living the fullness of herself as a European/Black woman, residing in a home space in México, and as a traveler across borders and cultures. Maritea is not apologizing for the complexity of her pluriversality, but performs the beauty of her existence as a critical intercultural subject. Maritea works against the logics of and cultural scripts, social imaginaries, and everyday encounters that lack the capacity for both seeing and naming.

Within racialized gender social reinforcement and the colonial realities that gave birth to them, the intersectionality between the categories of "woman" and "black" "shows us a hole" (Lugones, 2014, p. 61). This "hole" exposes a colonizing power dynamic that reinforces violence and racism against racialized women's bodies. Lugones (2014), through decolonial feminist theory/praxis, explains this hole:

This implies that the category "woman" in and of itself, without specifying this fusion, does not make any sense or it has a racist sensibility, given that historically categorizing logic has only selected the dominant group, bourgeois white heterosexual women, and as such, has hidden the brutalization, abuse, and dehumanization that the coloniality of gender implies. (p. 61)

“Woman,” as Lugones (2014) argues, has categorically and historically defined only *white* European women of a certain class background. Taking the category of woman for granted without considering its other intersections—in this case race—is complicit with a racism against women or which trope of “woman” this organizes. Read through Lugones (2014), I understand Maritea’s claims on the colonality of gender as definitive of an ongoing colonial system of dominance and capitalism—now also appearing in the forms imperialism and neoliberalism—that requires the subjugation of gendered bodies to continue its route of demolition.

Decolonizing gender’s colonality, then, is the struggle to undo the colonial impositions of biological sex dimorphism and, in doing so, to destabilize these modern/colonial categories of “man” and “woman.” These categories can only be destabilized by taking intersectional realities into account. Maritea’s gendered experiences, I insist, can only be understood through the categories of racialization that she is also constituted by and that, in the process of her own un-becoming, she wrestles herself out of public and violent impositions. Maritea’s agency lies in animative resistance: she performs against imposition and into un-becoming and agency. Maritea is not settled with coercive hegemonic practices of race and gender, but rather, performs her own sensibilities and desires.

Finally, Maritea’s animative resistance also came through the pain of having to choose a place of belonging. Maritea was told she was always free to choose to live with her grandparents in Norway or with her mother in México. She had a strong response to this possibility and *stronger yet* in recollection and reflection:

MARITEA: Y eso lo veo ahora que es un poco un error darle toda la libertad a un niño es como no sé. Como los papás que se divorician y que el hijo puede elegir entre el mamá y el papá es muy fuerte.

DANIEL: Yea.

MARITEA: Y para mí hubo un tiempo que era *demasiado* fuerte esa idea saber que *yo* tenía que elegir.

DANIEL: Yea.

MARITEA: Cuando tenía no se como once años o algo así. Eh, pero a parte de eso, lo veo como algo muy positivo.

Yo: Yea.

Maritea: Especialmente porque Noruega, y México...Chiapas, son como *totalmente* opuestos.

Yo: Sí.

Maritea: Entonces son, como se complementan mucho. Y me doy cuenta que siempre puedo ver las cosas como de otra perspectiva, no ... en los dos lugares.

DANIEL: Yea.

MARITEA: Tal vez se hace que no me siento cien por ciento parte de de ni uno de los dos. Pero también que puedo estar an cualquier lugar, no. En cualquier contexto.

MARITEA: And I see this now as a bit of a mistake, like giving a child all the freedom, is like, I don't know. It's like parents that get divorced and then the child can choose between the mother and the father is very intense.

DANIEL: Yea.

MARITEA: And for a time for me it was *too* intense. This idea that *I* had to choose.

DANIEL: Yea.

MARITEA: When I was like, I don't know, eleven years old or something like that. Um, but aside from that, I see it as something that was very positive.

DANIEL: Yea.

MARITEA: Especially because Norway, and México ... Chiapas, they are like *totally* opposite.

DANIEL: Yes.

MARITEA: So they are, like, they complement each other a lot. And I realize that I can always see things like from another perspective, no ... in both places ...

DANIEL: Yea.

MARITEA: Perhaps it makes it so that I do not feel one hundred percent part of either place. But also that I can be in whichever place, no. In whatever context. (Daehlin, 2015)

At the age of eleven, Maritea was given the option of choosing a nation. She asserts, “I see this now as a bit of a mistake” and at the same time, she confirms, “[...] but aside from that, I see it as something that was very positive.” Maritea then marks her animative resistance and response to this dialectic saying, “Perhaps it makes it so that I do not feel one hundred percent part of either place. But also that I can be in whichever place, no. In whatever context.” She is drawing together synapses of interconnectivity, uniting hemispheric relations.

Faced with a difficult decision for a child to make, Maritea “chose” Chiapas while never giving up all the rest of what and who she is. She exists in a liminal threshold of global movements and a whirlwind of time warps. She is currently able to process and reflect back to herself that existing across places and spaces has trained her to understand how to belong in any given context. In animative exuberance, Maritea relates to and speaks with people of expansive cultural histories. Rooting deeply into her own cultural landscapes—in their plural form—Maritea is ever-performing herself into fullness of being in expansive relation.

Ancestrality and Theatre/Performance: Uncovering Performance Possibilities

Given the animatives born of daily life resistances to being named and marked in limiting ways that have caused Maritea to live and work in the world as she does, I name her resistances as *intangible relational poetics* born in relation and resilience. While racialized gender is not separable from traditional family practices within Maritea's life story, Maritea is not limited to any of these narrow scopes of existence. So far, I have read these possibilities through animatives as well as through critical interculturality and decolonial feminism. Now, I consider how it takes, I argue, a *poetic* capacity to re-name, re-exist, and resist oppressive social and power structures that forcefully constitute our subjectivities without our permission. I see Maritea crafting new and highly poetic forms of relating to herself and the world. Poetry guides this final reading. Here I consider poetry and performance's roles as she is always in the process of un-becoming in relation to all who walk with her.

Poetic re-existences, as I see them in Maritea's life and narrative, emerge out of a performance practice fortified by these sites of tension and un-becoming. I drive my questions and connections around the associations Maritea is making. I see her inventing ways of resisting categorizations dripping in coloniality. I wonder if this is *precisely* what I felt, sensed, and saw in her live performance practice. I see her deriving strength from her artistic practice and in relation to her African *and* European ancestries as they connect her to people past and present. In her embodiment, I see the intersections of "woman" and "black" being worked out physically as agency and power.

Watching Maritea speak and continuing to listen with her words, I feel meditative. I wonder from just *what* internal space she drew such strength and resilience, even as the question of "what" seems to undermine the fluidity she embodies. I decided to ask what these intrinsic strengths she felt were but could not necessarily put a name to or locate. I struggle to

ask about what seemed to be intrinsic strengths, wanting to hold open a space for the intangible to be present in our dialogue:

DANIEL: ¿Y cuáles son estas cosas, como, adentro de tí de que dices, como, lo que sientes? Porque siento como es algo que es que que [sic] como *todos* de cierta manera como mencionamos como esas cosas que sentimos que simplemente están...

MARITEA: Mmm yo creo una como una así en específico es el ritmo... Como que hay algo con un ritmo. Sí, no, como lo sentía más fuerte como más como muy en adolescencia como que tenía más esa búsqueda y eso y como hacía danza africana y así ... pero justo con esa última obra que hice tu viste, yo *jamás* tuve presente esta parte africana... Y *mucha* gente me dice que esa que todo el inicio de la obra, de esta obra de teatro [...] es muy africano. O, otra parte que dicen, o me dijo una bailarina que la vió que hay como claro como un movimiento con el cuerpo como un ritmo porque es muy africano, muy tierra...y algo así lo siento muy muy fuerte en mí.

DANIEL: And what are these things like inside of you that you say...how do you feel? Because I feel that it's like something that is, that that everyone in some way as we mentioned like these things that we feel because they simply are...

MARITEA: Mmm, I believe that one like specifically in rhythm ... Like there is something with rhythm. Yes, right, like I felt it more strongly in my adolescence like I had more of this search and this like since I did African dance and these things but just like with this last play that I did and that you saw, I *never* had this African part of me present... And *many* people tell me that this that the entire beginning of this play, of this theatre play [...] is very African. Or others tell me, like a dancer that saw the performance says she saw that there is a clear movement with my body that is with a

rhythm that is very African, very earth...or something like that and I feel it very, very strongly within myself. (Daehlin, 2015)

Maritea describes herself hailed into thinking about how African movements, musicality, and corporeality are present in her theatre work. I came to the same conclusions as other audience members after seeing “Me Dan Envidia los Canguros” and wondered how much Maritea had intended to make *ancestrality* an explicit undertaking in the play or how much I might be reading this onto it. I later incorporated these doubts in to our ongoing dialogue, confirming that I was not just reading onto Maritea but that, in fact, in different interpellations, she was calling out of herself what was vividly present in her embodiment, even as this was not part of her artistic intention: “Yo *jamás* tuve presente esta parte Africana/I *never* had this African part of me present” *caught me by surprise*. Maritea’s explanation remains characteristically subtle. It provides a very real *glimpse*—as opposed to an “answer”—into her process and thinking, which is itself multi-vocal. Her sense of what she feels “very, very strongly within myself” is shaped, prodded, and coaxed into consciousness by others’ perceptions. “And many people tell me,” she says, “Or others tell me [...]” Her own telling depends, in part, on being told, and so, too, then is the strength of Spirit that emerges as a figure of relation.

The dancer friend who had seen Maritea’s work commented, “there is a clear movement with my body that is with a rhythm that is very African, very earth.” Maritea is hailed into the depths of her embodiment and all she moves and processes through her performance practice. While Maritea does not make this a center of her work, she also does not deny it: “something like that and I feel it very, very strongly within myself.” I decided to sit and think with what Maritea might mean of this “it” that sits “very, very strongly” within herself.

Peggy Phelan (1993) remains one of the performance scholars that has *most* poignantly tackled the question of visibility and disappearance in performance. I connect

what Phelan (1993) coined as “unmarked” to this landscape of intangible relational poetics. She identifies the materiality of the unmarked as, “an *active* vanishing, a deliberate and conscious refusal to take the payoff of visibility” (Phelan, 1993, p. 19). In the wake of my conversation with Maritea, I wonder whether the most effective response is not visibility, but perhaps the “unmarked” nature of *intangible relational poetics*. That is to say, the capacity to touch/be touched and to feel/be felt should not exist only insofar as it can be *seen* from the perspective of a scopic regime. Intangibility is not the absence of touch or felt-ness, but rather the capacity to touch/be touched and to feel/be felt without beginning with the field of vision. It requires that we expand our sensory perceptions and bracket visibility as the primary axis point for perception.

Phelan (1993) also remarks on subjectivity’s role within performance—performance’s ontology as one of disappearance. She says, “Subjectivity can only be ‘had,’ that is to say experienced and performed (through the performance one has the experience of subjectivity), in the admission and recognition of one’s failure to appear to oneself and within the representational field” (Phelan, 1993, p. 91). Thinking and sitting with the resounding quality of Phelan’s words even so many years later, I better understand the nature of Maritea’s performed subjectivity.

Maritea’s performance practicum is the moment in which she performs her subjectivity and all of the ancestrality that it brings with it in poetic relational form. If subjectivity is “the admission and recognition of one’s failure to appear to oneself and within the representational field,” Maritea uses pluriversal performances of *intangible relational poetics* to un/become a critical intercultural black diasporic subject. Maritea refuses the representational field and turns to relational poetics that she can feel/sense in both the performance of her oral history and in her staged performance work. Drawing synapses and webs across hemispheres and time periods in her oral history performance, Maritea bleeds

magnetic resonance. Maritea spindles and nurtures the processual completeness of her pluriversal embodiment through her staged performance work.³⁹

Poetic Reading with the Kangaroos: Imagining New Homes

Honoring the process and conversations that have developed in-relation with Maritea, while also considering our role as colleagues in distinct artistic practices, I conclude this chapter and oral history encounter by way of a poetic reading of Maritea's performance script in light of her oral history and my performance witnessing of her live performance, "Me Dan Envidia Los Canguros" or "I Envy the Kangaroos." I tune in to the *intangible relational poetics* Maritea performs and the power of the erotic and the ancestral in her embodiment. I am moved by Maritea's fiercely embodied performance of subjectivity vis-a-vis ancestry as she uncovers her own story and thinks forward to other artistic projects. I think back to this performance that has continued to resonate in me for two years now.

For this, I return again to Walsh and Leon (2006). Ancestrality, for Walsh and Leon (2006) acts as an "interior force" and "what the elders call 'cultural and spiritual energy,' that which enables the recuperation, reaffirmation, cultivation, and cultural (re)construction" (p. 218). Given this (re)construction that exists outside of the bounds of tradition, I tether the ancestral to the erotic as a powerful force of the Spirit living and exploding out of Maritea. Maritea calls upon these internal forces to respond to the diasporic negotiations that have created feelings of fracture in herself as she articulates the experience of having grown up between two worlds. Maritea expresses, "...well, they are two worlds. Um, on the one hand, it was difficult, no, because it is to grow up *always* missing a place" (Daehlin, 2015).

³⁹ Post interview, sitting with the implications of Maritea's performance, I asked her if she would mind sharing the script with me and how she might feel about me spending more time with her script to think through what I began to see as her embodiment of ancestry. She was thrilled about the idea. The resonances and reverberations that run across our many lines of encounter continue to pour in and across us. Maritea also wanted to talk about what doing the oral history had brought up within her as she continues to create webs of interconnection across her life and artistic practice. These dialogues and open conversations about ancestry and artistic process that come up in Maritea's internal investigations and in this scholar-artist-activist response remain open and fluid processes between us.

Ancestrality is enacted by Maritea performing/speaking back to the feeling of missing the "places" of her multiple geographies and genealogies that constitute her biographical and affective relationships. These places multiply expand. The strength she continues to develop in response is embodied and channeled throughout her performance.

The oral history and Maritea's performance practice are deeply informed by one another, both in the performance of in the interview encounter, and, in a beautiful ongoing dialogue, in Maritea's use of her oral history as she writes new performance work. As a brief experiment into the inter-layers of what the oral history animated within the performance script, I will highlight elements of the performance from both field notes of witnessing the live performance and the words of the script, to think through how Maritea erotically performs ancestrality as part of her life practice of un-becoming as a *mujer afrodescendiente* in Chiapas.

In this final section, I argue that in this *intangible relational poetry*, Maritea calls upon, via embodiment, the erotics of power as she undoes layers of coloniality across bodies and histories that have marked her body and histories. The erotic is positioned as diametrically opposed to the sexual and serves to wrestle its power away from patriarchy's demonization and violent impositions (Lorde, 1984/2007, p. 54). Lorde says, "The erotic is a resource within each of us that lies in a deeply female and spiritual plane, firmly rooted in the power of our unexpressed or unrecognized feeling" (1978, p. 53). Lorde's is a feminist gesture away from colonialities of race and gender. In Maritea's performance and its ongoing development, I see Maritea harnessing the erotic power within herself and the fullness of her being.

As a final note and entrance in, it is important to note that Maritea's mother passed away of cancer in the year 2012. Three months after her mother's passing, her son Río was born. Five months prior to her mother's passing, her grandmother also transitioned. These

matrilineal generational markers and transitions are carried throughout Maritea's performance and the impetus and birth of this work. The seeming coincidences of these major life passages position mourning as both losing and gaining new senses of home. These resonances trickle throughout her artistic decisions. The grounding matriarchal figures in Maritea's life and her own transition into motherhood quite literally expand across her skin in the performance. Her sense of belonging and longing seems to increasingly spread generationally as, the second time I witnessed the performance, her son Río ran underneath the stage as she performed, even repeating back some of the lines. Considering these quiet intangibilities that are *deeply* felt, further honing in on generative silences of blackness, I witness and learn.

Tierra

In the beginning of the performance, Maritea stands on stage alone, a soft off-white linen dress adorning her long tall figure. Her hair is pulled back, but you can see her tight tuft of curls yearning to break out of its elastic confinement. She begins a deep guttural song while using her fingertips and palms to paint her arms and face with wet brown clay. A voice, barely recognizable as Maritea's, is escaping out of her chest. I am spellbound. A baritone shadow launches itself out of Maritea's throat and seems to swallow us all whole. Though already a tall woman, Maritea stretches to the heavens as my figurative imagination goes wild with her embodiment. She begins in song:

Hace poco tiempo/Llegaron unos hombres/A correrme de mi tierra/Yo no quería
irme/Pero lo que traían en sus manos/Me dio miedo/Y entendí que no tenía más
remedio/Queirme/Y dejarles mi tierra/Pero lo que ellos no saben/Es que no se
quedaron con mi tierra/Porque/Antes deirme /Me convertí en tierra.

Not too long ago/Some men arrived/To run me off of my land/I didn't want to go/But
what they brought in their hands/Made me afraid/And I understood that I did not have
any other solution/But to leave/And to leave them my land/But what they don't
know/Is that they did not remain with my land/Because/Before I left/I turned into
earth. (Daehlin, 2015)

Maritea's presence reaches through me as if I were a hologram. As she says these words, clay drying across her skin and the guttural voice that is almost impossible to imagine as hers, she unpeels layers of colonial history. They are imbedded in and unfolding across her skin and her dress. These sounds and sights set the tone of the complexity of this play. It gets precisely at what I would say is the *need* for decolonial thought and art practices. This is to say, the need to move past the myth that conquest, displacement, and coloniality, are somehow demonstrative of the fact that Africans and Afro-descendants stopped thinking or fighting. Rather, it screams the opposite: it is only the strength and tenacity of African and Afro-descendant people that has allowed us to exist into this day. Arocha Rodríguez (1998) gives an excellent example of decolonial combat of this mentality (his words rooted in the case of Colombia) saying, "The fact that to them [colonizers] took their freedom away did not mean that the masters would have amputated their capacity to remember, and much less be able to take away their processes of political, social, and cultural reconstruction" (p. 207). Maritea is calling colonization to the stage and exorcizing its power. "But what they don't know/Is that they did not remain with my land/Because/Before I left/I turned into earth." The land that is hers will never be removed from her body. She repaints it across her skin, remembering and resisting.

As Maritea paints her skin with the wet clay, layers of her history unfold across this flesh of diaspora (DeFrantz and González, 2014). Gitte, Maritea's mother and ceramist, is also called into the performance, haunting every aspect of Maritea's movement. At this very

moment, Gitte is also quite literally painted across her skin. Mother-daughter mixed-race-ness and eternal connectivity seem to pull at us to watch, to witness, and to feel. The land she sings of that she reclaims by becoming earth herself seems to signal the French colonization of Cameroonians and her feeling of double removal as an African who does not speak the proper colonial language to communicate with her family. She expresses the lack of having the lived experience to be able to name Cameroon as her own, even as this earth lives across her flesh.

Maritea's reckoning with blackness and African identity, layered in metaphors and poetry that pottery is made of, challenges mythological notions of a stagnant, far off, or folkloric African past. She simultaneously challenges notions of an Africa untainted by colonial rule, language politics, and identity. She embodies her full ancestral composition of European and African heritages by bringing her mother as central and omniscient figure. As the clay dries across her skin, it comes closer to the color of her linen and is lighter than her own skin color: a potent aesthetic rendering of a multi-colored home.

From the moment of Maritea's first guttural release, I sense her standing in her erotic power. She moves and sways with the words of the song with such charged presence that you feel she is walking, swaying, breathing into other sources that are present with her on stage. She is. This is no longer performance: this is ritual action. Spirit has taken over, and we are invited to feel and be with its power.

Aire

Maritea moves through the space as she speaks, taking up most of the theatre's floor. Elation glides across her cheek bones. She begins expressing excitement at the idea of the air she breathes connecting her to people throughout the earth. "Respirando me convertí en todas las personas en el mundo y ellas se convirtieron en mí/Breathing, I turned into all the people in the world and they turned into me" (Daehlin, 2015). This proposition of seeing oneself

through the other borrows from multiple indigenous and African *cosmovisiones*, perhaps most commonly with the phrase “In Lak’ech” or “you are my other me.” She continues:

Y el punto revelador, fue cuando me sentí completamente viva en el presente, y me di cuenta de que este aire no solo me conectaba con todo lo que se encontraba en el planeta ahora, sino que también con mis antepasados, ya que todos ellos también respiraron el mismo aire que yo en ese justo instante estaba por inhalar. Cerré los ojos y al inhalar me convertí en mi bisabuela y en mi tataratataratataratataratartataratataratatarataraabuelo.

And the revelatory point, was when I felt completely alive in the present, and I realized that this air did not only connect me to all that I found on the planet now, but also with my ancestors, since all of them also breathed the same air as me in this exact instant that I was about to inhale. I closed my eyes and as I inhaled I turned into my great grandmother and my greatgreatgreagreatgreatgreatgreatgreatgreatgreatgrandfather. (Daehlin, 2015)

Here, through the connection to air, Maritea expresses the *comfort* of ancestry. She can feel a connection to her ancestors as far back as she can conceive of—great, great, great, great ... lineages beyond our capacity for recollection, but not beyond the capacity of imagination. I develop an affective relationship to Maritea’s performance work. I feel tears well up in my eyes and feel motion jolting through the epicenter of my body. I want to sob of profound relief but resolve to push out rivers. I feel a sense of being deeply seen and deeply seeing at once—unnerving and exhilarating.

Shortly after feeling completely alive with her revelation, Maritea asks why she should live more, asking “What more can she expect after this?” This is quintessential erotic power: “For having experienced the fullness of this depth of feeling and recognizing its

power, in honor and self-respect we can require no less of ourselves” (Lorde, 1984/2007, p. 54). In this moment of breathing in the air of her ancestors, Maritea experiences the erotic fullness of this depth of feeling and of relation. This performance space allows for her to honor and respect this process, these sensations, and these feelings with her. Following the meta-layers of her performance, an affective fourth wall is broken.

Then, the emotional landscape takes a very different turn. Maritea realizes that she/we might be breathing in this recycled air that went through bad and/or dirty people or animals, perhaps even in large and congested cities. What if the air she inhales has just come out of a person who does not have the cleanliness she does? Suddenly, her character starts to panic. It is as if we are watching someone who is mentally confused and bewildered about their exact location. She embodies a feeling of statelessness—we do not know if she knows where she is. We are powerfully interpellated: we no longer know exactly where we are. Within the folds of the performance, Maritea is signaling the aftershocks of colonial relations and their dark twin, modernity, coupled with imperialist powers that have corrupted what was once easily felt and breathed as ancestral lines and inheritances. This same air, given that the laws of physics do not allow any energy to be gained or lost, has become so polluted that Maritea’s character no longer knows if there is enough air space clear enough to find a sense of self and home. *Desconocidos*, strangers, block the path between herself and her lineage, causing panic, disorientation, and fear.

In this emotional leap, I am struck by Maritea’s vulnerability in performatively unveiling a state of total bewilderment. She has seen and felt this before. Her emotions are real: this is closer to what something like the Stanislavski technique would teach. We are taken on a ride with Maritea, gripping strongly to her waist as if a train that has just flown off its tracks. We all walk the crest of frazzled disorientation with her.

Fuego

Maritea opens the next section again with guttural singing but this time, in honor of the Kangaroo: "Guru/Guro canguro/Guro canguro/Guru canguro" (Daehlin, 2015). The second time I witnessed this performance, her three-year-old son Río was wandering around on the floor between where the first row of seats began and where the corner of the stage began. Part of Maritea's politic is to integrate children, families, and other generations into artist practices. It was profound to see this in action, but particularly during this section of her performance. At this moment, although I knew only a few pieces of information about her mother's death, it was clear to me that the kangaroo metaphor was the animal presence of her mother Gitte. Given that Río was born just after this passing, ancestry and home take on an even broader significance.

As Maritea sings, Río, in a small voice from below the stage, stages a call and response to her "guruuuuuuu" song. Having watched her rehearse this piece many times, Río knows it by heart. Río coos "Guru, guru" in his sweet child's voice, breaking the fourth wall in a different manner as we marvel and giggle at Río's presence and in turn, marvel at Maritea's integration. Maritea acknowledges Río's presence, responding to him as if part of the script, giggling to herself, without missing a beat, and continues her performance. I find myself making another welcomed and repeated connection: the separation between artistic practice and quotidian life is unnecessary. Such separation may be another form of imperial categorization, division, fragmentation, or dis-integration. I feel this especially as I watch the energy exchange between Maritea and Río as she continues her performance. Maritea honors generations past and future as Gitte guides part of the path.

With the next performance gesture, Maritea continues connecting multiple generations and lineages, exposing the fragility of losing the matriarchal figure who has brought her to this very moment in staged and life work. Maritea discloses her desire to crawl

back into her mother's "pouch" now that she is not present in physical form. Her mother, kangaroos and this pouch now signify "home."

De muy pequeña supe que los bebés canguros tienen una bolsa que solo es para ellos en el vientre de su madre, desde entonces le tuve envidia a los canguros. Toda mi infancia me imaginé que justo a la altura del vientre de mi madre, había un espacio, como la bolsa del canguro, desde afuera solo parecía que mi madre era un poco gordita, pero adentro había un cuarto, sí, así era, de niña tenía un cuarto en el vientre de mi madre...

Since I was a small child I knew that baby kangaroos have a little pouch that is just for them in their mother's womb, since then I have envied the kangaroos. All of my childhood I imagined that just at the height of my mother's womb, there was a space, like the kangaroo's pouch, from the outside it just seemed like my mother was a bit pudgy, but inside there was a room, yes, that's how it was, as a young girl I had a room in the womb of my mother... (Daehlin, 2015)

The animation of this pouch as a hiding place that protects Maritea from the outside world serves manifold purposes. It seems to signal a performative mourning of her mother and the energetic transfer of both her own motherhood, the work of mothering, and the nurturing work of her artistic practice. In an anthropomorphic fashion, Maritea pulls herself into a sweater that has texture like a kangaroo's fur. The sweater does not fit even a quarter of Maritea's form and she has to keep her arms tucked to her sides in order to keep it on. We almost want to giggle at this tall woman trying to fit into a sweater that is sorely ill-fitted for her form.

Maritea's attempt to conceal herself in a kangaroo sweater gestures towards the lack of protection humans have over their children once they are out in the world. It also signals

the passing of generational time and memory and a longing for the comfort of mother. I remember my own physical connection with my mother when we would lie together and I'd rest my head on her abdomen, all through my childhood. At the same time, it tethers this metaphorical climbing-into a mother's pouch to various forms of creative force that are not always grounded in the biological practice of birthing. Leaving any biological essentialisms aside *and* honoring the generational births, deaths, and transitions Maritea evokes, I embrace this connective tissue between stories and life-worlds.

Maritea also invokes home space as a site of initiation and/or respite. If this space is fractured, extended, expanded, from the beginning, where does it cohere? While I feel it is essential not to indulge the limiting and binary discursive structures of mother-as-earth so as not to collapse reproductive prerogatives as a "legitimizing" site of womanhood, Maritea holds "place" present and loosely. "Place" *is* and *is not* meant so literally. As Maritea climbs into the fabric shell of a kangaroo, too small for her body, she seems to contain all that she has opened in her narrative. What is the geographic place that can contain, cradle, and protect a sense of belonging, even and *especially* as Maritea rejects traditional gender roles yet embraces matriarchal presences in her life? Home, I argue, for Maritea, as a multiply-diasporic subject, is an *invention*, a *creation*, and a site located *in performance*. In this geography, she creates a ghosted and anthropomorphic figure out of fabric to crawl back into and find a new center, in her own skin.

Vendedor

In comedic and parodic fashion, the tone shifts dramatically again and Maritea turns on her best game-show host embodiment and persona. In the search for "happiness" she makes each of these elements essential to ancestral life, a commodity. In typified colonial language, to emphasize the historical nature of her parody, she begins:

...en ese momento ustedes eran ignorantes de que hoy les voy a presentar la solución a los problemas más grandes de la humanidad, dándoles la oportunidad de que si aceptan mis productos, al salir de esta misma puerta serán personas plenamente felices, las más felices del mundo.

...in this moment you were all ignorant about what I am going to present to you today which is the solution to humanity's biggest problems, giving you all the opportunity that if you accept my products, when you go out this same door you will completely happy people, the happiest people on earth. (Daehlin, 2015)

Maritea interpellates her audience, causing us to laugh, feel discomfort, and question all that she is calling forth. She calls into question and brings to the chopping block modernity's persistent coloniality—the empty promise of commodities to create human satisfaction and fullness.

One at a time she presents and performs the different options: a portable piece of land with its own plastic bag to take to any part of the world (large enough for her feet to stand in), a "private" sign in English on one side and in Spanish on the other, a portable air purification system in the form of a another plastic bag, a mother kangaroo sweater for any to slip over their head, a portable piece of ocean in a plastic basin with a smidgen of sand and fish smell to boot, and finally, sunglasses and disconnected headphones that are said to transmit the sound of the ocean. As Maritea brings out each option for her audience to "purchase," she again grows increasingly frazzled and erratic in her speech and in her movements. In the final moment, she is sitting taking in air from a plastic bag, imagining her ocean waves, encased in her kangaroo sweater and rocking herself back and forth hyperventilating with the plastic air. She turns inner turmoil outward and performs absolute lunacy. Maritea, I argue, is simulating the crazy-making commodification of ancestrality and existence.

Depth, absurdity, humor, parody, and the guttural come together in this moment. I pose this as a sharp contrast and yet a beautiful accompaniment to the oral history performance. *Performance* is the space for the erotic to shout, dance, drink through the pain, and run maniacally through an open field. Lid off, eyes blazed, we are following Maritea, learning to tread water in deep ocean—our muscular and pulmonary capacities forced to expand, lest we drown. We sync our breath and forget that we can no longer feel the bottom.

Agua, Mar, y Cansancio

...no estoy solo, estoy acompañada, me siento abrazada, no estoy sola, es un lugar donde no estoy sola, estoy acompañada, es un lugar donde estoy segura, soy feliz, sí, sí, soy feliz, no estoy sola, estoy disfrutando, soy feliz, estoy bien, la plenitud, soy feliz, no estoy sola, estoy acompañada, no estoy sola, no estoy sola, soy feliz, no estoy sola, no estoy sola, no estoy sola...

...I am not alone, I am accompanied, I feel embraced, I am not alone, it's a place where I am not alone, I am accompanied, it's a place where I am safe, I am happy, yes, yes, I am happy, I am not alone, I am enjoying myself, I am happy, I am well, plenitude, I am happy, I am not alone, I am accompanied, I am not alone, I am not alone, I am happy, I am not alone, I am not alone, I am not alone... (Daehlin, 2015)

Maritea rocks herself back and forth as her breathing slows and she reminds herself “I am not alone, I am accompanied.” We are watching her and now the distance feels immense. I want to run up on stage, embrace, hold, and rock with her. I become aware that there is a stage again. After what feels like the point of no return, Maritea stands up, faces us in a downtrodden and hushed tone and says, “Si alguien quiere alguno de los productos, háganmelos saber después. Ya no tengo más que ofrecer/If someone wants one of the products, let me know after. I don't have anything left to offer” (Daehlin, 2015). The

melancholic anticlimax leaves me with a knot in my throat, even in its clear parodic intentionality. This intelligent performance decision leaves an open ravine for resonances to begin to echo. I would attest that provocation and re-membling are the wavelengths of its sound patterns.

Maritea wraps us with dense ancestral layering that I stay with long after the performance, per se, ends. Maritea is tapping into a shared definition of ancestrality:

...a thought conceived from and within a place of marginality and connected to struggles of existence that have ancestral memories in common, that responds in a creative way to that which has been negated, a thought that takes as a central element the feelings of belonging and the cultural energy of the elders and ancestors, processes that give life to ancestrality as philosophy, doctrine and history and that find their bond in the return to "casa." (Walsh and León, 2006, p. 220)

Ancestrality, in the case of “Me Dan Envidia Los Canguros,” is manifested as a living philosophy, as an art form, and as a cultural energy dancing, singing, speaking, and moving across elders and ancestors present and past. As in many usages of animals to signal human desires of the capacity to carry their home on their backs, free migration, or a litany of other examples, here home space is contained within a pouch. This naturally bestowed pouch on the front of kangaroo bodies evokes very real, tangible, and yet *intangible* longings. Maritea has made room for us to see what cannot be seen but that can certainly be felt and witnessed.

Within Maritea's performance and her written script that I continue to read through, each time finding new discoveries and possible analyses, are ample opportunities and invocations. We are asked not only to hear the parody and to witness how she uses the trained body she has to story all of this, but to listen to what she is teaching us through this medium and platform as a Spirit-pedagogy interaction. In the erotic fullness that creates the intangibility of felt-ness, I can now only read her oral history through this other aspect of

story-telling. Maritea reveals endless layers of embodiment. I witness and process this embodiment as ancestral knowledge practices that she carries and performs from a deeply erotic source.

In her own diasporic life and experience, it seems that Maritea performs resistance as geopolitics of diaspora that cannot be settled or anchored to any one, or even two, places. It cannot be settled into two, or even three languages, or into any simple definitions, home spaces, or skin colors. No nation can contain the existence that she expresses through the medium of theatre performance. This work is difficult, painful, crazy-making, and lifelong. It is deeply erotic. In this storying, embodying, and listening, Anansi draws another web of her thread, and her spidering continues, always in motion, never settling on any one definition of belonging.

Recalling the image of Rio stumbling across the stage floor in front of Maritea, with the energy of creation and mothering tying her history together, I wonder *how* or *if* the work of mothering and the work of channeling such energy through her art has affected her.

DANIEL: ¿Y cómo ha cambiado eso de ser mamá, no, como tu práctica artística o tu tu [sic] visión del mundo desde el otro lado, no?

MARITEA: Pues mucho. Yo lo que sí mucho...yo no sé tanto como perdí a mi mama y me volví mamá al mismo tiempo...

DANIEL: Yea.

MARITEA: O sea creo que estas dos cosas se mezclan mucho para mí. Que no sé qué fue lo que me hizo cambiar más pero sí una energía mucho más...creo que ser mama es *tan* intenso y tienes que dar tanta energía hacia otro.

DANIEL: Yea.

MARITEA: ...que la práctica artística también requiere esto como normalmente o sea o yo también creo que con los artistas es muy intenso como cuando trabajas.

DANIEL: Yea.

MARITEA: Y al ser mama, como que vi que ya no tengo esa inten- no puedo dar esa intensidad a mi hijo y al trabajo.

DANIEL: And how has being a mother changed you, no, like in your artistic practice or your your [sic] vision of the world from the other side, no?

MARITEA: Well, a lot. What is yes much [sic]...I don't know but since I lost my mother and became a mother at the same time...

DANIEL: Yea.

MARITEA: Um, I think these two things really mixed themselves for me. I am not sure what it was that made me change the most but yes and energy that was much more...I believe that being a mom is *so* intense and you have to give so much energy to another.

DANIEL: Yea.

MARITEA: ...that artistic practices also require this or that normally, um, or I believe that artists require this same kind of energy when we work.

DANIEL: Yea.

MARITEA: And being a mom like I saw that I no longer have this intens- I can't give this intensity to my son and to my work. (Daehlin, 2015)

Maritea insists "And being a mom like I saw that I no longer have this intens- I can't give this intensity to my son *and* to my work." At the same time, this work is the first of its kind and expansiveness that Maritea has undertaken since having Río. What does it mean to hold such creative space to such a high regard such that ancestry is the central force of Maritea's work, on par with the attention and energy her child needs? What is this life-giving creative force in the context of Afro-descendancy?

Attesting to forces of family and creativity, Maritea insists on these active and living forms of creating family and community. When nation-state and geography do not exist in homogenized and singularized formats, they also do not open themselves up to be used and altered by those of us whose existences and belongings are multiple. In response, Maritea proposes an alternative method:

MARITEA: Y que eso lo veo muy claro ahora que esta, que tengo mi familia y casi no tengo familia de sangre con, no tengo contacto con nadie...de poder crear esa familia para él, no.

DANIEL: Yea.

MARITEA: Creo que es parte de crear esa identidad....y también como lo que dices...llevar esta a lo artístico también, no...al trabajo. A crear redes a crear...eso para mí...

DANIEL: Claro, sí.

MARITEA: ...de nuestras propias identidades.

DANIEL: Claro. Seguir nutriéndonos, no...de distintos puntos y lados.

MARITEA: Sí.

DANIEL: Sí.

MARITEA: *Eso* como verlo como algo positivo una...que nos da una libertad...

DANIEL: Hmm.

MARITEA: ...desde el margen pues crear nuestras propias...maneras de querer de querer [sic] que sea nuestra identidad...

DANIEL: Yea.

MARITEA: Y que nadie puede decir de dónde eres sino que eso cada quién lo, lo puede decidir.

MARITEA: And this I see very clearly now that it is, that I have my family and I have almost no blood family with, I don't have contact with anyone ... to be able to create this family for him, no.

DANIEL: Yea.

MARITEA: I think this is part of this identity...and also as you say...to bring this to the artistic too, no... to the work. To create networks ... this for me ...

DANIEL: Yes of course.

MARITEA: ...of our own identities.

DANIEL: Of course. To continue to nurture one another, no...from distinct points and places.

MARITEA: Yes.

DANIEL: Yes.

MARITEA: *This* like to see it as something positive a ... that gives us a freedom ...

DANIEL: Hmm.

MARITEA: ...from the margin, well, to create our own ... ways of loving, of loving [sic] that it is our identity...

DANIEL: Yea.

MARITEA: And no one can tell us where we are from...but instead this is something that each person can can [sic] decide. (Daehlin, 2015)

In our dialogue, we seem to be speaking the same language—affirming and checking out one another's views on the creation of chosen family when our racial, ethnic, national, and artistic belongings are so vast that they do not fit into what is easily identifiable and characterizable. “Y que nadie puede decir de dónde eres sino que eso cada quién lo, lo puede decider/And no one can tell us where we are from...but instead this is something that each person can can [sic] decide.” We can each decide where our sources of belonging are/where we are from in

relation to our histories—something that becomes increasingly important as these sources do not coincide with single geographies and/or have no one definitive point of origination.

Maritea encourages us all, by example, to find creative modalities for belonging. Both through creative praxis and through creative nurturing of multiple languages, places, and movements that constitute our senses of self. Choice is required to some extent, even if that is the agency to name. Within this choice can be multiplicity. Nationality starts to evaporate and creative spidering spindles its web in an invisible matrix. It disappears so that we can learn to sense it. With sunshine and rain, the web of silk strings is brought back to our attention and we marvel at its fine beauty, but we can always feel it. Intercultural belonging, ancestral livelihoods, and pluriversal border existences.

Lost a Whole Continent, but Gained Belonging

In oral history as well as staged and daily performances of relation, Maritea embodies and lives a very particular Afro-descendancy and Afro-Mexicanness. The complexity of her history and life path requires different approaches to existing and being in the world. Maritea re-creates her sense of home and personhood through the family she has created and her artistic practice. By reckoning with belonging as a local foreigner, Maritea crafts her own black geography. In the interstices of gendered racism and raced sexism, Maritea finds animative resistance and resilience. In performance practice, Maritea draws deep into her ancestral well and the power of her erotic being to fashion other ways of being in the world despite coloniality's legacy in social space. I see an artist and woman creating *referentes* that will far outlast her and complexities that no text book could account for.

In poignant and political, however quiet and often intangible ways, Maritea shares alternative geographies of knowledge production and Afro-descendancy that are, arguably, both deeply political and deeply feminist. In this profound erotics of belonging, Maritea crawls back into the pouch of the ghost of her mother's kangaroo that she has fabricated for

herself. She mothers and performs herself into existence in a world hostile to subjectivities like her own. In longing for a sense of self and belonging as a black woman, Maritea gains what no eternal longing can do but only what critical intercultural action and resistance can give: chosen family, community, and un-becoming into a full, erotically-powerful sense of self.

Guruuuuu...Guro canguro/Guro canguro

Guruuuuuuuuu...Guro canguro/Guro canguro

In the next chapter, I witness how Jalila Gómez struggles through and performs similar and different tensions around her mixed identity as an Afro-descendant woman who has spent her entire life in Chiapas. I bring these stories into conversation as narratives with both distinct and overlapping black geographies.

CHAPTER THREE

“ERA COMO SER NEGRA DENTRO DEL CLOSET”: AFRO-MEXICAN DOUBLE CONSCIOUSNESS, RACIAL INTERPELLATION, & AFRO FEMINIST RESIGNIFICATION⁴⁰

Introduction

Entering The Conversation

I find myself in an unfamiliar neighborhood. It seems to fall off the cliff of the *mercado*, pushing into a space I did not know existed. San Cristóbal can feel this way sometimes: like a very small pueblo contained in a tight-knit center where, if you go too far on the periphery, you feel like you might just fall off of it. You can become quickly overwhelmed by the outskirts that seem to stretch beyond a perception of edges – both endless and contained by the enormous green mountains that surround on all sides. I call Jalila, unsure of where I am, watching the vendors at the *mercado* shut down their day. I am walking observantly near the street where Jalila says she will meet me to turn right down the street to her house. My direction-challenged self finds the arches she had signalled. Even in a small town, I am sometimes hopeless when it comes to orientation.⁴¹ Jalila meets me where she said she would, right there after the primary school. I am oriented by her embrace and we walk together to her doorstep, making small talk. She opens the gate to her house and we are greeted by two black Scottie dogs in bow ties. They are brother and sister. I am overcome by

⁴⁰ “Era como ser negra dentro del closet” means “It was like being a black woman in the closet” (Gómez, personal communication, June 15, 2015).

⁴¹ I use “small town” loosely. San Cristóbal has over 100,000 inhabitants but because of the concentration and the level of activity that locals are usually involved in, it is impossible to not go into the center and see many people you know. It is the smallest place I have ever lived so the idea of “small” is entirely subjective.

the cuteness and the sweetness of home that fills my body. I have never seen Scotties in San Cristóbal and am delighted by this canine surprise.

We enter the garden, an enclave preceding the entrance to the house, with the doggies leading the way, and sit down at the table. Her kids come shyly around the corner. They are reserved and each have a flicker of a smile shining from the sides of their eyes and the corners of their lips. I feel tenderness as I observe how much they each look like smaller versions of her. She has a son and a daughter, twelve and eight. She serves all of us coffee and cookies and the kids go off to other areas of the house: the daughter to the living room where the television is and her son to his room. Children drinking coffee at 5:00 PM is not uncommon in México. I watch the smoothness with which this home scene unfolds and realize I have never seen Jalila perturbed. Even her children are calm! We sit down at the big table in the kitchen. It is early evening and the *pueblo* is settling down. Later in the interview, her husband Teo arrives and signals a hello, while slipping into the back of the house.

Jalila seems excited and nervous. I can feel her anticipation. I wonder if she can feel my nervousness as well. How to calmly approach an oral history interview with a professional interviewer? She is wearing a *turbante*, or colorful turban or head wrap, and I am curious about her presentation today. I see a performance of blackness she is donning (emanating?) at the anticipation of this interview. Simultaneously, I *see* blackness in her where I had not seen it before. I look down at my arms, then at hers. Our hues are not so far apart. Her skin color is like my own with what I would call a deeper coffee tone. Indigeneity? These questions surface for me, even though I never wish to rely on phenotype to name blackness. I take notice of the visual regimes that still cross my mind. I bracket these limiting preconceptions, curious as to what she will share and what I will learn. I reflect on my own phenotypical assumptions and any other preconceived reliance on physical markers.

The family has synched into our interview time and are complicit with our

conversation. Behind the gates of her house, I lose sense of where we are and what time it is.

A huge smile erupts across Jalila's face as I start the recorder.⁴²

Jalila

Jalila is a well-known and very visible journalist in San Cristóbal de las Casas. She is also quite visible in Chiapas and beyond the state. She works independently and as a professor at one of the Law Schools, and is one of the many feminist journalists in San Cristóbal who dare to cover the stories of women others will not cover. All women journalists, ultimately, serve as defenders of human rights in the face of unimaginable abuse and impunity. These women are fighting to get patriarchy out of reporting and to insist on rigor, ethics, and equity in journalistic practices from both those who report and those who are reported on.

Jalila is currently helping to run a national campaign against sexual abuse and assault of children in México, a rampant and historical problem. Her very visible work has led to numerous threats and many upsets by those in power. Politicians and male journalists have not been subtle in wielding these aggressions against her person. She is very careful about exposing her family and keeps them out of her work and public profile in any public matter. For the sake of confidentiality and safety, I exclude parts of her narrative that might serve as too identifying in terms of her career trajectory. I will think, instead, with instances of her life history seen from family and thought processes that elucidate a part of Afro-Chiapanecan and Afro-descendant plural histories.

Jalila is thirty-six years old and a prolific writer, thinker, and journalist. She has a master's and doctorate in Humanities and Social Sciences. Her work is grounded in how women are represented in mainstream media and how female journalists are treated in

⁴² Jalila's oral history citations have a lot more words contained in a shorter amount of space than both Maritea and Berenice's. There is even an aesthetic difference on the page. Jalila's Spanish is spoken quite quickly – characteristic of people who have worked extensively in journalism and radio work.

Chiapas. Jalila also used to run a program where she would bring in people from the state to talk about different pressing issues in the region. At different points, I joined her in her program, by invitation, to speak about initiatives and personal journeys, including: feminicide, Afro-descendancy and transmasculinity. Prior to our oral history interview, Jalila had interviewed me on three separate occasions. I had always been humbled and delighted by her generosity and genuine interest in learning, even with topics she was less familiar with, like transmasculinity. It was fascinating, albeit at first unnerving, to turn the tables. I was excited to learn from her.

Chapter Breakdown and Theoretical Frameworks

I have turned Jalila's lessons over in my mind-heart time and again. Jalila is a woman who was born and raised in Chiapas, México. Her story is quite different from that of Maritea's. I find it *essential* to put such stories into conversation in the same work. Jalila is a travelled professional and has seen many different parts of the world, always returning home to Chiapas. Jalila is a woman whose family fits into the narrative of coastal descendancy both in terms of geographic history and as people who, generation after generation, have not identified with their Afro-descendant heritage. Jalila has lived the majority of her life in San Cristóbal. She still breaks with the idea that Afro-descendant families never leave the coast, even as some family members still live there. As Jalila performs her experiences, I consider resonances with other testimonies/life histories of those born and raised in Chiapas. I dwell in the current literature on the topic. If oral histories are historical documents, I consider her words a diasporic contribution to historical thinking on blackness, Afro-descendancy, and Afro-Chiapanecanness within the context of México.

I would like to provide a few different filters through which to listen to her after ruminating on what her history has unveiled. I want to think with her words, and to bring in my role as listener and interlocutor. The principal theoretical contingencies I propose for this

Chapter are the following: (1) W.E.B. Du Bois' (1903/1994) concept of "double consciousness" in the cultural-social-political context of México. I understand double consciousness as the existential and ontological cognitive dissonance that comes with being a black person in an anti-black world. It is important to note that W.E.B. DuBois was speaking of the African American historical condition as a black *Haitian* descendant. The complexity of DuBois's belonging indexes the necessity of resisting provincializing tendencies across practices of black thought, locating black people only in relation to country of origin; (2) Fanonian (1967/2008) interpellation in conversation with Barad's (2003) performativity. I situate performative resistances to initial moments of interpellation as important practices of materialization that exceed the violence of the hail. I understand Fanonian interpellation as the physical hailing of one force or embodiment of another, often with a power or ideological differential in place. I understand performativity, in this case, to be a process or processes of *doing(s)* that enact(s) [a] change in direction, or a diffraction (more on this below); (3) Decolonial Afro feminism through the work of Ochy Curiel (2002). I understand decolonial Afro feminism to be taking up the call of collective injustices against black women and interjecting in their line of fire. Afro feminism—situated through Curiel's (2002) intellectual-activist contributions—articulates the intersectional lines of racial and gender violence and heeds the need to not respond by reacting to power or by inter-community re-policing practices; (4) Resignification as a semiotic process of re-crafting the sequence of signs that construct subjectivity through racial acceptance and integration of self. Within resignification lie performative possibilities for crafting. Each of these theoretical contributions help to think with the primary invocations and provocations of Jalila, decrypting and expanding possible methods for seeing.

Chapter Breakdown

In what follows, I work through four main arguments that Jalila performs in oral history

—the fourth argument pulls together the first three in continual conversation with her oral history as a performative semiotic practice. I am thinking with Jalila’s words as living and breathing historical material.

Firstly, I argue that Jalila performs *into* her subjectivity at first as Zoque (indigenous) and later as Afro-descendant, disobeying and delinking from Mexican double consciousness.⁴³ Jalila first has to go through double processes of negation as she comes to terms with her indigeneity *and* her blackness and the cognitive dissonance that double consciousness creates/is in relation to her national identity as a Mexican woman. Her narrative *performs* this dissonance, suggesting a broader historical existence of an Afro-Mexican and Afro-descendant double consciousness in México. I propose that it is Mexican double consciousness that racialized subjects in this country must work against *into* order to *perform themselves into* their descendancy. They must dwell *with* it and find an intimate sense of belonging.

Secondly, Jalila claims that she began to own her Afro-descendant identity when she watched blackness “come out of her.” I argue that this moment was one of corporeal and racial interpellation where her son gave birth to her blackness as she gave birth to her son. Her son’s birth detonated a series of other developments, including finding her voice within her family. I then argue that the performativity of this moment and Jalila’s subsequent “coming out” as Afro and indigenous-descendant marks a *doing of* blackness that is a continual performance of her descendancy.

Thirdly, Jalila makes clear that she begins the road towards accepting her blackness and Afro-descendancy through Afro decolonial feminism, giving herself to and performing *into* her subjectivity as a black woman. I argue that decolonial Afro feminism allows Jalila to

⁴³ I borrow the term “delinking” from Walter D. Mignolo (2007). To delink is to “introduce a fracture” with Western epistemological practices constructed under the modern/colonial world systems that make full humanness almost impossible (Mignolo, 2007, p. 452).

claim and position herself boldly in this place, despite all the resistances to non-hegemonic subjecthood at home in Chiapas and within broader social constructions in México.

Finally, I look at how Jalila pulls double consciousness, interpellation, performativity, and afro-feminism into her process of resignification, making new meanings where she previously rejected her history entirely. I argue that each of these contribute to Jalila's ongoing performative practices of resignification. I bring double consciousness into conversation with antiracist and Afro feminist thought from Abya Yala, given double consciousness's roots in more andocentric universalism for black people. My desire is to make a historical resituation so that men are not abstract universals for "humanness" and to honor the contribution and continual relevance of black consciousness. I also pull together the ongoing interpellative force of Jalila's body history to understand performativity's capacity to reorient towards and resignify black subjectivity.

To elaborate upon the implications of Jalila's words, I will first outline the theoretical foundations that guide and undergird this chapter.

Theoretical Frameworks

W. E. B. Du Bois's double consciousness

W.E.B. Du Bois (1903/1994) first wrote about double consciousness as a plight and reality for African Americans at the turn of the twentieth century. I find this thought still relevant to African Americans today given all that is happening to our country *and* I would like to think of what double consciousness might open for Afro-descendants in México, given that consciousness raising practices and the ensuing searches for genealogy and meaning are quite recent. For many groups of Afro-Mexicans, projects of consciousness raising and community determination have been ongoing for many years. Invoking the circular and cyclical nature of history, double consciousness, I argue, is extraordinarily relevant to the current moment in both México and the United States.

For DuBois (1903/1994), the intervention into the African American psyche at the time was a remark on the “American Negro”:

It is a peculiar sensation, this double-consciousness, this sense of always looking at one’s self through the eyes of others, of measuring one’s soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity. One ever feels his two-ness, – an American, a Negro; two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings, two warring ideals in one dark body, whose dogged strength alone keeps it from being torn asunder. (p. 2)

Whereas the “history of the American Negro is history of this strife,” the history of Afro-descendants in México is a history of another kind of strife: straight-up erasure. There are different histories that produce the same and different divisions, both creating types of double consciousness. It takes “dogged strength” to war against these unreconciled strivings for wholeness. Two-ness is a feeling of division and strife: how to be both black and American? In the case of México, it is “how to be both black and Mexican?” It is important to emphasize that this is also the case for indigenous people, as indigeneity is marked as a racialized category of difference, based in skin color prejudices and discrimination.

Until Afro-descendants in México and Afro-Mexicans come to claim their own heritage, they see themselves as Mexican, otherwise known as *mestizo*. To reiterate and reinforce, *mestizo* is, symbolically and culturally, the desired and imposed whiteness of a Mexican subject. Afro-descendants and Afro-Mexicans who see themselves as *mestizo* are looking at themselves through the eyes of the dominant culture who so desperately and successfully congealed a Mexican national identity under this umbrella of whiteness. I will tease out the division created by the historical haunting of double consciousness, looking specifically at how Jalila has wrestled with this doubleness as she has come to terms with her subjectivity and historical background.

Racial interpellation

Interpellation is racialized and corporeal in Jalila's life. As such, I use Fanonian (1967/2008) interpellation, while not ignoring Althusser's (1971) theses and formula. My desire is to account for the racial difference in forms of interpellation, specifying the significance of Fanon's version of hailing. Pierre Macherey (2012) helps me understand these major differences. First, we must begin with one of Fanon's (1967/2008) major scenes of interpellation:

"Look! A Negro!" It was a passing sting. I attempted a smile.

"Look! A Negro!" Absolutely. I was beginning to enjoy myself.

"Look! A Negro!" The circle was gradually getting smaller. I was really enjoying myself.

"*Maman*, look a Negro; I'm scared!" Scared! Scared! Now they were beginning to be scared of me. I wanted to kill myself laughing, but laughter had become out of the question. (p. 91)

In this scene, (dramatically different across translations), Fanon cites a maniacal relationship to being interpellated by the gaze of a young white boy speaking/shouting to his mother. Fanon is laughing with each hail of "Look! A Negro!" Then, as the child becomes scared, Fanon becomes terrified and laughter evaporates: he becomes fearful as a consequence of the white boy's fear towards him.

Macherey (2012) distinguishes between the linguistic hail of Althusser (1970) and the hail of the gaze in this passage of Fanon (1952). He explains Fanon's interpellation as:

[...] the primordial form of which, moreover, is not a verbal dialogue, but a simple exchange of intersecting gazes: the gaze of a child falling up on the black skin of the man facing him on the one hand, and the gaze borne by the latter, not so much on the child himself as the child's gaze, a gaze that he sees and through which he sees himself

as ‘a nigger’ [sic], which is to say that the representative of an essence of which he bears the mark, the stigma, the strangeness – an absolute, incurable alterity. (p. 15). The verbal dialogue is the difference Macherey is making between Althusser and Fanon. I assume this understanding as well, even as I want to push its performative implications. Macherey (2012) explains that the gaze, a physical form of hailing, does not require verbiage in order to fulfil its roll as an active hail. The gaze of the white child upon Fanon has a substantializing effect—Fanon is interpellated as a black man in relation to this white gaze.

Fanon uses his lived experience to explain interpellation, but is positing interpellation for black subjects as diametrically opposed to that of white subjects. It is also crucial to note that Fanon is writing almost twenty years before Althusser. Interpellation, in a Fanonian sense, is *racialized* and *embodied* where languaging is not required in order for the interpellative moment to have occurred. This is not meant to create a dichotomy between language and embodiment. Rather it signals that the absence of language does not mean that the languaging of embodiment cannot enact a doing of a hail. The energy exchange of the gaze and bodies interacting in social space also do the work of interpellation in the face of ideological apparatus that constitute them. I begin from here to think through interpellation in the case of Jalila.

Performativity

In my desire to take the theoretical proposals of performativity seriously and to “sharpen the theoretical tool of performativity,” I again turn to Barad (2003), who expresses performativity’s move away from representation, saying:

The move toward performative alternatives to representationalism shifts the focus from questions of correspondence between descriptions and reality (e.g., do they mirror nature or culture?) to matters of practices/doings/actions. I would argue that these approaches also bring to the forefront important questions of ontology, materiality, and

agency, while social constructivist approaches get caught up in the geometrical optics of reflection where, much like the infinite play of images between two facing mirrors, the epistemological gets bounced back and forth, but nothing more is seen. (803)

There is an understanding of performativity that centers practices/doings/actions, and moves against representationalism. There is another crucial element: diffraction. Diffraction is a different modus of relation than mirroring (as one example). Diffraction considers what else there is/what else is there. Barad (2003) uses Haraway's understanding of diffraction as "a mapping of interference, not of replication, reflection, or reproduction" (p. 803). *Interference* is the interface for diffraction, challenging normative (perhaps even misguided or inaccurate) understandings of discourse. Interference is, as argued in the Barad citation above, an opportunity for *seeing*. Performativity, understood through its possibilities for diffraction and materialization through diffraction, allows us to engage with discursive practices as productive actions – doings. The wrestling that occurs in the search for and construction of *referentes* emerges in this form of performative rendering.

Afro feminist decolonial thought in Abya Yala: Ochy Curiel

Ochy Curiel (2002), emblematic decolonial lesbian and Afro-feminist in Abya Yala of Dominican descent, makes an important distinction between what she calls two lines of debate existent within feminism and struggles for identity: identities as repressive fictions and identities as deserving of dignity and recognition. Elaborating upon the frictions that brought these struggles to light, Curiel (2002) explains that racialized identity:

...brings with it essentialisms, brings with it ethnocentrism and does not take on these categories as social regulations as much as we enter within the logic of how the racist system as defined us in opposition to an "other" white, the only legitimate, furthermore enclosing us into social groups in generalizations and stereotypes. (p. 103)

Given the essentialisms that decolonial feminism is interested in decentering, created by

structures of identity imposed by racist and violent social regulations, I wonder how Jalila performs herself out of the naturalizing and whitening structure of *mestizaje* as she comes to know herself as a Zoque and Afro-descendant woman, without creating an essentialized black identity. Essentialisms are not only reified by the erasure of dominance and hegemony. They also can be reinforced when minority groups try and turn these identities on their heads. Decoloniality is a way out of reinforcing all forms of essentialism, less ethnocentrism flow upstream as well—even so, we need to be wary of ethnocentrism’s place in decoloniality.

It is important to note that I am still not talking about identity politics. Rather I am concerned with *emergent* subjectivities—through the lens of performance—what could more accurately be called identity *in* politics (Mignolo, 2007). This is to say, subjectivities that are defended/dignified and that shift in accordance with the specificities of history and historical moments one is living in and responding to: the act of positioning oneself with an eye to both history and futurity is a political act of subjectivity-making. It is important to listen to just how Jalila has un/become and performed her way *out of* erasure and *into* the complexity of her own subjectivity. I think with ways in which she shares many of the same challenges as other racialized Afro feminists in Abya Yala.

Resignification

Resignification, following the lead of Todd Holden (2001) is:

[...] a particular kind of semiosis: one where new sign elements (signifiers, signifieds, signs, significations) are lifted from their original contexts and inserted into other semiotic sequences, though not always (indeed seldom) in the position they occupied in their prior incarnation. (para. 7)

I want to consider the emancipatory possibilities of resignificatory practices within their semiotic value within the reincarnation of signs. I will lift new sign elements from their original contexts and reconfigure their orientation/order in space to create new possibilities

for meaning-making. The movement of signs, conceptual frameworks for cultural studies, allows the re-making and resituating of subjectivity in space, place, and belonging.

I consider how Jalila resignifies the signs in her life about her Afro-descendancy, indigeneity, and blackness that were previously present but that she had not assigned meaning. Practices of resignification are performative *doings* of her blackness as she integrates the context of her life and family and re-performs the moments she “knew.” I consider how Jalila wrestles with “knowing” about and of her blackness through the signs she signals and resignifies in her un-becoming.

Gathering Together

I understand Jalila’s story as one that signals the cognitive dissonance of what I claim to be Mexican double consciousness through her oral history performance and the theoretical contentions that help me think with her. Jalila is hailed into her blackness and then begins to resignify its meaning in the materiality of her life. She performatively stories her existence as a feminist black woman in San Cristóbal de las Casas as she resignifies, meditates, and performs possibilities.

Focusing on the driving questions stated in the Introduction in conversation with the theoretical frameworks, further central questions I ask are: (1) How does Jalila reckon with the cognitive dissonance she has experienced, brought about by Mexican double consciousness? (2) How does Jalila decolonize her sense of indigenous ancestry and then Afro-descendancy, even through difficult realizations? (3) What are the performative and interpellative moments and contingencies of Jalila’s blackness? (4) How does Jalila *perform into* her subjectivity? (5) Through interpellative forces of her life, how does Jalila give herself over to her Afro-descendancy with the help of Afro feminist thought and practice? (6) What elements of resignification allow Jalila to continue her processes of un-becoming as a black woman in San Cristóbal? I leave these questions unfastened as I listen with Jalila’s oral

history performance.

Conversations and Dialogues with Jalila

“Ya No Eran Ellos [...]”: Cognitive Dissonance and Afro-Mexican Double

Consciousness

I begin with a play of words, trickling over from other interview encounters. I first ask Jalila about her racial background and her Afro-Mexican “ascendancy.” I had recently completed an interview with another community member and saw the interplay of the words *ascendencia* and *descendencia*. *Ascendencia*, in Spanish, refers to all the ancestors that precede someone. I found the interplay of ancestry and being “the descendant of” useful and provocative and decided to pose the question to Jalila in this way. In the beginning of her performance, Jalila feels shy—bordering on apologetic in her tone:

DANIEL: Bueno entonces este, pláticame un poquito de tú, uhm, dónde vienes, de tu familia, uhm, y el principio de lo que conoces de tu ascendencia afromexicana.

JALILA: Mm hmm. Pues yo soy originaria de Cintalapa que es un municipio que que [sic] colinda con Oaxaca.

DANIEL: Mm hmm.

JALILA: Y, y mi padre, eh, es de un municipio que se llama Arriaga que es costa.

DANIEL: Ah, Arriaga.

JALILA: Uh huh. Este, y mi abuelo era de Tonalá también que es costa. Y mis abuelos eran de Pijijiapan.

DANIEL: Ok, so tell me a little bit about your, uh, where you are from, about your family, uhm, and the beginning of what you know about your Afro-Mexican ascendancy.

JALILA: Mm hmm. Well I am originally from Cintalapa that is a municipality that that

[sic] adjoins with Oaxaca.

DANIEL: Mm hmm.

JALILA: And, and my father, eh, is from a municipality that is called Arriaga that is coastal.

DANIEL: Ah, Arriaga.

JALILA: Uh huh. Um, and my grandfather was from Tonalá that is also coast. And my grandparents were from Pijijiapan. (Gómez, 2015)

When I first heard where Jalila's family was from, I was floored. When I had imagined visiting coastal towns in Chiapas, prior to the reorientation I mention in the Introduction, I had wanted to spend time in the coastal towns of Arriaga and Tonalá—where Jalila's father and grandfather were from, respectively. Jalila appears almost shy—I have not seen her look shy before. The “Mm hmm” that begins her first response allows her to pause just slightly and meditate longer on her response. Jalila explains that her grandparents were from Pijijiapan. Arriaga, Tonalá, and Pijijiapan have historically concentrated populations of Afro-descendant and indigenous people. It is common knowledge that most of the people there identify themselves as “moreno”: an historically-inherited denial of their blackness (not always, but in large part). I am sitting in front of a descendant of people with a long history of Afro-descendancy in Chiapas. I feel myself grow excited and my eyes widen. I am sure she is going to surprise me in more ways than one.

I then begin to understand some of Jalila's trepidation. The initial part of her story is filled with a lot of work that involves piecing together information about her family history and some parts of their heritage by geographic default. Two things are happening: (1) Jalila is aware of the racial and ethnic implications of having family members from these towns; (2) She is nervous about performing the different instances of deduction that led her to her own discoveries. Jalila continues in the same way:

JALILA: [...] Mi mamá que es de Cintalapa y de parte de mi madre, eh, nunca se asumieron afrodescendientes. De hecho, pues por las características fenotípicas y por el lugar y y [sic] todo, me hemos pensado que por el apellido también que es [da su nombre materno] que somos Zoques. Pero, más o menos de cómo cinco generaciones atrás se perdió la lengua y pue- hay negación o sea eso, mi esposo que estudió este en la [...] me decía que era Zoque me ofendía mucho la verdad hasta le dijo, “esto me ofendió demasiado” porque teníamos una simpatía con la “E-Z.”

DANIEL: Mm hmm.

JALILA: Y bueno, éramos como militantes y y [sic] siempre cuando yo estudiaba en la universidad me refería a ellos como “los indígenas” o sí hay una especie como de proteccionismo de o verlos como alguien menor.

DANIEL: Yea.

JALILA: My mother is from Cintalapa and from my mother’s side, um, they never claimed themselves as Afro-descendants. In fact, well, for their phenotypical characteristics and for the place and and [sic], I/we have thought that for the last name as well [gives her maternal name] that we are Zoques. But, more or less five generations back, they lost their tongue and well, there is a negation or well this, my husband studied in the [...] and he told me that I was Zoque and I got very offended really. I even told him “that offended me too much” because we sympathized with the “E-Z.”

DANIEL: Mm hmm.

JALILA: And well, we were like militants and and [sic] always when I studied in the university, I referred to them as “the indigenous” or yes there is a species of protectionism of, or seeing them as someone less than. (Gómez, 2015)

Jalila explains that due to the “phenotypical characteristics and for the place [...] we are Zoques.” Almost in the same breath, she claims that in her family; “they lost their tongue and well, there is a negation”—a negation that goes back five generations now. There are several complexities here that cannot be overlooked. Loss is an inherited negation from the colonial period in México. In Jalila’s description of this negation and its historical consequences, she enacts a fascinating paradox so characteristic of Afro-descendant subjectivities in Chiapas and she is/re-performs her place within this paradox.

Her husband Teo, whose studies focused on the history of this region of Chiapas who helped her to determine that her mother’s family was in fact from a Zoque municipality, was both *asking* and *determining* that Jalila is Zoque. Teo hailed Jalila into aspects of her descendancies and caught her off guard. Mixed sentiments about belonging to an indigenous group were coupled with Jalila and Teo being “sympathizers” with the “E-Z.” E-Z stands for “Ejército Zapatista,” short for the EZLN or the “Ejército Zapatista para la Liberación Nacional” or the “Zapatista National Liberation Army.” It was common in 1994 and the years following the armed conflict for *mestizo* and international sympathizers to side with the E-Z, as commented in Maritea’s oral history. This remains a common alliance today, particularly in San Cristóbal. It was and is a way of defending the “buen gobierno” against the “mal gobierno”—the *mal gobierno* or “bad government” being another way of saying the Mexican government, currently the PRI or the *Partido Revolucionario Institucional*, or the National Revolutionary Party.

When Teo hails Jalila into her indigeneity through his anthropologically deductive logic of her Zoque heritage, Jalila retorts, “that offended me *too* much.” Suddenly the nervousness of her energy begins to dissolve as she can perform just *why* it exists—releasing her nervousness about voicing that *even the idea* of being indigenous was at one time *offensive* to her. Teo’s hail here could be considered pure speculation, but in the performance of Jalila’s

oral history, we buy the logic. The only information we have so far is geographical and anthropological deduction, but Jalila's performance asks us to suspend belief in speculation as an illegitimate element of story until further integration of new information. The idea of being Zoque did not just offend Jalila but it offended her *too* much. Jalila takes offense—stressing the emotions around this discovery in her re-performance of this moment—and we are called to believe that her indigeneity is a sure thing.

The fact that she took such offense is a reality that was not exclusive to their political militancy as E-Z sympathizers. Jalila could not reconcile the arm's length at which she had maintained indigenous people, even in her home state, since her university times, saying "I referred to them as 'the indigenous' or yes there is a species of protectionism of or seeing them as someone less than." Indigeneity could not *possibly* exist within her own blood lines if referring to them as "the indigenous" served as a form of protectionism so that they (Jalila and Teo) could be helpful and militant *towards* and *with* the E-Z/indigenous cause. If "the indigenous" were always *over there* and therefore, *not here*, then their politics and personal life could be held at a distance. Or so they thought. Sympathizers seem to take on a performance of empathy where it remains easy to maintain a binary of "us" and "them" as well as "here" and "over there." The reification of difference is seen even in the most "militant" of causes, like Zapatismo. How to sympathize with the "E-Z" if you suddenly realize you are "one of them"? Jalila's realization led to a series of other discoveries and caused her to question herself, her heritage, and her rightful positionality within her activism.

In her performance, Jalila recalls how these dialogues incited a series of deductive logics, stemming from her husband's further questioning. These conversations, in turn, began to shift and mold her relationship to her heritage:

JALILA: Y entonces cuando mi esposo me dijo, "¿Y y [sic] tú no eres indígena?" y dije, "No claro que no!" y me ofendí mucho. Yo recuerdo que me me [sic] enojé con él

y todo y ya después haciendo el análisis y recobrando un poco la historia dije, bueno, dije mi familia siempre ha estado en Cintalapa, no, no tenemos nada más, o sea gente que ha llegado de afuera, este, el apellido es de ahí entonces y es una región Zoque y dije, “Bueno, por lógica, este, soy Zoque, no.” Y me costó muchísimo, no sabes. O sea, eso te lo estoy diciendo ahorita, pero me costó como un proceso de medio año...

DANIEL: Hmm.

JALILA: Este, aceptarme, este, que era indígena no...

DANIEL: Mm hmm.

JALILA: Y eso cambió completamente mi perspectiva porque ya no eran *ellos*...

DANIEL: Hmm.

JALILA: ...sino éramos nosotros. Y igual como indígena te da otra perspectiva de la vida, no.

JALILA: And so when my husband said to me, “And and [sic] you are not indigenous?” and I said, “¡No, of course not!” and I got really offended. I remember that I I [sic] got really mad at him and everything and after doing an analysis and recapturing the history a bit I told him, well, I said, my family has always been in Cintalapa and we do not have anything else, or well, there are people who have arrived from other places. This last name is from there and, well, it is a Zoque region and I said, then, “Well, logically, I am Zoque, no.” And it really was hard for me, you have no idea, or well I am telling you this now, but it took me a process of about half a year.

DANIEL: Hm.

JALILA: Um, to accept that I was indigenous, no...

DANIEL: Mm hm.

JALILA: And this changed my perspective entirely because they were no longer

them...

DANIEL: Hmm.

JALILA: ...but now it was *we*. And in the same way, as an indigenous person it gives you another perspective of life, no. (Gómez, 2015)

“¡No, of course not!” Jalila’s performance first retaliates against her husband’s rhetorical question, “And you are not indigenous?” Her answer, “of course not,” is inflected with a, “how dare you?” I see Jalila re-perform the fear she had in remembering this interaction—a fear that can only be brought about by the terror of being demoted in class and ethnic status within the standardized and naturalized Mexican social imaginary. If the indigenous had to revolt and take arms up against the government, a cause they both deeply sympathized with, then *how on earth* could *she* be one of *them*?

Jalila then performs an analysis of what she knows of her mother’s family’s history. By “perform” I mean the heightened telling of her history, full with deep affective and subtle shifts in tone and energy as she takes us on this journey with her. I witness her aware of her place as the storyteller and her capacity to determine the terms of our conversation. Her tone shifts and her initial apprehensions turn into grounded resonance. I sense that the story is going to take a slightly different turn. Her family has, as far back as she can attest and remember, always been in Cintalapa. Cintalapa is not a region known for foreigners and immigrants and is almost entirely Zoque. As an educated and politicized woman, she must fight with herself *and* her husband to come to terms with his hail and the force this might have on her own reality. Jalila did not accept his automatically but, as she shares with me, “...it *really* was hard for me, you have no idea, or well I am telling you this now, but it took me a process of about half a year.” Jalila stories her anguish about this period of time—a woman feeling declassified from the social situation to which she was accustomed. She is storying the process of humility in which this ride has taken her.

Six months passed before she could start to integrate this new piece of family information into her psyche and her history. This is the force of performance: the self-witnessing. In a reflexive and highly charged turn of phrase, she performs her way out of the binary opposition and the power dynamic of *mestizo* vs. indigenous, saying, “this changed my perspective entirely because they were no longer *them* [...] but now it was *we*.” Jalila’s tone shifts again from the re-performance of anguish as she also performs her way out of a historically upheld division that has, arguably, been the source of a great majority of world evils: the “us versus them” phenomena. Integrating pieces of herself, she can now conceive of a “we.” Granted, this is not a “we” that would cause her to run off and join the E-Z, as she could never “lose” her social status as a mixed, relatively “passing,” and highly educated person. However, this did, as she confirms, shift her point of view to that of an indigenous woman. This was the first step in decolonizing her ideas of her self and her ancestry.

Coming to understand her family’s history, via geopolitical ethnic background and inference, was not all that she had to take on in the process of sewing her dispersed parts and crafting her subjectivity beyond a nationalistic and white-washed *mestizaje*:

JALILA: Entonces yo acepto, eh, en principio con mucha negación después con mucho orgullo con mucha resignificación que soy indígena pero luego cuando yo empiezo a decir, es un poco como "Ay, sí es de pose porque está en la E-Z..." este, "Tú no tienes nada de indígena" y siempre que yo lo decía en en [sic] espacios así de críticos o con militancia y todo, o sea me decían, "Mírate tú no eres indígena...No tienes ningún rasgo de indígena." Este, "Tu cabello es rizado o colocha" como decimos aquí. Este, "tienes muchas ojeras," "Tu nariz es diferente," este, "Tu cabello es diferente." Como muy fenotípicos y siempre me hacían sentir y además, “No hablas la lengua,” este, “¿Dónde está, este, tu pedigrí?”

DANIEL: Wow, wow.

PATRICIA: ...de indígena, no. Y esto me dijeron académicos, este, de San Cristóbal que trabajan, este, con indígenas y todo me dijeron que yo no era, que estaba yo, este, robando una identidad, no. Entonces, me empecé a sentir, este, fuera y como que la externa determinación el hecho de que afuera me dijeran que no era y a mí que me había costado tanto decir que sí me lo era, este, empezó a pesar. Y dije pues, entonces no, no soy, no soy. Pero también fue como un poco triste y un poco una búsqueda de identidad porque dijeron eso y pues, este, y, eh, entonces siempre había tenido como la, la curiosidad, este, de la afrodescendencia o sea que yo pensaba que por qué me llamaba la atención. Como lo más folklórica, no. Este, los tambores, los peinados, la comida. Este, nunca a mí la gente afro jamás me ha parecido fea...

JALILA: So, I accepted, eh, at first with a lot of denial and then with a lot of pride and a lot of resignification that I am indigenous, but then when I started to say this, it was a bit like “Oh yea, you are posing because you are in the E-Z...” and “You do not have anything indigenous about you.” And always when I said this in in [sic] spaces that are critical or militant and everything, or, well they said to me “Look at you, you are not indigenous...you have no indigenous features” and “Your hair is frizzy or curly,” um “Your hair is different.” Like very phenotypical and they always made me feel, and on top of that, “You don’t speak the language” and “Where is your pedigree?”

DANIEL: Wow, wow.

PATRICIA: ...of indigenous, no. And academics who worked with indigenous would say this to me in San Cristóbal and all that and they said to me that I was not and that I was stealing and identity, no. So, I started to feel, um, like and outsider and like the external determination...the fact that from the outside they told me I was not and that it had taken me so long to come to terms with it started to weigh on me heavily. And I

said well then, no, no I am not. But this was also a bit sad and a bit of a search for an identity because they said this and um, well I have always had like the the [sic] curiosity, um, of Afro-descendancy or well because I always thought and because it called my attention. Like the most folkloric, no. Um, drums, hair styles, food, um, black people to me have never been ugly. (Gómez, 2015)

Jalila describes the problem of identity in the politics of accepting and naming her indigeneity. She moves from denial to pride and then to resignification, but her process of resignification is not met with what she had hoped. First, she was met with the question of “posing,” because she is part of the “E-Z.” “Posing” is the backside of “passing” – rather than her easy “passing” as *mestiza*, her “posing” was read as an attempt to achieve greater credibility as someone invested in indigenous rights. Jalila’s conflicting performativities also work in opposition to what the actual dynamics of being a sympathizer with the E-Z are, namely that coalition building and appropriation of struggle are not the same thing. Sympathizing with and even directly supporting the E-Z does not require indigeneity, but when she claimed indigeneity, Jalila’s support came into question. Her indigeneity became identified with theatricality in the pejorative sense of faking, posturing, and posing. Jalila and her politics are rejected on the grounds of identity appropriation—not the reappropriation that E. Patrick Johnson (2003) offers.

She was then snared and judged for phenotype: “nothing indigenous about you,” “look at you,” “your hair is curly” are all used as authenticating markers that could not possibly allow her to belong to an indigenous group. However, at stake in Jalila’s somewhat disingenuous performance of indigeneity at this point in her life is the weaving together of pieces of her familial recollection and deductions to feel that she is part of a history other than *mestizaje*. Appropriating indigenous identification is asking for resistance, particularly with identities *in* politics like those of the Zapatistas, who use indigeneity against itself for

sovereignty. Further gate keeping followed when she was accused of not speaking the language. People began to ask where her “pedigree” was. Most indigenous people in Chiapas speak the language native to their ethnic group (many not speaking Spanish either). Jalila’s position at the beginning of this process was dangerous, as she had neither authenticating phenotypical markers nor a running record of “pedigree.”

Intellectuals working with indigenous populations then accuse her of “stealing” an identity. Such an accusation is somewhat understandable given the history of resistance that marks San Cristóbal and Chiapas. Some scholars who accompanied the processes of the EZLN over the years, have sought opportunism over committed participation. In many indigenous communities in Chiapas, little to no inter-ethnic or inter-racial mixing has remained a rule of thumb. Indigeneity, in such circumstances, combines bloodline purity and resistance to Spanish and *mestizo* rule, and its attempts at homogenization under one umbrella of Mexicanness. Resistance is also about autonomy in the face of neoliberal capitalist extractivism and threats to entire ways of existence and life worlds. Ethnic purity is paradoxically allied with anti-colonial power. It is tethered to tactics of domination typically identified with maintaining biological purity (Nazi’s, white supremacists, etc.), and often leads to apartheid techniques like “cleansing,” which are always opposed to miscegenation. When racial mixing comes from below, depending on the moment and the geographic location, it can serve as a threat to both domination and resistance: another conundrum of *mestizaje*.

Jalila finds herself in a crux of not being able to escape the very real social stratifications and hierarchies that structure dominance and resistance, even as dominance and resistance use some of the same strategies. She “started to feel like an outsider.” Although it had taken her a long process of resolving anger and denial to arrive at the early seedlings of resignification, she was then pushed into feeling and transmitting the opposite;

“...well then, no, no I am not.” She had performed her way out of the highly-erasing whiteness of *mestizaje* and yet, on the other end of the spectrum, she does not belong to a non-mixed indigenous group, therefore she simply cannot be. She feels defeated and without a sense of belonging: “no, no, I am not.”

In this liminal space of non-belonging, a destabilization she acquired by questioning hegemonic Mexican identity, Jalila allows her curiosity about Afro-descendancy to surface. In Jalila’s “search for an identity,” as she calls it, she explains, “I have always had like the the [sic] curiosity, um, of Afro-descendancy or well because I always thought and because it called my attention.” I wonder about the return of nervousness in her tone. As she recounts each life moment that implies that she may not be a *mestiza* woman, she also invites a strong sense of guilt. Though she is speaking in the past tense, I sense that this search is one that is still actively in motion when she says “...or well I always thought.” She indicates incomplete thought that is finalized by how Afro-descendancy has always *called her attention*. Jalila always stops herself short, emanating her fears of again being accused of “stealing an identity.” Jalila explains that the “what” of Afro-descendancy that has called her attention has been what she calls “folkloric” things like drums, food, and hair. There is no irony to her statement, given that the initial namings of place from which her *ascendencia* stems, suggesting her own displacement within systematic delineation of the good and the bad, the beautiful and not ugly and ugly.

Jalila admits to her role in a kind of exoticization that objectifies and diminishes a designated other. At the same time, she owns its implications. There is both honesty and a critically reflective response built into her storying. As Jalila’s observations become more coupled with an increasing awareness of direct descendancy in her family, I begin to understand more where her performance started and where it might be headed. She admits to a fascination built on considering cultural customs “not ugly.” She marks her “attraction” on

the very terms by which those traditions would be diminished and rejected, i.e. as ugly versus beautiful, or as dirty versus clean and proper. Her acceptance is haunted by the terms of colonial (dis)orders:

JALILA: Siempre me...siempre son *muy* atractiva para mí. Este, en Cintalapa, por ejemplo, cuando de casualidad veíamos a una, era súper exótica de salirlo [sic] a ver, de salir a espiar y un poco como entre admiración y también este también como de "el negrito" no.

DANIEL: Hmm.

JALILA: Este, "Ahí va el negrito." No sé, como admiración o no sé...como, este, admiración lastimera un poco. Eh, pero yo siempre me sentí mucha admiración y a mí el prototipo afro, tanto como hombre como mujer, siempre se me hizo, este, muy muy atractivo. Y luego, eh, mi papá, eh, le decían "el negro."

DANIEL: Hmm.

JALILA: Y era negro completamente.

DANIEL: Wow.

JALILA: For me always...they are always very attractive to me. Um, in Cintalapa, for example, when by chance we saw a black woman, she was super exotic and we went out out [sic] to spy a bit and it was something between admiration and also this like, "the black person" no.

DANIEL: Hmm.

JALILA: Um, "There goes the [little] black man." I don't know, like admiration, or I don't know...like, um, this hurtful admiration a bit. Um, but I always felt a lot of admiration and for me the afro prototype, with women and with men, has always been very, very attractive to me. And then, um, my father was always called "the [little]

black man.”

DANIEL: Hmm.

JALILA: And he was completely black.

DANIEL: Wow. (Gómez, 2015)

At this point, Jalila appears to have gotten on a bus she could not get off. As she relays the story, I see the wheels in her head working at full speed. She acknowledges her own folklorization and now exoticization as intimately part of coming to terms with her family history. Jalila’s acknowledgment is a form of critical reflexivity that I admire and respect. I see her wrestling with the multiplicity of identity even when her life has asked her to just check the box. In this passage, she admits the “hurtful admiration” that is apparent to her when she runs into phenotypically black people, like with the black person she saw with her family in Cintalapa: what she and her family would call “el negrito” or “the [little] black man.” Jalila’s “hurtful admiration,” as she calls it, is compensated for (perhaps) by her emphasis on how black women and men “have always been very, very attractive to me.” I am still curious about what all this attraction entails; the word “attraction” has an immense gamut of possible meanings, including fetishization and childlike affinity.

Jalila inserts, seemingly out of the blue, a comment about her father: “And then, um, my father was always called ‘the black man’ [...] And he was *completely* black.” Jalila uses “um” again, pausing before the revealing of her father as a black man. There is nothing particularly novel about this level of familial denial either in Chiapas or in México, given the historical panorama that marked the path for this kind of negation. This is part of a much longer historical argument that is outside the purview of this dissertation. I am almost *ticked* by this frank, simple claim. She says “*completely black*” and in my head, I see a crayon—like the newly-revised Crayola colors that take an array of skin colors into account. I reach down into the coloring book and fill in the dad’s once paper-colored skin as she performs the

elements of her family history that begin to make sense for her. Jalila's narration of her realization that her father was always the "negrito" and that he was "completely black" is gripping. It is as if she is seeing her father's color for the first time, and at the same time, in connection with the colonial dismissal "little black man." "Wow," is all I manage to get out as I try hard to picture just what Jalila's father must have looked like. What could it possibly feel like to live the majority of your life thus far before piecing together the people who make up your family as actual agents of Afro-descendant history?

Jalila runs down the line of her family, now gathering speed with the complexity of racial and ethnic lines that she has only recently come to know and to see. She is running down the historical and emotional barriers reckoning with Afro-descendancy. I imagine that total identification with "Mexican" must have been a survival strategy for her family. Now, though, whatever necessary absolutism there was in Jalila's family history is beginning to crack, leading to disorientation and reconnection.

Listening to Jalila's oral history, opposed to only reading about Afro-Chiapanecan history, I recognize a double consciousness of México. Beginning to identify with Afro-descendancy and indigeneity and to delink from *mestizaje*, Jalila is no longer purely deducing, exoticizing, nor being ashamed of blackness or indigeneity. Jalila continues to grapple with the complexities of Afro-descendancy and her implication in systemic erasure and in this case, of her subjectivity:

JALILA: Y, este, y mi abuelita, este, mamá de mi papá que ella se decía que también era Zoque, pero en realidad cito una vez, este, *es afro*, no. O sea ella dijo, ella decía, o sea, este es la familia de mi papá decía, "Es que yo soy, este, yo soy Zoque, no, y soy de barrio tal." Y siempre, pero, este, siempre *los rasgos fueron afros*, no. Y, este, también era negra. Y el abuelo que era de la costa era era [sic] blanco, no. El papá de mi papá. Este, y mi mi [sic] papá tiene hermanos blancos, este, y negros.

DANIEL: Claro.

PATRICIA: Y él es el más negro de toda su familia. Entonces, este, a pesar de esta admiración que yo tenía por lo afro, pero también había mucho racismo y auto racismo también.

JALILA: And um, and my grandmother, um, my father's mother she always said that she was also Zoque but in reality I will say now that *she is black*, no. Or well she used to say, she said, or well this is my father's family, she said, "It is that I am, um, I am Zoque, no and I am from this neighborhood." And always, um well, *her features were black*, no. And um, she was also black. And my grandfather that was from the coast was was [sic] white, no. My father's father. Um and my my [sic] father has white brothers, um, black.

DANIEL: Claro.

JALILA: And he is the blackest of his family. So, um, in spite of the admiration that I had for all that is Afro, there was also a lot of racism and self-racism too. (Gómez, 2015)

Jalila never uses the word "morena," but rather uses the word "black." Her word choice is deliberate, indicating agency over what she now knows and is coming to terms with in her family history. Now, she remembers that her father's mother used to say she was Zoque, but, as if Jalila wants to *set the record straight* once and for all, she insists, "I will say now that *she is black*." Indigeneity and and Afro-descendancy, somehow, are both markers of blackness for Jalila. Adding further complexity to her self-story, she explains that her grandfather from the coast was white. Given the history of the coast, white would have meant existing as a minority at some point. It is possible that his minoritarian belonging served to counterbalance the blackness there, even sweeping over and subsuming its existence as

everyone strove towards what he would have been. Her father had white and black brothers and, as Jalila nonchalantly emphasizes, “He is the blackest of his family.” Jalila switches into the present tense when speaking of her late father as the “blackest.” The present tense seems to perform into existence a memory that was lost – even as it stretched across faces and deep into veins. He *is* black brings her father into this moment, such that he seems to be accompanying her on her walk. Jalila is rescripting this family history for herself, but also for him and for those who came before.

Jalila recounts the mixed-raceness of her family and her grandmother’s negation, despite her skin color. As she brings her father *back into the present* with her and with us, she breaks down and reflects upon her “admiration.” Jalila explains that her admiration was born out of inherited racism that has also led to self-racism. Racism here seems to be the denial of a family’s heritage as it might have histories outside of or even in the cracks of national belonging. It seems that neither indigenous nor Afro-descendant people can win the fight for their own histories in the face of the monster of homogeneity and hegemony.

For someone like Jalila actively engaged in the process of coming to consciousness of what runs in her bloodline and what was always right in front of her, the experience is one of cognitive dissonance of a particular double bind: to be Mexican or to be black? We can only speak of double consciousness in the case of México when someone is no longer fully negating their descendancy. Of course, the unsettling nature and cognitive dissonance of trying to be both Mexican *and* Afro-descendant *and* a legitimate and legible subject is, I argue, what double consciousness looks like in México. Double consciousness contextualized within this history is not a mystery to be solved, but rather, a prism inhabiting the social imaginary that is a product of the historical situation. If we shine light on this prism, we can begin to see possible angles of light refraction and begin to understand its nuance.

I listen intently to hear how double consciousness played out in Jalila’s home life

growing up, wondering if in her story the development of this denial might play out in explicit ways. Racism, in the internal matrix of Jalila's family, was no stranger to her childhood and upbringing. Racism appears as a symptom of denial. The children are taught to explain it away and even to normalize its existence. I start to question whether denial is the proper terminology anymore and if instead blatant *erasure* more adequately responds to what Jalila stories:

JALILA: Porque me recuerdo que mi mamá nos decía este, "¿Bañaste bien la mugre?" no. Y, este, yo decía "Pero mami es que de aquí a los codos ya no sale." "Es que es mugre." "*Que no mamá es mi color,*" no. Y, este, y entonces siempre nos daba un estropajo que quedamos coloradas de tanto que nos tallábamos aquí, el cuello, las rodillas, porque mi mamá decía que eso no era el auténtico color, sino que era mugre. Y hasta las tías y todas las telenovelas entonces, este, sí nos medían, "Ah, tu eres, este, más blanquita, pero es morena clara," no. *Siempre* como despreciando un poco ser negra o, "No te asoles que te vas a ennegrecer." O sea, estos detallitos muy muy racistas. Yo me recuerdo que que [sic] siempre decía bueno, "Aquí soy un color y aquí de otro," y, este, y decían que no mire el sol no, para no, para no ser tan negra. O sea, sí peso- a pesar de esta admiración, este, sí había como una especie de auto-racismo, no, este, hacía mí, hasta mi color de piel. Pero, después de esta reflexión que yo hice ya muy grande, ya cuando estaba yo en la universidad que no encajaba yo como Zoque y y [sic] yo quería tener una una [sic] identidad, no. Y también como mis abuelos nunca, de parte de mi madre, nunca se enorgullecieron de ser Zoque, por el contrario, *siempre* que yo preguntaba me salieron otra historia este que éramos descendientes de unos chinos.

DANIEL: Wow.

JALILA: Because I remember that my mom used to say to us, um, "Did you wash that

filth off?” no. And um, I would say, “But mom from here to the elbows it does not come off.” “That’s because it is filth.” “*No it is not mom, it is my color,*” no. And, um, and then she always gave us a scouring until we turned red because she scrubbed us here, the neck, the knees, because my mom said it wasn’t our true color but it was filth. And even my aunts and all the soap operas and, um, they would measure us, “Ah, you are more white, but this one is light brown,” no. *Always* like with contempt of being black, or, “Don’t sunbathe or you are going to get black.” Or, well, these very, very racist details. I remember that that [sic] I always said, well, “Here I am one color and here I am another,” and, um, they said that we should not look at the sun, no, to not be so black. Or well, yes, it weighed or in spite of this admiration, um, yes there was a type of self-racism, no, um, towards myself and towards my skin color. But, after this reflection I did as a grown person, when I was already in the university and that I could not settle myself with being Zoque and and [sic] and I wanted to have an an [sic] identity, no. And also, like my grandparents never, from my mother’s side, they were never proud of being Zoque. Quite the opposite. *Every time* I asked they came up with another story like that we were descendants of Chinese.

DANIEL: Wow. (Gómez, 2015)

The threat of *becoming black* seems to have lined every childhood encounter with the sun and with bathing. “Mugre” refers to dirt that is extra dirty to the point of sludge. “Did you wash that filth off?” Jalila’s mother’s violent question marks the utter loathing around blackness that existed in her family. Jalila would respond with, “But mom from here to the elbows it does not come off.” Her mother reinforced the despicability of her children’s color by saying, “That’s because it is filth.” Their skin color was the “filth” that the children could not get off, to their mother’s utter disgrace and disgust. Jalila’s retort, “*No it is not mom, it is my color,*” was an early insistence on what should have been obvious: the color Jalila’s mom was so

desperate to wash off was her children's skin color, not a thick layer of symbolic-cum-material dirt that had not been washed for years. Her mother is the proprietor of the place where skin color meets caste.

Family comparisons led to inter-familial rankings of skin color. The children were warned, "do not sunbathe *o te vas a ennegrecer*." "Ennegrecer," as in *no te vayas a ennegrecer*, or the warning that if you sunbathe you are going to "turn black," does not have the same sting in English as it does in Spanish. In Spanish, built into the affective tissues and accent of the word is the sentiment of complete revulsion. It carries with it all the evocations of blackness as backwards, "uncivilized," and unclean. It is possible to see the effects of the Catholic Church's colonization of the Americas play out in fast motion in one utterance of the word. I am unnerved by how literal these historical resonances are within Jalila's own family. I run back over my head the image of Jalila's mom literally trying to scrub the color out of them. I feel my own skin getting red just at that image. I wonder *if* and *how* you can ever reconcile with literally being told to *scrub your color off*.

In this painful example, Jalila stories her concomitant admiration and self- or internalized racism and its roots. Instances like these give another backdrop to her desire to "have an identity" that is not only complicated by the rejection she received when internally coming to terms with her Zoque heritage, but also by her grandparents very real denial of their own lineage. "Every time I asked they came up with another story like that we were descendants of Chinese." For confidentiality's sake, I do not give Jalila's legal family name here. However, the emphasis on having a Chinese last name is a very clever sectioning and splitting of her family name into parts so much so that it is almost believable to someone ready and willing to buy the story. It is also not out of tune with a wave of Chinese migration that was also part of a formative population of modern México. It seems that any stretch, no matter how implausible, given location or geopolitical history, is better than being either

indigenous or black.

Contemplating the weight of the negation of Jalila's family and working back to the very explicit racism that played out in her mother's disciplining and policing practices with her siblings and their skin color, it becomes clear why blackness was denied so long for Jalila. Jalila, via her mother's own racist violence, for the majority of her life, looked at herself through the eyes of the oppressor: double consciousness was the way of the world. Wanting to rid her children of the "dirt" of their skin, Jalila was raised on the taste of colored candy canes' licks that you try to get off the stick to make white. Red and pink reminders of what Jalila and her siblings were not, no matter how many licks, left streaks of social and self-sabotage: shadowy and sticky remains in their racial and corporeal memories. I see Jalila hold these tensions in ongoing dialectical relation, *performing herself into* her subjectivity by negotiating these dissonances.

"Negra Dentro Del Closet": Interpellation as a Force of Un-becoming

For Jalila, becoming herself entails un-becoming the other to herself and reckoning with being unattractive with the scopic regime of race. I witness her performative emergence:

JALILA: O sea, yo cuando descubrí la poesía negra de Nicolás Guillén, o sea fui la persona más feliz, me los aprendí de memoria y todo y pero *era como ser negra dentro del closet*, no. Se me, este, "Van a decir que estoy loca que que [sic] no hay raíces" que no sé qué. Pero ya como en, este, búsqueda te digo que todo el mundo me decía, "Es que tú no eres indígena" y después empecé a preguntar y me decían, "Es que venimos de la costa y por supuesto que hay negros." Y así de la familia "Ay," que yo no tengo bien localizada la parte de quién porque te digo, el abuelo que es de la costa es blanco.

DANIEL: Sí.

JALILA: Y y la la [sic] abuela que se dice Zoque es *negra*.

DANIEL: Mm hmm.

JALILA: Or well, when I discovered Nicolás Guillén, well, I was the happiest person, I memorized all of them [the poems] and everything, but it was *like being a black woman in the closet*, no. I um, well, “They are going to say I am crazy and that that [sic] there are not roots” or I don’t know what. But, at this time, like um, in this search I will tell you everyone used to say to me, “Well you are not indigenous.” And then I started to ask myself and reflect, “Well, we came from the coast so of course there are black people.” And of my family like, “Ay” and that I am not well situated of where this comes from because like I shared with you, that grandfather from the coast is white.

DANIEL: Yes.

JALILA: And and the the [sic] grandmother that says she is Zoque is *black*. (Gómez, 2015)

In secondary school, Jalila was introduced to the poetry of Nicolás Guillén, a late Afro-Cuban poet whose verses were often filled with black pride and anti-slavery stories.

Memorizing his poems, she realizes that “well, I was the happiest person.” And yet this happiness is underscored, in retrospect, by erasure: “it was *like being a black woman in the closet*.” Even as Jalila felt they were “going to say” she was “crazy” and that “there are not roots,” she knew she was hiding or hidden. She was in a holding space. The “closet,” I argue, serves as a semiotic incubator for performing her way out of double consciousness. Without derailing too far, I would like to elaborate briefly on the potential Jalila unlocks with the performativity of this choice of phrase.

Rather than stretch too far by theorizing the space of the closet in all its queerly implications and citations, I would instead like to take on the quotidian use of the metaphor of being “in the closet” as a part of everyday life in México. “Dentro del closet” is a phrase I hear used frequently in everyday speech. The phrase may apply to *just about anything* that

anyone might be hiding and/or need to “come out.” I have now heard it used so often to refer to almost *anything but* queer sexualities that I have become more in tune with its simultaneous normalization and the ensuing laughter that the discomfort of this phrase often brings about – there is an implication of its queerness always-present, even if by virtue of its overuse, it does not tend to cite queer sexuality anymore *per se*.

Jalila explaining herself existing as “a black woman in the closet” has a loaded symbolic weight of un-becoming that both reinforces double consciousness and precedes more actualized and intentional subjectivity. Double consciousness, by my measures, is also looking at oneself through the legacy of historical colonialism and *mestizo* whiteness. Through the denial and within un-becoming, historical hauntings that shape mainstream acceptance must be discarded or at least, must be held in awareness in order to delink from them. Jalila, someone who is racially and ethnically incredibly ambiguous in appearance, at some point became aware of the door that encased her and kept her from her own racial identities. Her awareness of the double consciousness that precedes un-becoming allows space for performing *into* subjecthood, even and especially as it exists *outside of* the Mexican imaginary.

By asking herself and reflecting, she deduces, “Well, we came from the coast so of course there are black people.” She began early “coming outs” here. The closet as a semiotic for un-becoming requires a lifelong process of crossing its threshold time and again. As Jalila’s ongoing reckoning suggests, “coming out” is not a singular rite of passage. The “closet” is a *symbolic space* that requires an ongoing process of leaving. Rather than a coming out, I consider the complex work of pluriversal identification a *performing into* a non-closeted space. As someone not so easy to pin down within quotidian scopic regimes, Jalila must constantly perform *into* her subjectivity. In order to be conceived of as a legitimate subject, her Afro-descendancy and indigeneity usually must also take on

performative elements. By performing *into* her subjectivity and engaging in an active process of choosing to repeatedly leave the space of the closet, Jalila is grounding productive suspicions about her descendancies and paradoxically finding agency in memories of denial.

Jalila shifts into heightened descriptiveness. The performative elements of her afro-descendancy and indigeneity playfully unfold in the richness and boldness of her poetics:

JALILA: No, y, este, pero *todo* su dato, o sea, mi abuela pasa por por [sic]

afrodescendiente, o sea, que ayer la sacaron del Congo.

DANIEL: ¿Es muy negra?

JALILA: Pasa...sí. Y tiene el cabello, así como en resorte, este, y el modo y todo este es de por allá no no [sic] tiene un modo, este, muy muy de la gente de aquí pero o sea es gente que al menos esta lo que me pasó con la familia de mi papá es que nunca se avergonzaron de ser negros.

JALILA: No, and um well but all her life, or well my grandmother passed for for [sic] Afro-descendant and well like they took her out of the Congo yesterday.

DANIEL: She is very black?

JALILA: She passes, yes. And she has her hair like little springs and, um, the style and all of that is from there. She has a style that that is very, very much of the people from here but, or well, it is people that, at least this is what happened with my father's family, that they were never ashamed of being black. (Gómez, 2015)

"My grandmother [...] well like they took her out of the *Congo* yesterday" is a spatial metaphor for the color and style of African blackness that Jalila can locate. I want to make sure I am getting the story correct and ask an affirmative question, "She is *very* black?" to which Jalila emphasizes, "She *passes*, yes." "Passing," a racially-formed metaphor that has often been used for those who would "pass" as white, is here used refer to her grandmother's

dark color.

Forever moving “out of the closet,” Jalila has new eyes to see herself and her family. She can see and enjoy just *how* black her grandmother is. She performatively exaggerates what she calls her *abuela*’s “unmistakably black” features, describing, “her hair like little springs” and a style that is very, very much of the people here. A final affirmation and a seemingly previously-dormant familial affect bubbles to the surface, extending well beyond her father’s “pride” at having been “el negrito.” She further recalls, “they [her father’s family] were *never* ashamed of being black.” Jalila now projects a kind of pride in color and phenotypical markers that stands in intimate contrast with the denial of ancestry.

Double consciousness, seen in the first portion of Jalila’s narrative, creates a missing synaptic bond between what a Mexican “can” be and what Mexicans are in the fullness of their racial and ethnic compositions. Anything that is *not* white *mestizo* is doubly other. Even as doubly-othered people, those existing within this shared “other” space may yet police each other’s resistance to *mestizaje*’s ongoing colonial whitening project, by the fact that otherness in México is not black/white. Following Jalila, I contend that performing oneself *into* subjectivity is a complex, inventive, reflexive process that breaks Mexican double consciousness’s stronghold, and that creates new subjectivities of intimate resistance.

Interpellative forces

The familial side of Jalila’s un-becoming was not only limited to the family that formed her. She was interpellated into her blackness also by the family she created. For the purposes of this section, I will more intentionally emphasize the significance of blackness. Chosen families are co-constitutive and formed/unformed by and through the ways that Jalila performs herself into her blackness. An unexpected detail of a new arrival set the scene for another wave of coming to terms with her lineage:

JALILA: Y bueno, me casa con Teo que es blanco, mi esposo, y pues él es la segunda

generación que nace aquí en México...su familia es de España de una parte, de, la otra son Italianos y también tienen, este, la otra son Zapotecos, no, pero él es muy blanco. Y quieras que no, siempre se ve mi ideología de la raza, no, y y [sic] yo me caso y dije, bueno va a ver una mezcla ahí y por supuesto dije espero que se parezcan a él que sean blancos y todo. Y nace mi hija y dije bueno, término medio, no, pero algo así que fue *muy fuerte* fue cuando nació mi hijo.

DANIEL: Hmm.

JALILA: ¡Porque, cuando yo lo vi estaba *negro*! O sea, y ahí a mí me cayó el veinte de, de muchas cosas porque dije, “es que somos negros,” no.

JALILA: And well, I marry Teo, who is really white, my husband, and well, he is the second generation that is born here in México...his family is from Spain on one side and the other are Italians and also Zapotecs, no, but he is very white. And you want it or not, he always sees my racial ideology, no, and and [sic] I get married and I say there's going to be quite a mix there of course and I said well, I hope they come out like him, white and everything. And my daughter is born and I say, well, medium rare, no, but something like *very intense* was when my son was born.

DANIEL: Hmm.

JALILA: Because, when I saw him he was black! Or well, and there it hit me of of [sic] a lot of things because I said, “It's because we are black, no.” (Gómez, 2015)

When I first heard Jalila share these details of her life story, I was overwhelmed by the beauty of the symbolism. Teasing my own obsession with birth stories and their performances and the beauty and pain of their performances, I was taken by this defining moment in Jalila's life. Unable to hold back the connections this symbol brings up for me, I wonder if Jalila, like Maritea, mothered herself into her blackness, interpellated by her

youngest child, and *if* this is a fruitful reading. Jalila gets married to Teo, a man of of Spanish, Italian, and Zapotec heritage, and almost as if soothing herself she insists, “I say there’s going to be quite a mix there of course and I said well I hope they come out like him, white and everything.” Even in her retelling, I sense the anxiety she recalls and felt as she says, “*I hope they come out like him, white and everything.*” As if a silent prayer, she hopes that mixing with someone lighter than herself might increase the chances of the baby coming out light – following the quintessential logic of colonial legacies of racial violence vis-à-vis “bettering the race.” This is a racialized logic that differs from colonial sexual violence that produced “illegitimate” children of color. “Whitening up” desires “passing” as *mestizo* – a racial choice to be legible on hegemony’s terms.

Jalila compares her daughter’s color to a desirable degree of “doneness” attributed to meat: “medio término” or “medium rare,” as if a beef flank or *carne asada*. Jalila is expressing her once-felt relief that her daughter did not “overcook” inside her. Put another way, her daughter did not marinate in too many black genes. The tables are turned when she exclaims, “...but something like *very intense* was when my son was born [...] when I saw him he was black!” I reflect here, having seen the color of black babies in my family, that at birth even babies do not have their melanin fully shining, but there is a noticeable difference in shade. If a child is clearly of darker pigmentation at birth, you can be fairly certain that their skin color will hover within similar hues as they grow.

Quite literally, when a black child, Jalila’s son, came out of her, Jalila can no longer deny anything, “It hit me [...] It’s because we are black, no.” With no cards left to play and nothing left unturned, Jalila was faced with her own heritage in the form of a small human she has produced, bringing all the previously disparate parts of herself together in new form. Modifying my former question of Jalila and Maritea’s connection to birth, in full racial interpellation: Jalila’s son gave birth to her blackness, as she gave birth to him.

Though Jalila's process of acceptance and searching had already begun with her own family, suddenly she is corporeally hailed into blackness when her second born child is put in her arms. Jalila embraces her blackness when she first embraces her new-born son. Jalila continues:

JALILA: Y, este, tengo familia negra y yo creía que mi hijo iba a ser blanco y luego era negro, entonces ahí fueron... como que algo me cayó el veinte, no. Y, este, de decir, "He querido ser negra y *me sale*, me sale aquí." Y dije, eso soy, no. Eso soy. Y fue un poco fuerte entenderlo y y [sic] cuando yo lo vi dije, "Es *hermoso* este chamaco." No, o sea está bellissimo y ahí fue cuando dije, "Yo soy negra y no me voy a avergonzar," y y por supuesto que lo traigo en la sangre y ya no voy a a [sic] esperar más mezclas y no voy a tener más hijos para ver si salen blancos, no [los dos se ríen]. Y este, y ya, me voy a sentir muy muy orgullosa y quiero que me hijo se siente orgulloso de ser negro, no. Eso fue más bien como lo decisivo...

JALILA: And um, I have black family members, and I believed that my son was going to be white and then he was black and so then they were like...then something hit me, no. And um, to say, "I have wanted to be a black woman and *it comes out of me*, it comes out of me" and I said, "This is what I am, no. This is what I am." And it was a little intense to understand it and and [sic] when I saw him I said, "This little one is *beautiful*." No, and um, he is gorgeous an it was then that I said, "I am black and I will not be ashamed," and and [sic] of course I have it in my blood and I am no longer going to to [sic] wait for more mixes and I am not going to have any more children waiting for one to come out white [both laugh]. And um, and yea, I am going to feel very, very proud and I want my son to feel proud of being black, no. This was more or less the deciding factor... (Gómez, 2015)

Jalila's first stream of thoughts create ongoing connections, laced with excitement as she remembers. Jalila is able to string various moments of revelation together: "I have black family members [...] I believed my son would be white [...] and then he was black." Pulling blackness out of her own body is putting members of her family and physical self together. "I have wanted to be a black woman and *it comes out of me*, it comes out of me." In this moment, Jalila is racially and corporally interpellated into belonging to and assuming the entirety of her history and subjectivity. If she needed another reason to believe, she now no longer needed new evidence.

Jalila performs blackness through this birth story. She is aware of the poetry of this life moment of performative interpellation as she re-performs its significance in her life. The birth story is an intimate embrace of generational longing. She re-performs this moment with such clarity and intention – this is the moment *she knew*. Though it was also a moment about seeing, it was also visceral and painfully extracted hailing.

Naming the beauty of her child, as she observes him, Jalila comes closer and closer to herself and affirms, "I have it in my blood and I am no longer going to to [sic] wait for more mixes." She jokes that she will not undergo a testing of her genetic pool by having more children. She says, "this was more or less the deciding factor..." She expresses that this was a final test by way of her readiness and willingness to fully grasp and live within all that she was discovering and deducing from family, memories, and conversations. Her physical experience, met with all she was learning, called her to insist she wanted to make sure that her son felt proud of being black and proud of who he was. Though this was not the case with her family, she could no longer carry on the same negation.

From her racial interpellation through the birthing of her second child, it is my contention that Jalila's birth (as the case with most births) is performative. She is hailed into un-becoming when her blackness is handed to her: her child becomes a performative

invocation of blackness itself. With this performative moment, Jalila can then more fully perform herself into a process of un-becoming the black woman she has always wanted to be by seeing previously unexpressed/unresolved melanin dance across her son's skin. Jalila's son becomes a subject of diffraction; her son is the enactment of a boundary *and* the illumination that is only possible by passing through an aperture: the open door of the closet. Rather than *represent* blackness to Jalila, her son creates a crack in what she thought she knew and what she now knows. She is performatively undone and then her body takes its new shape—it materialized—around the incorporation of this new body memory.

Afro-Feminism and Initiations Into Acceptance

Jalila then began a process of deeper acceptance that required her to come to terms with all that she had been missing out on. The feeling of recovering time and of bringing parts of herself together that were previously separated is strong throughout. Intellectual practice and engagement and feminism guided her on this part of her journey – a journey I see her on to this day:

JALILA: Y, este, para mí fue muy luminoso porque ya fue parar de negar, de avergonzarme. Fue aceptarlo y fue con mucho orgullo y a partir de ahí empecé a leer, a buscar a buscar...este, ya leí el libro este *¿Dónde están?* que fue, este, bueno en realidad ya luego leí otro libro pero era así como muy general y algo que me ayudó muchísimo fue este el seminario de Ochy Curiel...

DANIEL: Ah, wow.

JALILA: Este, el de "Feminismo lésbico este antirracista." Eso a mí, no sabes, este, cuando yo lo recibí luego sentía rabia sentía mucho coraje, este, conmigo, con el sistema, este, fue muy decepcionante porque dije "¿cómo pude vivir este despreciándome *tanto* tiempo, negándome *tanto* tiempo?" Este, eso me ayudó una cantidad increíble. O sea, yo ya estaba un poco re-valorada a raíz de una experiencia

personal como por mi rollo, no. Este, bueno, quiero decir como de una manera independiente haciendo la reflexión. Pero cuando las descubro a ellas yo dije pero "¿Quién soy?" "¿Cómo he podido vivir así tanto tiempo negándome?" Este, y ya busqué un poco más y y [sic] cuando me acepté afrodescendiente yo vi que la gente no podía cuestionar esto, o sea, no puedes decir como de lo Zoque pues, "Esa no no [sic] eres." Y, este, dije bueno pues sí. No, pues, "Sí lleva pinta de afrodescendiente." Y ya pues, este, me empecé a leer todas las lecturas del seminario y pues esto va muy bien en mi vida al momento de articulación ante las- con mi feminismo, este, también cuestionar el propio feminismo que yo aprendí de como todas las blancas o o [sic] sea ahí en el CESMECA que solo traen españolas, este, o gente de blancas, finalmente. No traen gente de de [sic] *Guatemala* mucho menos de África, no...

DANIEL: Claro...

JALILA: Y eso me hizo *muy* crítica, este, tener mucha rabia, y, este, mucha dignidad también, no. O sea, sentirme orgullosa, y dije, "Ya, este, no más cremitas para cuidarse todo, o sea, soy o lo soy."

JALILA: And this, for me, was very illuminating because now it was to stop denying and to stop being ashamed. It was to accept it and it was with a lot of pride. Starting from there, I started to read and to search and to search...um, and I read the book, um *Where Are they?* That was um... well, in reality, then I read another book but it was more like general and something that helped me a whole lot was the seminar with Ochy Curiel.

DANIEL: Ah, wow.

JALILA: Um, the one of "Anti-Racist Lesbian Feminism." This, for me, you don't even know, when I took it and then I felt rage, I felt so much anger, um, with myself, with

the system, um, it was very deceiving because I told myself, “How could I have lived not accepting myself for *so* much time, denying myself for *so* much time?” Um, this helped me a tremendous amount. Or well, I was already a bit re-valorizing myself through the root of the personal experience like for my own things, no. Um, well I mean to say like through my own personal reflection. But when I discovered them and I said, well, “Who am I?” “How have I been able to live like this for some time denying myself? Um and then I look a bit more and and [sic] when I accepted myself as Afro-descendant, I saw that people could not question this or, well, you cannot say the same thing like you can with being Zoque, well, “You’re not this.” And well, yes I said. And no, “Well, yea she does have an Afro-descendant aspect.” And then, well, um, I started to read all the lectures of the seminar and, well, this went very well with that moment in my life at the articulation, before the- with my feminism, um, to also question the present feminism that I had learned like all the white women or or [sic] well there in CESMECA where they only bring Spaniards, um, or white people in the end. They don’t bring people from from [sic] *Guatemala* or from *África*, no...

DANIEL: Of course.

JALILA: And this made me be *very* critical, um, to have a lot of rage, and um, a lot of dignity too, no. Or well, to feel myself proud, and I said, “Enough, um, no more creams to protect everything, or well, I am what I am.” (Gómez, 2015)

Jalila’s exposure to Anti-Racist Lesbian Feminism and to scholarship about Afro-México all happened around the time of her son’s birth and early life. Jalila came across several influences and teachings that guided her vision for her own Afro-descendancy. Jalila’s first reference, the book *Where Are They? Research about Afro-Mexicans* chronicles historical research on Afro-Mexican populations in diverse parts of the country and provided Jalila with

what she called a “general” overview.⁴⁴ When I hear Jalila use the phrase “general overview,” I find her sharing the sentiments I have about classical anthropological or sociological work on Afro-Mexicans and Afro-descendancy in México; the work situates historical realities but does not help black people in México find *referentes* for the possibility of performing into their own subjectivities, as useful and as interesting as this historical information may be.

The feeling of lack was filled when Jalila took a seminar with Ochy Curiel at CESMECA.⁴⁵ Curiel’s seminar on “Anti-racist Lesbian Feminism” brought up many feelings in Jalila. She says, “You don’t even know [...] then I felt rage, I felt so much anger, um, with myself, with the system [...] ‘How have I been able to live like this for some time denying myself?’” Jalila’s methodical and multi-tiered process of battling double consciousness via familial and historic negation hailed her into blackness. I now hear Jalila’s rage associated with how her Afro-descendancy and blackness had been inexistent as part of her life and daily practice for far too long. Jalila required an anti-racist lesbian feminist seminar to go through the emotions of rage and arrive at lasting acceptance and full incorporation of her identity.

In this process, Jalila discovered that she did not face the same gate keeping and discrimination she had experienced when first defining her indigeneity or Zoque heritage. She said, “When I accepted myself as Afro-descendant, I saw that people could not question this.” As an identity and a historical locus much more difficult to pin down, she was not challenged on markers of authenticity. She could perform her blackness fully. Jalila voraciously went through the lectures of the seminar and arrived at a questioning of the

⁴⁴ Jalila is referring to the text by Gallaga Murrieta (2010), *¿Dónde Están? Investigaciones sobre afromexicanos* available for free download on through the website of the university UNICACH.

⁴⁵ CESMECA is el Centro de Estudios Avanzados sobre México y Centroamérica or the Center for the Advanced Studies of México and Central America.

whiteness in academic spaces as well as in personal ones; “This made me be *very* critical, um, to have a lot of rage, and um, a lot of dignity too, no.” Jalila does not separate her critical mind from her sense of dignity as she came to understand what it was exactly that the system and institutionalization had accustomed her to and how challenging patriarchy and anti-blackness went together. Ochy and other feminists (Jalila also mentions Rita Segato and Yuderkys Espinosa, major feminists in Abya Yala) become *referentes* for Jalila’s struggle to integrate her various parts and to proudly claim her blackness.

Jalila comes to solidify her identity as a black woman in-motion through critical thought practices with *referentes* like Ochy Curiel. Given that it was a seminar in black lesbian feminism run by a black lesbian feminist, I am fascinated by the intersection of a heterosexual woman and mother who most sees her blackness reflected in the stories and struggles of scholars and activists like Curiel. I wonder what has shifted since Jalila’s son was born (he is eight years old at the time of the interview) and what connections Jalila has drawn between the initial moment of performative interpellation and the challenges and rage she has faced through her approximation to anti-racist feminist thought and practice.

I wonder, from a feminist perspective, how being a woman and being black have come together for her and how she has signified their intertwinement in her life. I understand that being black is difficult for *all* Afro-descendants in a country like México, but I know that the intersection of being black and being a woman pose very specific challenges that men do not share.

DANIEL: ¿Y para ti, este, en los últimos ocho años, no, que ha sido como el cruce este entre afrodescendiente y mujer? Porque creo que es bueno, lo que siempre escucho hasta lo que he vivido también, y con gente cercana mía es muy distinto ser como mujer afrodescendiente que ser mujer que ser un hombre afrodescendiente y cómo lo has vivido?

JALILA: Pues, más bien, me, en el lugar, no.

DANIEL: Mm hmm.

JALILA: Que una es la negación como lo quieres participar y y [sic] también en relación a mi siendo feminista...

DANIEL: Sí.

JALILA: Y si digo que soy afro-feminista o feminista antirracista, este, es así como, “Pero si aquí no existen,” no. Este, o ¿De dónde vienes o en representación de qué mujer?

DANIEL: Claro.

JALILA: Y yo creo que esto es más bien lo problemático. Este, la poca legitimidad que le dan a tu palabra. Este, o lo otro es que, eh, bueno que también ha de ser que ser un poco, este, en algún momento seguramente te ha pasado...es como poner que es más importante no, ¿A ver, cuál es tu opresión más importante?

DANIEL: Mm hmm.

JALILA: ¿Es tu opresión por ser mujer o por ser afro?

DANIEL: Yea.

JALILA: Entonces es como las feministas blancas es como te meten a concurso, no, este, ¿Que quieres ser feminista o antirracista, no? No puedes ser las dos cosas.

DANIEL: And for you, um, in the last eight years, what has been the intersection between Afro-descendant and woman? Because I think it is, well, what I always hear and even what I have lived as well, and with people close to me, is that it's very different to be an Afro-descendant woman than being any woman or than being an Afro-descendant man, and how have you lived this?

JALILA: Well really, for me, in this place, no.

DANIEL: Mm hmm.

JALILA: On the one hand, the denial, like, you want to participate and and [sic] also in relation to me being a feminist.

DANIEL: Sí.

JALILA: And, if I say that I am Afro-feminist or an anti-racist feminist, um, it's also like, well, "How, if here they [black people] don't exist," no. Um, or "Where are you from or what women are you representing?"

DANIEL: Of course.

JALILA: And I believe that this is more the problematic. Um, the little legitimacy that they give to your work. Um, the other is that, um, well, that also it must be that it has to do a bit with, um, at some moment I'm sure it has happened to you as well...it is like how to place which is more important, no, "Let's see, what is your most important oppression?"

DANIEL: Mm hmm.

JALILA: Is your oppression being a woman or for being Afro?

DANIEL: Yea.

JALILA: So it is like the white feminists, like they give you this challenge no, um, "Do you want to be a feminist or an anti-racist?" no. You cannot be both things.

(Gómez, 2015)

Jalila begins to tease out this question by first situating the intersection of blackness and being a woman "in this place": San Cristóbal and Chiapas. Jalila brings her feminist self and black self together. She has started to use the terms Afro-feminist and anti-racist feminist to describe herself and her politics, only to be met with a doubly-confused public quick to settle with the erasure of Afro-descendancy. She hears them saying, "how, if here they don't exist?" She is then asked to choose where she is from or to elaborate which women she is

“representing,” challenging her location as an anti-racist feminist. The women challenging her could not grapple with the fact that she was not trying to be representative of anyone.

By not trying to be representative of anyone, Jalila moves away from the repressive fictions that Curiel (2002) signals while also dignifying her identity as a black woman. She is not limited to fixing her blackness as an easily-definable category, but she does situate it within feminist practice. Jalila confuses people by claiming a position as an anti-racist feminist. The clarity of her position as an Afro-descendant woman within feminism, and her insistence on only speaking for herself and her experiences, fall under a collective feminist practice.

Subjectivities in social spheres are often taken as separate and compartmentalized parts, rather than infinitely modifying and constitutive of one another. As a black person, she is met with non-existence and as a woman she is met with the “little legitimacy that they give to your words.” Jalila is often responded to with full-on questioning and doubting, or the provocation and insistence on “choosing” what her “most important oppression is.” Audre Lorde (1983) once reminded us that there is no hierarchy of oppressions (also speaking as a black lesbian feminist). Jalila is hailing in the voices of many Afro feminist thinkers by not re-creating a hierarchy of oppression and insisting on this method as the only proper praxis. Jalila’s thought and practice further develops into a fuller sense of self. She insists with greater conviction each time that feminism that is anti-racist and blackness that is feminist both work against erasure and the taking away of voice for Afro feminists.

The challenge of having to choose an oppression that Jalila most felt she needed to fight for and identify with causes Jalila to bring up the different oppressions that she has experienced and lived in the work place and in university settings. These include the fears and challenges brought up for her in feminism:

JALILA:...las opresiones nos atravesaban también a nosotras en todo momento y no

solo a las que veíamos. Este, de ahí decido entrar a la maestría y pues casi todas eran feministas pero la especialidad era en género y a mí me daba mucha pena, este, declararme feminista porque yo les veía a ellas muy radicales, y este además un poco, yo cumplía como todo el estereotipo de la mujer subordinada, no: madre, esposa, este, heterosexual, con hijos. Este, pues, yo era una señora que andaban cocinando en la casa y que estudiaba la maestría también y ya eso me, por eso me sentí tan insegura porque yo dije que para ser feminista hay que estar separada o hay que estar sola, este, o hay que ser más atrevida.

JALILA: [...] the oppressions crossed us as well in all moments and not only the ones we could see. Um, from there I decided to enter the Master's and well almost all of the women were feminists but the specialization was gender and this made me a bit embarrassed, um, to declare myself a feminist because I saw them [women] all as radicals, and, apart from this, I fit a bit like with the stereotype of a subordinated woman, no: a mother, a wife, um, heterosexual, with children. Um, well, I was a madam that went around cooking in the house and that I studied the Master's was for me also like because of this, I also felt insecure because I thought that in order to be a feminist, I had to be separated or I had to be alone, um, or that I had to be more daring. (Gómez, 2015)

Jalila was at first “embarrassed” to declare herself a feminist for fear of not being radical enough. She says, “I fit a bit like with the stereotype of a subordinated woman, no: a mother, a wife, um, heterosexual, with children.” Jalila was worried that she was not daring enough to belong to the feminism that had helped her to solidify her sense of self as an Afro feminist woman. I find Jalila's fears steeped in a separatist reality that has been fomented by many years of struggling against heteropatriarchal violence, especially for lesbian women in

México and other parts of Abya Yala. While these separations are completely legitimate, so are Jalila's fears. Luckily, it seems her fears did not leave her without a feminist space, nor was she looked down upon as not radical enough to belong or to feel identified with them.

These doubts and insecurities did not sway Jalila's identification as a feminist. Emotionally she was increasingly coming closer to her blackness and to understanding its previous erasure in familial, corporeal, and institutionalized spaces. In this process, Jalila has another realization that serves as grounding point for performing her un-becoming:

JALILA: Y ya con Ochy con todas ellas dije, "Pues, soy feminista y siempre he sido, no." Y de lo que más me gustó es del feminismo la posibilidad que te va a ver que tengas razón...

DANIEL: Claro.

JALILA: Que no estás loca, no alguien rebelde, ni una niña inadaptada, si más bien si te dabas cuenta, no, y que tenías consciencia de que había algo injusto.

JALILA: And now with Ochy and with all of them I said, "Well, yes I am a feminist and I always have been, no." And what I most liked from feminism is the possibility that they are going to see that you are right...

DANIEL: Of course.

JALILA: That you are not crazy, not a rebel, and not an unadapted little girl, or rather that you realized, no and that you have a conscience that there was something unjust.

(Gómez, 2015)

"Well, yes I am a feminist and I always have been" is a claim Jalila can make without batting an eyelash after her encounters with Curiel and others. She is redeemed in her identity as a feminist, learning what she had previously known to be true for herself as a woman: "You are not crazy, not a rebel, not a maladapted little girl." Jalila knows that her words will be heard

when the conscience in her expresses, “there was something unjust.” Jalila is black, a feminist, and unforgiving. She is a proud mother, interpellated by the process of giving new life. Jalila stands up against a history of erasure, silence, racism, internalized racism, and the sabotage of history by performing her way in herself. It is from this place of agency that she can name and fight for a subjectivity that is her own that she can honor, deepen, and dwell in. Jalila brings everything with her and is no longer afraid of in-authenticating discourses and people as her identity is now both separated from all that would suppress her *descendencia* and her blackness.

“Que tú te des una Identidad”: Resignification and Resistance

At this point in the interview, I decide to explicitly ask Jalila about Afro-descendancy’s meaning in her life:

DANIEL: ¿Y, qué significa ser afrodescendiente para ti?

JALILA: Mmm...pues quizás agarrarse de, hmm, de una identidad, no. Eh, como que a veces uno quiere pertenecer a algo, no.

DANIEL: Hmm.

JALILA: Y, bueno quizás cuánto hay honores de los familiares de mi esposo que casi todos son de España y todo, este, y otros son de cuando me preguntan a mí...

DANIEL: Sí.

JALILA: Este, pues les digo que soy de Cintalapa y que tengo rasgos indígenas como que no representa nada y si digo afrodescendiente, a lo mejor la gente no dice nada, pero a mí me dicen *mucho*...

DANIEL: Yea.

JALILA: ...como, sentirme orgullosa de lo que soy.

DANIEL: Sí.

JALILA: Eso es, es de tener una identidad, este, pero, no, una identidad de *orgullo* de

resignificación...

DANIEL: And for you, what does it mean to be Afro-descendant?

JALILA: Mmm...well, perhaps to grab hold of, mmm, an identity, no. Um, like sometimes you want to belong to something, no.

DANIEL: Hmm.

JALILA: And, well, perhaps when there are legacies of the family of my husband that are almost all from Spain and everything, um, and others when they ask me...

DANIEL: yes.

JALILA: Um, well I tell them that I am from Cintalapa and that I have indigenous lines and like it doesn't represent anything and I say that I am Afro-descendant, perhaps to others it doesn't mean anything but to me it means a *lot*.

DANIEL: yea.

JALILA: ...like, to feel proud of what I am.

DANIEL: Yes.

JALILA: This is, to have an identity, um, but, no, an identity of *pride* and of *resignification*. (Gómez, 2015)

Afro-descendancy is for Jalila “to grab hold of an identity” that comes from wanting to “belong to *something*.” To “grab hold” implies the chance that her object – identity – may slip away. “Wanting to belong,” brings with it, on the flip side, non-belonging. I read this as Afro-descendancy’s ephemeral presence in México; it requires a vigilant and solid grasp to not fade into the distance nor be consumed by mainstream culture or historical and ghostly baggage without chance of retrieval. “Wanting to belong” simultaneously marks the impossibility of ever feeling a deep-seated gratification in belonging to Mexican *mestizo* ideology of whiteness when wanting to assume blackness. Jalila has moved pass the desire to

belong to mestizaje and is now trying to grasp onto the ephemerality of Afro-descendancy, always performing through these tensions.

Jalila's husband's family has a more linear possibility for describing their Spanish heritage. When asked about her own, Jalila explains where she is from (Cintalapa). She explains that she has indigenous ancestry. She grounds herself into the floor and I can see her roots reaching deep down. She gives a difference answer: "I am Afro-descendant. Perhaps to others it doesn't mean anything but to me it means a *lot*." Jalila is no longer concerned what this means to others at the moment of naming her background, but rather, what it means *to her*. It means to "feel proud" of whom and what she is, and to have "an identity of *pride* and *resignification*."

Resignification is a performance of possibility ever on the edge of retrieval. It is always ready and willing to be grabbed and contended with. It is the opportunity to make signs dance in the face of the fire. Resignification desires to be felt, sensed, seen, heard, and recognized as an active and performative process of integrating or reintegrating; in this case, descendancies and knowledges of family. "I" is the future in the past and the past in the future that resignifies Jalila's existence as an Afro-feminist and as an Afro-descendant woman. By bringing her future out of her past, Jalila enters a process of processual and continual un-becoming without the promise of arrival. Only performative potentials for Jalila's existing and re-existing, as semiotic possibilities, continue to emerge and present themselves.

In practices of resignification and un-becoming, it is important to not get stuck on or reify constant negations and tensions of racism; for this is *precisely* what would give alimentation to racism. It cannot be our sole focus. Jalila insists on this, saying:

JALILA: Eh eh, eso, eso básicamente, no. Porque pues *todo* es negativo, no. No sólo en México sino la publicidad es *muy* agresiva para los afros, no. Y que hay niveles porque,

o sea, si te dicen afro, "No es que ya estas," o sea como, al nivel de pigmentación o sea "no eres tan *negra*." Este, pero hay gente lo ves muy cruel porque te decía es que "No eres negra pero tampoco eres blanca pero tampoco blanca pero tampoco eres indígena." O sea, también ser ser afrodescendiente es posicio- que *tu* te posiciones. Que tú te des la identidad y no que los *demás* te ubiquen.

DANIEL: Claro.

JALILA: Eso también hasta para mí ha resultado transgresor.

JALILA: Um um, this, this basically, no. Because well *everything* is negative, no. Not only in México, but also the publicity is *very* aggressive for Afros, no. And there are degrees because, I mean, if they call you Afro, "It is not that you already are," I mean, like on the level of pigmentation, I mean, "You are not *so* black." Um, but there are so many people I mean it feels so cruel because like I was telling you, "You are not black but you are also not white but neither are you indigenous." I mean, also being being [sic] Afro-descendant is a position- that *you* position yourself. That you give yourself an identity and not that *other* people locate you.

DANIEL: Of course.

JALILA: This, for me, has also been transgressive.

DANIEL: Yes. (Gómez, 2015)

Jalila makes several beautiful gestures here. She affirms the reality of race relations and racism without remaining in the erasing and negating forces that are always at work. She emphasizes the reality that social conditions are already always negative for Afros. She explains that when someone is called black, it is not that you "are" black—there is an impossible ontology of the "being" of blackness within the Mexican imaginary. On top of the negation of ontology for Afros, there is a pigmentocracy that further questions authentication

for light-skinned racialized people within the impossibility of being a subject with authenticity in any discourse to begin with. Jalila reinforces this reality by citing a commonly used statement—“You are not *so* black”—limiting blackness to skin tone or degree of melanin, leaving out most if not *all* questions of descendancy, culture, history, and family.

Jalila then speaks from the other side of double consciousness, performing her way out of its grip. In the Mexican imaginary, ““You are not black but you are also not white but neither are you indigenous.”” Whiteness is unachievable if you do not look like, if you do not perfectly perform, or if you cannot prove pure Spanish lineage. Blackness is based on a pigmentocracy, even as it exists outside of the possibility of a fundamental ontology. Indigeneity, as a resistance movement, is also mostly limited to purity constructs.

Jalila and subjectivities like hers, and that of millions of Mexicans throughout the country, require new ways of thinking and living as Mexican subjects. She insists that “being Afro-descendant is a position- that *you* position yourself. That you give yourself an identity and not that *other* people place you.” Jalila is re-writing and performing her sense of ontology with this assertion.

Afro-descendancy and all the mixtures that cross it – the least valued of all racialized identities in México whether white, indigenous or black – requires self-positioning. This resignification wrestles the power of naming away from hegemony and its pawns: check-mate. Naming is really the performative possibility for crafting oneself as a full being. I echo Jalila’s words when she describes this act as “transgressive.” Naming herself Afro-descendant is to position herself, not where others feel comfortable or where they *give her* the words for her identification, but rather to take the power to name back into her own life-body-story by being fully embodied in her blackness. Jalila concludes this part of the conversation saying, “And, um, this gives me a lot of significance, no, a lot of identity.” Meaning is given to her life when she takes the power back into her own hands for naming,

being, and existing.

I was curious how Jalila had come to terms with the “Mexican” identity. It has become clear to me that she does not align with the mainstream vision of what Mexicanness “can” be.

DANIEL: ¿Y cómo reconcilias esto con la cuestión de de [sic] ser mexicana, no?

Porque muchas veces, es cosa es un- una tensión inmediata, no.

JALILA: Mm hmm. Eh, pues es difícil, no. Bueno, para empezar Chiapa que fue, fue el estado que decidió unirse a México que no tenemos tan arrollada la identidad mexicana...

DANIEL: Yea.

JALILA: Este, pero al mismo tiempo, este, nos cuesta definirnos, no. Y, hay una confrontación muy fuerte porque la mexicana, yo creo que el prototipo del mexicano, es como de la zona centro, no. No es la mexicana del sur: quizás más chaparrita, más llenita, más morena, no.

DANIEL: Hmm.

JALILA: Eh, y más diferente en el sentido que nos parecemos más a Centroamérica.

DANIEL: Claro.

JALILA: Fenotípicamente, no. Y te lo digo porque a mí se me han parado dos veces y me han dicho de qué país soy, no, de Centroamérica. Y y [sic] bueno sí entra en tensión porque el modelo de de [sic] la mexicana es es [sic] blanco.

DANIEL: Yea.

JALILA: O, es mestizo, o es esa mezcla tan anhelada, tan soñada. Y que yo, por supuesto, no la represento, no.

DANIEL: Yea.

DANIEL: And how do you reconcile this with the question of of [sic] being Mexican,

no? Because a lot of times this thing is an immediate tension, no.

JALILA: Mm hmm. Um, well it's difficult, no. Well, for starters, Chiapas it was was [sic] the state that decided to united itself with México so weren't not so wrapped up in Mexican identity.

DANIEL: Yea.

JALILA: Um, but at the same time, um, we have a hard time defining ourselves, no. And we have a very strong confrontation because the Mexican, I think the prototype of the Mexican, is like from the central zone, no. It is not the Mexican from the South: perhaps shorter, fuller, and more brown, no.

DANIEL: Hmm.

JALILA: And more different in the sense that our appearance is more like those in Central America.

DANIEL: Of course.

JALILA: Phenotypically, no. And I tell you this because they have stopped me twice and they have asked me what country I come from, no, from Central America. And and [sic] well, I am in tension with the model of of [sic] the Mexican woman that is is [sic] white.

DANIEL: Yea.

JALILA: Or, she is mestiza or this other much desired, much dreamed of mix. And that I, of course, do not represent her, no. (Gómez, 2015)

Chiapas, as a geopolitical site, is situated between many worlds. It is a border space – *una zona fronteriza*—the forgotten duckling of México, and yet, still subject to México's whims and racialized politics. Jalila affirms that people in Chiapas are not as wedded to a notion of nationality as you might see in other states. Jalila explains that the “prototype” of the Mexican woman, for instance, is “from the central zone” and “perhaps shorter, fuller, and

more brown.” Such a prototype creates an image of what can and cannot be policed as belonging or not belonging to México. Formal and informal practices of policing govern legitimacy in Chiapas, this liminal zone between what was once a part of Guatemala, and the first entry point many Central Americans must cross on their way to México City or to the United States. Jalila has been stopped twice traveling in her home state and labelled Central American. Her features – a mix of indigenous, Afro, and European – are unimaginable and therefore, must be located *outside* of the body politic.

Jalila marks the tension she holds in her body: “I am in tension with the model of of [sic] the Mexican woman that is is [sic] white [...] Or she is mestiza or this other much desired, much dreamed of mix. And that I, of course, do not represent her, no.” Jalila separates the white woman and the mestiza, but names them both as a desired prototype that neither represents nor is represented by her. Jalila refuses representation in favour of resignification, insisting that for her performance is not about recognition, but about resistance:

JALILA: Este, pero también tiene que ver también con esta contraparte o esta contraste, no. Resistencia también de decir, “Me vale que esa sea tu tipo, no.” Hay otra y yo soy de esas otras y si me quiere reconocer, bien. Y si no, pues no me importa, no. O voy a voy a [sic] hacer algo para que me reconozcas, no.

DANIEL: Yea.

JALILA: Este, pero más que para que reconozcas, este, pero “para que me respetes.”

JALILA: Um, but also it has to do with also with this counterpart or this contrast, no. Resistance is also to say, “I don’t care that this is your type, no.” There are other types and I am of these others and if you want to recognize me, fine. And if not, well, I don’t care, no. Or I am going to, I am going to do something for you to recognize me, no.

DANIEL: Yea.

JALILA: Um, but more than so that they recognize you, um, but, “so that you respect me.” (Gómez, 2015)

Jalila is actually less concerned with *recognition* than she is with *respect*. She reinforces that the social imaginary and field of possibilities with state apparatuses may not allow her to be seen or to be recognized, so this is not what she is asking for or even expecting. She insists, “I don’t care that this is your type,” citing the prototype of the white or *mestizo* Mexican woman as she is expected to appear or to perform *as* appearing. In Jalila’s final statement, it may seem confusing when she says, “Or I am going to- I am going to do something for you to recognize me, no.” Jalila is *not* going to do something *just* for the sake of being recognized in her compositional complexity. The *not* doing and the performing *into* herself are the resistances to which she is referring. She is not looking for recognition – that complicated ocularcentric logic that can continue to fetishize and racialize without challenging the fundamental logics and historical phantoms of its construction and maintenance. Instead, she *does not care*. She conjures her journey, seen or not, bringing forth generational histories not yet written.

Finally, but never conclusively, Jalila poses her un-becoming in the face of familial indifference on her mother’s side and the double bind of both not being ashamed of yet not articulating any sense of historical awareness that comes with her father’s side. Stretching the colorline across her own lineage creates a clear separation between her own process and those of her family. There are irreconcilable and historical generational factors that remain (and may always remain) intact. These historical tensions play out in private space and intimate histories:

JALILA: Y, es es [sic] difícil, no, porque dices se supone que ahora cuando estuve estudiando la maestría y te digo que estaba yo en este proceso y dije que era indígena...

DANIEL: Yea.

JALILA: Y me dice me abuela, "¿Oye hija que tanto estudiaste para que dijeras que eres indígena?" No.

DANIEL: Wow.

JALILA: Entonces, es como un retroceso.

DANIEL: Claro.

JALILA: Y y [sic] el que yo me nombre afro es como decir, "Oye, es para que quisieras ser otra cosa" no, es que quieres ser lo más oprimido no o lo más despreciado.

DANIEL: Hmm.

JALILA: Entonces, es bien contradictorio porque la gente que no lo comprende, o o [sic] que tiene ya el racismo ya muy cabrón este, pues dicen "¿Cómo tú quieres ser eso si es lo que que [sic] por quinta generación hemos tratado de dejar de ser?" no.

DANIEL: Wow.

JALILA: Y eso es lo que me ha ayudado un poco de parte de la familia de mi padre que aunque no saben muy bien, pero [sic] nunca han querido dejar de ser lo que son.

JALILA: And it it [sic] is difficult, no, because you say you suppose that now that I was studying the Master's and I told you that I was in this process and I said that I was indigenous...

DANIEL: Yea.

JALILA: And my grandmother says to me, "¿Hey daughter, all of this studying so that you turn around and say that you are indigenous?" No.

DANIEL: Wow.

JALILA: So, it's like a going backwards (Gómez, 2015).

DANIEL: Of course.

JALILA: And and [sic] that I call myself Afro it's like saying "Hey, you want to be something else," No, like you want to be the most oppressed and the most underappreciated.

DANIEL: Hmm.

JALILA: And so it's really contradictory because people don't understand it, or or [sic] like they have racism really heavy and they say, "Why do you want to be that in which, that that [sic] for five generations we have tried to stop being?" no.

DANIEL: Wow.

JALILA: And this is what has helped me a bit with my father's side of the family that even though they don't know very much, but [sic] they have never wanted to stop being what they are. (Gómez, 2015)

Jalila's mother's family asks her why, after all her education, she would "want to be that in which [...] for five generations, we have tried to stop being." Education, normalized by her family, is seen for what it often functions as under neoliberal governments: a state apparatus meant to create the ideal subject for government servitude and manipulability. Her family cannot understand how this project did not work on her, even as they understand the machinations of its functionality. On the other side, her father's family is not in-tune with the texture of their heritage and yet do not deny their blackness. These tensions play out across and through Jalila's life-heart-body-mind-soul as she continually performs a subjectivity that would otherwise remain lost, hidden, and erased.

Listening with Jalila, following her multi-grained path of un-becoming, I have raised a few major contentions. Jalila learns and comes to grips with the cognitive dissonance of Mexican double consciousness first as a Zoque-descendant and then as an Afro-descendant, embracing her *ascendencias* and *descendencias* and performing her way into her subjectivity. In these initial performances, Jalila has a moment of "coming out of the closet," where the

closet served as an ongoing performative incubator of double consciousness. Jalila is then racially interpellated as a black subject through the birth of her son, a complete corporeal resignification that makes it *impossible* for her to ignore her own blackness. Her blackness is handed to her in the form of a soft, warm bundle of new life. Soon after this birth, Jalila gains her grounding as an Afro-descendant woman in Chiapas through Afro-feminist thought and praxis from black lesbian feminists in Abya Yala. She subsequently resignifies herself as a black woman and feminist by resisting nationalist whitening projects and social projections of erasure.

In the many performances and performative encounters with possibilities for re-existence, Jalila performs into her subjectivity as an Afro-descendant woman. Instead of putting on the shields of ghostly hauntings of Mexican double consciousness, she chooses to un/become in the fullness of her *descendencia* and subjectivity. She *knows with whom she walks* and walks with those who came before her whose histories were silenced and erased. In this intimately and intensely performative and ongoing performance of self in-relation, she must continually un/become to say her own name. Beyond recognition and politics of visibility—which would not have the capacity for acknowledging her existence—she resists surrender and presses through expectation and precedent. Rewriting possibilities for herself, she exposes for others the possibility of working beyond the curse of Mexican double consciousness and prototypes of personhood.

In the next chapter, Berenice Aguilar Vera similarly pursues resignification, extending its scope to include “signifyin’” and resistive silence.

CHAPTER FOUR

“ACERCAMIENTO CON UNA PARTE DE MÍ QUE PENSÉ QUE NUNCA IBA A TENER”: THE SOCIOGENIC PRINCIPLE, STAGES OF UN-BECOMING, & SIGNIFICATION⁴⁶

Introduction

Easing into Storytelling

I find myself in another neighborhood in Chiapas I had not known existed. This city always feels like a *pueblo* or a town, but its over one hundred thousand inhabitants far exceed the idea that downtown gives you of a quaint place of maybe ten thousand people. Berenice had given me very specific instructions that I relayed to the taxi driver hoping I would not get lost. I had no idea how close this was to another friend's house where I had just eaten a large meal in anxious anticipation. Berenice and I had people in common but did not know much about one another. When I arrived, I was surprised by just how central her house was to downtown. I am here and knocking. Her house is very characteristic of México: on the outside, a metal gate links up the houses lining the street. Upon entering, you are transported to another world as if walking into the wardrobe of Narnia. The metal door to the gate clinks open, and after the short entry hall, rooms line the corridor that connects the home around in rectangular formation. Over the central corridor of the house is the open sky that makes each room, when inside, feel as if its own unit. The open air allows the home and its inhabitants to breathe. The portal closes between the street and the interior secures a sense of hush from the world outside—a welcome insulation encouraging fullness of presence.

⁴⁶ “Acercamiento con una parte de mí que pensé que nunca iba a tener” means “Getting close to a part of myself I thought I was never going to have” (Vera, personal communication, June 12, 2015).

Berenice is a remarkable storyteller. She greets me with a warm smile and an embrace, and I relax and take in her home and energy. She invites me into the kitchen and after sitting down for small talk, she stands up to cook right away. She asks if I like “quekas,” or quesadillas, and starts to warm the comál. She also asks what beer I would like and we pop open a couple IPAs. It is early evening and her house is inviting and homey. I take off my coat and take a few sips of my beer as we begin with smile and laughter—the affective tone and landscape of our encounter established. Something just below my diaphragm signals ease at the giddiness she incites. Off the bat, I gather that she does not take herself nor anyone too seriously and that she uses humor to diffuse life’s aggressions. I welcome this energy. We enthusiastically share some of our interconnections; “Oh how’s so and so?” [...] “Ah, and you know so and so?” and Berenice is already animated. I am excited that she has accepted the invitation to talk and growing more excited by the minute. I explain a bit more about the context of the interview, the motivations of my project and the various dialogues I have begun, and start the recorder. Sounds of cooking and sizzling complement our talk. We paused the interview halfway through to eat with her partner and a friend who was coming through town and then continued.

In the first half, Berenice begins her storytelling. She mentions that at some point she had done theatre and then left it behind, but it seems to me that her theatrical skills and passion for relating are part and parcel of how she goes about in daily life and the world. She is a tall woman, close to six feet, and has semi-long curly hair, medium dark skin and a large dark birthmark across her forehead: a deeper pigmentation peeking through. Berenice speaks in an organized fashion: each part of her story develops cogently from what she has just shared. In the first half of the interview, she walked between the stove, sink, bar area, and door, cooking, organizing, taking beer breaks, and letting people in and out. I loved that the interview was integrated into Berenice’s normal nightly routine, the porosity of her

movements inviting an ease and normalcy to our dialogue woven into her everyday life. In the transcription of the interview, because of the level of animation, I leave in notes about laughter and try to italicize the words she emphasized. Even long after the interview ended, I am left with a feeling of excitement and wonder. Impressed upon me is her capacity for storying of her life and tackling part of her family history that no one else has taken on. There is a tremendous rigor to her research and the performance of her subjectivity. Each time I listen anew, I learn things only possible in multiplicitous constructions of a process-driven listening. Fresh minerals arise with each sifted layer. Storytelling invites the listener to walk into a portal, to leave the world outside and transform the world inside forever, even if only in perception. The possibilities for unfolding and the colors of the landscape bleed new scents and visions with every step.

Berenice

Berenice grew up in the Isthmus of Oaxaca, land of the Muxe.⁴⁷ Her father's mother was Zapoteca, making her descendance Afro-indigenous. She was raised an only child, until her mother discovered half-brother from Berenice's father. Berenice's mother initiated regular contact with Berenice's half-brother, who now lives in France. Berenice explains that he looks just like her. She is an anthropologist by training. One of her first questions to me is if I am as well. I explain my interdisciplinary training, including critical ethnography. I suddenly find myself caught in the intimacy of presumed complicity bound up in the intrigue and curiosity of the anthropologist's search. Berenice brings her own anthropological training

⁴⁷ The "Muxe" are perhaps the most famous third gender of indigenous people in México. They are men who dress, take on the rolls, and live as women but are identified more by their sexual orientation as gay men who sleep with men and "cross dress" if we were to explain them in Western terms. However, Muxe is an entire way of life. Muxe are revered in their community and for a mother, if her son decides to become a Muxe, this is considered a great honor. Muxe, of course, are part of a larger non-Western cosmovisión of the Zapotec community as to what their genders are and represent. My friend and colleague, Lukas Avendaño is a wonderful example of the performative and spiritual possibilities of Muxe identity. Muxe, more and more, is being elaborated as a third gender possibility within Zapotec culture at its intersection with folkloric Mexican practices. It is also becoming increasingly complex as trans women come into Muxe practice, challenging how Zapotec cosmovisiones exceed Western discursive practices and embodiments.

up multiple times, describing how it shaped her lifeworld, particularly toward her recent familial discovery project driven by feelings of legacy and desires for belonging, Berenice is always finding symbols and stitching meanings, resuscitating archives and stories whose pulses were never checked before they were taken for lifeless.

Berenice worked in many different organizations in San Cristóbal and helped start several projects, supporting a number of her friends in their community business initiatives. She spent the latter years of her childhood in Tuxtla Gutierrez, the capital of Chiapas, and came to San Cristóbal to study anthropology in 1997, just a few years after the Zapatista uprising. She arrived in San Cristóbal during a highly charged and intensely political period. Berenice is now thirty-five and lives with her partner Ingo, a German immigrant to San Cristóbal. They each have their own spaces within the house and appear to have a dynamic of independence and respect. Ingo became part of the non-recorded conversation during dinner. We sit down, unrushed, as the night grew darker. This was Berenice's first interview of its kind. The warmth of eating and drinking together attested to the cultural landscape that produced our encounter. The interview is a fully-embodied conversation that dances between us as our stomachs and hearts swoon with dairy, fermentation, and visions for belonging, crafted in deep-bellied giggling. Each time I recall our encounter, I reopen the sensations in my body at the site just above my navel where laughter begins its push upwards.

Berenice has worked through a series of discoveries. This manifests in the interview as intense narration and elaborate detail. For the purposes of honoring how she shared her family heritage and the emerging testimony, I will cite more of the interview at length in this chapter in order to not tell her story *for* her. Accordingly, some of this chapter is more expository than others due to the desire to maintain space for her narration of the details to remain central and for my thinking *with* her to remain complimentary to the primary narrative. Berenice's investigative work and what it continues to unfold have caused her to

take on a series of personal and intimate journeys of un-becoming in always-mutable temporality and place.

Chapter Breakdown and Theoretical Frameworks

The two optics that frame this chapter are: (1) Sylvia Wynter's (1999) the "sociogenic principle," a theorization and elaboration of Fanon's notion of sociogeny. Fanon defines sociogeny as the social conditions upon which one's blackness are predicated. Sylvia Wynter elaborates on Fanonian sociogeny to understand how blackness has been constituted as *lack* in relation to whiteness rather than as fullness of being ("ontos") in-relation to other black people. (2) Processes of signification that I will identify as part of a black feminist decolonial performativity of silence. I understand a performativity of silence—borrowing from María Teresa Garzón Martínez (2014)—as a performativity of self-fashioning *made in* silence rather than a reaction to *being* silenced by larger oppressive forces. Such emergence no longer requires that the subject scream her presence. Such opening, I argue, decolonizes the very act of both listening and speaking from the position of a black woman. These two framings guide the ongoing dialogic encounter with Berenice Aguilar Vera.

Chapter Breakdown

In this chapter, I think along with Berenice as she stories and shares the process of coming into and performing her heritage over her two-year journey of descendancy discovery. I will consider this in all its implications for Berenice coming into both a sense of subjectivity and what I consider historical agency. This chapter will be broken down into three primary sections that represent an ongoing dialogue with Berenice and her life.

Berenice explains she *needed* to understand her family background and where she came from beyond her ill-fitting identification with México and the narrow structures of "Mexicanness." When she starts to acknowledge that there are reasons behind her feelings of non-belonging, and when she becomes fed-up with having her physical features consistently

pointed out as “unusual,” she actively begins to pursue the root causes. She then begins to dig and the active work of the sociogenic principle’s operation in her life becomes apparent. Simultaneously, racism’s stronghold in her upbringing and cultural location becomes clear. She then allows herself to come to terms with how her self-perception developed under the duress of this historically and ancestrally-situated racism.

Secondly, once Berenice learns about her racial and ethnic heritage, she claims that “me reconcilié”; she has reconciled with her childhood. She was flooded with the interconnection of being racialized and erased under the omnipresence of anti-blackness without knowing its root. Here, I argue that, in her self-reconciliation, Berenice underscores the seedlings of sociogeny and of her own self-perception as a defect of whiteness. Once she can name the violence under which she constructed her sense of self, she can become a new self. Berenice can then subvert her sense of racial inferiority by laying the grounds for moving beyond its choking grasp.

Thirdly, Berenice names some of the ways she has been signified and the symbolism she has found uncovering her descendancy thus far. I argue that in the intimacies of her own un-becoming, she echoes a decolonial performativity of silence as she comes into the fullness of her subjectivity – her being-ness to herself in-relation. Berenice’s work, seemingly “quiet” to the extroverted gaze, becomes animation, story, laughter, and even *loud* telling. In the storying of her story, I jump and tumble and skip along with her as she makes meaning in this 3-D puzzle of familial loss, always becoming more unraveled by belonging’s deepest curiosities. Given the development of Berenice’s story and what I feel she is asking us to see *with* her, I will start with two main optics that provide a frame for reading. I arrived at these theoretical frameworks through my investment in lessons from Berenice’s struggle and story that I posit as a fascinating and ongoing treasure trove of familial information for her un-becoming.

Theoretical Frameworks

The Sociogenic Principle

Sylvia Wynter (1999) took Fanon's (1967/2008) contention, "beside phylogeny and ontogeny stands sociogeny," and made a principle out of the latter (p. xv). Two important definitions serve as a point of departure: sociogeny and the sociogenic principle. Wynter (1999) explains Fanon's sociogeny:

While the black man must experience himself as the *defect* of the white man—as must the black woman vis-a-vis the white woman—neither the white man or woman can experience himself/herself *in relation to* the black man/black woman in any way but as that fullness and genericity of being human, yet a genericity that must be verified by the clear evidence of the latter's *lack* of this fullness, of this genericity. (p. 40)

Per Fanon, as read through Wynter (1999), black people cannot be *referentes* for, nor mirrored by, one another, because they are always posed as lack when held alongside white humanity. The interpellative force of whiteness's hierarchy leaves (almost) no possibility for black relationality. The black woman/man learn to relate to themselves in third person, without knowing that the construction of their humanness is already predicated on lack. If these internalized hegemonic discursive forces are the conditions under which one has to become a subject, subjectivity is only ever partial in relation to whiteness. Relationality, thinking with Wynter and Fanon, requires a new human subject to arise in-relation. This subject must be first wrestled out from under the conditions of possibility predicated on the white hegemony's violence. In large part, this requires taking lived experience and ensuing consciousness seriously.

The sociality and culture that create hierarchies of oppression have contributed to and historically sustained the idea that black people are only people insofar as they represent a

defect of whiteness. Therefore, their existence is always only subhuman. Wynter (1999) refers to this phenomenon as the “sociogenic principle,” or:

...the information-encoding and organizational principle of each culture’s criterion of being/non-being, that functions to *artificially* activate the neurochemistry of the reward and punishment pathway, doing so in the terms needed to institute the human subjects as culture-specific and thereby verbally defined, if physiologically implemented, mode of being and *sense of self*. (p. 54)

According to Wynter, the discursive formulation of a criteria for being/non-being actively creates a sense of inferiority in black people with the effect of rewiring brain activity, to the extent that the institution of humanness is repeated and reinforced over time. We could call this a performativity of inferiority or a performativity of internalized racism. Black people will police their own humanness as the underside of whiteness—what they learn to be the measure of humanity. One consequence is the immense blockage inhibiting black people’s capacity to find fullness in relation to one another. The result over time, according to Wynter, is neurochemical rewiring so that the oppressive forces of power denying humanity are reinforced by those posited as subhuman to begin with – black people. Relationality is always deferred, as racial coloniality is maintained.

For my purposes, the sociogenic principle serves as an important nexus for the constitution of black women’s subjectivity in a cultural context predicated on *mestizo* whiteness as the measure of humanity and belonging. I argue that a founding ontology of black subjectivity is not accessible to Berenice and others, insofar as it is yoked to the sociogenic principle, making whiteness the only point of entry for blackness. Here I agree vehemently with the particular type of ontology Fanon (1967/2008) describes: “Ontology does not allow us to understand the being of the black man [sic], since it ignores the lived experience. For not only must the black man be black; he must be black in relation to the

white man” (p. 90). The ontology Fanon is referring to here is delimited by performativities of race, making other ontologies, like self-definition through and with other black people, impossible. To exist outside the bounds of white power’s ontology in México requires inventing new grammars of being. Un-becoming as a black subject requires understanding how new languages can “convey what it is like to be conscious outside the terms of each culture-specific order of consciousness” (Fanon, 1967/2008, p. 55). New ontologies are possible outside the bounds of the sociogenic principle. In the first two sections, I will consider the challenges of sociogeny, or crafting subjectivity beyond sociogeny, in part based on Berenice’s telling and un/doing of her “lived experience.”

Signification/Signifyin’ as a Black Feminist Decolonial Performativity of Silence

In the final section, Berenice discusses how she has been signified throughout her process of familial investigation and uncovering. I put this question into conversation with Henry Louis Gate’s (1983) contention that signifying is a “neologism in the Western Tradition” and a “homonym of a term in the black vernacular tradition [signifyin’] that is approximately two centuries old” (p. 685). Here, again, I would like to put African American thought and practices into conversation with Afro-descendancy in México. I insist that signifyin’ practices, sometimes considered strategies of punning that perform affection and the reinvention of meaning, are not unique to African American culture. I argue that these signifyin’ practices serve an important discursive and corporeal purpose in México as well by opening a gap between denotative and figurative meanings. For example, “negrita” or “little black girl” is almost always used as an expression of tenderness, while simultaneously naming a melatonin-meter derived from the family. Using the diminutive “ita” is meant to passively aggressively lessen the citation of a familial melanin hierarchy. However, this disguise should not always be taken as passive innocence. Instead, we should understand that

most of the time this disguise also bears the weight of its historical baggage that the diminutive “ita” leverages even as it seemingly obscures.

Given this cultural reality, I would like to consider signification and signifyin’ through the lens of black feminism as a decolonial performativity of silence. I am borrowing the notion of a “decolonial performativity of silence” from scholar María Teresa Garzón Martínez (2014). I consider black feminism a necessary optic of seeing implicit in decolonial performativities of silence. Garzón Martínez (2014) asks, “But what happens with those [women] for whom screaming is not an option, since their voice has been kidnapped by medical, white and patriarchal discourses that speak for them?” (p. 233). If decoloniality here means a separation from coloniality’s entanglements, I understand Garzón Martínez (2014) to offer performativity of silence as a strategy of re-existence (Maldonado-Torres [2006] paraphrased in Garzón-Martínez). A performativity of silence, according to Garzón Martínez (2014), moves against the tendency of “‘speaking for the subaltern’, silencing, diverting or rejecting their voice, as an act of mute speech, that functions, by its repetition, as a disciplining project of bodies and a deconstructive subversion” (p. 234). Silences, via oral history performance, stop being silences. Rather, what we normally read as silence can only be heard by the type of listening oral history affords—undoing the disciplinary projects of both silencing and speaking for.

Within (perhaps always-exceeding) the listening-witnessing practice unfolded by decolonial performativity of silence, I argue that signifying elaborates new grammars for subjectivity in-relation. Signifying, within African, African American, and Afro-Mexican/diasporic practices and discourse, lets in the trickster. There is room for play and transfer and re-appropriation through re-signification. Louis Gates (1983) elaborates, “Signifying turns on the play and chain of signifiers, and not on some supposedly transcendent signified” (p. 688). If signifying is also a play on a chain of signifiers, “la

negrita” can be used against itself as pastiche—a rhetorical strategy that undermines the quotidian racism of its usage when used by the person originally signified. The person signified, in employing this strategy, uses subjective agency to move beyond the site of transcendent signification. Signification is ultimately performative in its “repetition *and* difference,” rupturing out of categories that uphold dominance and subordination (Louis Gates, 1983, p. 696, emphasis mine).

A decolonial performativity of silence here is a way of wrestling “being/ontos” out of coloniality’s death hold by disposing of the idea of “fixed” signification. Silence allows for the emergence of a critically conscious black subjectivity forged in new ontological relation and new signifying practices. Berenice’s presence is received in listening relation, animating re-existence within a decolonial performativity of silence. Here, we listen and inevitably, see. I consider this a black feminist gesture of centering black women’s voices as a method of resistance, re-existence, and the generation of new grammars for signification(s).

Gathering Together

In Berenice’s oral history performance, I think with her and the theoretical guiding frameworks positioned for co-constructing knowledge. I watch a skilled anthropologist and lover of discovery digging through and uncovering elaborate family lineages and histories that have come to her attention over time. She performs with vigor as she makes sense how erasure and racism have operated in her life. Berenice is anything but silent in the stages of her ongoing un-becoming, even as we have to reframe the idea of silence to fully approach and listen with her performance. In the interstices of what she unravels, Berenice enters into a powerfully intimate relation with herself as a black woman.

Grounding into the driving questions of this chapter from the Introduction, in light of the theoretical scheme, I ask: (1) How does Berenice discover and uncover the presence of the sociogenic principle in her life? (2) How does Berenice become reconciled to herself once

she understands how processes of historical negation have played out in her family? (3) What are the signification practices that have been a part of Berenice's journey and that have given her a new sense of agency as a black woman? (4) How is Berenice's performativity decolonial and her silence very aural? (5) What are the ontological implications of the performativity of Berenice's blackness? In Berenice's passionate oral history performance, these questions peel open many more.

Conversations and Dialogues with Berenice

Lo Necesito: An Extended Narration of Coming Into

I begin the interview as I have all others, asking about the origin of Afro-descendancy in Berenice's family. Berenice begins relaying the details of her family make-up, all material to which, at this point, she had only had access for just under two years:

BERENICE: Para que entiendas el por qué *tan* recientemente yo me vengo a enterrar de esto.

DANIEL: Claro.

BERENICE: Y de alguna manera, pues, digamos que, por todo el tema familiar me acerca mucho más a esta raíz, no.

DANIEL: Yea.

BERENICE: Porque toda la vida, eh, en su momento, la sufrí por no saber de dónde venía...

DANIEL: Hmm.

BERENICE: Y pues ahora más bien es como de lo que me agarro para poder echar raíz con esa parte...con esa otra parte, no, que yo desconocía.

BERENICE: So that you understand why it? was *so* recently that I came to find out about this.

DANIEL: Of course.

BERENICE: And in some way, well, we could say that, for all of the family question that brings me close to this root, no.

DANIEL: Yes.

BERENICE: Because my entire life, um, in its moment, I suffered a lot for not knowing from where I came from...

DANIEL: Hmm.

BERENICE: And well now it's more like what I grab onto to be able to put a root down with this part...with this other part, no, that I did not know of. (Vera, 2015)

Berenice begins with a disclaimer: "So that you understand why it was *so* recently" that she came to know about her roots. She says this with ease and a smile. Her disclaimer is not one of apology but of locating an initiation of urgency. The disclaimer serves as a caveat meant to explain how – as someone with phenotypical markers I would describe as unmistakably Afro-descendant – the information she is going to share is still new to her. She explains that digging into family descendancies brings her closer "to this root" and that this is what she can "grab onto" (an echo of Jalila's earlier claims). Though she remains relaxed in her sharing, from the beginning, Berenice does not shy away from expressing the pain of not knowing. "[...] my entire life [...], I suffered a lot for not knowing from where I came from..." signals hope and despair. Though Berenice knows much more now than she used to, the new information does not erase the suffering that came with so many years of not having access to this information.

With this entrance in and caveat/disclaimer, Berenice begins to chart the genealogical path:

BERENICE: Eh, la raíz afro viene específicamente de mi padre. De su, sería su abuela, su abuela *paterna*. Ella eh, era una mujer Tabasqueña y según lo que me dijo mi tía, es,

era *hija* de una negra que vino de *alguna* isla que no, no se sabe cuál, y un mestizo, no. Entonces ella, pues ella fue el resultado. Toda esta parte yo, no lo sabía hasta el añ-- hasta, el fin de año de 2014.

DANIEL: Ya...

BERENICE: Porque yo no tuve contacto con mi familia paterna hasta hace dos años, no. Más o menos que la hermana mayor de mi papá me me contactó por Facebook, el maravilloso Facebook [Daniel se ríe] y así yo había ido a conocer una vez a mi papá porque eh me parezco mucho a el...

BERENICE: Um, the Afro root comes specifically from my father. From his, it would be his grandmother, is paternal grandmother. She was, she was a Tabascan woman and following what my aunt told me, she is, she was the *daughter* of a black woman that came from some island that they don't, don't know which, and a mestizo, no. So, she well she was this was the result. All of this part, I, I didn't know until the yea- until the end of 2014.

DANIEL: Ya...

BERENICE: Because I didn't have any contact with my paternal family until two years ago, no. More or less the older sister of my father contacted me via Facebook, the marvelous Facebook [Daniel laughs] and it was this way that I had gone to meet my dad once because I look a lot like him [...]. (Vera, 2015)

Berenice says the Afro-descendancy in her family comes from her father's paternal grandmother who was from the state of Tabasco. This woman, Berenice's great grandmother "was the *daughter* of a black woman that came from some island [...] and a mestizo."

Berenice's great-great grandmother was likely part of the Caribbean diaspora before arriving in México—another common subset of Afro-descendant populations in México. I am

fascinated by the notion of “alguna isla/some island” because the histories of the islands in the Caribbean in and of themselves are so drastically diverse and charged in relation to blackness, diaspora, and histories of slave trade and rebellion. Yet, Berenice’s family has been in México for a couple hundred years already, making them more Mexican than Caribbean in culture, history and knowledge. I wonder how silences of diaspora indicate historical trajectories of migration that have been swallowed up by a single geopolitical memory.

As Berenice opened this channel, she quickly acquired information. I witness and feel her sense of inquisitiveness, generated by the erasure of geopolitical memory through generational absences and silences. The look across her face as she glides about the kitchen is one of elation and ongoing wonderment. I try to imagine having no knowledge of my father and only meeting him in my thirties when his entire family unlocks the key to the full complexity of my genetic and racial composition. Berenice’s response was one of curiosity and yet still a kind of disaffected distance. After living the majority of her adult life without this information, I imagine this is also a strategy for coping with such immense absence—a gaping whole in self-knowledge and family legacy.

BERENICE: Entonces, bueno pues claro que me generaba *mucha* curiosidad, no.

DANIEL: Yea.

BERENICE: Eh, en ese momento yo no no [sic] ni siquiera es que me lo planteaba, sabes. O sea, el tema de la raíz afro, no. O sea, no pasaba por mi mente. No, porque, o sea, no por nada negativo ni nada positivo.

DANIEL: Claro.

BERENICE: Simplemente no pasaba por mi mente.

BERENICE: So, well, of course it generated a lot of curiosity in me, no.

DANIEL: Yea.

BERENICE: Um, in this moment I didn't didn't [sic] even plant it to myself, you know.

I mean, the question of the Afro root, no. I mean, it didn't even pass through my mind.

No, because, I mean, not for anything negative or positive.

DANIEL: Of course.

BERENICE: It simply did not pass through my mind. (Vera, 2015)

Berenice reiterates three times that “the question of the Afro root” did not come up for her and that it was not in her conscious mind. She provides another culturally insinuated qualifier here: “not for anything negative or positive,” but that is simply never entered her mind. I read this as consistent with a cultural erasure so strong that there was no reason she would have committed to finding out more or even questioning because nothing around her would have influenced her in that direction. The erasure of this part of herself transformed into externalized curiosity that led her to reconsider what she had left unquestioned.

Arriving in San Cristóbal in 1997, Berenice was faced with a town significantly smaller than it currently stands. She found herself in the midst of one of the greatest revolutions México has ever known. Since the Zapatista uprising in 1994, San Cristóbal increasingly attracted visitors' eager to witness Zapatismo—a flow that has experienced peaks and troughs over the last twenty-three years. Bustling with national and international arrivals, the city quickly became a hub of movement, languages, colors, and nations. Independent journalists swarmed every event, people of all nations lived mingled(?) with the indigenous communities, and foreigners gave up their lives and jobs to learn to live off the land with no electricity, running water, or modernist infrastructures. “¡Viva la revolución! ¡Viva la E-Z-L-N!” became (and remain, for some) a welcome alternative to capitalism and the corporatization of life. The Zapatistas were showing them the way out. Zapatismo represented a successful anarchist enclave against the “bad government” that radicals from

the around the world wanted to soak in and take from.

In a more internationalized space, people had other *referentes* for locating Berenice's identity, creating major changes in internalized and externalized perception of her:

BERENICE: Eh, sí fue, fue muy curioso. Yo cuando llegué a vivir a San Cristóbal, estoy hablando del año '97, o sea, hace ya un montón de años...

DANIEL: Wow, ya...

BERENICE: Que yo vine a estudiar acá antropología, este, pues acá es donde más bien me hicieron ver eso, no.

DANIEL: Yea, yea.

BERENICE: Porque *claro*, o sea, es algo como suena muy ordinario, no, pero realmente es así. O sea, el mexicano, la mexicana, la sociedad mexicana, tenemos este el racismo negativo y positivo que al final es racismo.

DANIEL: Ya.

BERENICE: Entonces, pues claro o sea en Tuxtla como que pasaba bastante desapercibida.

DANIEL: Yea.

BERENICE: Y pasó que llegué a San Cristóbal y de repente todo el mundo me preguntaba y era como, hmm mm o sea, no soy cubana, me hace falta como dos kilos de culo para ser cubana o brasileña no lo soy pero por qué insistirán *tanto* en eso, no.

DANIEL: Huh, huh.

BERENICE: Y así fue como empecé.

BERENICE: Um, yes it was, was [sic] very interesting. When I arrived to live in San Cristóbal, I'm talking about the year 97', many years ago...

DANIEL: Wow, ya.

BERENICE: That I came here to study anthropology, um, well here is where they made me see this, no.

DANIEL: Yea, yea.

BERENICE: Because, *of course*, I mean, it's something that sounds very ordinary, no, but really, it's like this. I mean, the Mexican man and the Mexican woman, Mexican society, we have this negative and positive racism that in the end is racism.

DANIEL: Ya.

BERENICE: So, well of course I mean in Tuxtla, like I was able to pass pretty unnoticed.

DANIEL: Yea.

BERENICE: And this passed and I arrived in San Cristóbal and all of the sudden the whole world asked and it was like, hmm mm, I mean, I am not Cuban, I am missing like two kilos of ass to be Cuban or Brazilian, I am not that but they insist *so much* on this, no.

DANIEL: Huh, huh.

BERENICE: And it was like this that I began [...]. (Vera, 2015)

Within this panorama, and having arrived from the capital of Tuxtla where she “was able to pass unnoticed,” all of a sudden she stood out in San Cristóbal. Again, Berenice offers a disclaimer—“I mean, it's something that sounds very ordinary, no”—making sense for herself why she had not seen this and why she had not been aware that aspects of her physical self marked her as “other.” As she makes sense of this for herself, she has an ironic smile across her face. Berenice is well aware of the racism that set the turf for this distance. She explains the phenomenon in México of not recognizing people like Berenice as either negative or positive, but as racism nonetheless. I see a trickster personality emerge in the irony dancing across Berenice's face. Berenice hints at the possibility of subverting the

othering she has lived. I see her making sense of the root of where new possibilities of meaning-making begins to surface.

Berenice started getting asked the infamous and repetitive question asked of anyone with phenotypical characteristics like her own (often by bold strangers), “¿De dónde eres? / Where are you from?” She jokes about what she would answer if she were to stop censoring herself, “I am missing like two kilos of ass to be Cuban or Brazilian.” She puts a sarcastic nudge between herself and attributed national identities, using common racist phenotypes against themselves. I crack up with her, recalling the familiarity and absurdity of these stereotypes. Berenice knows that her family came from an island. Given the history of black migration to México, a large portion of which came from Cuba entering through the port of Veracruz, Cuba certainly *could* be in the picture, but racist and sexist stereotypes get us nowhere in that regard. We both mock and laugh at the absurdity of how these phenotypes come about. Berenice emphasizes how strangers have been *insistent* about her geographic location being located *elsewhere* and that this—like a bee hovering over a picnic—is a turning point for her. Swatting at it just made the bee return more times. “And it was like this that I began,” both signals an origination point much earlier than two years ago and insists on a consciousness that took seventeen years to emerge. This is coupled with “they insist *so much* on this, no,” with “they” being strangers who insist she *locate* herself, even if motivated by their (strangers’) morbid exotification of her.

Berenice continued to percolate on *why* she kept getting asked where she was from. It was an equally odd and common question, one that would put her *in her place*, inside or outside of México. Rather than focus on being *put in her place* and the historical longevity of racism’s infiltration in psychic space, Berenice focused her attention on what this shifted in her internal landscape and began asking hard questions:

BERENICE: ...a, pues, a preguntarme un poco de "bueno sí, no es bastante *obvio*" o

sea, encima pues el pelo lo tengo súper chino, mi color de piel...

DANIEL: Sí.

BERENICE: ...algunos rasgos, no todos, porque también tengo una parte indígena, no.

DANIEL: Mm hm.

BERENICE: Que es *muy* fuerte pero *claro* predominó la negra.

DANIEL: Mmm hmm.

BERENICE: Y este... entonces así fue como empiezo ah, pues a preguntar...lo que pasa que en ese momento yo no tenía contacto con *absolutamente* nada que tenía que ver *con* eh, pues la familia de padre...

BERENICE: ...to, well, to ask myself a bit of “Well, yes, no, it is pretty obvious,” I mean, on top of this, well, my hair is super curly, my skin color...

DANIEL: Yes.

BERENICE... some of the features, not all of them because I also have an indigenous part, no.

DANIEL: Mmm hmm.

BERENICE: That is *really* intense, but *of course* the black side dominated.

BERENICE: And um... so, this is how it began ah, well, to ask... what happened is that in this moment I did not have constant with *absolutely* nothing that had to do *with*, eh, well my father’s family [...]. (Vera, 2015)

From here, Berenice begins a journey of self-recognition. “Well, yes, no, it is pretty obvious,” was an internal dialogue she is now re-performing as she recalls coming to terms with her skin color and hair texture. She recognizes that she is not a perfect phenotype because she is also indigenous but she still insists that it “is *really* intense, but *of course* the black side dominated.” The domination of her black side gives an “explanation” of physical

attributes as she carefully weaves together why she has stood out for so long, and not always in welcomed ways. This is “*really* intense” because it is beyond her control and she is forced to reckon with it or otherwise find more extensive modes of assimilation—certainly no guarantor of access to the treatment a *mestiza* would receive. Now that Berenice had opened this space within herself, ignoring the acquisition of new knowledge and consciousness is more painful than before and would have resonances-responses in her body. At this point, she did not yet have contact with her father’s family so these initial percolations remained in waiting but ignited in a deeper part of herself.

Coming into Contact

Until this point in her life, Bernice had never met her father. It was well into her mid-twenties that she decided to meet him in person. She relays this as the experience that marked a secondary shift in her acknowledgment of self:

BERENICE: Hasta que yo decido ya conocerlo, pasaron, pasaron como ocho años, no.

DANIEL: Wow.

BERENICE: Desde que llegué a San Cristóbal. Entonces, eh, nada, o sea, el contacto con mi padre fue bastante "x." Bueno bastante impresionante porque sí o sea comprobé que soy *igual* a él, no. Así me hablaron de mi tía, la que me contacta años después.

DANIEL: Wow.

BERENICE: Pero en ese momento, no, no tuvimos ningún contacto.

DANIEL: Wow.

BERENICE: Entonces, pues ya ésta tía curiosamente, ella tiene un hijo en una circunstancia muy parecida a la mía, no. Su hijo creció sin padre, empatiza *muy* bien con este sentimiento que yo tenía...

BERENICE: Until I decide to go meet him, like eight years went by, no...

DANIEL: Wow.

BERENICE: ...since I arrived in San Cristóbal. So, um, nothing, I mean, the contact with my father was pretty “x.” Well, pretty impressive because yes, I mean I proved that I look *exactly* like him, no. That is how my they spoke of my Aunt, the one that contacted me a year later.

DANIEL: Wow.

BERENICE: But in this moment, no, we did not have any contact.

DANIEL: Wow.

BERENICE: So, well then this aunt, strangely, she has a son in a circumstance pretty similar to mine, no. Her son grew up without a father, and she empathizes really well with the feeling that I had. (Vera, 2015)

Berenice had lived in San Cristóbal for eight years already before she decided to meet her father. Her recollection of meeting him confirms her physical features. She says that their relationship was “x,” a stand in for a relatively non-existent or “blah” relationship, but she also affirms that was impressive because, “I mean I proved that I look exactly like him.” There is a force of physiognomic proof that assuages Berenice’s disconcertion about her looks, given she had lived most of her life looking almost nothing like the mother’s side of her family while not knowing her father’s. While physiognomic “proof” of blackness certainly has an underbelly of essentialism, I sustain this necessary tension as indispensable to her initial process of seeing herself, even as it requires physical recognition first. This allowed Berenice to be affirmed in her own journey of racial discovery, permitting her to then shift her focus to the claims of sociogeny: centering her blackness while de-centering affective and spiritual ties to multiple forms of “lack.” All claims to blackness require an entry. In order to denounce and underwrite whiteness’s ontology always predicated on blackness’s lack, it was crucial for Berenice to begin by naming her blackness, even as this

naming starts with physical self-recognition.

Berenice's ongoing contact with her paternal family also shifted when a paternal aunt, contacted her. This aunt had a son in similar circumstances to Berenice's: neither grew up with a father. She apparently felt and extended quick empathy to Berenice and made a concerted effort at developing a relationship, which by extension became a relationship with her cousin:

BERENICE: Y pasa que mi primo, eh, él él [sic] tampoco vive, él no vive en México, él vive en Francia, entonces también a la distancia ya empieza a surgir esta, este como gusanito, no.

DANIEL: Yea.

BERENICE: De qué onda, este pues, “¿De dónde venimos?”

DANIEL: Sí.

BERENICE: Y entonces mi tía, gracias a que su hijo y su sobrina empiezan a joderla [Daniel se ríe.] pues mi tía, súper buena onda la verdad, ella vive en Ensenada y no nos conocimos, o sea, no la he visto.

DANIEL: Wow.

BERENICE: Pero, genuinamente siento que la quiero y siento que ella me quiere *mucho*, no, porque digo no se habría tomado una molestia de contactarme a través de mi amigo Carlos....

DANIEL: Ah, sí.

BERENICE: Este, o sea, a través de él fue que me contactó porque tenía miedo que yo la rechazara.

DANIEL: Wow.

BERENICE: Entonces, pues mi tía súper buena onda pues empieza a hacer la investigación del árbol genealógico. A demás su marido es antropólogo.

BERENICE: And it turns out that my cousin, um, he he [sic] also doesn't like, he doesn't like in México, he lives in France, so also at a? distance starts to emerge this, this like worm, no.

DANIEL: yea.

BERENICE: of, what's up, um, well, "Where do we come from?"

DANIEL: Yes.

BERENICE: And then my Aunt, thanks to the fact that her son and her niece start to bother her [Daniel laughs], well my Aunt, super nice really, she lived in Ensenada and we haven't actually met in person, I mean, I have never seen her before.

DANIEL: Wow.

BERENICE: But I genuinely feel that I love her and I feel that she loves me *a lot*, no, because I mean she would have not have taken the chance to contact me through my friend Carlos...

DANIEL: Oh, yes.

BERENICE: Um, I mean, through him was how she contacted me because she was afraid I would reject her.

DANIEL: Wow.

BERENICE: So, well my aunt is super sweet and well she starts to do an investigation of our genealogical tree. Apart from this, her husband is an anthropologist. (Vera, 2015)

Her aunt's son, residing in France, was the initial point of contact for reaching out to Berenice. It seems that her aunt's reticence stemmed from Berenice's estrangement from her father for the great majority of her life. She explains (describing her aunt) that she is "super nice" but that, "we haven't actually met in person." Fashioning diasporic relational parts involves spooling webs across temporalities that sometimes do not require being in the same physical space.

Berenice shares another quite astounding fact, one that lends itself easily to family excavation. Her aunt launches an “investigation” of their “genealogical tree” with the aid of her husband, another anthropologist. Familial-genealogical-intellectual digging brings up breathing and moving archives as anthropologist minds, hearts, and those of their loved ones go to work in Berenice’s family. The classical struggles of anthropology as a disciplinary endeavor are countered here in the tangibility of coming/performing themselves into relation to their family history. Their methodology falls in tandem with critical anthropological critiques of the colonizing tradition the discipline used to (and sometimes still) uphold(s). From within familial lines, anthropology serves as a method and force bringing them into their stories—a vibratory catalyst for unearthing performative possibilities to witness themselves and one another.

Berenice then confirms the team effort that developed between Berenice, her aunt and her aunt’s husband, the other anthropologist, in beginning to unveil historical layers:

BERENICE: Entonces, su marido empieza a decir, "Ah sí" de curiosidad porque ya después hablé con él por eskype me dijo "es que es fascinante la historia." Porque bueno después viene *todo el rollo* de que mis bisabuelos, eh, bueno, otro paréntesis. Mi abuelo, era muy mayor.

DANIEL: Ah, ok.

BERENICE: Y te conté, no, o sea...

DANIEL: Sí.

BERENICE: Mis fechas como que no cuadraban mucho entonces ahora cuadraban un poco más.

DANIEL: Sí.

BERENICE: Los padres de mi abuelo paterno...

DANIEL: Sí.

BERENICE: ...eh, se fueron a los estados unidos eh, como parte de la camaría de Benito Juárez.

DANIEL: Wow.

BERENICE: Entonces, eh, pues vamos, toda esta parte de la historia también me resulta fascinante...

DANIEL: Sí.

BERENICE: Benito Juárez, pues Benito Juárez me resulta *fascinante* porque *nunca* he tenido *contacto* con mi historia, no.

DANIEL: Claro.

BERENICE: Porque yo siempre me sentí *fuera de*.

DANIEL: Hmm.

BERENICE: O sea, la situación con mi familia materna bueno, mi pasión por la cocina, es prácticamente lo único que comparto.

BERENICE: So, her husband starts to say, “Ah, yes,” from curiosity because afterwards I spoke with him on Skype and he says, “The history is fascinating.” Because well after this whole thing emerges that my great grandparents, um, well, another parenthesis. My grandfather was much older.

DANIEL: Ah, ok.

BERENICE: And I told you, no, I mean...

DANIEL: Yes.

BERENICE: My dates, like, they didn’t fit very well, so now they started to fit a bit more.

DANIEL: Yes.

BERENICE: The parents of my paternal grandfather...

DANIEL: YES.

BERENICE: They went to the United States as part of the businessmen of Benito Juárez.

DANIEL: Wow.

BERENICE: So, um, well let's look at this, I found this whole part of the history really fascinating as well...

DANIEL: Yes.

BERENICE: Benito Juárez, well I find Benito Juárez *fascinating* because I had *never* had *contact* with my history, no.

DANIEL: Of course.

BERENICE: Because I always felt *outside of*.

DANIEL: Hmm.

BERENICE: I mean, the situation of my maternal family, well, my passion for the kitchen is practically the only thing I share. (Vera, 2015)

Berenice attests that the only thing she has shared with her maternal family is her “passion for the kitchen” and that learning about this portion of her paternal history was “*fascinating*” because she “had never had *contact*” with her history. After Skyping with her uncle, she found that the dates she had in her head from what she was gathering in conversation with her aunt and uncle so far, did not match the history that was coming out of the anthropological digging. If her paternal grandfather's family travelled to the United States as Benito Juárez's businessmen, then her story also contains a very literal trajectory of the denial of multiplicity in Mexican ethnic and racial make-ups. Berenice has a more diverse geographical composition than she had anticipated.

It is essential to briefly explain the role of Benito Juárez in the construction of modern México as not only racist but andocentric. Benito Juárez was an indigenous Zapotec lawyer

and politician originally from Oaxaca who served as president of the Mexican Republic for five full terms: 1858-1861 (as interim), 1861-1865, 1865-1867, 1867-1871, and 1871-1872 (four terms as constitutional president). Though Juárez is best-known for his successful resistance to French occupation in México, his regime was founded on the idea of mestizo men as the subject of humanity. As Octavio Paz (2002) articulates:

Juárez and his generation founded a state whose ideals are distinct from those that animated New Spain or pre-Cortesian cultures. The Mexican state proclaimed an abstract and universal conception of man: the Republic is not composed of criollos, Indians, and mestizos (as the Laws of the Indies, with a great love for distinctions a great respect for the heterogeneous nature of the colonial world, had specified) but simply of men alone. All alone. (p. 27)

Juárez's infantrymen and businessmen who would have travelled to the United States with him upheld this ideological apparatus that sustained the erasure of races and ethnicities in México and maintained that "men" were the abstract universal subject of identity. Berenice's great grandparents were products of this historical moment. As Juárez's workers, they would have also been required to uphold these postures, even if only for the sake of maintaining good business ties. Surely, maintaining these positions over time can also have the effect of internalizing such mentalities.

Mexicans working with Juarez relied on the business ventures of the United States as a reliable source of income. These were significant early (verging on alternative) border crossings – crossings only possible via train and ship. (It is also not a small mention that the international airport in México City is named after Benito Juarez.) Traveling with Juarez's team implies a significant investment of time and movement, all of which would have been archived at entry and exit portals—residue and trace imprinted in lands and waves beyond México. Benito Juarez was known for his desire to attract foreign capital to subsidize

México's modernization project. His businessmen assisted in these aspirations—a secondary border crossing leap into the vision of México as a modern, industrial, and capital nation, further away from anything considered non-European descendant, even as this negated Juárez's own heritage.

Bernice placed increasing pressure on her family members to engage in her history-making project. Weaving and understanding their family's history in serpentine fashion, through significant cultural and historic moments in México and abroad allowed Berenice to hone in on the tactical reverberations as they presented themselves in her life and across her body:

BERENICE: O sea, obvio no. Eso solo que siempre me sentí como un frijolito. [Lxs dos se ríen] Así, "pum," no. Entonces, ya con esto es como "guao qué qué [sic] súper chido" no. Pues, un día le preguntó, así como "oye, tía sabes pues, estoy un poco, pues, estoy un poco cansada de que todo el tiempo me preguntan lo mismo y yo pues simplemente no sé qué carajos responder."

DANIEL: Sí, sí, sí.

BERENICE: O sea, porque yo no tengo ni idea, no.

DANIEL: Hmm hmm.

BERENICE: Entonces, pues mi tía habla por teléfono con *la hermana* que es una viejtitititita [Daniel se ríe]... o sea eso ya ha de ser una pasita... y habla con ella, antes de año nuevo.

DANIEL: Hmm.

BERENICE: Entonces, eh, así es que le saqué la información. Entonces mi tía de ahí directamente le preguntaba, "¿Bueno y de dónde viene la parte negra porque mi sobrina me está jodiendo todo el tiempo?" [Daniel se ríe] Entonces, ya la viejita le cuenta, "Fíjate hijita pues, que la parte negra pues es que mi mamá era una negrita de Tabasco"

[Daniel se ríe] "cuyos padres, pues vinieron de una isla."

DANIEL: Wow, wow.

BERENICE: "¿De cuál isla?" Pues, hasta ahí llegó la historia.

BERENICE: I mean, obvious, no. This that I always felt like a little bean [both laugh]. And, "bam," no. Then yea with this, like, "wow, how how [sic] super cool," no. Well one day I asked like, "Hey Aunt, you know well I am a bit, well I am a little tired of everyone asking me the same thing all the time and I, well, I have no idea what the fuck to answer."

DANIEL: Yes, yes, yes.

BERENICE: I mean, because I have no idea, no.

DANIEL: Hmm hmm.

BERENICE: So, well my aunt calls up her sister on the phone and she is a reallllllllly old woman [Daniel laughs] I mean, this one must be a raisin...and she speaks with her before the New Year.

DANIEL: Hmm.

BERENICE: So, um, this is how she got the information out of her. So, my Aunt from there she asked her directly, "Well, where does the black part come from because my niece is fucking with me all the time?" [Daniel laughs] So, then the old woman told her, "Look at this child, well, the black part is because my mother was a black woman from Tabasco." [Daniel laughs] "Whose parents, well they came from an island."

DANIEL: Wow, wow.

BERENICE: "From which island?" Well, that was as far as the story went. (Vera, 2015)

Berenice re-performs both the depth of her investigative work and the story as it unfolds in

conversations with her aunt. There is a delectable quality to her rigor and engagement in anthropological and genealogical unfolding held and suspended in story. I daresay, even positively *scrumptious*. Berenice contacts her aunt and pushes a bit further and harder, her curiosity ever-increasing, and asked, “Hey Aunt, you know, well, I am a bit, well I am a little tired of everyone asking me the same thing all the time and I, well, I have no idea what the fuck to answer.” She is tired of years upon years of being asked where she comes from and poses the problem to her aunt as a question she no longer knows how to answer. The aunt calls up her very old sister (Berenice drags out the modifier on *viejita*—“ititititita”—as if to emphasize the aunt’s sister’s historical weight, even going so far as comparing her to a raisin) and asks her explicitly where the black part of the family comes from. Berenice and I are cackling as she continues to chart the path.

I find Berenice both as a person and in her performance of retelling these exchanges quite hysterical. Laughter becomes sonic elisions in our conversation. Berenice modulates her voice for each character in her family, bringing them into the conversation with us. Berenice is aware that she is both *telling* and performing her story, journey, and experience. When I use “performing” here, I mean the animated reveal of her experience, brought to life by the heightened awareness of the performance of the interview exchange. I become the audience for witnessing what continues to unfold, apparently generating increased reflexivity on Berenice’s part. Berenice again expresses feelings of obviousness. These realizations coming along with increasing availability of information falls upon Berenice as if from nowhere, even though they have been dormant for years.

The answer to Berenice’s question is coherent with the answer she had received up to this point: her aunt and her aunt’s sisters (and therefore her father’s) mother were black women from Tabasco and her family had come “from an island.” This was as far as the story would go. Berenice decides to take it from here and pursues archival work herself, stitching

together the information she had:

BERENICE: Entonces, bueno, la cosa es pues por ahí... por ahí viene la, si en algún momento me da el tiempo, eh, voy a buscar en los archivos. Ah bueno, yo estuve buscando en archivos ehm...

DANIEL: ¿De Tabasco?

BERENICE: De Estados Unidos, en Nueva York...

DANIEL: Ah, ¿Ahí estaban?

BERENICE: Sí, estaban en Nueva York.

DANIEL: Wow...

BERENICE: Ah, no sé si te conté este dato...

DANIEL: No.

BERENICE: Que es un poco peculiar porque, bueno, sí es peculiar [...] es solamente una locura pero un día, antes de que mi tía me contara eso, mmm le platico a a [sic] mi amigo Valentín. Le dijo "Fíjate Valentín" porque estaba viendo algo que tenga que ver con Nueva York, ah no, unos amigos se habían ido a Nueva York...

BERENICE: So, that's what that's about...it's from there that- if at some point I get the chance, eh, I'm going to look in the archives. And well, I was looking in the archives in the um...

DANIEL: Of Tabasco?

BERENICE: Of the United States, in New York...

DANIEL: Ah, they were there?

BERENICE: Yes, they were in New York.

DANIEL: Wow...

BERENICE: Ah, I don't know if I told you this fact...

DANIEL: NO.

BERENICE: That is a bit peculiar because, well, yes it is peculiar [...] it's only a crazy thing but one day, before my Aunt told me this, mmm I was speaking to a a [sic] friend of mine Valentín. I told him, "Look Valentín," because I was looking at something that had to do with New York, ah, no some friends had gone to New York. (Vera, 2015)

Berenice travels to New York to sift through archives that might present more detailed material regarding her family's journeys and trajectories. New York creates a tremendous conflict within Berenice that she shares with her friend Valentín. She continues:

BERENICE: 'tonces yo le decía, ah él es Argentino, me decía "Es que no entiendo esa fascinación, o sea, porque estados unidos y pinches gringos y no se qué" y yo, "Sí, o sea, yo tampoco lo entiendo." Pero sabes, hay una cosa yo no sé qué me pasa con Nueva York...

DANIEL: Hmm.

BERENICE: O sea, que hay algo de Nueva York que que [sic] me chupa...

DANIEL: Hmm.

BERENICE: No... y le conté en ese momento. Dije, "Hace *muchos* años, ya tuve el sueño en dónde yo era hombre..."

DANIEL: Wow.

BERENICE: Mm hmm y yo me veía...o sea, yo iba caminando en un como muelle, y habían, este, como se dicen, como los postes de luz...

DANIEL: ¿Ah, sí?

BERENICE: Pero no era luz eléctrica porque yo la veía. Y decía, "Ay mira," o sea, eran los que se regulaban.

DANIEL: Ah, ¿cuando vas caminando, no?

BERENICE: Ah ha, pues, yo iba caminando y yo veía eso, no. Y veía la sombra que se

proyectaba en el mar.

DANIEL: Wow...

BERENICE: Entonces yo me paraba bajo la luz de una cosa de esas, de un faro, y yo me veía las manos y yo decía, "Ah mira, soy como yo," y entonces me veía y entonces, pero soy hombre, no.

DANIEL: Wow.

BERENICE: Entonces, yo seguía caminando y de repente en algún momento yo decía, "Claro, es que estoy en Nueva York porque esta es mi casa."

DANIEL: Wow.

BERENICE: Yo me desperté así, o sea...

DANIEL: ¿Esto fue antes de que sabías la, tu familia?

BERENICE: No *claro*, eso fue, eso fue hace años o sea *fue hace años*... Pero lo tengo así *súper* presente porque *siempre* he tenido una fascinación.

DANIEL: ...con Nueva York...

BERENICE: ...con *pinche* Nueva York...entonces, yo decía, "Pues por qué si los gringos tan mal que me caen" [Daniel se ríe]. O sea ¿que pedo? ¿no?

BERENICE: So, I told him, ah he's Argentinian, and he said to me, "It's just I don't understand your fascination, I mean because the United States and the damn gringos and I don't know what else," and me, "Yes, I mean, I don't understand it either." But you know what, there's something and I don't know what happens with me and New York...

DANIEL: Hmm.

BERENICE: I mean, that there's something in New York that that [sic] sucks me in...

DANIEL: Hmm.

BERENICE: No...and I told him in this moment. I said, "From *many* years back, I had a dream that I was a man..."

DANIEL: Wow.

BERENICE: Mm hmm and I saw myself...I mean, I was walking on like a dock and there was like, um, what do you call it, like the light posts...

DANIEL: Really?

BERENICE: But it wasn't electric light because I could see it. And I say, "Oh look," I mean there were those who were regulating them.

DANIEL: Ah. Like, when you walk in front of them?

BERENICE: Ah ha, well I was walking and I saw this, no. And I saw the shadow that projected over the sea.

DANIEL: Wow.

BERENICE: So, I stood underneath the light of one of these, of a lighthouse, and I looked at my hands and I said, "Ah look, I am like me," and then I saw myself and then, but I'm a man, no.

DANIEL: Wow.

BERENICE: And so, I kept walking and suddenly, in some moment, and then I say, "Of course, I am in New York because this is my house."

DANIEL: Wow.

BERENICE: And then I awoke like this, I mean...

DANIEL: This was before you knew about the, your family?

BERENICE: No, *of course*, this was, this was a few years ago, I mean, a *few years ago*...but I have it as something like *super* present because I have *always* had a fascination...

DANIEL: ...with New York...

BERENICE: ...with *fucking* New York. So I said, “Well, why if I really cannot stand gringos.” [Daniel laughs] I mean, what the hell, right? (Vera, 2015)

Berenice’s long-time dream of New York adds an ancestral layering to her story. I want to underscore this detail for its complexity and nuance. This ancestral layering de-essentializes Berenice’s geographical belongings—a hauntology that visits her in her dreams. Berenice at first expresses her disconcerted feeling of “I don’t understand it either” when Valentín challenges her fascination with New York because of the commonplace feelings of detestation for gringos. Then, as she re-performers her conversation with Valentín as a meta-layering of sharing this dream with me, she locates her fascination with New York. Seeing herself as a man, knowing within her dream the sensation of being in her “house,” and implicitly *at home*, follows the storying of her paternal family’s involvement with Benito Juárez in the United States. By being “*at home*” in New York,” Berenice is forced to reckon with new complexities. She brings previously disparate parts of her self together—the unsettling feeling of the visceral and embodied connection she feels with New York—knowing that it is part of a land associated with imperialism and all the havoc wreaked on México. At the same time, New York incites within her grounded goodness associations with home. Berenice, now, in the form of a dream, seems to be calling upon what are revealing themselves to her as culturally-inherited memories and ghostly hauntings of her family’s past. She answers their call.

At this point in the interview, I feel I might be anticipating the answer to the question that then arises: did these dreams begin before she started searching for rooting? In fact, they did. She explains this is a dream she has had “*super present*” ... “because I have *always* had a fascination...” Berenice’s fascination with New York has been a constant presence in her subconscious. Its *super* presence and her storying of this particular layer of her revelations raises the performance of our encounter to another threshold as she raises her own

performance of the storying itself. Berenice is climbing up a spiral staircase singing and conducting her way up. I follow her lead.

As the evolution of Berenice's story continues to garner propulsion through her discoveries and uncoverings, on phenotypical, subconscious, and anthropological, familial, spiritual, and hauntological manners, it becomes apparent that so much of her search for her blackness was long within her before she started to uncover it. The story does not stop here. A few other details she shares help paint the entire panorama of movement and complexity of her descendancy:

BERENICE: Porque *yo* soy igual a mi papá. Y mi papá es igual al abuelo. [Daniel se ríe] Hay un *rollo* ahí bien, bien fuerte, no.

DANIEL: Hmm, hmm hmm.

BERENICE: Entonces, me decía, "Fíjate que tu abuelo era traductor de las aduanas de, de Veracruz y de Salinas Cruz, Oaxaca."

DANIEL: Wow.

BERENICE: O sea, las dos eh aduanas más importantes de México y casi de Latinoamérica, o sea.

DANIEL: Claro.

BERENICE: O sea, son aduanas *muy* importantes. Y en esos años, todavía *más*.

Entonces, yo en ese momento no lo pregunté, pero después lo pensé y dije, "*traductor*."

DANIEL: ¿De inglés al español?

BERENICE: Claro, de inglés a español.

DANIEL: Yea.

BERENICE: Claro, entonces yo sí me quedé con eso de, "¿Por qué carajos mi abuelo hablaba el inglés?" [Daniel se ríe] Tampoco es que sabía que vinieron de una familia así súper pudiente, no. ¿'tonces, por qué habló inglés mi abuelo? Entonces, el dato se

quedó así como en el aire, no. Claro, después me entero que este tipo nace en Nueva York.

DANIEL: Wow, ¿tu abuelo?

BERENICE: Mi abuelo.

DANIEL: Wow.

BERENICE: Que *es él que hereda la parte negra*. Y que es el que le transmite la parte negra a mi papá que es el que me la transmite a mí.

DANIEL: Wow. Wow...

BERENICE: Because I am *just* like my father. And my father is just like my grandfather. [Daniel laughs] There is a thing there that's *really*, really strong, no.

DANIEL: Hmm, hmm hmm.

BERENICE: So, then she said to me, "Imagine this, your grandfather was a translator for customs of, of Veracruz and Salinas Cruz, Oaxaca."

DANIEL: Wow.

BERENICE: I mean, the two most important customs sites in México and almost in all of Latin America, I mean...

DANIEL: Of course.

BERENICE: I mean, they are *very* important customs zones. And in those years, even *more* so. So, in this moment, I didn't ask her but after I thought about it and I said, "translator."

DANIEL: From English to Spanish?

BERENICE: Of course, from English to Spanish.

DANIEL: Yea.

BERENICE: Of course, so it stuck with me this, "Why the fuck did my grandfather

“speak English?” [Daniel laughs] It’s not that- I also knew that he came from a well-off family, no. So then, why did my grandfather speak English? So, this fact stayed like this in the air, no. So of course, after I discover that this guy was born in New York.

DANIEL: Wow, your grandfather?

BERENICE: My grandfather.

DANIEL: Wow.

BERENICE: And that it is *he that inherited the black part*. And that it is he that transmitted the black part to my father, who is the one who transmitted it to me.

DANIEL: Wow, wow. (Vera, 2015)

Having seen her father, Berenice can now attest, “I am *just* like my father. And my father is just like my grandfather” and that there is “[...] un *rollo* ahí bien, bien fuerte.” By un *rollo muy fuerte*, perhaps the best translation of this form of Mexican vernacular would more accurately be, “there a *very* intense complex there.” Her patriarchal lineage is Berenice’s connection to blackness. Berenice now has new pieces of information that are major markers of ancestry: her grandfather was born in New York and translated for customs at the Veracruz and Salinas Cruz entries. Reiterating that Veracruz was the primary entry port for Afro-Cuban immigration into México, it becomes more and more probable that the island previously associated as a point of origination for her family was Cuba.

It appears that geographical and other triangulations now exceed the parameters of Berenice’s original questions. Her performance, in its own un-becoming, is exponentially more porous, its flesh increasingly fibrous as it breathes to hold-sustain (rather than contain) new information. Berenice also performs breath, creating space for new linguistic possibilities for naming her own history as she assumes and integrates the information she learns. She is powerfully and tenaciously integrating the information she continues to obtain.

What to do with such revelations? Berenice has started down a path that, it seems to

me, she will now never get off, even if she takes periods of pause here and there to brace the weight of discovery. Berenice explains just what she found in the archives of New York:

BERENICE: ...no, entonces *claro* que descubro eso y digo "carajo" o sea...

DANIEL: Sí.

BERENICE: Lo *necesito*.

DANIEL: Sí, sí claro.

BERENICE: Lo necesito. Así que bueno lo que hice así más rápido porque sabía que era mucho más probable que en estados unidos guardan archivos que estaban sueltos así que busqué, este, migrantes de, quince años antes de que se acabara el siglo veinte, sí. Y encontré muchos entonces pues ahí va a ser pues como hacer más investigación, no.

DANIEL: Ya.

BERENICE: Pero sí que encontré, entonces nada pues me gustaría *mucho* pues probar en Tabasco, no.

DANIEL: Hmm.

BERENICE: Ya te contaré.

DANIEL: Wow.

BERENICE: Si un día lo hago. Es cuestión de tiempo. [Berenice se ríe]

BERENICE: No, so, *of course* I discover what I am and I say, "fuck" I mean...

DANIEL: Yes.

BERENICE: I *need* it.

DANIEL: Yes, yes of course.

BERENICE: I need it. And then so well what I did like more quickly because I knew that it was much more probably that in the archives in the United States they would save the ones that were like hanging out there, so I looked at immigrants from fifteen

years before the end of the twentieth century, yes. And I found a lot so from there, it is going to be how I do more investigation, no.

DANIEL: Ya.

BERENICE: But yes, I did find, so nothing, well I would really like well to try in Tabasco, no.

DANIEL: Hmm.

BERENICE: Then I will let you know.

DANIEL: Wow.

BERENICE: If one day I do it. It is just a question of time [Berenice laughs]. (Vera, 2015)

Berenice is no longer surprised by the journey of revelation she is on. “So, *of course* I discover what I am and I say, ‘fuck’ I mean...” seems to indicate the release of the pent-up frustration of dreams, looks, reflections in the mirror without a name, and a long-standing desire to know how to answer back. Berenice is steeped in a research project about her own life and identity. She did, as she confirms, find “a lot” in the archives about family immigration to New York. Next on her list is Tabasco: where her grandmother was born. Always mobile and always open to the integration of new material, Berenice is entwining pieces of her soul, crafting a story no one else has held, assumed, or embodied prior to her. Time and curiosity continue to serve as mobilizing forces that guide her story performances and performances of story. The archive gains a pulse as the reflection back in the mirror cites memories beyond dreamscapes. I can see new blood fill her veins, oxygenating material conditions for new existence.

Unveiling the Sociogenic Principle in Berenice’s Life Story

In this last portion of the previous passage, Berenice emphasizes, “I *need* it.” The “it” that she needs is the connection *to* and grounding *with* a history that is her own. Berenice is

able to distance herself from the dry narrative of textbook history for Afro-Mexicans as one that does not name her reality. Berenice explodes in the face of all constraints. She makes clear that initially she had no point of relationality, familial or otherwise, from which to see her own phenotype mirrored. Berenice had no way to see herself sideways nor crossways, across countries, continents, facts, fables, and dreams. Here, it is useful to return to the sociogenic principle.

The sociogenic principle, read within Berenice's reality, was maintained in her life by the forces of the disciplining structure of *mestizaje* that resulted in three decades living in the shadows of her descendancy—always within the cracks and never allowing light through. In this first section, Berenice makes clear that she had no point of relationality (familial or otherwise) from which to see her own phenotype mirrored in, much less understand what the absence of her father was ultimately withholding. The sociogenic principle, we could argue, *produced* the very space of non-being from which the urgency of Berenice's need to locate herself erupts. Urgency, for Berenice, is situated in non-being doubled as lack. In the mirrorings that surface for Berenice in meeting her father, then in the connections to her aunt and cousin, and then in the various geographic constellations that the archive brings to light, Berenice beings to craft alternative points of relationality that respond to black geographies, rather than to lack or negation of being.

Within the realm of the sociogenic principle's operation, her continual dismissal of dreams, corporeality, signs and symbols as they were regulated by a punishment pathway in her own being were fomented by culturally-specific reiterations of her non-being. She “needed” to enter this journey, arguably, to exit this space of non-being and to begin a reward response to her own process—to begin to say “yes” to herself and “no” to the principle's omnipresent forces.

In the next section, I will consider how this reward response started to be built in the

process of abandoning the sociogenic principle's enslavement, in Berenice's steps towards finding and naming her own existence.

“Me Reconcilié”/I Reconciled with Myself

Childhood

Living so many years without ever having any contact with or entry into the history that marks its reality across her skin resulted in a second necessity to reconcile all that was lost and the extended period it was lost for: thirty-three years of her life and countless years prior to her arrival in the world by those who preceded her. “Me reconcilié” might more organically translate into “I made peace with myself”: a process of constructing windows where doors once stood. Having initiated a research process into her family's life, she then returns to recollections of childhood. She has a hard time dealing with her corporeality. Given the additional information she has acquired, she has a hard time reading her childhood critically and thoughtfully in light of what was underlying the information she lacked:

BERENICE: Yo siempre fui la negrita y que hace una chica siendo negrita en México si es la más feíta.

DANIEL: Hmm.

BERENICE: Mm hmm. O sea, en México y en muchas partes.

DANIEL: Mm hmm.

BERENICE: Entonces, sí que pasé momentos en los que no me- no me encantó, no, o sea, ser morena, no me encantó, tener una boca grande, mis chinos, bueno, o sea. Esos- creo que sigo sin gustarme mucho, no por otra cosa sino porque me cuestan luego peinar [Daniel se ríe].

DANIEL: Ya.

BERENICE: Pero si no, claro o sea. Así que, sí. En en en [sic] una sociedad como ésta, es rudo.

DANIEL: Hmm.

BERENICE: Puede ser rudo, no.

BERENICE: I was always the little black girl and what does a little girl doing being black in México if it is the ugliest.

DANIEL: Hmm.

BERNICE: Mm hmm. I mean in México and in many other places.

DANIEL: Mm hmm.

BERENICE: So yes, I did go through moments in which I didn't- I really didn't like, no, I mean being brown, I really didn't like having a large mouth, my curly hair, I mean. These- I think I still don't like myself very much, not for anything other than it is hard to brush my hair. [Daniel laughs]

DANIEL: Ya.

BERENICE: But if not, of course I mean. So then, yes. In in in [sic] a society like this one, it's rough.

DANIEL: Hmm.

BERENICE: It can be rough, no. (Vera, 2015)

“What is a little girl doing being black in México?” Her first statement is telling, horrifying, and seems to name a historical condition: the inversion of denial and projection of difference. She seems to echo many of Fanon's (1967/2008) assertions, including, “In the white world, the man [sic] of color encounters difficulties in elaborating his body schema. The image of one's body is solely negating” (p. 90). “Of color,” in Fanonian terms, does not share the exact meaning as it does in the U.S. By “of color” Fanon (1967/2008) means black. In this same vein, by thinking with Fanon, I wish to destabilize the sexism inherent in the universal fixity of the “male” subject in his writing (even if it is a sign of the times he was writing in).

Living in a white world, Berenice “really didn’t like [...] being brown [...] having a large mouth [...] curly hair” and jokes that she still does not like having curly hair because of the difficulty of maintenance. It seems Berenice’s body schema was absorbed by the information-encoding systems that simply did not then and do not now include corporealities like her own. México’s sociogenic principle took active root in her body and psyche from childhood, maintaining its stronghold and, unfortunately, continuing to sway her responses to her body, even as she laughs them off. Much of Berenice’s perception of her own body image is “solely negating.” Laughter takes on a more nuanced tone here, undergirded with the morbidity so characteristic of Mexican humor; a humor that experiences death through *fiestas* and laughter as a cultural strategy of negotiating otherwise heavy relationship. The persistence of negation in its stubborn repetition over time comingles with humor as Berenice wrestles with the gravitas of new information.

Perceptions based in negation were confounded by Berenice’s singular exposure to her mother’s side of the family. What was reflected back to her was not a true semblance of her own reality, a reflection she learned to assimilate and normalize. Self-loathing—however subtle and oblique—was further exacerbated when her younger brother (by a different father) was introduced into her life. How could she not compare herself to him when everyone else did?

BERENICE: Las comparaciones, te digo es que va así no. O sea mi hermano *siempre* era el niño de rizos de oro porque encima también el *cabrón* tenía rizos. Y sus rizos eran así parados y rubios *rubios*.

DANIEL: Wow.

BERENICE: Y yo, o sea, lo ves en fotos...

DANIEL: Yea...

BERENICE: ...Yo todo el tiempo estoy con cara así de enojada o llorando. [Berenice

hace sonido de estar llorando y Daniel se ríe] Un drama total. Y mi hermano con una sonrisa así angelical... y sus rizos de oro, y claro él era los rizos de oro y yo los rizos del azabache, no.

BERENICE: The comparisons, let me tell you, it goes like this, no. I mean, my brother was always the child with golden curls because on top of it the *asshole* had curls. And his curls stood up like this and were blonde, *blonde*.

DANIEL: Wow.

BERENICE: And me, I mean, you can see it in photos...

DANIEL: yea.

BERENICE: I am always with a face that is either angry or crying. [Berenice makes the sound of crying and Daniel laughs] I was a total drama. And my brother with an angelic smile...and his golden curls and of course he had the golden girls and I had the jet black curls, no. (Vera, 2015)

Our shared laughter returns to deep belly ravines, bubbling up like sulphur over hot springs, its smell permeating our conversations. Berenice puts me in that place with her brother and I have exaggerated images of an angel child with cherub cheeks. She is *emphatic* in her telling, almost as if she is reading a storybook to children: “my brother was always the child with golden curls because on top of it the *asshole* had curls. And his curls stood up and this and were blonde, *blonde*.” A conflicting set of emotions hits my body even understanding this humor and the reality she is signaling. On the inside (well, and through the gurgles erupting outwardly) I am in stitches at the scene she is portraying: “the *asshole* had curls.”

Simultaneously, I feel a sick sense of injustice and dis-ease at the normalizing capacities-violences of family life. Berenice responds with elegance and nonchalance, underscored by fury.

Berenice is attacked from many angles in childhood. This includes the normalizing forces reinforced by her brother's body and presence in her family life. She is subjected to an epidermal racial and racializing schema. Fanon (1967/2008) explains what this means, saying, "[...] the body schema, attacked in several places, collapsed, giving way to an epidermal racial schema" (p. 92). The entire experience of the body is collapsed—its experience is sieved—into a process of racialization, giving way to an epidermal schema. The epidermal schema means turning up black in an anti-black world. Berenice, as if seeing herself outside of her own body as she works her way back through childhood in her story through this performance, is drawn into the lacing of the epidermal schema on her life. She repaints every layer of this palimpsest that constructed her sense of self.

Berenice mimics and re-performs herself as a child. She describes herself as “total drama” in opposition to the picture of her white, “angelic” brother with blonde hair and curls. Curls, a marker that often denotes blackness for mixed Afro-descendants in México, also fall on her brother's head but not, as far as is known on her mother's side, due to Afro-descendant mixing. Comparing herself with her brother, Berenice re-performs in an heir of both levity and saturation. The saturation I sense and feel in the undertones of her speech is not just inferiority, but rather informs a deeper sense: the feeling of being non-existent. She is epidermalized in the face of this younger human with whom she shares DNA.

The blows to her corporeal schema did not only come from home:

BERENICE: O sea... chapopote. Un día me acuerdo me dijeron eso...

DANIEL: ¿Chapopote, wow?

BERENICE: Y wow...

DANIEL: Wow, y ¿cómo respondiste?

BERENICE: No, pues, o sea, realmente no me acuerdo. Yo me acuerdo que estaba chiquita y recuerdo que escuché esto.

DANIEL: Claro...

BERENICE: Y entonces yo fui a preguntar *qué era* el chapopote.

DANIEL: Yea.

BERENICE: Ya entonces cuando me dijeron que era como el pos el desecho, no...

DANIEL: Sí...

BERENICE: ¡*Imagínate!*

DANIEL: Claro.

BERENICE: No.

DANIEL: Sí, es muy fuerte.

BERENICE: *Es* muy fuerte.

BERENICE: I mean, chapopote. One day I remember they said this to me...⁴⁸

DANIEL: Chapopote? Wow.

BERENICE: Y wow...

DANIEL: Wow, and how did you respond?

BERENICE: No, well, I mean, I really don't remember. I remember that I was a little girl and I remember that I heard this.

DANIEL: Of course.

BERENICE: And so, I went to ask what chapopote was.

DANIEL: Yea.

BERENICE: And then when they told me that it was, well, waste and tar, no...

DANIEL: Yes...

BERENICE: *Imagine!*

⁴⁸ Chapopote usually means asphalt or tar. This was the first time I had heard it used to talk about “waste and tar” but also understand this to mean the conglomerate that makes asphalt stick.

DANIEL: Of course.

BERENICE: No.

DANIEL: Yea, it's really heavy.

BERENICE: It's *really* heavy. (Vera, 2015)

Chapopote: Berenice was referred to as tar or a blacktop. I am of a generation that can remember hot, insufferable days in primary school, where the blacktop was so scorching that sitting on it and looking up at the sun was impossible, if not physically painful. If you fell on it, your arms and elbows would get scraped up and burn. I remember the asphalt—that tough ground in the raging sun—and I cannot manage to understand how a *child* could have developed such a violent image to spew in racist banter. Berenice does not remember her response, but she does remember the event. “It’s *really* heavy,” she emphasizes, a sharp contrast to her previous performance.

Bernice found ways not only to survive but also to resist the landscape of epidermalized racial schema, which had sedimented a sense of non-existence. Berenice is crafting and performing re-existence, partly by turning up black in an anti-black world *fully*, and partly by performing her way into a different ontology, not predicated on her lack.

Transforming the Sociogenic Principle

“Since the Other was reluctant to recognize me, there was only one answer: to make myself known” (Fanon, 1967/2008, p. 95).

Berenice recalls what it meant for her to be unrecognizable as a subject of hegemony as a child. Her intellectual, thinking, and storying self remains at the center and forefront, always circling back and making connections as she examines problems of non-existence and relocates herself in space, time, body, mind, and geography. Rather than being *put in her place*, she crafts space for herself in intangible geographies. With an endlessly curious and investigative mind, Berenice returns once again to her “formation”—a word used to mean

intellectual training in Spanish—that she forefronts as an active participant in her entire world view:

BERENICE: Y también yo me vine- mi formación contribuyó pues contribuyó muy muy muy fuerte a lo que soy, a lo que pienso ahora, no.

DANIEL: Ya.

BERENICE: Este, yo vine tres años después del levantamiento armado, entonces eso también fue algo *muy* fuerte.

DANIEL: Claro, claro.

BERENICE: Y no sólo me reconcilio con esta parte de mi infancia, así de, bueno que acá esta chido ser un poco más negrita. Sino también el hecho que también tengo una parte indígena. Lo que pasa es que mi familia *materna* pues no me vas a creer, no, decían, o sea, todos vienen de Hernán Cortés. Yo pues siempre me reía y me decía pues "¿No se ven en el espejo estos pobres?" [Daniel se ríe] O sea, porque de veras, digo. La cara de *de maíz*, ¿sabes?

DANIEL: Sí.

BERENICE: Mi abuelo era un hombre- bueno, mi abuelo también tiene es una mezcla muy interesante. Mi abuelo es medio moro, medio indígena Tsotsil.

DANIEL: Wow.

BERENICE: Entonces, claro, mi abuelo era un tipo con este tipo de moreno *más* moro, no?

DANIEL: Hmm.

BERENICE: De ojos medios amarillos.

DANIEL: Wow.

BERENICE: Pero rasgos *fuertes*, no.

DANIEL: Sí, sí.

BERENICE: Indígenas.

BERENICE: And also I came- my formation contributed, well, it contributed very, very, very strongly to who I am and what I think now, no.

DANIEL: Ya.

BERENICE: Um, I came three years after the armed uprising, so this was another thing that was *very* heavy.

DANIEL: Of course, of course.

BERENICE: And I didn't only reconcile with this part of my childhood, like well here it is kind of cool to be a bit blacker. But also the fact that I have a part that is indigenous. What happens is that my maternal family, well you're not going to believe me, no. They said, I mean, they all come from Hernan Cortés. I, well I always laughed and said well, "Don't they look at their poor selves in the mirror?" [Daniel laughs] I mean, because really. The face *of corn*, you know?

DANIEL: Yes.

BERENICE: My grandfather was a man- well, my grandfather also had a really interesting mix. My grandfather is part North African and part indigenous Tsotsil.

DANIEL: Wow.

BERENICE: So, of course my grandfather was a guy with this type of brown that's more Arab, right.

DANIEL: Hmm.

BERENICE: With yellowish eyes.

DANIEL: Wow.

BERENICE: But *very* strong features, no.

DANIEL: Yes, yes

BERENICE: Indigenous. (Vera, 2015)

It is clear in this performance and in all that Berenice continues to cipher through and develop, that anthropology is part of her life, much beyond her formation. I sense that Berenice garners a lot of her strength and determination for knowing and un-writing racialized histories of erasure from this life-methodology. What she says here makes even clearer the evidence of this formation, as she does not miss a detail, even in recalling physical features and geographical locations of family lineages. With this information, it is now *not* so clear that her mother's family does not have racialized features given their indigenous roots. Her grandfather, a fascinating mixture, has "very strong features," as a combination of North African (Moor) and Tsotsil heritage with yellow eyes. Here she makes a very significant shift in thinking of her mother's immediate family as mostly white, while, when moving just a little further out, new color schemes are added to the room. There is nothing that can be easily written off her family's complexity on either side, and all contribute to a stronger sense of self in relation to this information.

Berenice jokes here about her mother's family *saying* they were descendants of Cortés. Cortés was a violent Spanish conquistador. Insisting on direct lineage with him is buying into and insisting up on the fictions and fables colonization would have Mexicans believe about themselves. She laughs sarcastically, questioning how they could not look in the mirror and see their "caras de maíz/faces of corn." *Caras de maíz* is a powerful poetic jolt of a phrase that profoundly marks the racialization of indigeneity and its uptake in Mexican Spanish. As the now famous slogan of the Zapatistas "el tierra es de quien la trabaja" or "the land belongs to those who work it," her choice of language evokes images of Mexican *campesinos* (country people or peasants) throughout the country.

On any drive in the surrounding mountains of San Cristóbal and off into the highlands, you are surrounded by acres and acres of breath-taking *milpas*—maize or corn fields where

the corn is interspersed with *frijol*, *chile*, *tomatillo*, and *calabaza*.⁴⁹ These are all ingredients that make the corn grow tall and strong. Skin the color of coffee mixed with cacao, powerfully strong bodies with prominent features work these acres and acres of land in the boiling sun, using only hand-held tools like machetes. The women often use rebozos—a sash of fabric where their babies and toddlers remain dangling from their body all day. Centuries later, these ancestral practices remain intact. *Campesinos* are the keepers of the corn. When Berenice uses this image, “las caras de maíz,” she ties indigenous people directly to their land, livelihood, and history—always under threat of destruction. As the globalization project of neoliberal capitalism has threatened to eradicate corn crops in all its varieties, Berenice seems to want to wrestle her family’s delusions around whiteness out of their fortress of European descendancy. Can they not see their faces of corn? Berenice asks, interpellating her mother’s side of the family in colonial legacies of erasure and shame. With every bit of new information, Berenice always weaves her way back, echoing out the historical revelations.

With an anthropologist’s mind, grounding symbols and signs of historical memory, Berenice begins to untangle herself from the Mexican sociogenic principle that held her captive for so long:

BERENICE: No, y entonces también como que me reconcilié con eso. O bueno, no reconcilio porque yo de esa parte si no recuerdo como haber, o sea, probablemente sí, no. Porque vengo de una familia, eh, racista.

DANIEL: Sí.

BERENICE: Vengo de una familia con un tema religioso, ya sabes...ya tu lo sabes ...

DANIEL: Sí.

BERENICE: ...familia mexicana...

DANIEL: Mm hmm.

⁴⁹ Beans, chili, green tomato, and pumpkin/squash.

BERENICE: ...latinoamericana.

BERENICE: No, and so I also like I reconciled with this. Or well, I didn't reconcile because me from this part I don't remember having, I mean, probably yeas, no. Because I come from a, um, racist family.

DANIEL: Yes.

BERENICE: I come from a family with a religious thing, you know...you already know...

DANIEL: Yes.

BERENICE: ...a Mexican family...

DANIEL: Mm hmm.

BERENICE: ...Latin American. (Vera, 2015)

Bernice does not negate the racism of her own family: "reconciled with this." She goes back on her words for a minute saying she does not remember having reconciled with this as it was happening, but now she speaks from a future made in new grammars of un-becoming—knowing and performing an existence outside the traditional Mexican family's racist-racial schema. "I come from a family with a religious thing, you know..." This religious thing is wedded to coming from a "racist family," "a Mexican family," "a Latin American [family]." Berenice makes claim to the levels of tradition that her family reiterates across markers of religion, Mexicanness and Latin Americanness. Racism is embedded in these markers for her. Berenice is seeing these markers, as she performs back for a devoted audience, and their many socio-historical and intimate connections with culture and racial violence.

Reconciling with Family

Berenice again, a welcomed repetition, drives home the significance of her intellectual training, not only in performing herself into re-existence given this family process of

discovery and archival research, but also by zooming out to the structures that she is now able to recognize as traps, even for her own family. Her anthropological eye seems to offer a welcome and critical distancing—enough for her to separate her own search and integration from family erasure, apathy, and violence, and to even create a sort of psychic barrier between herself and them:

BERENICE: No, pero sí que fue chido mi formación me contribuyó *mucho* a esto y lo agradezco profundamente porque porque [sic] me ayudó entender *muchas* cosas, no. O sea, a *ver* de otra manera, a a [sic] poder *convivir* con mi familia de *otra* manera. O sea, actualmente y ya no solo con con [sic] el racismo, no. Con el racismo *hacia* los indígenas, *hacia* los negros.

DANIEL: Claro.

BERENICE: Porque además es bien curioso: mi mamá tenía *negrofobia*.

DANIEL: [Exhala] Wow.

BERENICE: Yo *recuerdo* a mi mamá. Es *bien* curioso...

DANIEL: Sí.

BERENICE: Porque, además, tiene estas dos, estos dos lados, sabes. Y no sabe bien cómo manejarlos. Por un lado, dice, "Ay que negrote" y por el otro, era así como "ay no" como una cosa así de de [sic] pues no asco sino como de miedo. Mm hmm.

BERENICE: No, but yes my formation was cool because it contributed *a lot* to this and I am profoundly grateful because because [sic] it helped me understand *a lot* of things, no. I mean, to *see* from a new way, to to [sic] to able to coexist with my family in *another* way. I mean, actually and not only with with [sic] the racism, no. With the racism *towards* indigenous, *towards* black people.

DANIEL: Of course.

BERENICE: Because apart from this it's very strong: my mom had black phobia.

DANIEL: [Exhales] Wow.

BERENICE: I *remember* my mother. It's super strange...

DANIEL: Yes.

BERENICE: Because, apart from this, she has two, these two sides, you know. And she doesn't know how to maneuverer them. On the one hand, she says, "Wow, what a black hunk" and on the other, she was like, "Oh no" like something like like [sic] not disgust but like fear. Mm hmm. (Vera, 2015)

Berenice stresses many of her words here: "it helped me understand *a lot* of things, no. I mean, to *see* from a new way." Berenice is citing and wielding the strength the counter-disciplinary force of critical anthropology has imbued in her. Her training has given her tools to make connections through signs and symbols across times, space and history, gathering her genealogies as she might gather fallen leaves in a long-unraked yard.

Berenice is able to "coexist" with her family "in *another* way," through some painful realities. The pain is specific and pointed. She is able to coexist with them (her maternal family) "not only with the racism" but "with the racism *towards* indigenous, *towards* black people." The historical leverage and insight her investigation has given her allows Berenice to situate her family's racism towards black and indigenous people as systemic and historical. She is even able to understand the internalization of this racism—her maternal grandfather who was North African and Tsotsil and her presence in their family—as wedded to these larger systems of oppression. The work of excavation allows her to engage her family without an eternal reliving of all that has obscured her own history, aware that the work of owning their own history and lives will have to be co-created, long-term, and slow. Berenice does not take this on herself, even as she continues to elaborate her own process.

Berenice also began to see that her mother on the one hand says, "What a black hunk"

and then turns around in total fear and denial. The attraction-repulsion, phobia-philía of her mother seems to have always been existent through Berenice's upbringing as well. Berenice then jokes about this fracture within her own mother's psyche from her trained perspective:

BERENICE: Por qué mi mamá, o sea, y claro yo me veía, decía, "¡chale!" mi mamá no se ha dado cuenta de que tiene una hija que que está bien pinche morena o sea...

DANIEL: Wow.

BERENICE: ¿Qué pedo, no?

BERENICE: Why is my mom, I mean, and of course I looked at myself and said, "hell no!" My mom has not realized that she has a daughter that that that [sic] is really damn brown, I mean...

DANIEL: Wow. (Vera, 2015)

Berenice sarcastically and *emphatically* remembers conversations with her mother where she was flabbergasted when she realized that her mother did not really get "that she has a daughter [...] that is really *damn* brown." Berenice doubly performs humor and exasperation here. Birthing a child of a certain color is not a guarantor of acceptance or freedom from denial, even from the mother, as Berenice makes evident here. Berenice, it seems, was well on the path of integrating the various parts of herself, even though her mother had not taken the same journey.

I then inquired how much/if Berenice had shared in her own journey with her mother and what had come of this. I wondered whether her mother had been receptive and whether, in listening to Berenice and hearing Berenice's increasing comfort in dealing with racism against indigenous and black people from her mother's family had perhaps softened her mother's perception. Or perhaps listening helped her mother to see family details anew:

DANIEL: Wow ¿Y has hablado mucho del tema con ella y como tu propia búsqueda?

BERENICE: Sí, sí sí sí, claro claro.

DANIEL: Sí, sí. ¿Y cómo responde ella?

BERENICE: Pues, con mucha curiosidad también.

DANIEL: Sí.

BERENICE: Pues sí, responde con mucha curiosidad, así como, “Ay mira, que interesante,” porque tampoco sabía mucho sobre la historia de mi papá.

DANIEL: Ya, ya.

BERENICE: No, entonces, sí ha sido bonito. Ha sido, um, como un proceso hermoso de acercamiento con una parte de mí que *pensé* que *nunca* iba a tener.

DANIEL: Wow. And have you spoken much about your own search with her?

BERENICE: Yes, yes yes yes, of course of course.

BERENICE: Well, with a lot of curiosity too.

DANIEL: Yes.

BERENICE: Well, yes she responds with a lot of curiosity like, “ah, look how interesting,” because she also didn’t know much about the history of my dad.

DANIEL: Ya, ya.

BERENICE: No, so yes it has been beautiful. It has been, um, like a beautiful process of coming close to a part of me that I *thought* I would *never* have. (Vera, 2015)

Berenice assures “yes, yes, yes, yes,” that her mother has *indeed* entered into part of this journey *with* her, bringing her curiosity to these uncoverings as well. In a striking poetic utterance, Berenice explains that this has been “a beautiful process of coming close to a part of me that I *thought* I would *never* have.” She has entered a process of learning, feeling, sensing, and then having the chance to rewrite and re-perform parts of her self, her story, and her family’s story she thought she would *never* have the chance to.

Digging herself out of the heavy sand hill of the sociogenic principle produced by the horrors of sociogeny's omnipresence, I witness Berenice re-perform this process for herself, even in the interview encounter. She gains a new ontology on her own terms by seeing herself in-relation to these histories. She is not ashamed or frustrated that this had to happen in her adult life. Rather, in her words and her physical expression, I see her resolved to have this be *the* lesson of this life moment. It is. She is determined to continue the journey and to maintain these feelings moving forward. Berenice's performance involves sense-making of this enormous hole that characterized the absence of this knowledge for so long:

I am inquisitive about how larger social constructions of Afro-descendancy in México are related to Berenice's life, particularly as I begin to understand just how intimate and private her processes have been.

BERENICE: Y pues finalmente, lo *ser* afrodescendiente digamos que ha sido como una cosa de casualidad...

DANIEL: Sí.

BERENICE: O sea, yo ni me lo hubiera plantado. Mm hmm.

BERENICE: And well finally, being Afro-descendant we could say has been like a coincidence.

DANIEL: Yes.

BERENICE: I mean, I would have never bet on it. Mm hmm. (Vera, 2015)

The "being" of Afro-descendancy is what she calls a "coincidence." This being, brought forth through the impossibility of her own ontology, is a selfhood fashioned in re-existence. An existential question of existence makes the being of Afro-descendancy something she would have never "bet" on. She would have never bet on having a full ontology, essentially.

I am curious about what all this has provoked within her as she comes to understand

herself as a black woman in México, considering the *tremendous* amount information Berenice has managed to gather in such a short period of time. I am struck by the layers of negation she has been and continues to be up against. I feel the level of tenacity and resistance required of her to continue to probe, to ask, and to question what is hers.

Processes and Movements

I posit that coming into a sense of self under the sociogenic principle, premised upon not belonging to the realm of humanity considered universal, requires an intensive process of reconciliation. I wondered just how this process of reconciliation had been for Berenice.

DANIEL: ¿Y cómo ha sido esta reconciliación para tí en en [sic] torno a tu propia identidad? ¿Como que qué es lo que ha movido eh, en tí?

BERENICE: Uf, eh, uf. Ha movido muchas cosas. O sea, yo ahora estoy en terapia.

DANIEL: Ah ha.

BERENICE: Porque va va [sic] o sea entre otras cosas, como que pasar una vida en la que no sabes de dónde viene una parte de tí o por qué eres como eres, no, y sufrir tu negritud...

DANIEL: Yea.

BERENICE: ...No... sin saber qué pedo. Sin saber por qué chingados, no. Sin sin [sic], o sea, siempre me preguntaban...*siempre siempre siempre* me preguntaban, y yo, algunas veces inventé historias.

DANIEL: How has this reconciliation been for you in in [sic] terms of your own identity? How is it that it has moved, um, in you?

BERENICE; Uf, um, uf. It has moved many things. I mean, now I am in therapy.

DANIEL: Ah ha.

BERENICE: Because yes yes [sic], I mean, between other things, like to spend a life in

which you do not know where a part of you comes from or because you are as you are, no, and to suffer your blackness....

DANIEL: Yea.

BERENICE: ...No...without knowing what's up. Without knowing why the hell, no. Without without [sic], I mean, I always asked myself, I *always always always* asked myself, and I, sometimes I made up stories. (Vera, 2015)

Berenice is not shy to share that she required a therapeutic process of reconciliation. "To spend a life in which you do not know where a part of you comes from" was, for Berenice to "*suffer* your blackness." I see Berenice's reckonings as echoes of Fanon (1967/2008) and tangential with some of his elucidations, particularly: "I was responsible not only for my body but also for my race and my ancestors" (p. 92). I feel Berenice's ancestral weight pulling at her as I listen to her describe the feeling of "suffering your blackness." Fanon reminds us that our bodies are not ours alone—they also belong to our ancestors.

Berenice spent years making up stories to herself and others, left, "always, always, always" wanting to know. Berenice performs her memories of *suffering* her blackness through her emphasis on the *intense* desire to know. Knowing is both elusive and painstakingly tangible in this moment. An entire part of her was missing. Berenice recognizes in this movement and process the simultaneous limitations of the epidermal schema in her effort towards knowing herself and existing much further beyond her physical self. Namely, that schemas of classification based on phenotype blocked her capacity to understand her blackness beyond reifications of difference:

BERENICE: O sea, yo que sé. Sabes, también hay otras cosas de mí que no son que sea morena, tengo el pelo chino, o que tenga una gran boca.

DANIEL: Mm hm, mm mm, mm mm, yea.

BERENICE: No, entonces ahora, eh, en esta parte de mi vida pues viene a ser algo

como que viene a ser unión.

DANIEL: Hm.

BERENICE: O sea, en esta parte de mi vida para mí viene a ser *mí* unión con esa parte que *nunca* tuve, no.

DANIEL: Hmm, hmm.

BERENICE: Eso es lo que viene mi hacer... mi reconocimiento como una afrodescendiente en México, no.

DANIEL: Yea, yea.

BERENICE: Esa parte de la que nunca supe. Mm hm.

BERENICE: I mean, what do I know. You know, there are other parts of mean that are not just that I am brown, I have curly hair, and that I have a large mouth.

DANIEL: Mm hm, mm mm, mm mm, yea.

BERENICE: No, so now, um, in this part of my life well it is like some sort of a union.

DANIEL: Hmm.

BERENICE: I mean, in this part of my life, for me, it is my union with this part I *never* had, no.

DANIEL: Hmm, hmm. (Vera, 2015)

Berenice makes clear that this part of the process is about “a union” of parts. Here she brings together the initial frustrations with the constant questioning she received about her physical appearance with all the information she has acquired along the way. What once haunted her, not only as inferiority but as non-existence, is now what she insists is only a very small fraction of who and what she is. When she says, “[...] there are other parts of me,” she requires any listener to de-center ocularcentric logic that would make racial difference a basis from which to discriminate and to dislocate her from a common “humanity.”

In a small comment in a subsequent passage, Berenice gestures away from the obsession with corporeal difference, insisting she wants to “simplemente naturalizarlo porque esto es lo que soy” or to “simply naturalize it because this is what I am.” The “it” Berenice wants to naturalize signals the incorporation of her physical self into all that she has learned so that the emphasis on phenotype does not remain a centrality of focus in relation to her blackness. Berenice is performing a de-centering of ocularcentrism in the fullness of her ontological un-becoming: an ongoing process of reconciliation.

Berenice shares the mixed sentiments that have accompanied these movements and discoveries in a final moment reckoning with what this reconciliation process has been:

BERENICE: O sea, muchas cosas. Que cuando *hablé* con Juan, nos hablamos y yo decía es que no puede ser, o sea hemos pasado 35 años y parece como si hubiéramos compartido toda la vida. Entonces, es súper fuerte, o sea es súper lindo pero a la vez...

DANIEL: Wow, que fuerte...¡que lindo!

BERENICE: Entonces, es súper fuerte, o sea es súper lindo pero a la vez...

DANIEL: *Super* lindo...

BERENICE: Es *tán* doloroso, no.

DANIEL: Da *rabia*, no...

BERENICE: Ay *que* rabia, o sea *que* rabia, no. O sea, la vida te da, te pone en pruebas que dices, puta. Está chido pero llévatela leve, no.

BERENICE: I mean, so many things. That when I *spoke* with Juan, we spoke and I said it's like it cannot be, I mean we have let thirty-five years pass and it's like we have shared our entire lives. So, it is really heavy, I mean, super beautiful at the same time...

DANIEL: Wow, how intense and how beautiful!

BERENICE. So, it is super heavy, I mean it's super beautiful at the same time...

DANIEL: *Super* beautiful...

BERENICE: It is *so* painful, no.

DANIEL: It brings rage, no.

BERENICE. Oh, *so much* rage, I mean, *what* rage, no. I mean, life gives you, it puts you in tests and you say, damn. It is cool, but take me down easy, no. (Vera, 2015)

Juan, her cousin and the son of the aunt who first contacted her about completing the family tree, was the first person through which she could see her own reflection. No longer needing to look at herself through white eyes, she had another *referente* for black relationality and being in-relation. Juan and Berenice are the same age. Berenice feels the weight of the thirty-five years that have passed without knowing one another and having very similar stories of absent fathers and absent blackness. She is smiling and holding space for all that she has uncovered while allowing the sentiments of “really heavy” and “super beautiful” to comingle.

The reconciliation process, for Berenice, has also involved rage, “so much rage.” The history others had fabricated (perhaps neglected to fabricate) for her is torn asunder as she works through the pain this dislocation and racism have and continue to cause. The sociogenic principle, even as its operations on social scales remain intact, is, bit-by-bit, losing its possibilities of operation in Berenice’s life. Through rage and reconciliation, she is disabling its powers over her life, performing her way into an entirely different process. I watch the principle pale in comparison to all that she has integrated into her life world. It is like a scraper taking paint of a very old building—each layer revealing a surface that appears as if untouched by time, each layer more intense than the one before.

In this final part of the conversation, I make a final dialogic gesture as Berenice negotiates new grammars for re-existence through semiotics and re-signification within this space filled with agency and resistance that she has come to claim and live.

“Me Significaron, No”

Signification

Searching for new grammars of re-existence requires locating oneself within culture and cultural practices. In the latter half of the interview, I am curious, beyond the intensive genealogical and familial processes that Berenice has entered, what she sees as the cultural points of resignification along the way. Berenice is enthusiastic in her response as she finds and plays with culture's influence on situating her blackness (literally) in movement:

BERENICE: Entonces a mí me *encanta* bailar.

DANIEL: Sí.

BERENICE: No, me *encanta*, me *encanta* entonces- Y *siempre* hago como un énfasis de pues, claro, no. Pues si eso lo trajeron los negros. En la facultad, yo tuve un compañero que luego estu- bueno yo no tuve un compañero, pero digamos que él estudiaba también en la facultad, historiador, tal vez lo conoces, Efraín.

DANIEL: Sí, sí, sí.

BERENICE: Ok, y *él* era amigo del que en ese entonces era mi novio y el empezó con este estudio, no, sobre los afrodescendientes en la costa de Chiapas. Y recuerdo que, gracias a él, yo supe que una de mis comidas favo- bueno mi comida favorita Chiapaneca es una comida de origen negro.

DANIEL: Wow.

BERENICE: La Chanfaina. Entonces, para mí esto fue muy significativo porque encima soy cocinera.

BERENICE: So, I love to dance.

DANIEL: Yes.

BERENICE: No, I love it, I love it, so- and I always make an emphasis on, well, of

course, no. Well, if black people brought it. In university, I had a boyfriend and well he was- well, I don't know if I had a boyfriend, but let's say he studied in the university, a historian, you might know him, Efraín.

DANIEL: Yes, yes, yes.

BERENICE: Ok, and he was a friend of who, at this point in time, was my boyfriend and he started with this study, no, about Afro-descendants in the Coast of Chiapas. And I remember that thanks to him, I knew that one of my favorite food- well, my favorite Chiapanecan foods is a dish with black origins.

DANIEL: Wow.

BERENICE: Chanfaina. So, for me this was very, very significant because on top of this, I am a chef. (Vera, 2015)

Berenice is proud of the joy that dancing brings her. While sharing this, she is sure to emphasize, “*black people* brought it.” Dance signals that which moves and represents a modality of cultural mobility—hailing those who “brought” this movement and bring them (Afro-descendants) and it (the dancing that she loves) back. She combines this expression of joy for movement with the anthropological work of her boyfriend at the time, who, when studying about Afro-descendant communities on the coast of Chiapas came across Chanfaina. Chanfaina is a cow dish with black origins that contains much of the offal of the cow. Afro-descendant food of Chiapas resonates with Berenice’s ancestral memories: her favorite Chiapanecan dish is black.

Moments like this, for her as an anthropologist, are happenings that reside in heritage and belonging, not mere happenstance. Berenice signals these cultural connections as significant symbols and moments:

BERENICE: No, entonces era *súper* simbólico y además yo estudiando antropología que siempre llevábamos bien toda la parte *simbólica* y no sé qué, siempre te clavabas en

esas cosas. [Daniel se ríe]. Entonces para mí eso era *la* señal.

DANIEL: Wow.

BERENICE: Sin ser, sin sin sin [sic] saber realmente que- porque pasé muchos años sin saber la verdad, o sea, que yo fuera una o que me considerara una afrodescendiente. La verdad no.

DANIEL: Yea.

BERENICE: Sin embargo, tenía este acercamiento, no. O sea, lo he tenido desde hace *muchísimos* años. La música, el baile, eh, muchas cosas. El arte, personajes, eh, tanto masculinos como femeninos.

DANIEL: Sí.

BERENICE: Que me *significaron*, no.

BERENICE: No, so it was super symbolic and on top of that, I was studying anthropology and were are always taking everything to the *symbolic* side of things and who knows what else and you always get stuck on these things. [Daniel laughs] So this for me was *the* signal.

DANIEL: Wow.

BERENICE: Without being, without without without [sic] knowing really what- why I spent so many years without knowing the truth, I mean, that I was one or that I considered myself to be an Afro-descendant. The truth is no.

DANIEL: Yea.

BERENICE: Nevertheless, I had this closeness, no. I mean, I have had it since *many* years ago. The music, dance, um, many things. Art, people, um, as much masculine people as feminine people.

DANIEL: Yes.

BERENICE: They signified me. (Vera, 2015)

For Berenice, the fact that her favorite dish in Chiapas was of Afro-descendant origin from black communities on the coast was “*the* signal.” Given Berenice’s very recent investigations and discoveries, it is clear that Berenice had not yet made the full circle connection (this would have been over seventeen years ago). Stitching together the *symbols*, as she calls them, and clues that have led to this day, Berenice can put an emotion to this joy. She poetically renders the moment that she knew, performing a temporality of clear hindsight as she brings many pieces together.

Berenice acknowledges a level of “closeness” she has felt with food and dance practices from particular Afro-descendant cultures. “The music, dance, um, many things. Art, people, um, as much masculine people as feminine people.” Art and people of Afro-descendant origin are added to the mix as symbol-makers along her journey of understanding. Berenice punctuates this feeling with a powerful remark, “*me significaron*.” If we treat this reflexive verb as a cognate and translate accordingly, it means, “they signified me.” Or, if we broaden the definition to its cultural-linguistic implications and usages, it means, “they imbued me with meaning.” Both ways, signification is the bestowal of meaning through cultural scripts. Here, as named by Berenice, signs and symbols do the work of signifying.

Berenice is hailed into her own performance of blackness through signs and symbols – cultural practices and other humans—garnering meaning for her far outside of lack. Returning to Louise Gates (1983), we can recall the signifyin’ practices in black vernacular he claims and posit what such practices do for diasporic black subjects who have to search for signification and significance in signs and symbols not indigenous to their everyday cultural environments. Louis Gates is calling on a “black tradition” and simultaneously also signaling diasporic reach, calling upon various trickster figures (what he calls the “Signifying Monkey”) in Yoruba mythology, and their uptakes in Brazilian Candomblé, Haitian voodoo,

Santería in Cuba, and other national-spiritual practices, to understand the beginnings of signifyin' practices (1983, p. 687). Across this diasporic reach, Louis Gates (1983) asserts that each of these traditions, "speak eloquently of the unbroken arc of metaphysical presuppositions and patterns of figuration shared through space and time among black cultures in West Africa, South America, the Caribbean, and the United States" (p. 687).

While it is crucial to note that México is not included in the black geographies named here, it just as important to consider when the essay was written and the reality that México is still just *barely* being given the place it deserves as part of black spatializing practices and the diaspora.

Black metaphysical presuppositions, based in ontology, are grounded in signifying practices. It seems the "being" of blackness is based in signification. Berenice is able to *perform* her way into a full ontology that is not premised on *mestizo* whiteness and therefore all that she is not by finding her signification in powerful cultural and racial signifiers. When Berenice says, "me significaron," she is driving home that they (the signs and symbols she named) gave her the permission to unleash the trickster within herself to use the presence of symbols in her life to perform her blackness. Berenice is a trickster, playing with contradictions and contingencies to change up the material-cosmic order of blackness where it cannot be named or seen. Like the Yoruba god Èsù, Berenice's signification practices are indirectly guiding by the power she takes to resituate and reappropriate signs and symbols before her (Louis Gates, 1983, p. 687). While Louis Gates (1983) is invested in literary and discursive signifying practices, here I extend practices of signifying out to relational and interactive moments and events. By encountering certain signs and symbols—all subjects of relation and exchange—Berenice signifies her blackness, calling it out of her and into her full view. This is the nature of trickster work as it has worked through her and as she has worked through it.

In another telling narration, Berenice anticipates future events of signification, dancing along with all that she continues to reveal as she comes into the fullness of her self. She now literally expands her physical self as she shares—growing more audacious with each image as she envisions future reckonings and possibilities:

BERENICE: Pero en general, mi sueño, o sea, yo y eso también lo dije desde hace muchísimo tiempo desde que era muy niña, o sea, *no me puedo morir* sin en esta vida sin ir a África.

DANIEL: Hmm.

BERENICE: Sí, mira *no* puedo. O sea, no *no voy a permitirlo*.

DANIEL: Hm. Mm hm mm hm.

BERENICE: O sea, *tengo* que ir.

DANIEL: Hm mm hm.

BERENICE: No, o sea siento que si *piso* el continente ya eso me va a significar *algo*, no.

BERENICE: But in general, my dream, I mean, I and this is also what I said a very long time ago since I was a really small girl, I mean, *I cannot die* without going to Africa in this lifetime.

DANIEL: Hmm.

BERENICE: Yes, look *I cannot*. I mean, no I am *not going to allow it*.

DANIEL: Hm. Mm hm mm hm.

BERENICE: I mean, I *have* to go.

DANIEL: Hm mm hm.

BERENICE: No, I mean, I feel that if I *step* on the continent, this is already going to mean *something* for me, no. (Vera, 2015)

“*I cannot die* without going to Africa in this lifetime [...] I am *not going to allow it*” carries levels of adamancy and resolve that are boundless. Berenice is sure that in her lifetime, she must *at least* allow one foot to touch somewhere in the continent. She is sure that this will “mean *something*” for her as she continues to engage with the possibility of being hailed by particular signs and all of the sensations and feeling these signs bring. It is an embodied encounter with her existence. Berenice appears to be operating with a logic of signs that brings her fully into her diasporic present. She is carving out future possibilities of signifiers by digging into a much deeper past. Like many African American’s journeys for roots, Berenice wants to feel a cradle of home beyond the immediacy that was always fed to her. What this will signify for her is what is at stake. The future possibility of its realization is out in her horizon. A return to Africa, the ultimate symbol of lost descendancy and longing, is a location of hope for Berenice. It is an existential *need* prior to death.

The intentionality behind Berenice’s increasing horizon of potential signifiers is a performance of agency. It seems to draw Berenice further and further away from the national identity that has never recognized her existence. I ask her, taking in this robust and exhaustive performance, how her relationship to México and the question of “Mexicanness” has shifted over time:

DANIEL: Sí. sí. ¿Y en tu propia identidad como vives como la cuestión de ser mexicana con ser afrodescendiente?

BERENICE: Lo que pasa que al nivel de identidad es curioso porque yo creo que desde hace muchísimos años, yo dejé de sentirme como mexicana, no.

DANIEL: Hmm hmm.

DANIEL: Yes, yes. And in your own identity, how do you live the question of being Mexican with that of being Afro-descendant?

BERENICE: What happens is that at the level of identity it is strange because I think that since a long time ago, I stopped feeling Mexican, no.

DANIEL: Hmm hmm. (Vera, 2015)

Berenice, in a soft and confident tone, assures me that she stopped feeling Mexican a long time ago. Chiapas, the southern border and forgotten child of México, coupled with the journey she has taken in coming into her Afro-descendancy in the last two years, do not make for an easy identification or feelings of belonging. This bifurcated liminality opens a propitious crack for re-existing. “[...]since a long time ago, I stopped *feeling* Mexican” posits an affective distancing from a “being” of Mexicanness, if you will. Mexicanness’s claims of national identity are so often conflated as racial that Berenice must distance herself from this identity to exist—guaranteed to be lifelong work.

On Silences & Performativity

Signs and signifying practices mark Berenice’s past and future, from the “negrita” to the day she sets foot on the continent of Africa and beyond. She has transformed passive racializing forces of the epidermal schema and come into an alternate ontology of blackness as she performs her story. In wrestling herself away from the violences of non-belonging, she uses symbols to perform her way into existence as a black woman in México. Her process, as I have witnessed in Berenice, is far from public. It is assertive, yet quiet. It involves a small family collectivity of work, and yet is intimate. Berenice tells a story like few I have known. It is a story written in kitchens over *quekas* and beer. It is a story that writes her melanin out of the complex of epidermalization and into a fullness of being beyond the bounds of corporeal exoticization and objectification.

In this final moment of dialogue with Berenice and her oral history, I listen for what loud voices in a room predicated on competition might wash out. Silence, in this sense, is a decolonial gesture that works with sensibilities that may appear oppositional. I am referring

to a decolonial performativity of silence. I can hear the resonances and reverberations of silence as the loudest markers of presence and voice. We must learn to hear that which is “not” and decolonize that which is most audible. We must expand our capacities for auditory perception through embodied listening. The failure to listen is the underbelly of “hearing” as a passive exercise. I insist, again, on listening as one of *the* most important components of dialogue, following indigenous *cosmoaudiciones* as our markers and guides. In this vein and mode, the final dialogical moments with Berenice sit with me as some of the loudest silent gestures I have ever heard.

Berenice affirms that all that she has entered into and opened up is not over but always in movement. I honor her process as an ongoing endeavor of meaning-finding and making. I sit and listen in reverence to all that has and continues to guide her:

BERENICE: Entonces, claro, sigue siendo un proceso, no. Y, pero es un proceso necesario. Entonces también lo disfruto, no. As veces pesa, pero la mayor parte de las veces, lo disfruto.

DANIEL: ¿Y esa fue parte porque mencionaste que iniciaste terapia, no?

BERENICE: ¡Sí!

DANIEL: ¿Y, este fue como algo que tu buscaste...?

BERENICE: Sí.

BERENICE: So, of course this is still a process, no. And, but it is a necessary process. Sometimes it weighs on me, but the majority of the time, I enjoy it.

DANIEL: And this was part of why you initiated therapy, no?

BERENICE: Yes!

DANIEL: And this was something that you looked for?

BERENICE: Yes. (Vera, 2015)

Turning inward, one element of loud silences is what she calls a “necessary process.” I wish to signal Berenice’s deeply personal mode of discovery, affirmation, and healing, as one avenue of intimacy offered through performative silence. I do not wish to get caught up in the therapeutic process as a source of emphasis. Berenice decolonizes her zone of non-being in coming back to herself, not by screaming but by stillness in flight. She bears witness to her un-becoming in stillness and intimacy of quiet relations. She can bear witness to her own process and heal the many years of negation.

It was during the process of introspection that Berenice began to heal from the personal and systemic violences of racialization and erasure she endured (and will continue to endure). Juxtaposing emotions coexist in her body in this process.

DANIEL: Yea, yea. ¿Y esto inició como el mismo momento en la búsqueda de la historia o fue como...?

BERENICE: Sí, porque yo no no [sic] había sido consciente, no.

DANIEL: Wow.

BERENICE: Pero la verdad yo dije sí porque, o sea, que mi tía me contactara fue *un golpe*, no *Muy* positivo pero emocionalmente *devastador*.

DANIEL: Yea, yea. And this started like at the same moment that you started the search for your history or was it like...?

BERENICE: Yes, because I had not not [sic] been conscious, no.

DANIEL: Wow.

BERENICE: But the truth is, I said, because, I mean, that my Aunt contacted me was a *blow*, no. *Very* positive, but emotionally *devastating*. (Vera, 2015)

Berenice confirms that questioning the effects of racialization on her body-heart-mind coincided with the initiation of the genealogical excavation. In a significant turn of affect,

Berenice shares that at the point of contact with her aunt it was, “*Very* positive, but emotionally *devastating*.” Berenice was devastated for not having known she could exist within a history and a place in a way that honors the fullness of her descendancy and racial and ethnic heritage. At the same time, she is elated to come up close with this history, even if it took thirty-four years. It becomes more and more clear why this work has been so internal and private and not externalized as a form of street or community activism, for example. Berenice’s internalization of this journey is another form of activism and just as significant.

Berenice’s desire for belonging created a cloud made of wishes unfulfilled. Her desire eventually became urgency and guidance towards-resistance, wrought in struggle, and brought forth in the breakthrough of illumination. Ironically, blackness as the absorption of light is her beacon. Feeling precedes vision and silence becomes a form of speaking. An affective panorama of such juxtapositions guides the performativity of silence in Berenice’s introspection:

BERENICE: O sea, vas por la vida haciendo cosas que tú crees que no necesariamente obedecen a a [sic] algo, pero en este caso, en este caso particular, claro que obedecía, no, o obedecía esta necesidad que he tenido de toda la vida de pertenencia, no.

DANIEL: Wow. Sí, sí.

BERENICE: De saberme de un...o sea *más allá* del lugar, no. De saberme parte de una historia.

BERENICE: I mean, you go about life doing things that you believe that don’t necessarily obey with with [sic] anything but in this case, in this particular case, of course it obeyed or it didn’t obey with this necessity that I have still of belong, no.

DANIEL: Wow. Yes, yes.

BERENICE: Of knowing I am from a- I mean, *beyond* a place, no. Of knowing that I

am part of a history. (Vera, 2015)

She explains how you go about life “doing things that you don’t believe necessarily obey.”

Berenice can conclude, in the case of what she has found, that “of course” all that she sought after obeyed what she was looking for: belonging. She is less concerned with just any type of belonging; rather, Berenice says she is investing in “knowing that I am part of a history.” Her history is one of dispersal, diaspora, displacement, the zone of non-being, and

detritorialization, even within her own body. Within the silences of remembering, Berenice performs a corporeality that speaks its own truth and writes its own grammar of resistance.

One of her hiccups serves as a point of clarification: “Of knowing I am from a- I mean, *beyond* a place.” Belonging is an affirmation of being from *beyond* a place—this place.

Berenice’s body explodes: she performs *far outside* the bounds of territory and borders, building new pieces and integrating old ones.

Silences for Berenice repeatedly bear the burden of dialectical tensions that sustain affirmation and denial of existence. Silence allows her to sit with these dialectics and soothe their disturbances, finding pathways for un-becoming. Afro-descendancy brings up an entirely new question or set of questions. These two years have been intensive revisions of Berenice’s former ideas of personhood. In this performance and through the re-staging of the past two years, I notice many shifts and resituate my provocations. I ask her about Afro-descendancy again *now*, taking into account the evolutions of both external and internal life worlds and how she has come to think of it.

DANIEL: ¿Qué significa o que ha llegado a significar la afrodescendencia para tí...como tanto desde adentro como desde afuera...desde la diferencia de otra gente viviendo, como lo defines, como lo piensas?

BERENICE: [...] Es como, como dos sentimientos encontrados, sabes. Porque por un lado es como, la parte de decir “*sí* me reconozco, *sí* me veo, *sí* me siento, *sí* me siento

parte de..." y al otro- y por el otro lado, como es un momento en que estoy descubriendo muchas cosas. También siento que pudiera verlo como más a distancia y decir, "Wow, tengo la posibilidad de ir caminando lentamente y como haciendo el disfrute de acercarme a esta parte de mi identidad tan importante hacer ese camino más largo como para gozarlo más detenidamente."

DANIEL: What does it mean or what has being Afro-descendant come to mean for you...like as much from the inside as from the outside...from the differences of other people living it, how do you define it, how do you think of it?

BERENICE: [...] It's like, like two conflicting feelings, you know. Because on the one hand it's like the part of saying, "Yes I recognize myself, yes I see myself, yes I feel myself, yes I feel part of..." and on the other- and on the other side, like it is a moment in which I am discovering a lot of things. I could also see it like more at a distance and say, "Wow, I have the possibility to go walking slowly and like creating the enjoyment of coming close to this part of my identity and making it so important that I need to make this journey longer to enjoy it thoroughly." (Vera, 2015)

Berenice harnesses the life force of performative silence and temporal prolongation. I refer to "silence" as breath and stillness. Berenice recognizes, sees, and feels herself as a part of something now—she is deeply committed to an internal process. However, her agency lies in "walking slowly" and making sure she is moving slowly enough "to make this journey longer and to enjoy it thoroughly." There is lusciousness in her words and her desires. She says "wow" at the possibility of this elongated temporality and recognizes the power of drawing out all that she is feeling so that she has time to register it in her body and mind. The deeply political commitment of Berenice's path is oppositional to most of the life forces of the modern world. It slows down a temporality by knowing, feeling, sensing, and walking with

full awareness of all that has come before.

Berenice is always moving in this intensely intimate process, even when the movement is so slight you have to feel its vibration to recognize its motion. She is undergoing an eternal process of un-becoming that does not exist in linearity but in a matrix of webs and nodes of connective tissue. Berenice, exiled from her body, came back to or perhaps performed *into* herself. This is a process without finality. In a final comparison, Berenice returns to the gravitas of her story and her search:

BERENICE: O sea, yo tengo una amiga que vivió exiliada y no mames, cuando hablamos de eso, h́jole o sea empatizamos muchísimo porque la puedo entender ella y me puede entender.

DANIEL: Claro.

BERENICE: O sea, aunque yo haya nacido en México, he vivido en México toda mi vida y ella no, hay algo que nos une.

DANIEL: Sí.

BERENICE: Porque finalmente una una [sic] parte de nuestra identidad estaba perdida.

DANIEL: Claro.

BERENICE: No, entonces en su momento, considerarme *parte de* este grupo, no, este *montón* de gente latina me significó mucho.

BERENICE: I mean, I have a friend that lived exiled and no way, when we speak about this, geez, I mean, we empathize with each other so much because I can understand her and she can understand me.

DANIEL: Of course.

BERENICE: I mean, even though I was born in México and I have lived in México my whole life and she hasn't, there's something that unites us.

DANIEL: Yes.

BERENICE: Because at the end a a [sic] part of our identity is always lost.

DANIEL: Of course.

BERENICE: No, so at the time, to consider myself *part of* this group, no, this *tremendous amount* of Latinx people gave me a lot of meaning. (Vera, 2015)

Exiled by the sociogenic principle and its omnipresent and insidious violences, Berenice felt as good as an exiled person in her own country. By embracing the intimacy and quiet longevity of this path of un-becoming, Berenice comes into her fullness of descendancy as a black woman in San Cristóbal through her awareness of and connection to a larger Afro-diaspora of Latinx people and by opening herself to her own processes and signification practices. Performativities of silence and the intimate witnesses of perpetual process, bring the entirety of ancestry, race, family, genealogy, and embodiment together in ongoing re-existence. By continuing to excavate and remain curious and provoked by the symbols that are continually uncovered, Berenice comes into consciousness as a black subject in all that she is and will continue to un/become.

Berenice performs against loss, erasure, racism, and the violence of not having discourse or sources from which to name and to live her experience. This requires, for Berenice, intimate and silent processing with a select number of family members and friends. It is a temporally distended process that allows her to deeply *gozar*, or enjoy, the trajectory. It is my sense that oral history's role in Berenice's process is an opportunity for dialogical relation; one in which Berenice gets to story and re-perform, even *order* the tale of accounts that have led her to her lived experience and thought process today.

The fullness of Berenice's ontological relation to the world is one of signs, symbols, and performativities of silence. She has wrestled herself out of the sociogenic principle and the epidermal schema's death holds and yet, this wrestling will require lifelong processing

and processes. Berenice has become a being-in-relation to blackness, not a lack of *mestizaje*'s whiteness. She centers, for the first time, blackness in her life and lives powerfully and openly as a black woman in San Cristóbal de las Casas.

Berenice smiles and breathes deeply, resolved in both the joy and the pain of how long it has taken her to arrive at this place and the ongoing work it will require as she integrates its many forces into her lived experience. I look at her and feel my entire body smile in awe and with deep respect. I tap in to her energy and feel grounded by its power. Berenice performs a resolution and I gather a profound sense of peace from her presence. We continue to sip on our teas and hum and resonate with all that she has shared. Berenice says that as she continues to learn more information, she will share it with me. We embrace and part ways, knowing we have entered into further realms of conversation and complicity that will outlast this encounter.

CHAPTER FIVE

CONCLUSION

TOWARDS

Contentions of the Dissertation

Over the course of this dissertation, I endeavored to share three intimate portraits of un-becoming black in San Cristóbal de las Casas, Chiapas, México. I focused the work on oral history performances from the perspective of diaspora-oriented Afro-descendancy and blackness. Women/*mujeres* from San Cristóbal de las Casas, Chiapas, México—Maritea, Jalila, and Berenice—perform *into* their subjectivity from many axes of feminist and black diasporic thinking. I arrived at the scope of three interviews in order to think in intensive detail with a few women who are charting the difficulties of finding *referentes* and community for performing Afro-descendancy and blackness as diasporic subjects in Chiapas. The stakes in these conversations include the limits of intercultural negotiations and possibilities for maintaining militant critical reflexivity and relationality in order to be in order to be speaking *with* and never speaking *for* the diasporic subjects in this project. I proposed and worked from critical/performance ethnography and oral history performance as decolonial methodologies that allowed me to walk and be with these stories in a way that remains ethically accountable to my communities and *compañeras*. I asked how decolonial prerogatives were directing my methodological, epistemological, theoretical, and interpersonal relations. My role has been that of co-performative witness in the production of knowledge from those who have lived these experiences.

The project was not meant to be a representative of Maritea, Jalila, or Berenice as human beings or an exhaustive qualitative study, but rather a generative thought experiment and intimate dialogue, thinking *towards* possibilities for better understanding the nuances and potentials of Afro-descendancy and blackness as diasporic relationality in the transnational city of San Cristóbal de las Casas. Possibilities for honoring the nuances of Afro-descendancy and blackness become available when we move beyond the often too-tightly circumscribed historical narratives that rely on linear trajectories and accounts of relatively homogenous communities as the tell-tale realities of Afro-descendancy in México.

Meditating with the words, images, and stories of Maritea, Jalila, and Berenice, I invite us to continue to ruminate with all they have opened up in the pedagogies of their orality. I recall Maritea standing on stage, her guttural singing voice emitting “Guro/Kanguroooo” as Río coos along in the space between the carpet and the stage beneath her – generations colliding across her skin. I remember the images that unfolded before me as Jalila painted the scene of her second child’s birth—how she had her blackness handed to her in the form of warm mushy being. I remember the cackles that played between me and Berenice when she emphasized the raisin-like quality of her aunt’s sister as she excavates her genealogy. Maritea, Jalila, and Berenice continue to teach us so much, including the value of listening deeply and with our whole beings.

In Chapter Two, I thought with Maritea’s oral history performance and with her one-woman performance, “Me Dan Envidia Los Canguros” to consider how lines of ancestry weave through her life-work and body memories as she diasporically spiders and ontologically gathers parts of herself. Maritea, as a child of a particular moment in San Cristóbal’s history that ushered in a transnational community, was brought up under conditions that led her to un/become a local foreigner. As a Norwegian-Cameroonian who has lived the majority of her life in México moving between Chiapas and summers in

Norway, she has learned to craft her own sense of black geography through the spatializing practices that have constituted the terms of her diasporic path. Maritea stories the operations of gendered racism in her life and finds animative resistances by naming that which she would not acquiesce within her African family. She also found resistances to practices of policing that she has encountered during travel between and within Norway and México. It is my contention that Maritea gained and continues to register critical intercultural belonging by enacting spatializing practices that account for the breadth of her histories and locations through story and performance.

Reading her staged performance with her oral history performance, I argue that *intangible relational poetics* cross time and space, with people seen and unseen who continue to guide Maritea's walk, including her late mother Gitte, as Maritea weaves intergenerational migratory flow and homes. In her performance and the embodied storying of these poetics, Maritea's full erotic power erupts forth out of her diaphragm and flesh when she converses with her ancestral memories and lineages onstage, blurring easy divisions between art and life and breaking linear temporalities of knowing self and history. By performing into and from the erotic fullness of herself—beyond the confines of current sub-genres and communities of blackness in México—Maritea can ask no less of herself that to stand in the fullness of her erotic power. Maritea cradles her existence in a fabricated kangaroo sweater and nurtures the pouch of her ongoing diasporic journey.

In Chapter Three, I thought with Jalila Gómez's oral history performance to imagine how her story cites for her and might suggest for us a cognitive dissonance specific to México: a Mexican double consciousness. I wondered how Jalila, like many Afro-Mexicans and Afro-Chiapanececs, was taught to look at herself through the eyes of whiteness (*mestizaje*), always feeling her lack, even if not named or brought to consciousness. Double consciousness, then, is a process that begins when Afro-descendants move out of the denial

of their ancestry and can recognize their ever-doubleness as a relation to racial hegemony and hierarchies in México. As a woman originally from coast of Chiapas who has lived the majority of her life now in San Cristóbal, Jalila parsed lines of descendancy particular to her family history.

First, through a series of deductions and questions from her husband, Jalila came to reconcile with herself as Zoque, in what was initially publicly registered as an appropriation of indigeneity. Jalila and her husband had been sympathizers of the EZLN, but when suddenly indigeneity was no longer part of a reification of “us” versus “them” in her life and activism, her relationship to processes of racialization and her own racisms and prejudices changed significantly, even as she was accused of posing as indigenous. Then, as Jalila began to trace how her family members named themselves, she was able to recall that her grandmother called herself Zoque and that her father was *el negrito*. In a shift of focus, Jalila was able to piece together moments in her life that were revealing her lineages and to begin to perform them, first through named exoticization and “harmful admiration,” and then through integration and acceptance.

At a moment of what I call performative interpellation, Jalila had her blackness handed to her in the form of the birth of her second child. Corporeally, she was hailed into her Afro-descendancy. From this moment, on, she could no longer deny her blackness and could no longer be what she calls a “black woman inside the closet.” Jalila performatively enacts an alternate ontology for herself. Around the same moments in her life, Afro feminism coming from Abya Yala and processes of resignification allowed Jalila to name her blackness and to find new grammars of belonging, regardless of who does and does not publicly recognize her. Through reorganizing the signs of her life, enabling new practices of signification, through speculation and then familial storying, Jalila has begun to craft an ongoing and mobile process for her ongoing un-becoming.

In Chapter Four, thinking with the intricate oral history performance of Berenice Aguilar Vera, I argue that it was only once Berenice could understand the workings of the sociogenic principle in her childhood and adulthood that she could actively choose to delink from them—when she understood the historical, social, and cultural structures that composed her sense of blackness as lack, she could begin to perform her way out of their imprisonment. Berenice, an Afro-Mexican trained anthropologist, has begun a process of deep genealogical excavation and investigation, instigated by a communication with one of her aunts—the sister of her father. Through intimate archival and storying processes with her aunt and a select number of close family members, over the last two years, Berenice has also begun a journey of working through the racism she internalized and had modeled to her for so long.

I argue that Berenice’s storying work is a decolonial performativity of silence where she centers stillness, the intimacy of process and family connections, and extended temporalities for understanding and being with longing and belonging. Berenice imbues her life story and black subjectivity with meaning by seeking out and performing *referentes* beyond herself and into transnational historical legacies and cultural practices. The more she learns, the fewer borders she can draw around her blackness and the more diasporic her subjectivity becomes. Berenice embodies a trickster figure, turning predeterminate signs into playful iterations of black performance. She practices forms of signifying that allow her to show up fully to herself. Exploding beyond all previously defined identity spaces, Berenice finds ontological fullness in silence and in relation.

As each of my *compañeras*, in their quiet and intimate un-becomings, performed her way into subjective being, each resisted foundational or essentialist ontologies that fail to account for the colonality of Being. Rather, they perform into alternate ontologies by entering into an ongoing process of decolonizing their relationships to gendered racializing discourses and histories as they have played out in their lives. My *compañeras*’ ontologies

are always destabilized by the animative potentials of performances of blackness; this is where the performative potential of their ontologies lie. They each have to strive powerfully against the workings of coloniality as black women and, over time and space, learn to craft performative resistances and re-existences for themselves in relation to all that holds them, and all that they hold-dear. They each teach us about new possibilities for un-becoming diasporic subjects through simultaneous reintegration of and disarticulation from parts of their histories. In performative eroticism, they bring their stories to bear on the erasures of México's historical coloniality and on contemporary negotiations that deny fullness of diaspora. Maritea, Jalila, and Berenice are protagonists of their own lives. I honor their intensely political performances and un-becomings.

My aim is not to create generalizable explanations about blackness or Afro-descendancy in México, to characterize Maritea, Jalila, or Berenice as representative of Afro-descendancy in Chiapas or in México, or to provide an exhaustive reading of their emerging performances. Containment would be the epistemological enemy of this work. Rather than attempt to claim this as a conclusive work that could account for all types of black subjectivity existent in San Cristóbal, much less México, I wish to open a conversation and to now ask if the lives and words of Maritea, Jalila, and Berenice might suggest sonic resonance with other diasporic subjectivities. I wish to continue to ask whether the gap I found—a conversation not happening about missing *referentes* for black diasporic subjects—might signal that there are more people in Chiapas and in México whose understandings of their blackness also require diasporic attention to detail and performative uncoverings. If each of my *compañeras*' subjectivities have been made and crafted in resistance to their perpetual deterritorialization, their *reterritorialization* exists in diasporic relation and performative un-becoming. I wonder what other diasporic subjects would feel resonance with these stories and experiences on other journeys of un-becoming.

Synthesizing the Path

Prior to honing my project, I had contemplated working in coastal communities in Oaxaca and in Chiapas to be with Afro-Mexican people. A series of events—a vacation to Chacahua, Oaxaca, sitting with the literature on Afro-Mexicanness and Afro-descendancy in México and in Chiapas, a course on Decolonizing Methodologies, and my encounter with a black diasporic community member in San Cristóbal—led me to shift my project site to San Cristóbal de las Casas. Once I discovered the gap to which I wanted to attend and from where my intellectual-activist contribution would arise, I could name my area of investment: black diasporic people and subjectivities in non-homogenous urban centers as an important and necessary component of the plurality of Afro-Mexican and Afro-descendant histories. I understood that as a *nepantlera* insider/outsider and bridge builder between worlds, my positionality as a trans* African American performance artist, provided me with a particular capacity to enter into relation with and to listen to diasporic subjects by thinking across, beyond, and through boundaries of prior knowledge.

By thinking with the oral history performances of *mujeres afrodescendientes* in San Cristóbal de las Casas, Chiapas, México I have discovered numerous methodological theoretical, epistemological, performative and interpersonal openings. I offer these provocations towards the meaningfulness of these performance turns and breaks.

Thinking with blackness from México requires that we insist both on the non-uniqueness of blackness in México and on the situatedness of Afro-descendancy that puts discursive constraints on and enables the emergence of blackness. In order to do so, we need to take the fullness of the diaspora into account in all of its performative possibilities. As Maritea, Jalila, and Berenice repeatedly made clear, dominant narratives of Nation State tend to eclipse black geographies. Linear historiographies of black lives and histories reinforce

internalized and externalized racializing logics of *mestizaje* displacing diasporic black people even as they try to locate themselves within Mexicanness.

Diasporic Afro-descendancy, as I have witnessed it in San Cristóbal de las Casas so far, is about performing blackness. Performing blackness entails sewing together encounters with histories and *referentes*, through processes of reconciliation. These performances, further enabled and/or re-storied by oral history performance, allow in turn for resignificatory practices of black subjectivity. Based on my experience with Maritea, Jalila, and Berenice, Resignification is site of agency and subjectivity that defines the lifelong process of un-becoming.

Maritea, Jalila, and Berenice crafted black diasporic belongings through the materialization of subjectivities-in-relation, suggesting that the performance of black diaspora and black geographies may allow us to imagine and forge relationality beyond that which can be immediately seen. Black diaspora, through and with oral history performances, relies on sensory perceptions beyond visuality and visibility. When listened to through their diasporic implications, the un-becomings performed or re-performed in oral history performances are embedded in extensive webs of relationality that unfurl beyond immediate space, time, and people.

Centering black women's voices means decentering normalizing hegemonic constructions of womanhood/femininity/female sexuality; this is the value of decolonial feminist scholarship and work. By centering black women's voices, I felt called to and responsible for contending with a labyrinth of intricacies that made encasing "woman" as a biological marker of given identity that cohered around a shared ontology both essentialist and violent. Co-performing race further decentered any strict idea of "woman," instead, locating ourselves in a web of historical, social, political, and cultural contingencies and possibilities.

Lastly, community-accountable scholarship also means developing a listening practice nurtured by world views—*cosmovisiones* and *cosmoaudiciones*—of being-with that challenges listening as a passive reception. This is also a decolonial imperative. In this case, community-accountable scholarship meant learning to listen to and with the intricate details of stories from Afro-descendant women and asking what the pulse of each of their lives-in-performance teach us. I want to continue to insist on the pedagogical-political work of listening-with that favors, even requires, extended connection over time, in space—a duration performance of accompaniment.

Ruminations and Directions-in-Motion

Lingering and New Questions

Continuing the pedagogical-political work of deep listening, some questions that guided this study continue to persist, especially given emerging geographies of blackness in Chiapas. These questions have been somewhat attended to in this work, but they are questions that we need to continually ask, as political and historic situations are always in motion. These include: (1) What is the breadth of black performance possible for Afro-descendant subjects in San Cristóbal de las Casas? (2) What is it about San Cristóbal that might invite flows of black diaspora and migration that will require a more extensive conversation between indigeneity and blackness in Chiapas? (3) What kinds of community formations are possible among black diasporic subjects in San Cristóbal? (4) What is the potential or possible impact for oral history performance to speak across lives and histories, with what possible impact? (5) How will black diasporic claims and subjectivities continue to be troubled by claims to Mexicanness over black geographies? Such questions stake the ground for ongoing ethnographic, activist, performance, and relational work.

My encounters with Maritea, Jalila, and Berenice have also prompted new questions. These include: (1) What are the lifetimes of oral history performances such as these and how might they become part of a living repertoire and a vital archive of *referentes* (Taylor, 2003)? (2) Is it necessary or useful to identify diasporic blackness as a locus of life histories and cultural considerations distinct from that of Afro-Mexicans and Afro-Mexican scholars in coastal communities, even while remaining in conversation with them? (3) Can oral history become a means to get people to listen and to garner nuance and insight about such histories when most attention and time capacities do not invite such sitting-with? (4) How can we have an increasingly-robust conversation about blackness by putting lives and realities in México in conversation with black thinkers, activists, and artists from around the world? (5) What role might/will life-staged performance practice play in this work? (6) If, and in the likely scenario, my life requires me to live and work transnationally, how do I continue an ethic that includes nurturing collaborations of accountability and with-ness across borders, languages, privileges, and cultures? And then, (7) Where does this work go from here?

Directions for Further Performance-Activist-Research

Pressed by these persistent and new questions and new questions, I imagine a few directions for further research. I will continue to work from a *nepantlera* space and to engage conversation with more black diasporic women and LGBTQ subjects in México to further envision the expansiveness of diasporic implications in Chiapas. I think from my position as a black transfeminist performance artist and scholar, and the life I want to continue to curate and grow in conversation with my communities. In the ongoing process of grounding-in-motion that this study begins, I expect to nurture multi-year projects and relationships towards, creative, critical and co-constructed knowledge production.

As a transnational *nepantlera*, it is likely that I will situate myself between two homes of research and life that I have developed and chosen over the last five years in order to

maintain my existence and remain embedded in and accountable to my communities and desires: the United States South and the Mexican South. In the work that will continue, I feel a deep urgency to go deeper into my family's history in the U.S. South to further situate myself in my own blackness. I have been inspired by my *compañeras* to respond in kind—and to pursue my own histories as part of a larger agenda of Performance as Research praxis, writing, and process. As this doctoral process comes to a close, I realize more fully that I did not come to the U.S. South not only because the U.S. South was where I would find the people with whom I wanted to work, but also because of my own unsettled familial connection to this part of the country, which is now like another home. I hope that by doing more of my own investigative work I will enact the promise of Maritea, Jalila, and Berenice as models of embodied un-becoming and renew/deepen my own sense of diaspora, home, and longing. I welcome what feels like the beginning of extended temporalities and long-term commitments between these two spaces.

I expect this work will move in the direction of collectively-created writing and performance around black diasporic identities with my community in San Cristóbal. I would like to continue to work with oral history performance with *compañerxs* in San Cristóbal and to consider the possibility of expanding my study and to imagine writing together. I will continue to write and work across English and Spanish and imagine the concomitant, mutually nurturing processes of both expanding my research and writing collectively. My role in collective writing and making may shift to one that provides theoretical framings or draws possibilities for alliances and coalitions between black and other minority subjectivities through oral history performances.

Since my *compañeras* and others not mentioned here (some not yet interviewed) are all artists, cultural workers, activists, scholars, and journalists, I envision performance and/or performative responses to dialogue with one another's stories in gestures, installation, video,

sound, and/or intervention in San Cristóbal: another process of collective co-creation. Two moments of ongoing conversations and feedback loops in the last four months make this an immediate, exhilarating possibility: (1) Maritea has written and begun to perform three new pieces based on some of what the oral history work and conferences in San Cristóbal have resonated within her. In the last months, I have listened to her new texts and shared back what I hear, as she extends and shares what she intends with the work. She has since performed first iterations of these performance and video performance experiments in México City. (2) In December 2016 I was able to sit down with the woman I mention in the discussion of Maritea's interview, Medhin. Medhin has the closest diasporic lines to Maritea (she is Eritrean and Mexican, born and raised in México). In December, she was writing a grant in response to a call for Afro-descendant and indigenous women to make documentary work around their and other's life histories. A videographer and documentarian, Medhin wanted to discuss ways to frame the project description. After she mentioned not feeling aligned with the coastal narratives but identifying with group struggles for Afro-Mexican self-determination living in San Cristóbal with a father from the African continent, I suggested she might think about the performance of diaspora in her life. She pursued that direction and in March 2017, received the grant. Medhin is excited for us to sit back down in San Cristóbal in the summer of 2017 to continue our conversations about what this project now might look like now that it has the support it needs to come to fruition.

Our ongoing dialogues and the work being born out of them are two of many examples that continue to emerge with each passing month. It is a two-way street: as I ask more questions about my black identity, I also turn to my *compañeras* to think through processes and have them reflect back to me what they are hearing. I will continue to do so as webs begin to materialize in everyday, oral history, and devised performance. I am already imagining a live component of this document: staging these conversations in San Cristóbal

elaborated as co-witnesses to diaspora, home, belonging, and blackness in San Cristóbal. The performance could pull together together the intimacy and collaboration across cultural centers in San Cristóbal, many of which could come together to curate performances of these conversations that bring our lives-worlds and artistic discussions into a luscious pluriversal conversation.

In each of these possibilities for further research, collaboration, co-creation, co-witnessing, performance, activism, and scholarship come together and stay together. I also see this as my role—togetherness versus compartmentalization—in all I have been trained to do and all I have learned to do through experience, intentionality of paths, and sharing and being with generous interlocutors, friends, and collaborators. I will use the ground laid as a launch pad to dive into all that is to come.

Emergence and Intersections

Moving forward, one further community intersection will continue to guide ongoing work and dialogues. In my desire to work against many injustices in San Cristóbal, I have done a lot of organizing around feminism and transfeminism throughout and well beyond my field work time. I was motivated to make life more livable for women and LGBTQ people in Chiapas. I continue to meditate on the many intersections of blackness and trans*ness on social, historical, theoretical, cultural, linguistic, corporeal, and interpersonal layers, what this looks like in feminist work and organizing, and what this looks like moving forward. In a platform that I helped create, “Anti-Racist Transfeminism in Chiapas,” we were able to bring, in December 2016, a dear performer, activist and friend, Lia La Novia Sirena (Lia Garcia) from México City. Lia’s performance theorization, as a trans* woman, asks us to question if performance is always the right terminology. Lia calls her performance work, “affective encounters,” because of the nature of the shifts that happen with people who encounter her body in performance actions. Affective encounters are part of the work of transfeminism. I

want to momentarily consider what *affective encounters* might mean and/or do for oral history performances with black people seen through a trans* woman's lens.

Affective encounters are directly influenced and mutually constituted by *radical tenderness*. For Lia, as a very politically active trans* woman in México through her artistic practice, choosing to have the location of her affective encounters in the street, and requiring that strangers interact with her body (dancing, touching, smiling, carrying her, etc.) in some of the most dangerous neighborhoods and locations (the *Tepito* neighborhood of México City, México City subways, among other very public locations), is risky work. Lia does not shy away from the vulnerability of what her presence in public space means, knowing that—as she watched what happened with four trans women activists and friends in México City in 2016 – this could cost her, her life. She still chooses to use *affective encounters* to insist that her life matters and that people can be moved to change and to see differently by being affected.⁵⁰ She has staged XXY “Quinceañeras” in the one of the busiest subway systems in the world – in México City; she has been lowered down to swim in one of the most polluted lakes in the world in México City in a mermaid fin, accompanied by day laborers who she entrusts with her life; she has staged her Quinceañeras in male the roughest male prisons in the City and come out with loving images, embraces, letters, and ongoing communications with the men left on the inside. Lia chooses affect over division, and teaches me every day how to do this more.

I want to consider a current primary implication for further exploration inspired by and taking lessons from Lia's artistic practice: what might *affective encounters* of oral history mean? Moving from performance to *affective encounters* is not intended to shy away from

⁵⁰ Two of Lia's primary performance personae in the last six years, “La novia” (the girlfriend/bride) and “La sirena” (the mermaid) trope on hegemonic femininity to question the accusations that trans* women get of feeding into the stereotypes and hegemony that cis women have fought so many years to get away from. Lia uses tropes of femininity to transgress their form and invited affective encounters with a trans* woman's body and lived precarity as she tries to continue to live with dignity in a machista and heteropatriarchial colonial society.

the trail blazing trajectory of oral history performance work and all that it does; it is, rather, to center affect as oral histories perform across one another. What are the trans* implications across black oral history performances? By putting these two lines of inquiry into conversation, I want to suggest first that the combination of *radical tenderness* and *affective encounters* is an invitation to learn how to understand and to celebrate trans* identities in community and how this example might extend across black diasporic community formation. This is not merely a methodological application onto an unrelated struggle, but rather, one that requires that blackness and trans*ness converse and even *love, care for, and nurture* one another. How might forms of organizing and community-building invite dialogue and coalitions through *radical tenderness*, radical and generous acts of reception, *affective encounters*, and performative witnessing where everyone involved in the process *necessarily* leaves transformed? I will continue to pursue this question as I continue to strive for coalitions across and with difference, pluriversal subjectivities, and to find lines of intersection against common enemies of colonial-patriarchal-capitalist violences.

El Caracól

Rather than write a point of termination or severance, I want to offer an image in-motion. Recalling the lessons of the spider that have guided diasporic journeys, webbing, and inter-weavings, here I invite another animal guide to close with, that directs us further into non-linear motion and that resonates with San Cristóbal de las Casas and with Chiapas. The caracól—snail, seashell, conch, or cochlea—is emblematic of the organizing structure of the autonomous territories of Chiapas. It represents both the slow and steady progress that is always moving towards liberation and the spiral nature of the ebb and flows of life and history with which we have to reckon. Walking towards it, we enter into the spiral of the *caracól*, and release the stranglehold of any leashes—that might remain around our necks—pulling us uni-directionally. We have to harness the spirit guide of *caracóles* to move in

directions that allow us to come into relation with pluriversal belonging. In movement and in motion, we create our trails and circles and invite others with us along the way, gathering our strength from our collective performative resistance. On we walk, spiral, slide, and shuffle.

AFTERWORD

RESOLVING TO REMAIN INTIMATELY TENDER OR WHAT NO METHODOLOGY COURSE CAN TEACH YOU ABOUT THE FIELD AND CHOSEN HOMES

New Year's Eve, when 2016 turned to 2017, part of my chosen family circle decided to take an alternative route from classical celebrations of drinking and merriment: a *temazcal*. A *temazcal* is a Mesoamerican and Pre-Hispanic sweat lodge. It comes from the Mayan *Nahuatl* word *temāzcalli* or "house of heat." Its original purposes included (though were certainly not limited to): curing the sick, cleansing after battles or ceremonies, purification and post-natal practices, among others. It is still a frequent contemporary practice for Mayan descendants and for those who desire to experience the ritual. A *temazcal* usually lasts at least two hours and has a shaman or a guide. Twenty-eight stones are heated over a fire for the two hours prior to the initiation of the ceremony. Each stone is considered a grandmother and aligns with the twenty-eight days of the lunar and menstrual cycles.

Two hours into the heating process of the stones, the *temazcal* is ready for entrance: a circle of bamboo sticks creates the enclosure and a thick layer of blankets over the bamboo structure seals the *temazcal* tent. Before entering, we sit around the grandmother stones cradled in a pit in the ground just outside the *temazcal*. The spiritual leader and initiator of the center the *temazcal* is held at, Nahual-ha, has prepared readings of our *nahuales* for us before we enter into the *temazcal* so we can meditate on the wisdom our *nahuales* have for us. *Nahuales* are birth signs and represent human beings who can exist in spirit and animal form and whose medicine, according to Mayan calendar, serve as our spiritual guides. My *nahual*, *Ajmaq*—a presence I carry around my neck in the form of a necklace-glyph since

New Years 2017—is the the *nahual* of pardon and of moral forces who enter in relationship with the Spirit of the ancestors.

Our *temazcal* guide gives us each tobacco to offer to the fire—offerings to our elders. We say a silent prayer before throwing the tobacco on the fire and giving our intention to our *abuelas*. Then, one at a time we may now enter the *temazcal* as we wish. I enter nude, my body rife with fever and weakness. I am in the midst of a third round of antibiotics in three weeks. I am on day fifteen of seventeen. Three days prior, I had fallen into a relapse. I tested positive for typhoid and bacteria. Yet, under the full moon entering the *temazcal* to welcome the New Year, I feel blessed. My heart is heavy and I am exhausted by my illness and by all of the physical and emotional transformations in the last years. I feel the weight of it all hitting my body at once now that I am allowing in a new form of stillness. A part of me has collapsed. I surrender to my fragility and welcome its transformative power. I now have a chance to physically respond to all that the last years have meant in my body and community negotiations: there is no romanticizing I can possibly do anymore. The challenges have been vast and many. My body has taken over and I am full of dis-ease. I am seeking a new way of cleansing and of continuing onward. But first, a pause is necessary.

In the time I have lived in Chiapas, I have grown so accustomed to having salmonella, amoebas, bacteria, and typhoid—it is like getting a cold. The emotional sicknesses, circumstantial crises within and beyond this place, have been much harder to stomach than the intestinal ones and have made the intestinal ones harder to cure. One harsh reality of the area is the contamination of water and food sources, no matter how antibacterial and clean you are. Contaminations also effect those who were born and raised in Chiapas and supposedly have the defences to resist their strains. The bacteria grow stronger with each year, it seems. The systemic national and international injustices that have created this crisis cannot be ignored. I understand and accept this reality, even in its corporeal effects. My love

for this land is no less strong—only stronger. According to Mayan worldviews for living, the plants within a half a mile radius from your home (in a world untampered by pesticides and corporations) provide all the medicine you need to cure yourself. I trust the wisdom of this center just a five-minute walk from my home and welcome *cosmovisiones* of sacred healing as they surround me.

At the time of the *temazcal*, several rounds of the strongest antibiotics are not curing me. I have had to result to five days of intra-muscular injections in an attempt administer a stronger dose of antibiotics to my bloodstream. Day three, barely walking again, I enter the *temazcal*, asking that my ancestors stand with me. I rely on forces stronger than myself for wisdom and guidance. My body has something to teach me. I rest in the dark, huddled, sitting cross legged alongside friends and a handful of others who have joined the ceremony. There are four rounds of heat; seven *abuelas* enter each time, carried in with a shovel, and we greet them with *bienvenida abuela* or “welcome grandmother.” The temperature rises at the introduction of each new set of seven *abuelas*, every forty minutes or so. I brought a hand towel in with me to toss over my head and create a pocket for breathing when the heat feels too stifling—a bit of stolen air to assure my mitral valve prolapse will not be overcome by the temperature. I breathe deeply and lose all sense of who is around me. My eyes are closed in meditation with my skin. My focus shifts to my breath.

Sweat begins to pour down my body and I rub the water secretions over my skin. I do not notice the waterfalls rushing out of my pours until I sit in a puddle of my own liquid. The sweat pours out endlessly, beginning from minute fifteen. I sweat out the pain of the community ruptures—my entire being is crying. I sweat out the misconceptions that framed my initial walk in 2013. I wish even minority struggles could agree with one another, recognizing our common enemy, but we *often* do not. I sweat out the mourning of all the mothers, fathers, and other kin that I have accompanied over the years that have lost their

family members to feminicide. Sitting on this land, I am able to feel their death and the pain. I sweat out the performative excesses of my un-becoming trans* in a painfully anti-trans* world. I sweat out the tears of my ancestors as they cry through me. I sweat out disappointment. I sweat out fear of death that this place taught me to lose by embracing the death around us through food and dance. I sweat out friendship lost when capitalist activism takes over. I sweat out body, time, and kinship transitions—our only guarantee. I sweat out the imminent end of this project and my body cries at this transformation, even though I know no energy will not be gained or lost. A smile returns to my face and body, through the downpour.

Disembodiment has simply *not been an option*. I have known pain, fever, sadness, and dignified rage like never before. They have been some of my greatest teachers. I welcome their arrivals. Along this path, my thinking is always a process of feeling and my feeling is always a process of thinking in-relation. I am nothing without my ancestors and communities, even as they sometimes literally tear my body down, leaving me to build myself back up again with the persistence of those who remain in relation. These lessons will carry on with me as I begin to contemplate the other iterations and translations of this work and my ongoing involvement in life in San Cristóbal and wherever else the path may lead.

Holding my *nahual*—*Ajmaq*—in my right hand with my left hand over my abdomen, I ground myself into the earth of San Cristóbal de las Casas, Chiapas, México. My creative center is alive and well and my fever has broken. I feel a deep vibrational resonance that I have never felt anywhere else quite this strongly. I am fed and nurtured by this land. I am at the very beginning of various projects that will constitute my life work. Of greatest value in my life are decolonial pedagogical-political practices, performance, and human relationships. In resolving to remain intimately tender, I continue to return to oral history as another form of life practice, engaging the power and nature of the fullness of dialogue and ethical reception

to transform our existences. I give one last tobacco offering to the lingering fire of the pit of the *abuelas* after drying and re-clothing myself. With respect, I close this circle and return to a state of stillness to continue to integrate the lessons of this journey. Ashé.

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