The following individuals certify that they have read, and recommend to the Faculty of Graduate and Postdoctoral Studies for acceptance, a thesis entitled:

After the Altepétl: Indigenous struggle and the colonial origins of the modern state in sixteenth century Central Mexico

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Abstract

This thesis examines the contested character of early colonial domination in central Mexico, more specifically, the Valley of Mexico or Anahuac. Informed by critical Marxist and postcolonial state theory, critical race theories, and Nahua epistemology and historiography, I examine the traces left behind by Indigenous politicians, elders, and community leaders by looking at testaments and primordial titles to reconstruct their actions and some of their policies vis-à-vis colonial encroachment. From this perspective, I interrogate approaches to the modern state and colonialism that exclude Indigenous epistemologies and fail to consider racial formations as a crucial aspect of the modern constitution of power relations. I conclude by assessing the impact that this approach to the modern state can have in the understanding of hemispheric and global processes of state formation and the centrality of Indigenous and ‘subaltern’ geographies as embodied, relational, and productive frameworks for the decolonization of state theory.
Lay Summary

This thesis makes the case for reconstructing critical state theory from the perspective of Indigenous actors, more specifically the Nahuas of the Valley of Mexico (Anahuac) during the first century of colonization in the 1500s. Through a close reading of testaments and other official documents of the time produced by Indigenous public officials and leaders, I interrogate some of the core postulates of state, race, and development theories. I conclude with an offer to open up dialogue and cross-pollination among these theoretical approaches to favor scholarly discourses that privilege social justice and decolonization.
Preface

This research did not require ethics approval, was not conducted as part of a collaboration, was not previously published in whole or in part, and was designed, carried out, and analyzed by myself (of course, in what is always a collective enterprise).
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AGN: Archivo General de la Nación (Mexico).

AMP: Alcaldes Mayores Particulares (Bolivia).

UCD: Uneven and Combined Development.
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Dedication

To those who will definitely not read this thesis but are the definitive source of all my knowledge and preoccupations: nations, organizations, movements, individuals and protesters that are taking a stand against colonialism, capitalism, and neoliberalism in their multiple forms, and even under extremely dangerous conditions. You are the only hope for an anticapitalist, decolonial future in Abya Yala and beyond.
Introduction

I wrote this work out of the need to address the issue of Eurocentrism in current theorizing in the social sciences, including geography. Especially within critical studies of colonialism and capitalism, a great deal of dehistoricized thinking and practice continues to be reproduced by scholarly discourse – particularly, but not exclusively, when this discourse comes from the Global North. In the latter, contemporary discussions about the form and structure of colonialism in Latin America, as well as other regions of the world, has not engaged sufficiently with critical theorizing from any of those places. At the same time, some of the most important discussions in Latin America about the coloniality of power relations, including studies on the extractivist character of capitalist development, require in my opinion a reconsideration through the lens of critical state and race theories.

I believe that both conversations are crucial if we are to establish forms of solidarity that are trans-continental and potentially global, like recent works in what I would broadly term anticolonial studies have proposed (Allen 2012; Brooks 2018; Driskill et al. 2011; Gopal 2019; Jackson 2012; López Caballero and Acevedo-Rodrigo 2018a; Tallie 2019; Van Deusen 2015). Indigenous – and allied– scholars of settler colonialism have produced extremely relevant works that need to be discussed and addressed in Latin America (Coulthard 2014; Day 2015; 2016; Glenn 2015; Gutiérrez Nájera and Maldonado 2017; A. Simpson 2014; L. B. Simpson 2017; Veracini 2011; 2014), just as works on colonialism by scholars from all corners and origins of Latin America require serious engagement within settler colonial studies (Ari Chachaki 2014; Castro-Klarén 2001; Echeverría 2000; 2010; Gálvez González and López Nájera 2018; Gandarilla Salgado and Ortega Reyna 2017; Quijano 2014; Rivera Cusicanqui 2010a; M.-R. Trouillot 2002).
The latter is very important, because I believe it could produce an exchange from which we can imagine possible futures and forms of solidarity that emerge from our shared experiences as subalternized and racialized peoples in the continent. My initial and tentative intervention is to bring the decolonial to state theory –Marxist and postcolonial– through a re-reading of the modern state as an inherently colonial and racialized project. The aim is to demonstrate that as early as the sixteenth century, colonial Mexico –or more precisely, the Valley of Mexico– erected one of the first large scale bureaucratic apparatuses whose main purpose was to surveil the people and their indoctrination into ‘good citizens’. These techniques of ‘good government’ also extended themselves to the management of the economy, public works and services, as well as religious activities of all kinds, and was the product of a violent, authoritarian and genocidal process of colonization carried out mainly by Spaniards and other continental Europeans.

At the same time, my core argument is that such a narrative of state formation can be strategically subverted by emphasizing a ‘subaltern’ account of ‘what happened’. Indigenous peoples, African slaves, Asian indentured laborers, as well as many others from different parts of the world, engaged in constant dissent, ranging from major adaptations to outright rebellion against colonial structures of domination. To achieve their goals of resistance, the ‘subaltern’ employed all the material and cultural resources they had available to them, which allowed for constant engagement in ‘public matters’ and multiple forms of cross-pollination. Bonds of solidarity, collaboration, and competition were established among different ethnic and racialized groups, initiating a five-hundred-year-old tradition of anticolonial resistance and creative alternatives. I take this proposition further by arguing that several key components of the emerging state in colonial Mexico were the result of an increasingly tense conflict between anticolonial resisters and dissenters and their colonial rulers. The outcomes of the conflict, unbeknownst to those
who lived at the time, had profound ramifications for a critical, decolonial assessment of
the modern state and possible political alternatives to it.

Before proceeding to explain my case and the importance it holds for state theory and
anticolonial studies, I will situate the space in which my research sits and some of the main
literatures I am interested in conversing with, but also intervene in. Afterwards, I will lay
out the core arguments of my thesis, as well as my position and intentions in engaging with
this project.

The theoretical framework that informs my understanding of colonialism in Mexico –and
the larger subcontinental region of Latin America– comes from two main sources: Latin
American theorizations of internal colonialism and its critique (Bagú 1949; 1952; Bartra
2008; Bartra and Otero 2008; Echeverría 1976; 1984; González Casanova 1965; 1969; 2006;
Lander 2006; Stavenhagen 2010); and postcolonial theory, especially works that deal with
forms of subaltern resistance against colonial structures of domination (Anthias 2017;
Bhambra 2014; Chakrabarty 2008; Coronil 2008; Guha 2001; Gopal 2019; Lazarus 2011;
However, I will not understand the ‘subaltern’ as Subaltern Studies scholars do (Guha
2001; Mustapha 2001; Seed 1994), but rather as a descriptive term for those who were and
are deemed ‘racialized’, that is, marked by an image of their being as inherently defective,
lagging behind white Europeans by reason of their ‘racial origin’. This tautological marking
has been imposed on a multiplicity of bodies, including Indigenous peoples, Africans,
Asians, and many others. Those are the subjects I refer to when speaking of ‘the subaltern’
and a subaltern history of state formation in Mexico, even if my methodological emphasis
will be solely on Indigenous peoples of the Valley of Mexico, specifically the Nahuas.

As Mexican historians have suggested (Alcántara Rojas and Navarrete Linares 2011; Levin
Rojo and Navarrete 2007a), it would be naïve to assume that focusing on Indigenous
sources will automatically exclude other peoples, given the fluid and inclusive character of Nahua documents. In parallel, it would be naïve to assume that bracketing primarily African and Asian sources from my account of colonialism will not somehow exclude some of these groups’ main contributions to anticolonial activism and state formation. I recognize that this work needs to be carefully undertaken, and whenever possible I will mention sources and texts on the topic. But a crucial starting point must be the history and theory of Indigenous forms of anticolonial resistance, given that in my perspective they paved the way for subsequent, subaltern and racialized anticolonial projects, including those of Africans and Asians. Acknowledging the centrality of these intersecting histories, I will attempt to reach a definition of ‘the mestizo state’, which I schematically define as a (post)colonial structure of political domination driven by the contradictions and transformations of its ethnopolitical landscape.* Whereas the struggles of some historically oppressed and racialized groups have been vindicated by postcolonial states in Latin America and the Caribbean, colonial logics of racial exclusion and radical marginalization continue to be both ‘internally’ and structurally reproduced. This means that, at the broadest level, both subjectivities and territories are constantly re-colonized in forms that can mirror (or be worse than) long-standing practices of oppression, exploitation, dispossession, and domination.

Such continuity between colonial past and postcolonial present is what led me to reflect on the modern state as one of the sites from where important insights can be drawn. The modern state emerged as the institutional crystallization of all the political conflicts and tragedies produced by colonialism, it has their imprint in most policies and governs according to many of its principles. It also makes possible to engage in trans-national or

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global forms of comparative analysis, whether we study Latin America or other regions in the world. However, I do not see the state as a single, unified actor, or as an individual conscience that acts independently of its members. I will only focus on the construction of the state because it allows to emphasize social processes that were and continue to be essentially political and conflictive. This means that the state is the site where struggles for space, territory, resources, and survival; intersect in a continuously contested fashion. For this purpose, I will mainly attempt to put critical state theory – of both Marxist and postcolonial orientation – in conversation with two variants of critical race theory: racial formation theory (Goldberg 2002a; 2002b; Omi and Winant 2002; Patil 2014; Winant 2006; 2015), and the work of Latin American sociologists and theorists of race (Bonilla-Silva 1997; 2015; Carrera 2009; González Navarro 1968; Grosfoguel 2018; Martínez 2004; 2008; Nahuelpán Moreno 2007; Zermeño 2011).

My suggestion here is that we need to re-assess what we understand as the main sources of modern state power: in many classical Marxist accounts (Bratsis 2006; Jessop 1990; 2010; Lefebvre 2003; Miliband 1969; Poulantzas 1975; 2000), the state is rarely analyzed as a racial and colonial project, but rather as a structure of domination associated to class conflict and the appropriation of space. On the other hand, the question of ‘the international’, or the inter-state dimension of global state formation, is also bypassed or, in the case of Jessop (2000; 2008), not explicitly linked in any significant way to colonialism and race. I propose to include processes of racialization as a key component to understand the structure of the colonial state and its ‘genetic’ relationship to other colonial forms of government, as well as ‘metropolitan’ states. This means that modern states are the outcome of class conflict and the appropriation of space, but also of colonization and the emergence of systems of racialization. The latter are necessary to address the uneven and combined character of modern state formation around the world, and to develop a much more sophisticated
analysis that understands race as a key component of the past and present of colonialism and capitalism (Shilliam 2009; 2012).

I employ many of the insights of uneven and combined development (UCD) to excavate the impact that race has had in the institutional materiality of the state, as well as its role in the emergence of a global inter-state system. At the same time, the methodological emphasis that UCD places on interaction, combination and discontinuity (Allinson and Anievas 2009; Anievas and Nişancıoğlu 2016; Banaji 2018; Blaney and Tickner 2017a; Davidson 2018; Hobson 2011; Kasmir and Gill 2018; Makki 2015; Rosenberg 2013) allows me to narrate the construction of the state in a way that speaks truthfully to the contested, muddy, and entangled nature of the process. The colonial state emerged as the product of an uneven, combined and contested process of interaction, cross-pollination, conflict, and overt confrontation between peoples, and not simply as the external imposition of an omnipotent European subject.

None of the above could have been formulated without my constant interrogation of what a proper methodology is, and why and who decides which forms of knowledge production are deemed to be valid. Generally, I understand these questions as ‘epistemological’, intrinsically linking them to political and ethical considerations, including the ticklish subject of how to produce an epistemology –or rather a plurality of epistemologies– from the Global South (Blaney and Tickner 2017b; Blaser 2013; Grosfoguel 2008; Matin 2013; Querejazu 2016; Rabasa 2008; Seth 2016). I will address this ‘epistemological turn’ by engaging with ethnohistory and the methodological strategies it provides for the interpretation of texts and documents, in an effort to reconstruct other forms of representing knowledge. I understand ethnohistory as a research strategy that is “rooted in histories of encounters and colonizing”, offering “a long-standing challenge to views of social groups as encysted and homogeneous”, or as “natural” (Silverblatt 1995, 639).
Instead, ethnohistory emphasizes the porosity of borders between communities, recasting many assumptions about cultural identities and political projects among racialized groups (Silverblatt 1995, 640). To try this principle, I will employ archives not merely as interpretive tools or sources of empirical evidence, but also as particular forms of representing knowledge and making it intelligible to an audience, a process that is deeply infused in historical, cultural and political events. In this sense, the structure and content of Nahua documents reveal traces that, alongside readings of contemporary and classical works on Nahua epistemology and historiography, provide the foundations for my reinterpretation of the process of colonization in central Mexico (Castro Gutiérrez 2010b; Chimalpáhin 1998; Herrera Meza, López Austin, and Martínez Baracs 2013; Levin Rojo and Navarrete 2007a; López Austin 2015; López Caballero 2003; K. S. McDonough 2014; 2017; K. McDonough 2018; Nava Nava 2014; Pérez Zevallos 1984; Restall 2012; Ruiz Medrano and Kellogg 2010). All the documents I examine in this work are part of the collection of the National General Archive (AGN) in Mexico City, and have been published by this organization and others. I surveyed 62 testaments from the collection edited and translated by Teresa Rojas Rabiela, Elsa Rea López, and Constantino Medina Lima (1999a; 1999b), as well as the collection of 65 testaments of Culhuacan published by Sarah Cline and Miguel León-Portilla (1984), for a total of 127 testaments. All of them were written in the Valley of Mexico from 1530 to 1599, mainly in Tenochtitlan, Culhuacan, Coyoacan, Tlatelolco, Azcapotzalco and Texcoco. My second source are 42 land decrees or títulos primordiales, government rulings, and complaints from Tenochtitlan and its surrounding areas, edited and translated by Luis Reyes García (1996) and written from 1551 to 1601.

My account of state formation in early colonial Mexico is thus informed by Nahua epistemologies of history-making, which in turn determine my readings of critical race theory, critical state theory, and UCD. With this intervention in mind, I attempt to
interrogate and deconstruct some preestablished notions regarding the structure of modern states and their power over the societies upon which they rule. I will be examining the first century of colonization in central Mexico, specifically in the Valley (or Basin) of Mexico, because it provides one of the first examples of the emergence of a thoroughly institutionalized colonial state in modern history.

The colonial discourse of improvement and ‘good government’ can first be seen in sixteenth century writings of mendicant friars and other colonists. They all increasingly shared the conviction that the inhabitants of this continent were sophisticated and had complex social structures, but remained in a state of ignorance and savagery because Christianity was not practiced or even known. Thus, the task of scholars, officials, conquistadores and other European men was to provide the necessary means so that Indigenous peoples and other racialized groups could ‘achieve salvation’ (read modernity) and stop ‘lagging behind’ in history (Levin Rojo 2007, 29). This powerful discourse captured the colonists’ minds, producing an imaginary or unconscious that, I argue, still influences critical analyses of colonialism and Indigeneity.

The template of colonial improvement is what I will refer to when speaking of Eurocentrism, delimiting the concept’s content and application. Eurocentrism is broadly a specific set of practices, attitudes and ways of being that are mainly wedded to the idea that the center of world history\(^1\) is Western Europe, or more precisely, Northwestern Europe. Clearly, this mode of thinking has circulated over time and acquired different consistencies, including the fact that it has been extended to encompass ‘ideal’ or ‘prototypical’ modern societies like the settler colonies (United States, Canada, Australia and New Zealand mainly). But this extension is by no means accidental, and reveals the inherently colonial and white supremacist character of Eurocentrism. Eurocentric assumptions, then, are not

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\(^1\) And hence civilization, culture, modern political life, civil society and universal values.
necessarily programmatic and require careful deconstructive work according to each specific case.

In narratives and theorizations of early colonial Mexico, Eurocentrism is typically found in preconceived images of ‘the Conquest’. These begin from the supposition that Spaniards – and Europeans in general– were (and are) what Danna Levin Rojo calls “impervious and refractory subjects” (2007, 24), remaining almost thoroughly unaffected by the process of colonization. A form of subterraneous ‘cultural’, political and racial purity is assumed when examining ‘powerful actors’, including European colonists. In contrast, I will argue –alongside critical historians, sociologists and theorists of race from Latin America– that the vertiginously fast and dramatically profound changes experienced by both Indigenous peoples and European colonists deny any sense of absolute agency to the latter. Spanish colonists encountered densely populated societies in all regions of Mesoamerica, including the Yucateca coast, the regions of Zempoala and Tlaxcala, the large Iréchecua Tzintzuntzáni or Tarascan (purépecha) state, and the most populated of all, the Tenochca Alliance of the Valley of Mexico. Spaniards recognized –perhaps for the first time– an organized group of peoples from an ‘undiscovered land’ that had institutions and political forms of organization. Castilian, the language spoken by the colonists, even allowed them to relatively define and understand Indigenous forms of government (Levin Rojo 2007, 30). Despite the immense cultural, political and material shock that this must have meant for Spaniards and Europeans of the sixteenth century, most geographical, political and sociological analyses of colonialism –in Mexico and elsewhere– ignore the relevance of Indigenous forms of sociality in the construction of modernity. They relegate the latter to

2 Commonly known as the ‘Aztec Empire’.
a passive recipient, and colonization becomes a one-way process of oppression, marginalization and eventual elimination or cultural assimilation.³

Instead, what my approach on subaltern histories of state formation attempts to redress is the lack of recognizable agency allowed to Indigenous peoples. Their histories and forms of sociality can be occasionally recognized as relevant, but they are almost always rendered secondary when studying the institutions of colonialism and capitalism. As Mabel Moraña, Enrique Dussel and Carlos A. Jáuregui argue, “Latin American coloniality originates in the transoceanic adventures from which European modernity itself was born”. The “foundation of the oldest colonial system in the West” is located in this part of the world, and it offers a different logic from that of “English and French territorial appropriations during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries”. Its crucial difference, then, comes from the fact that it produced an “unforeseeable outcome” because no antecedents to the event of colonization actually existed. Moraña, Dussel and Jáuregui remark that the effects of the ‘colonial encounter’ were felt even in “epistemological and geopolitical paradigms of the Renaissance”, influencing from the outset the “enterprise of territorial conquest and colonization” (2008, 6–7). It would be disingenuous to suppose that none of the elements composing this crisis in European epistemological, geopolitical, and cultural ‘certainty’ were actively caused by Indigenous peoples. More specifically, the resilience and plasticity shown by Indigenous forms of political organization in the Valley of Mexico constantly challenged the colonial state and its policies. Indigenous leaders, representatives and officials, as well as macehualtin or the common folk, constantly adapted, negotiated, challenged, steered and openly rebelled against colonial rule, decisively shaping its institutions and practices. These forces almost completely subverted colonial rule several times from 1521 to 1821, and continue to have a very tense relationship with the

³ In contrast, historian and chronicler Felipe Castro Gutiérrez goes as far as to categorize the sixteenth century in Mexico as ‘post-pre-Hispanic’ (2013).
postcolonial state because of its uneven—and at other times simply appalling—history of exclusions.

Having said this, I want to clarify that my analysis of the state will not merely reproduce traditional binaries that oppose the state to the subaltern, or political society to civil society. Rather, what the case of colonization in the Valley of Mexico suggests is that the institutionalization of segregation between political actors according to race was far more tenuous and disputed than commonly assumed by economic and agrarian historians (Chevalier 1963; Van Young 2003). High-ranking Nahua leaders, politicians and intellectuals achieved important positions in the state, and retained control of most of their peoples’ lands throughout the sixteenth century (Castro Gutiérrez 2010a; Connell 2011; 2016; De Rojas 2011). A few of them even traveled to Europe and attempted to meet with the Emperor, while others wrote severe letters of disapproval demanding immediate changes to colonial administration (K. McDonough 2018; Van Deusen 2015). The history of the colonial state is thus the history of a cataclysmic clash between peoples in which domination is imposed vicariously, always contested and relatively provisional.

In sum, the crucial quality of Latin American colonial history lies in the complexity that it provides to extant accounts of coloniality considered by anticolonial studies (Moraña, Dussel, and Jáuregui 2008, 8). Sixteenth and seventeenth century historiography shows that “a long series of political, economic, and cultural processes” that had “the support of an intricate and diversified web of projects and discourses”, established modernity as “the space of intelligibility where colonial domination could be implemented and legitimized as the strategy that would allow the installation and consolidation of Western civilization as defined by metropolitan standards” (Moraña, Dussel, and Jáuregui 2008, 8). Missing an analysis of these histories erases fundamental components of the political, cultural and racial formations that shape the present of the subcontinent as well as other (post)colonial
parts of the world. At the same time, my goal in attempting to provide a nuanced understanding of coloniality also intends to uncover the subversive character of Latin America’s contributions to ‘modernity’, forged in political organization and rebellion.

Following Eduardo Bonilla-Silva, I will argue in chapter 1 that the necessity of re-assessing Mexican (and to a lesser degree, Latin American) colonial state formation through critical race theory and UCD stems from an effort to develop tools and concepts appropriate to the political needs and struggles of the region (1997; 2015). Otherwise, an attitude of ‘cultural and academic imperialism’ proper of the Global North, notwithstanding its intentions, constantly ends up reducing the struggles of racialized peoples in the South to explanatory models and frameworks exclusively produced in the first.4 This means to me that the notion of race and the regimes it produces cannot be taken for granted. Instead, I follow Bonilla-Silva in arguing that weak foundations in racial theorizing come from a lack of emphasis in race as a “relatively modern social category” that emerged significantly with “the experiences of the first peoples who experienced racialization”, that is, the inhabitants of America after 1492 (2015, 79). Indeed, most “of our racial and ethnic theorization has come from the United States or Europe”, even prompting some scholars from these regions to think that other parts of the world lack a ‘proper’ framework to theorize race and colonialism.5 According to Bonilla-Silva, this also includes “Latin American and Caribbean writers” when they analyze race, because most of their explanations rely on theorizations from the US and Europe, without any proper critical engagement with their own racialized contexts (2015, 79).

Instead, Bonilla-Silva argues that we can be “in a better explanatory position today to understand not only race” globally speaking, but in Europe and the United States6

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4 This is experienced, of course, in many other parts of the world that are located in the ‘non-West’.
5 I see this happening, for example, in (Castellanos 2017; Speed 2017).
6 Including Canada and other settler colonies.
themselves, “if we were to go back and follow the King’s advice in *Alice in Wonderland*, “begin at the beginning.” Developing racial theories from “the historical experiences of the oldest racial regimes in the world” is not only useful to come up with another ‘lineage’ of the notion of race, or to establish a longer genealogy of the modern state, without substantially changing our pre-established conceptions of all these categories (Bonilla-Silva 2015, 79). For Bonilla-Silva, “there is no one “racism” but rather variations in how racial regimes are organized and, hence, variations in the racial ideologies of those regimes” (2015, 75). Race is the effect “of racial practices of opposition” at various levels, making “racial contestation […] the crucial driving force of any racialized social system” (Bonilla-Silva 2015, 75).

Chapter 2 will elaborate my propositions about epistemology, race, and political conflict by examining archival evidence from Nahua *tlacuiloque* or officials in the Valley of Mexico throughout the sixteenth century. Combining methods from anthropology, history, Indigenous studies, archeology, linguistics, and sociology, ethnohistory is a multidisciplinary field of research that has provided the tools for me to critically examine the interpretations, analyses, experiences and forms of organization of Indigenous actors. By emphasizing voices that have been systematically excluded from major narratives of states and empires (Riehm et al. 2019, 145–46), I will attempt to provide an account of early modern state formation ‘from below’. My goal is to historicize the colonial past by looking at the material and cultural practices of the Nahua peoples of the Valley of Mexico, excavating their strategies and reactions towards the process of colonization.

Similarities between modern forms of racial reasoning (Baber 2009; Bonilla-Silva 1997; 2015, 75; Goldberg 2002a; Stoler 2002), and Marxist accounts of the state as conflictual or contested process (Althusser 1978; Lefebvre 2003; Poulantzas 2000) will be explored in Chapter 3. My intention is to highlight the productive points of convergence and tension
between both approaches, and to achieve a combined analysis of state and racial formations. Most critical insights into both literatures are closely developed from the examples examined in Chapter 2, and in other cases I will make explicit reference to them when needed. Out of the conversation between Nahua epistemology, critical race theory and Marxist state theory, I will argue for a conception of the state in times of turmoil as an arena were the ‘political means of production’, as well as their relative control, acquire special prominence to understand the condensation of forms of colonial domination and anticolonial resistance into institutional structures.

The insights of Chapter 3 will be contextualized historically in Chapter 4. Here, I will trace the transition from Nahua altepetl to Indigenous pueblos in the Valley of Mexico after the constitution of Mexico City. Through a reading of primary archival sources like títulos primordiales alongside secondary historiographical works (Kourí 2018; Reyes García 1996; Rojas Rabiela, Rea López, and Medina Lima 1999a; 1999b), I will emphasize the continuities and adaptations within Nahua forms of political organization during the adoption of more Hispanicized forms of governance. Through a description of the inner life of Indigenous pueblos (or ‘pueblos de Indios’ in colonial discourse), I intend to counter accounts of modern state formation that silences and elides Indigeneities, relegating them to a role of mere passivity, of less-than-subalternity. Informed by recent decolonial historiographical work being pursued by Mexican scholars (Alcántara Rojas and Navarrete Linares 2011; López Caballero and Acevedo-Rodrigo 2018b; Jalpa Flores 2010), I will employ a fluid and emergent definition of Indigeneity that pays attention to the ways in which actors themselves appropriate and mobilize this ethnic and racial identity for political purposes. Nahua structures of production, culture, political organization, and ways of being, retained a very strong influence across the territory, amalgamating complex
social assemblages influenced by colonial relations of power (Silverblatt 1988, 182–91). Nahuas and other Indigenous peoples of central Mexico interlaced their pre-colonial experiences and modes of life with new, emerging and syncretic understandings, constantly challenging “colonialism’s moral ascendancy and cultural dominance”. Indigenous forms of syncretism and interactivity “encouraged resistance”, even if “it was a resistance contained within the boundaries of colonial power relations” (Silverblatt 1988, 191), boundaries that have proven to be extremely difficult to surmount.

At the heart of my study is the conviction that states can be studied beyond their description as administrative committees of “the economics of empire”. As John L. Comaroff notes, most historical analyses of colonialism –irrespective of their ideological position– “pay exquisitely detailed attention to the ways in which these states intervened with greater or lesser efficacy, in the face of greater or lesser resistance to promote European commerce”, facilitating “the extraction of raw materials and ‘native’ labour power”, and developing “trade networks and markets of various kinds” (Comaroff 1998, 325). As a result,

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7 A clear illustration of this is the famous example of Tonantzin-Chalchiuhcihuatl, or Coatlaxopeuh, the name given to Tonantzin in the temple of Tepeyac. Her name in Nahuatl –particularly Coatlaxopeuh– sounds very similar to ‘Guadalupe’ in Spanish or Castilian. This allowed a transfiguration of Tonantzin into Tonantzin-Guadalupe, a form of syncretism that is widely seen across Mexico and other parts of Latin America*. Irene Silverblatt, for example, examines these forms of ‘combination’ in her account of ‘Andeanize d Santiagos’ in Peru. For her, many colonial religious figures “captured peasant understandings, sentiments, and fears of their cracked world and of the larger political reality encapsulating it. Comuneros sensed that as colonialism became more firmly entrenched it was only as well-heeled elite in colonial relations that their gods could attain the power of saints (i.e., embody the hope of being able to manipulate, with some success, the political-economic relations that produced saints)”. In a twist that mirrors –and influences– my own approach to the state, she concludes: “Ironic indeed that it was not the orthodox Santiago who constrained native feelings for their possibilities in the colonial world. This was not the Santiago of the church’s campaigns to indoctrinate compliance to the colonial order but a more insidious, profoundly persuasive Santiago, all the more so for his less conspicuously conventional demeanor” (Silverblatt 1988, 189–92).

* From here on, I will refer to Latin America as Abya Yala. This is the name that the subcontinent has had since before colonization, and comes from the Guna language, meaning ‘land full of vitality’. Even if there is a Nahuatl term for the continent (Itzachilatan), I have opted for Abya Yala because this is in conformity with the Declaration of Teotihuacan that took place in Mexico in the year 2000. Here, during the First International Indigenous Summit, the peoples of the region decided that to build solidarity across nations it was necessary to employ the name of Abya Yala, abandoning names imposed by colonizers (Council of Indigenous Organizations and Nations of the Continent 2000). A similar move has been made by Indigenous peoples inhabiting Canada and the United States with the adoption of the term Turtle Island.
Indigenous peoples are almost always rendered passive objects and recipients of the whiplash of colonialism, erasing histories in the process. Attention is paid to colonialisms only through a Eurocentric gaze, to understand how these ‘enterprises’ constructed the rise of Europe as a global hegemonic power. All the ‘others’ are rendered less-than-subaltern, and part of a remarkably different world that is always about to disappear, or in the best of cases, inherently incapable of surviving or producing its own ‘modernity’. However, contemporary as well as past politics are, have been, and will continue to be importantly shaped by Indigenous peoples. As Héctor Nahuelpán says, “any reflection around Latin American being and identity does not include arguing for the incompatibility between a traditional model and the modernizing processes propelled until now”. Instead, we need to rethink “how certain cultural formations have varied over time, redefining and restructuring themselves to produce a diverse cultural scenario that impedes homogenization […] under a single identity category” (Nahuelpán Moreno 2007, 163).
CHAPTER 1

What is the modern state? Unevenness, combination and race through the lens of Abya Yala

The “transformation of history into world history is by no means a mere abstract act on the part of “self-consciousness”, the world spirit, or of any other metaphysical spectre, but a quite material, empirically verifiable act, an act the proof of which every individual furnishes as he comes and goes, eats, drinks and clothes himself” (Marx and Engels 1975, 51).

In this chapter, I will formulate my conception of the modern state by discussing particular texts from three bodies of literature: critical state theory (Marxist and postcolonial), critical race theory (racial formation theory and theories of race from Abya Yala), and uneven and combined development (UCD). My reading of these constantly interacting fields and their relationships is inflected by a decolonial approach to the historical social sciences, which means that I will adopt strategies – proposed by postcolonial theorists and Abya Yalan scholars – on deconstructing Eurocentric epistemological assumptions in scholarly discourse (Bhambra 2014; Levin Rojo and Navarrete 2007b; Navarrete 2007; Sabaratnam 2011; Seth 2009). The chapter is divided into three sections, each develops a critical reading of the literatures mentioned in the order above. Nonetheless, constant cross-pollination occurs between sections because my methodological attempt is to theorize the state from each of these lenses. In an effort to provide a sense of coherency to my strategy, I decided to combine, manipulate, and mestizar some of the postulates encountered in each tradition.

The chapter concludes with reflections on how to develop an ‘integrated’ account of the state, and how race and coloniality are fundamental to achieve it. My attempt at a ‘synthesis’ of Marxist, postcolonial, and critical race theories has the goal of establishing an
operative conception of the modern state. This means that states gravitate, from the perspective of both ‘colonizer’ and ‘colonized’, around the notion of ‘race’ as primary marker of colonial modernity. More than conferring predominance to it, my analysis understands race as the inaugural sign of a deeper conflict over land, territories, resources, and ultimately cultural survival. The crystallization of these struggles is reflected in some of the most prominent institutional mechanisms of the colonial state, and from this perspective, a genealogy of colonial forms of governmentality and exploitation can be traced back to ‘subaltern’ histories of resistance and adaptation. Based on this approach, I will argue that the categories employed by both critical state theory and critical racial theories can be put in conversation to produce an ‘integral’ account of the modern state.

**Attempts at a definition of the state: Marxism, (post)colonialism, and the promise of an integral account**

Peter Bratsis argued in his *Everyday Life and the State* (2006) that one of the most pernicious customs followed by critical scholars when they study the state is their almost complete emphasis in classical theoretical texts. In his view, theorizations of the state – as well as many other ‘objects of analysis’– constantly disregard its historical context and conditions of possibility, leading to theories of the state but not about its content, form, and construction in particular historical and geographical circumstances. Through an exclusive emphasis on authors and concepts, critical state theorists sacrifice concrete and situated analyses of the state that illuminate more clearly its forms and functions, as well as the social roots of its power (Bratsis 2006, 2). More recently, Bob Jessop (Jessop, Brenner, and Jones 2008; Jessop 2010) has stressed the importance of historical and spatial variability in forms of statehood to avoid the pitfalls of economism and functionalism. But the content of the category ‘statehood’, what it implies and what it can capture, is constantly positioned in a liminal relation to race and colonialism.
Consequently, and following Bratsis, critical analyses incur in a fetishization of the state, which consists in taking it as a “point of departure” instead of a process that remains to be explained. Explanation here proceeds “as if” the state was indeed a universal a priori predicate to our social existence rather than a product of our social existence”. Furthermore, this proceeding ‘as if’ the modern state was always-already there “endows” it “with ontological qualities not of its own and abstracts its existence from the realm of social relations” (Bratsis 2006, 9). Bratsis here vindicates a ‘subaltern’ theorizing of the state, given that, from his perspective, “the point of view of the colonized” reveals an account of modern statehood “often […] experienced as a contingent product of a political project and not as some essential and natural thing” (2006, 5, n. 8). This experience of the modern (colonial) state as a contentious political project guides my understanding of its structure, institutions, and processes of formation in the early colonial era. The state “is not a set of functional imperatives determined by the societal whole”, but “the product of past political strategies and struggles” (Bratsis 2006, 20).

However, this epistemological point of departure is not sufficient “if we do not know what institutions to look to” when establishing the form and unity of the state. At a certain point, Bratsis suggests, we must “posit what “state” institutions are a priori” (2006, 20). I propose to locate the emergence of modern statehood in the processes of adaptation, contestation and rebellion that Nahuas engaged in during the first century of colonialism. If, for Bratsis, relational approaches to the state in critical theories are often unclear on “what types of practices and mechanisms translate the materiality of classes and class power into the institutional materiality of the state”, my hope is to address this gap by integrating race and coloniality into the very fabric of the modern state and its contingent and “specific articulations of power relations” (2006, 20). In doing this, I select the ‘practices and mechanisms’ that Nahuas employed to simultaneously manage racial, ethnic, economic,
cultural, and land conflicts: the production of *títulos primordiales* and other forms of documentation to stop land encroachment, as well as the transition from Nahua *altepetl* to Indigenous *pueblos* and *barrios* in the Valley of Mexico. Both ‘institutional histories’ reveal –in my view– a process of articulation or concatenation of practices in which the production of “the social existence of the state” negates claims to its “universality and naturalness” (Bratsis 2006, 14), that is, as a monolithic entity severed from the bodies it manipulates.

I understand the state at its broadest, and after critical Marxist relational theories, as a *social relation*, or more precisely, as the practices of production and reproduction of that social relation (Althusser 2014; Poulantzas 2000). This means that forms of class, racial, cultural and political struggle have to be considered if an integral account of the state is to be reached, and the unity of different state institutions and actors, as well as their relative coherence, cannot be assumed (Poulantzas 2000, 15). The issue of the state is both a theoretical *and* a historical one, and should be investigated with particular attention to each geographical and racial context. The main goal of such an analytical strategy is to clarify what the state *is* from a genealogy of its historical conditions and conjunctural forms of emergence, including the social practices and situations that allow us to ‘see it’. I locate the latter in political situations that mobilized large groups of peoples – the largest sectors of the population in the sixteenth century–, and in particular, intra-ethnic forms of solidarity among Nahua peoples that conduced to land preservation and the reproduction of forms of sociality.

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1 The same applies to the assumption that the state is always disjointed and operates incoherently. The modality of social relations that the state reproduces, and that Marxist theorists like Althusser, and most importantly, Poulantzas have identified, is that of the interlocking struggles among classes. However, in a bid to complete the ‘turn’ to a materialism of the encounter that the late Althusser himself espoused (2006), I argue that it is necessary to see the modern state as the interlocking of class *and* racial, (post)colonial struggles.
In this sense, I make the move of understanding key elements of autonomous forms of political organization *in and against* the state as penetrating it and at least partially configuring many of its institutions. Since I emphasize the reproduction of a set of social relations (racial and political in particular) as the core element of the modern state, it is important to not forget that the form of these relations themselves also need to be constantly subjected to critique. The state is not “a substantial entity separate from society” –as Philip Abrams reminded us more than three decades ago–, and ignoring five centuries of extremely violent struggles over land, resources, and ultimately survival, can only turn it into “a remarkably elusive object of analysis” (Abrams 1988, 61) to say the very least. Consequently, following a critical materialist and relational account of the state, I propose to identify the emergence of modern forms of statehood in what at first appeared to be an “abstract unity” of inter-ethnic practices of solidarity and alliances –but also of increased hierarchization and marginalization. Different “subaggregates” that were previously “functioning separately” coalesced under an Indigenous elite (*pipiltin*), producing institutional materialities that were not merely subservient to the colonial imperatives of Europeans. Precariously, *pipiltin*, *macehualtin*, Africans, Asians, Arabs, and other racialized groups that continued to arrive during the 1500s, incorporated into “a field of forces whose flows” were increasingly expressed in terms of coordinating “autonomous relations of domination and subordination” (Deleuze and Guattari 1983, 221) inside an overarching totality or power structure.

Nahua and other Indigenous epistemologies, political institutions, and conceptions of government inflected not only local, small, and secluded communities, as traditional historical accounts of colonialism would presume (Brooks 2018, 347–48). They rather maintained prominence across territories and between different peoples, representing –I argue– a sort of ‘template’ for the installation of *pueblos*, *municipios* and *cabildos*, or
towns, municipalities and assemblies. With this perspective in mind, my intention is to establish an analytical device that appreciates the radical contingency with which state formation occurs. As Abrams recognized, the “only plausible alternative I can see to taking the state for granted is to understand it as historically constructed” and “used for specific social purposes in a specific historical setting” (1988, 80).

Instead of embracing a ‘relativist’ position or the need to simply study ‘local’ forms of political power, I understand this call to historical specificity as an opportunity to put Marxist-cum-postcolonial state theories in conversation with uneven and combined development (UCD). This body of literature –in spite of some of its limitations– has been involved in efforts to understand international (or global) state formation as a relational and interactive process, where multiple instances provide essential components to the creation of large-scale, modern institutions and relations of power (Acharya 2014; Anievas and Nişancioğlu 2017; Banaji 2007; 2018; Kasmir and Gill 2018; Taylor 2014). The state is not just a ‘power container’ or a ‘node of power relations’ that operates at a certain scale – the ‘national’. It is the crystallization of a “distinctive mode of social/spatial organization” (Elden 2013a, 10), one that secures, hinders, or marginalizes the reproduction of Indigenous and non-Indigenous forms of sociality. Hence, UCD’s emphasis on the co-dependence of multiple scales provides an opportunity to intervene in theorizations of state formation that take seriously into account subaltern politics, with all their complexity and muddiness.

Unevenness, combination, and modern state formation

To grasp the historical and spatial crystallization of modern statehood, I will employ some of the basic insights of the categories of unevenness and combination as developed

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2 Henri Lefebvre also recognized the need for doing this in his call to study the production of social space (Lefebvre 1991; 2003).
by UCD scholars (Allinson and Anievas 2009; Hobson 2011; Makki 2015; Rosenberg 2010). My reading of UCD’s framework is informed by recent works on Nahua epistemology and historiography (Alcántara Rojas 2007; Brotherston 2008; Echeverría 2008; Herrera Meza, López Austin, and Martínez Baracs 2013; Inoue Okubo 2007; Levin Rojo and Navarrete 2007b; Navarrete Linares 2011), which has led me to adopt a ‘restricted’ attitude towards the category of development and its capabilities. However, unevenness and combination provide an opportunity to link two traditions of critical thought and stress their points of disagreement and continuity, in an effort to engage in the kind of decolonial epistemological work that many anti-Eurocentric scholars have called for throughout the years (Anievas and Nişançioğlu 2016; 2017; Matin 2013; Said 1994; Seth 2016; Shilliam 2010; M. Trouillot 2001).

My understanding of the categories of unevenness and combination is historical and genealogical. I trace their meaning and application back to what are, to the best of my knowledge, their earliest apparitions in the nineteenth century, particularly in the works of Karl Marx and the Russian populists (Narodniki) like Vera Zasulich (Shanin 1983, 9–19; Wada 1983). This allows me to situate the perimeter and positions within the current field of debates around the meaning, reach, and limitations of UCD for critical, anticolonial scholarship and activism (Anievas and Nişançioğlu 2017; Ashman 2009; Bhambra 2011; Blaney and Tickner 2017; Davidson 2018; Matin 2007; Hobson 2007; Kiely 2012; Nişançioğlu 2014; Pal 2018; Sabaratnam 2011; Shilliam 2009). An approach that brings together people from a wide range of fields like political science, sociology, history, international relations, geography, anthropology, literary, cultural, and gender studies, as well as multiple parts of the world (Christie and Degirmencioglu 2019), UCD provides an opportunity to engage in trans-disciplinary discussions about fundamental categories and methodologies of scholarly discourse, including the modern state. I will develop a brief
genealogical and contemporary mapping of the categories of unevenness and combination in particular, linking them to broader debates about the state, colonialism, race and capitalist development, as well as my project on decolonial critical theories of the state.

Between the decades of 1870 and 1880, the last of his life, Karl Marx began studying and writing about the Russian peasant commune, prompted by revolutionary events in that country (Krätke 2018). Engaging in sustained correspondence with some of the leaders of the movement –the self-declared ‘populists’ or Narodniki in Russian—, Marx’s understanding of the history of capitalist ‘expansion’ started to reveal a central concern: “the newly perceived notion of ‘uneven development’, interpreted not quantitatively (i.e. that ‘some societies move faster than others’) but as global interdependence of societal transformations” (Shanin 1983, 17). As Michael R. Krätke demonstrates extensively (2018), he was preoccupied with turning his attention towards ‘world history’, that is, the consolidation of capitalism from an integrated perspective that could incorporate the trajectories of areas of the world beyond Europe. Later on, in the Chronological Notes of 1880-82, Marx turned his attention “to ‘the problem of historical interdependence of people and countries in the different period[s] of global history, i.e. the synchronic unity of history’”. According to Teodor Shanin, Marx’s long-term project was that of joining the synchronicity of history with the “dichronic intersocietal unity” of peoples, leading him to the suggestion that “for the future a multiplicity of roads of social transformation” were possible, “within the global framework of mutual and differential impact” against capitalist reproduction (Shanin 1983, 18).

It was clear that Marx was trying to think about ‘societal transformations’ beyond the narratives of Enlightenment that posit Europe as the center of world history. Given his involvement in Russian revolutionary politics at the time, what was at stake in such theoretical re-assessment was not merely an academic issue, but rather how to employ the
analytical insights of historical interdependence in a way that spoke to political agitators and their political parties. Therefore, unevenness and combination as ‘sociological’ categories were not coined by Marx “to simply describe the many labors involved in capital accumulation or the heterogeneity of capitalist social formations” (Kasmir and Gill 2018, 355), but as a way of anticipating a political program that could unify efforts and be used by revolutionaries in many parts of the world. This meant emphasizing the crucial importance of synchronicity and diachronicity through categories that were able to capture both, leading Marx to think about the emergence of ‘transitional’ and ‘hybrid’ forms of social reproduction. In his Economic Manuscripts of 1861-1863, he writes about transitional forms “leading to the specifically capitalist mode of production” without needing the formal existence of “the capital-relation”. In other words, we have transitional forms to capitalism –the social system, not capital the social relation– in which “labour is already exploited by capital before the latter has developed into the form of productive capital and labour itself has taken on the form of wage labour”. Forms of sociality become captured in the vortex of capitalist colonization, constantly reproducing “themselves within the latter” and partially being “reproduced by [capitalism] itself” (Marx 1994, 117).

Most recently, Alex Anievas and Kerem Nişancioğlu (2015) have proposed that the key insight of UCD is its recognition of capitalist development as multiple and polycentric. For them, “the ontology of uneven and combined development postulates”, echoing Marx, “that historical processes are always the outcome of a multiplicity of spatially diverse nonlinear causal chains that combine in any given conjuncture” (2015, 61). They conceive of “social development” as “ineluctably multilinear, causally polycentric, and co-constitutive by virtue of its very interconnectedness” (Anievas and Nişancioğlu 2015, 48).3 For them, a thoroughly deconstructive work on the emergence of “historically distinct

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3 Emphasis in the original. A work on the connections between UCD’s interconnectedness and Althusser’s ‘materialism of the encounter’ needs to be urgently written.
social structures”, including the modern state, does not make sense if it remains ignoring “the non-West”. Predominantly considered “empirically significant yet theoretically secondary” (2015, 57) for Western scholars, the contributions of the ‘non-West’ to critical theorizing have been traditionally unacknowledged, remaining mostly untranslated. My intention here is to address this ‘theoretical gap’ with a critical reading of unevenness and combination inflected by Nahua epistemology-historiography and postcolonial theory.

Strictly speaking, I understand unevenness as the inherently plural and differential paths taken by specific forms of sociality when they ‘reproduce themselves’ within colonial capitalism. In addition, combination specifies the logics of this ‘reproduction’ by encouraging us to carefully examine –both in history and the present– how forms of sociality themselves are only ‘partially reproduced’ by colonial capitalism. Unevenness and combination are, for me, not transhistorical categories, but conjunctural ones, and can be applied to different historical contexts as long as they are reformulated according to the needs and characteristics of each. Indeed, Fouad Makki suggests that before proceeding with categories like ‘uneven’ and ‘combined’ (or ‘development’), it is necessary to derive their “ontological assumptions and epistemological procedures”, especially the ones connected to a “heritage of classical social theory” (2015, 472). For him, and for Michel-Rolph Trouillot (2002), ignoring such critical deconstructive work implicates reproducing ‘universalistic assumptions’ and ‘North Atlantic universals’ that structure the production of knowledge in terms of an epistemological monism.

Consequently, and Makki argues that this is proven by the history of academic disciplines, a fundamental misrecognition is made at the level of how ‘societies’ change. All transformations are assumed to be part of “internally generated” processes “within discrete societies”, or its alternative, external imposition “by some onto others”, flattening “the manifold significance of interaction for the constitution and reproduction of societies”
Such interpretive closure has been categorized by Justin Rosenberg as ‘domestic analogy’ (2006), and the call for more polycentric and multilinear work is said to be the appropriate answer to a challenging task. However, as Dipesh Chakrabarty has already noted, the assumptions behind an idea of social transformation in time—or “directional change over time”, as Rosenberg suggests (2006, 330), that change always occurs given “a certain amount of time”, implies a particular epistemological positioning that assumes the universality of “secular, empty, and homogenous time”, a rather historical product of capitalist colonial modernity (Chakrabarty 2008, 22–23). It is not only a matter, following Sanjay Seth, of re-working the ‘content’ of scholarly discourse, of expanding its empirical scope of analysis to include ‘other genealogies’. Instead, “even after the biases of social science are corrected for and appropriate adjustments made, problems of the politics of knowledge remain”, because the “central categories” of analysis—in other words, the epistemological dimension, are not “necessarily adequate to everywhere, even in their amended versions” (Seth 2009, 336).

I find it crucial to avoid universalizing—in the sense described above— the core tenets of unevenness and development, or ascribing to them excessive analytical powers. As David Blaney and Arlene Tickner note, “Although attentive to multiplicity [...], UCD remains grounded in an ontology of development, albeit now multi-linear or relational, that imagines a singular world or uni-verse” (2017a, 74). A rejection of the uni-verse, or a single field and entity of representation called ‘the world’, implies rejecting unevenness and

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4 Justin Rosenberg defines the ‘domestic analogy’ as an ad hoc, analogical style of reasoning, that “proceeds by assimilating the properties of one thing to those of another, rather than trying to grasp the former in themselves” (2006, 322).

5 Seth also makes the point that “In the West too, the analytical categories of the social sciences do not neatly and fully map onto the entire social space, for many and varied forms of human solidarity and belonging have not wholly given way to, or been subsumed by, citizenship; older public arenas and their rituals and practices of identity have not been completely effaced by the rituals of statehood; and the secular assumptions of the social sciences have not become the common sense of everyone” (2009, 337). In synthesis, the claims to knowledge that the social sciences make are not fully adequate anywhere.
combination as a “transhistorical general abstraction” (Allinson and Anievas 2009, 49) that provides sufficient footing for decolonial theorizing. This is why it is also necessary to employ epistemological tools from traditions that highlight a different treatment of plurality and difference, based in “the historical specificity of colonial modernity and the existence of numerous modes of life” interacting within it (Blaney and Tickner 2017a, 74; Echeverría 2010; Grosfoguel 2008; M.-R. Trouillot 2011). My purpose in doing this is to recover histories of anticolonial dissidence and rebellion that shaped the state, paving the way for subsequent struggles against all forms of colonial rule throughout the globe.

Critical Race Theories and the state of colonial modernity

Here, I would like to address the fact that most thinking produced in critical race theory rarely addresses matters of the state. Conversely, state theory –mainly from its ‘classical’ Marxist proponents– has seldom established conversations with the main traditions of critical race theory, cutting a possibly fruitful dialogue about the ‘analytical’ integration of capital, coloniality, and race. Critical race theories have always been very attentive to how power dynamics shape subjectivities and identity formations, emphasizing the “inherently contradictory and internally fractured” character of most racial regimes (Goldberg 2002b, 7). In particular, racial formation theory’s highly strategic and contextualized approach to how a racial regime operates, is sensible to subaltern struggles and forms of collective solidarity across time and space. Informed by a close reading of Gramsci’s concept of hegemony, racial formation theory has attempted to extend the Italian’s conceptual apparatus to race (Goldberg 2002a; Hall 2002; Omi and Winant 2002).

One of the few works in racial formation theory to explicitly address the state, David Theo Goldberg’s The Racial State (2002b) employs hegemony to understand the circulation of racial discourses and practices across state institutions. For him, race is reproduced not
only in “agencies and bureaucracies, legislatures and courts”, but also through “norms and principles, individuals and institutions” (Goldberg 2002b, 7). His relational approach is employed to examine the ‘racial character’ of all modern states, how they “are racial in their modernity, and modern in their racial quality” (Goldberg 2002b, 7). In this sense, modern states “fabricate races, imputing to them a semblance of coherence. They do not create races artificially from whole cloth, however, but pick up the threads for designing the racial fabric from various sources, scientific and social, legal and cultural”. States weave race “into the social fabric, and indeed the fabric of the modern state is fashioned with racially woven threads” (Goldberg 2002b, 130–31).

Goldberg’s project understands the state as a historically contingent structure instead of a “unique institutional entity” (2002b, 33). This means that location, historical conjuncture, and relations of power are vital to examine the racialized character of states. Race signals to the state’s multiple trajectories and origins because it occupies a “structural position” in “producing and reproducing, constituting and effecting racially shaped spaces and places, groups and events, life worlds and possibilities, accesses and restrictions, inclusions and exclusions, conceptions and modes of representation” (Goldberg 2002b, 104). However, racial regimes constantly face challenges, and their unity can be fractured by disruptive events, requiring constant reinvention. “But once institutionalized in and through the state, the state now racially conceived cannot speak, cannot state itself, other than in the terms of race” (Goldberg 2002b, 119–20).

I interpret Goldberg’s call to historical specificity as the need to address the interaction between modern states and racial regimes in one of the earliest examples where this occurs: The Valley of Mexico. I am interested in employing the tools of racial formation theory because of their affinity to Marxist and postcolonial approaches to the state, but also because of the productive dialogue it can have with critical race theories from Abya Yala.
As Bonilla-Silva has proposed, we need to assume a “better explanatory position” to “understand race” by ‘going back to the beginning’ and examining “the historical experiences of the oldest racial regimes in the world” (2015, 79). Making a clear reference to Abya Yala, Bonilla-Silva warns us that this approach is not only useful to establish a deeper genealogy of racism and its practice, but serves to identify and compare how racial regimes are organized across time and space. Consequently, “there is no one “racism” but rather variations in how racial regimes are organized and, hence, variations in the racial ideologies of those regimes” (2015, 75).

Similar in rationale to critical state theorists and UCD scholars, Bonilla-Silva retains a relational conception when he states that race is the effect “of racial practices of opposition”, elevating “racial contestation” to the pinnacle or “crucial driving force of any racialized social system” (Bonilla-Silva 2015, 75). The key for him is to understand the “mechanisms and practices” reproducing racism, including “the social, economic, ideological, and political levels responsible for the reproduction of racial domination” (2015, 75), instead of personal or individual attitudes of prejudice. I find this argument useful to make explicit why racial regimes are fundamental to the dialogue between critical state theory and UCD on global state formation: racial regimes link the problem of the ‘international’, or the impulse towards colonization and expansion, with the issue of (localized) state formation. I employ Bonilla-Silva’s distinction between race and ethnicity to derive even further the connection between race and state formation, given that the case of the Valley of Mexico suggests that an increased reference to ethnicity –and forms of intra-ethnic solidarity– was the main response against pressures of racial domination. Race on the other hand, was the tool employed by colonial discourse to attempt to disrupt subaltern forms of resistance and sociality, separating and classifying bodies according to differential, mutually exclusive political interests. However, the problem of where to draw
the line that separates ethnicity from race was not always easily settled, and “racial groups” constantly inhabited what Bonilla-Silva calls ‘spaces’, that is, groups of peoples “sharing a [racial] location without necessarily crystalizing into a social collectivity” (2015, 80), or a form of collective behavior based on racial belonging. I locate instances of Nahua dissidence and rebellion as inhabiting this unstable and contradictory racial space, a ‘structural’ position that explains their subsequent mobilization of the idea of ethnicity as an emergent or floating ‘unifier’ for anticolonial, trans-ethnic solidarities (Ari Chachaki 2014, 13–16).

However, my understanding of race and ethnicity as colonial albeit contested discourses and practices does not mean that I see racialization, in opposition to ethnicity, as merely a “matter of” setting “boundaries” among groups (Bonilla-Silva 2015, 83). I recognize boundary-making as an essential component of white supremacy, not of all racial practices and regimes, because as Bonilla-Silva remarks, “so far no society has created a social order fundamentally organized around the logic and practice of black or brown supremacy” (2015, 76). Given that my approach is informed by records of subaltern anticolonial organization, I am more interested in a framework that prioritizes “the highlighting of inter-group connection”, or the way in which collaboration is also substantively meaningful to processes of racial and state formation (Patil 2014, 362).

All three literatures discussed in this chapter converge on the relationality granted to modes of inter-group connection and conflict, whether we speak of class, geopolitical, or racial dynamics. But critical, decolonial theorizations of race have been able to reveal more explicitly the multiple links between all of them, and suggested productive alternatives for an ‘integral’ account of coloniality, race and the state. In particular, Waskar Ari Chachaki’s account of the creation of Indigenous activist networks—the Alcaldes Mayores Particulares or AMP—in Bolivia as a form of decolonial, inter-ethnic politics (2014, 3–16), informs my
understanding of how the Nahuas mobilized an idea of ethnicity that procured and solidified forms of collaboration in the face of colonial destruction. For him, the AMP presents an example of Indigenous organization that articulated a “new interpretive frame and a new language” for the “interests, identities, and claims across Bolivia’s indigenous communities”. This allowed them, in his account, to reach an “ideological consensus” across the “Indian peasantry, the emerging labor movement, and the modern nation-state”, eventually challenging “the landlords and then the peasant’s unions, state institutions, and the Catholic Church”. AMP efforts would also reach “a broader international audience”, extending its influence to “contemporary Bolivia”, as seen “in the political and cultural transformation taking place under the country’s first indigenous president” (Ari Chachaki 2014, 4).

Such strategic account affirms Indigenous practices “against oppressive social and labor policies”, and crucially, focuses on those that forged new ways of interacting with “local constituencies, local allies and politicians, and national supporters” (2014, 4). I see Ari Chachaki’s ‘new interpretive frame’ and ‘language’ as emerging –probably for the first time in modern history– during the Nahuas’ attempts at articulating a broad consensus on ethnic belonging. This includes “the potential of certain aspects of early colonial legislation to be repurposed as a tool in the Indians’ struggle”, as well as an emphasis on actors that provide “alternative understandings of nation making in modern Latin America” (2014, 3). Ari Chachaki’s purpose is to show that Indigenous “and independent communities” have been capable of developing “strong political organizations and a complex ideology that challenged the modern state’s discourses of ethnic domestication” (2014, 12). My goal is to expand further this approach by arguing that the emergence of a relatively unitary ensemble of intra-ethnic Indigenous institutions and discourses can first be seen in the crystallization of altepetl-based forms of political organization in early colonial Mexico.
At the same time, I localize the doings and undoings of Indigenous political institutions in what Vrushali Patil has termed ‘the perspective of social justice’, that is, an approach that accentuates “inter-group connection and collaboration” more than boundary-making. Seen by her as a key component of “decolonial struggle”, this strategy prioritizes abandoning “a misplaced emphasis on the scale of the racialized group in what are fundamentally multi-scalar phenomena”. Despite the “multi-scalar dynamics of racialization” she continues, “at the individual, group, national, international and other scales”, theories of race and ethnicity grant “hyper-visibility to some scales while others remain largely invisible” (Patil 2014, 362). Thus, a “more comprehensive analysis of racialization in colonial modernity” requires for her “a multi-scalar approach that acknowledges differences and commonalities among the “objects” of such racialization, as well as their interconnections” (Patil 2014, 364).

Similarities between critical state theories and UCD as developed so far also become clear in Patil’s project when she argues for a turn from ‘coloniality to relationality’. This would not imply forgetting coloniality as a crucial component of modernity, but a need to highlight “the parallel, interconnected histories of racialization (and resistance) of different groups across one or more racial formations” (2014, 374). In other words, her understanding of racial formations is motivated by an assessment of how particular forms of racialization interrelate and engage in processes of combination and uneven interaction, beyond traditional, hermetic units of analysis. By emphasizing multiple scalar dimensions to racialization, its effects on state formation are more legible, and the emergence of “new forms of human association with definite status differences” based on the notion of ‘race’ can be attached to institutional and material processes more clearly (Bonilla-Silva 1997, 472). After all, as Bonilla-Silva argues, “races historically are constituted according to the
process of racialization; they become the effect of relations of opposition between racialized
groups at all levels of a social formation” (1997, 474).

In synthesis, by putting UCD, critical state theory, and critical race theory in conversation,
I propose to begin to address the problem of acquiring a multi-scale, historically grounded
analysis of colonial state formation. In this respect, I follow Goldberg in arguing that the
structurally racialized character of the modern state comes from “tension between racial
conditions and their denial, racist states and their resistance”, as well as the ways in which
tension and denial are “taken axiologically” to negotiate deviations with respect to
racialized norms (2002b, 6). I will employ this mode of reasoning –which I have termed
‘relational’ so far– to find common threads across traditions, developing in the process a
capacious conceptual apparatus that can be better equipped to deal with the entanglements
of race, colonialism, and the state.
Archival traces of duress: Nahua epistemologies of land and anticolonial politics

Emerging at the core of the Valley of Mexico (Anahuac), Nahua conceptions of history are rooted in the experiences of a diverse multi-ethnic system of cultural and political interdependence that extends all over the region. In the early 1500s, it consisted of multiple urban centers distributed across the Valley with agricultural areas in between. Individual urban centers received the name of altepetl, and each had sovereignty over their lands and peoples. However, their regional political unity—that is, when they acted as a full collective body of several altepetl– was known as huey altepemeh. The capital–or central urban node–of Tenochtitlan acted as the seat of political and economic power, and was built in the 1200s by an inter-ethnic alliance between the altepetl of Tetzcoco (alternatively spelled Texcoco) and Tlacopan, in an effort to counter-balance the influence of Azcapotzalco. Eventually named Excan Tlahtolloyan (the triple alliance) by historians (Chimalpáhin 1998; Herrera Meza, López Austin, and Martínez Baracs 2013; Navarrete Linares 2011), Tenochtitlan was also the largest city of the Mesoamerican social system, that extends from what is now central-northern Mexico until roughly present-day Honduras and El Salvador (Blanton and Feinman 1984, 420). This ‘loose’ confederation—in the sense that no central power was ever imposed over the whole region before colonization– of social systems had in the sixteenth century a lingua franca: Nahuatl, the native language of the peoples of the Anahuac (Valley of Mexico). This is why the name of the language means to speak intelligibly or in an understandable way, as opposed to other adjacent languages that might not be understood by everyone. However, its geographical

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6 In the Anahuac now stands Mexico City, the largest metropolitan area of the Western hemisphere.
extension as common language meant that multiple variants of Nahuatl emerged from its interaction with predominant languages outside of the Anahuac.
Even within the Valley itself, no single variant of the language was practiced by everyone during the early 1500s. Nevertheless, most extant archives from the sixteenth century were written in *tecpillatolli* (elegant writing), a formalized style of Nahuatl that was mostly employed by *tlacuiloque* (public officials and leaders), *pipiltin* (principals or high-status individuals), and *tlahhtoque* (high rulers) (Lastra 1985; López Austin 1967). Most *altepetl* in the region of the triple alliance served as the basis for historical interaction and the conformation of diverse ‘ethnic’ identities, which meant that many of them housed pluri-ethnic populations (Nemser 2015a, 345). Rivalries between different polities would result in some *altepetl* being more predominant than others, but with the consolidation of the triple alliance in the mid-1400s, a system of general taxation and labor coordination was established. Most importantly, several large-scale political institutions were produced to regulate this web of inter- and trans-ethnic relationships, solidifying the important status of the Anahuac across the Mesoamerican system (Lockhart 1992, 14).

For the Nahuas, as well as other Indigenous groups inhabiting the Anahuac, “the traditions that dealt with origins gravitated around migratory processes, central to the articulation of a collective identity and the establishment of interethnic relations” (Levin Rojo 2007, 30–31). Different ethnic groups narrate their origins as being located somewhere far away (*Aztlan*), and their current fixed position is understood as a ‘revelation’ of the land, of its fertility and generosity. In this sense, Nahua conceptions of ethnic belonging are inherently dynamic within a framework of relational sovereign power. Mario Blaser, Ravi de Costa, Deborah McGregor, and William D. Coleman argue that most Indigenous epistemologies from Abya Yala “build on the notion that relationships constitute the very fabric of reality: without relations there is no world or life”. Furthermore, these

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\(^7\) An *altepetl* is fundamentally linked to the land because its name references the “territorial conditions of possibility for human existence” (Nemser 2015a, 345).

\(^8\) Hence the famous symbol in the Mexican flag that represents a snake standing in an island devouring a serpent.
“relationships are not limited by space, place, or time. [...] The scope of Indigenous knowledges is therefore enormous and challenges modern distinctions between nature and society and brings into view the intricate webs of relations that constitute all that is known”, taking “account of and care for the multiplicity of relations that exist between the elements of creation, all of which are endowed with life and agency” (Blaser et al. 2010, 8–9). Nahua ethnic identity formations are thus not classifiable as exclusively racial, political, economic, cultural, educational, or historical: instead, they are all of the above and more, and imply a set of responsibilities to the human and non-human which form the foundation for social reproduction.

To speak about humans and non-humans, or of nature and society as separate entities does not make sense in the context of life within the altepetl, hence the need for both stability and fluidity when instituting specific political orderings. After the beginning of European colonization, any direct challenge to the (dynamic) structural stability of this ‘institutional order’ produced a multiplicity of responses from Indigenous peoples, including overt resistance and rebellion. As James Lockhart asserts, “Rarely would the Spaniards attempt to divide an indigenous unit in a way not following already existing lines of subdivision, and seldom indeed would they try to create an independent unit in the absence of a recognized tlatoani [ruler] commanding the allegiance of a well-defined calpolli [neighborhood] set” (1992, 28; Gerhard 1972, 270–73). Lockhart is echoing an

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9 Indigenous epistemologies from Abya Yala are, in this particular sense, radically different from ‘Western’ or, more precisely, colonial epistemologies of social life. Their relational character conceives of difference “as being a matter of location rather than discrete essences. Diversity (of locations) is a precondition for the very existence of the web of life. By failing to recognize this relationality, analysts and commentators often misconstrue Indigenous movements for autonomy. For example, they construct Indigenous peoples’ demands for land in primarily economic or political rather than spiritual and emotional terms. Thus, they fail to recognize that their attempt to classify these demands as economic, cultural, political, or educational results from the very modern epistemologies and ontologies that contemporary Indigenous autonomy movements resist” (Blaser et al. 2010, 9).

10 Most Nahua and Nahua-influenced intellectuals argue that one of the driving principles of human life is the search for balance between the forces of destruction and the forces of creation (Chimalpahín Cuauhtlehuanitzin, Schroeder, and López de Gómara 2010, 79–82; López Austin 1997; 1972).
interpretation already formulated by Nahua chronicler Chimalpahin Cuauhtlehuanitzin, who—in his version of the conquest of Mexico—suggests that, in spite of all their loses, sovereignty was never renounced. For him, “the Spaniards lost more than the Indians, even if you compare the deaths and destruction that ensued for the former and the contentment and rest for the latter, for once he [the tlatoani] was dead, they remained in their houses and took a new king” (2010, 253).

All the documents I have used for this work were produced during a time when the process of colonization shook any existing framework of socio-epistemological existence. More specifically, Indigenous actors had to constantly remake their forms of self-representation through writing and many other practices, making possible to trace the effects of the torsion experienced by all living beings and their social relations in alphabetic, pictographic, and symbolic texts. Consequently, the archives that I employ are more than mere repositories of (instrumentalized) information, but textual representations of the land, its people, and the processes they endured in a time where ‘survivance’ required—as it continues to do so today—making use of all resources available. Almost the entirety of the archives I examined are written in Nahuatl, and because of linguistic barriers with other Indigenous languages of Mexico, I decided to only focus on sources in Nahuatl and Spanish. A considerable majority of the documents were written by tlacuiloque (public

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11 There is an immense amount of literature that deals with the torsion and transformation of meaning in Indigenous cultures of Mexico, mostly coming—in academic discourse—from anthropology, history, sociology, and cultural studies. In my opinion, some notable examples that deal with the process of ‘trans-culturation’ from an Abya Yalan perspective are: (Alcántara Rojas and Navarrete Linares 2011; Anthias 2017; Ari Chachaki 2014; Bartra 2008; Bialakowsky et al. 2018; Corsín Jiménez 2018; Dussel 2004; Echeverría 1976; 2000; Gareis 2005; González Casanova 1969; 1998; González Navarro 1968; Grosfoguel 2007; Gutiérrez 2012; León-Portilla 1969; León-Portilla and Navarrete 2007a; Levin-Rojo 2001; Maldonado-Torres 2007; Méndez 2005; Ortiz 1995; Quijano 2006; Rabasa 2001; 2008; Rivera Cusicanqui 2006; 2010a; 2010b; 2010c; Sanjinés 2000; 2002; 2014; Sanjinés C. 2016; Segato 2010; 2011).

12 I employ the definition of survivance proposed by Anishinaabe scholar Gerald Vizenor: “an active sense of presence over absence, deracination, and oblivion; […] the continuance of stories, not a mere reaction, however pertinent. […] renunciations of dominance, detractions, obtrusions, the unbearable sentiments of tragedy, and the legacy of victimry” (Vizenor 2008, 1).

13 Others are written in Mixtec (ñuu dzahui), Popoloca (ngiwa), Zapotec (diidxa), and Spanish (Castilian).
officials), and in some cases Spaniards—as well as unidentified individuals—were in charge of the interpretation and translation, especially when the case required an intervention from the General Court of Indians. Most of the publications of sixteenth and seventeenth century documents that I employ have been originally restored, curated, and translated by nahuatlato Constantino Medina Lima and Luis Reyes García. The complex convulsions that their language experienced particularly in the sixteenth century are sensibly and intelligently explained in their translations, and I have employed many of their interpretations to understand the nuances of such a rich and complex language like Nahuatl.

Historians of Mesoamerica like Eduardo Natalino dos Santos argue that most archival research on early colonization in central Mexico pays attention only to texts and documents from Spanish missionaries and colonial officials, scripting the voice and agency of Indigenous peoples to the realm of inconsequence. Chronicles like the Historias from different friars including Bernardino de Sahagún, Diego Durán, José de Acosta or Toribio de Benavente Motolinía have served as the canonical texts from which the history of Spanish colonialism in Mexico is reconstructed (dos Santos 2007, 231–32). However, Nahuas prolifically engaged in history-writing and the registration of multiple events at the time, including the adoption of notarized documents as early as 1530 (Rojas Rabiela, Rea López, and Medina Lima 1999a, 1:26). Nahua documents, according to Rojas Rabiela, represent a “privileged source to carry out different types of studies about the transformation of Mesoamerican pueblos” as well as the “continuity of pre-Hispanic culture throughout the colonial period” (1999a, 1:17). The structure and narration techniques employed by tlacuiloque was far from uniform, and included the use of pictographic techniques, literature, oral history, and cartography. Some of the topics

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14 Native Nahuatl speaker.
covered range from proverbs for children to everyday issues and disputes, including extensive details on how different communities and individuals adapted and transformed themselves during this time.

When examining letters, testimonies, testaments, and land decrees and agreements, I emphasize how they reveal crucial aspects of the transformation of Indigenous political structures from the perspective of the communities themselves. I argue that the special interest *tlacuiloque* and Nahuas developed in notarized documents comes from the perception of these as ‘political means of production’, by which I mean resources that could be weaponized against colonial encroachment and consolidated in a set of transformed political institutions.\(^\text{15}\) According to Sarah Cline and Miguel León-Portilla, Nahua testaments are also useful to understand the functioning of ‘subaltern’ governance during the period (1984, 2:5–6). The testaments of Culhuacan,\(^\text{16}\) for example, reveal that many *tlacuiloque* were not officially regulated by Spanish authorities, as is the case with testaments where existing colonial notarial titles and signatures are not included. Nahua terminology is employed to address land measurement, the allocation of its use, and the communities involved in their support (Cline and León-Portilla 1984, 2:10), revealing the multiple connections and inseparability of politics from land, as well as the need for developing strategies for survivance and consolidation. As Federico Navarrete has noted, Nahua documents of this time contain an ‘experimental’ character that he defines as ‘double dialogue’, that is, the development of “complex discursive strategies, like […] hidden discourses or subtext that attempted to satisfy its different audiences” (2007, 99).\(^\text{17}\)

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\(^\text{15}\) However, my understanding of notarized documents is not juridical, and does not derive from an analysis of juridical and property practices. I consider the latter a component among many of the ‘political means of production’.

\(^\text{16}\) All English translations of the Testaments of Culhuacan employed here are from Cline and León-Portilla (1984). I will indicate if a particular term in Nahuatl requires a clarification not evident in the translation.

\(^\text{17}\) For a detailed analysis of a Mesoamerican text that deploys this ‘double dialogue’, see (Navarrete 2004).
During the first decades of the sixteenth century, many Nahuas assumed the role of ‘mediators’ between Spanish colonists and Indigenous populations to administer the implementation of colonial policy. Most of them were tlacuiloque that learned the alphabet and used amatl and other kinds of paper to transcribe the testimonies of different individuals in their communities and beyond. This was a ground-level, day-to-day activity from which radical conflict emerged constantly, because it included adapting to the construction of colonial institutions while attempting to maintain political sovereignty.

More specifically, tlacuiloque began an intense labor of translation and documentation, including the composition of stories, paintings and drawings, official documents, and the translation of thousands of pages from European texts, developing in the process multiple forms of presence and adaptation to colonial society (dos Santos 2007, 227; Gruzinski 2000, 20–21). This implied that tlacuiloque were able to teach ‘foreign’ concepts and ideas to their own people, including alternative forms of reception and interpretation. In spite of suffering dramatic changes in a very compressed period of time, it would be exaggerated to speak of a ‘Westernization’ of the Nahuas and the creation of a radically different form of consciousness that uprooted Indigenous principles in favor of the transplantation of European elements (Alcántara Rojas 2007, 119, 121). Berenice Alcántara Rojas synthesizes properly the kernel of ‘intercultural transformation’ or ‘transculturation’ at play in the materialization of all institutions of early colonial society. For her, “Europeans and Naturals decided to employ part of the categories and codes of the other to make themselves legible. The first desired that “Indians” would understand that their submission to Spanish powers was a “just” retribution for the immense gift that these brought with Christianity, that they recognized their political institutions and made the new religion theirs. The second ones wanted that conquerors understood their full quality as human beings, the worthiness of their history and lineages and the rationality of their ways of being in the world” (Alcántara Rojas 2007, 115, n. 4).
However, Alcántara Rojas warns that extant Nahua documents from the sixteenth century “escape easy and monolithic models of classification”. Instead, “novelty, curiosity, new findings and rootedness to very ancient traditions predominate” (2007, 159), asserting the relational character of Nahua politics and epistemology. Many colonizers, particularly mendicant friars and missionaries, attempted to emulate the experimental character of Nahua documents to address Indigenous peoples in a way that made sense to them. In an effort to introduce Christianity and evangelization, colonists were probably unaware that, simultaneously, they were reinforcing and accommodating to forms of expression that significantly changed the original, colonial discourse. An example is Bernardino de Sahagún’s *Historia General*, that contains almost two different texts –one in Castilian or Spanish, the other in Nahuatl– when he lays out his critique and refutation of Indigenous ‘idolatry’. In the Castilian version, he denounces the adoration of any ‘force of nature’ as “vain” and stemming from lack of knowledge or purposeful ignorance, employing a confrontational style that denies any validity to Indigenous spiritualities. On the other hand, the Nahuatl version is far more measured in its judgements and proposes that all the “gods of nature” as well as the knowledge they provide have an ultimate, unique source of power: the Christian god. He then spends most of the text arguing why this is the case, and how in the end Nahua spiritualities require the revelation of Christianity to be complete (Sahagún 1938, II:128–30).

Therefore, a relational reading of archival sources avoids committing the same mistakes as uncritical analyses that take colonial classificatory systems for granted. This gesture is generally preceded by a separation of sources according to the assumed ‘racial identity’ of the author, reifying essentialist notions of non-contamination of Indigenous knowledges

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18 The texts that I employ here appear in Sahagún’s *Historia General*, specifically in the Appendix to Book I. In this section, he proposes to ‘refute all idolatry’. See (Sahagún 1938, II:113) a facsimile edition of one of the original versions from 1563.
and interpreting Indigenous rebellions as culturally particular, localized struggles. Instead of dividing sources based on a pre-established notion of racial identification, I understand documents as provisional instances of information subject to a specific constellation of knowledge production and dissemination (Inoue Okubo 2007, 88) characterized by the cataclysmic events of colonization.

The land belongs to Ciuayztitzin: Testaments as sovereign claims of political independence in the Anahuac

Adopted as early as 1530 and quickly infused with the tradition of Nahua ‘codex’ writing (Rojas Rabiela, Rea López, and Medina Lima 1999a, 1:26), testaments are a registry of belongings, lands, and responsibilities among members of different communities. Mostly written by tlacuiloque with the presence of witnesses, who tended to be members of the ‘extended family’, testaments contain diverse preoccupations, strategies, and concepts employed by the peoples of the Anahuac before their passing. Because of the urgency and gravity of the matter, it was usual that other people would gather around, serving as external witnesses that represented the ‘public eye’. A network of collective relations beyond the individual provided fertile soil to transmit the lessons, but also demands, of the deceased, in a time were illnesses and the dramatically amplified exploitative character of labor were taking too many lives. Therefore, my reading emphasizes changing configurations of land tenure as inherently epistemological and political, that is, as a contested process of land defense, acquisition –or rather expropriation– and loss, that crystalized (or materialized) in a new configuration of power relations characterized by the need to ‘regulate’ and ‘account for’ Indigenous bodies and their destinies to secure a ‘good government’. 
I focus predominantly on the cases of multiple powerful Nahua women – Angelina Poqui, Madalena Tiacapan, Juana Hernández, María Salomé, María Gerónima de Ateponazco, and María Tiacapan – because of how they assert a sense of continuity between land, body, and political sovereignty in a context of increased attempts at ‘regulation’. At the same time, I highlight the testaments of two prominent pipiltin because of their extension and detail: Alonso de la Cruz Thezozomoc’s, and Pedro Matlahualcaltzin’s. Both try to arrange the ‘succession’ of vast extensions of land that covered multiple communities, and offer a look into how the rulers of the Anahuac began to understand their political responsibilities in a distinctively new way, shaped by the concern for good government.

Angela Poqui was a resident of Cotolco, Mexico City, and at the time of her passing, she was concerned about her two small children. Her husband had already passed away some years before, and she was left alone to take care of them with the only resource available to the family: two pending debts owed by Martín Tentli of Ecatepec, and Jhoana Papan of Tenayuca. Both places were considerably far from her home in Cotolco, even considering that Martín owed ten pesos for a piece of land, and Jhoana had also been using an elbow of land next to her door without retribution. Probably sensing the difficulty of her predicament, Angela decided to summon the members of her community through the intervention of Cotolco’s respected tlacuilo and member of the ayuntamiento (‘city council’) of Mexico City, Bernabé Huitztecpanecatl. In response, another three prominent political leaders and public officials attended Angela’s dictation, serving as witnesses and guarantors that her debtors would always favor her children after she died, and as ‘guardians’ to them and ‘neighbors’ to Poqui19 (Huitztecpanecatl, n.d.). Angela’s wishes appear to have been followed – albeit in a tragic turn of events – because some years later,

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19 In the testament, Angela’s witnesses are named Pedro Moquetiza, Domingo Cuixcocolatl, and Martín Teuca. Their names also appear in several testaments of the same region, and are always addressed as honorable people by their interlocutors.
her son Jhoan Tehutzil was dictating his own testament to one of his mother’s notable friends, Pedro Moquetiza. Jhoan begins by reminding those present that he is the son of ‘Angelina’ Poqui, and that all he has was inherited from her. Because of an unknown illness, Jhoan was forced to travel to the coast, and his concerns for the land he left behind were eased by the fact that his wife would remain in charge. However, she belonged to a different community and had recently arrived, prompting some people to make fun of her and disrespect her standing, a situation Jhoan did not seem to take very kindly. He reminded his audience that most new members of the community had been able to arrive and obtain land because of his mother, and that after his passing, his wife could re-marry with the condition that she stayed as part of the community. Alongside Pedro Moquetiza stood Domingo Cuixcoatl and Martín Teuca once again, with all their relations, debts, and responsibilities, as well as those of the collective, laid out in detail throughout the text (Moquetiza, n.d.). Testaments, in this sense, were not only allowing one same genealogical family to retain a sense of their political sovereignty through land tenure, but also reaffirming the individual’s intrinsic connection to a wider network of relations and institutions embodied in the figure of particular, notable leaderships.

Not very far away from Cotolco, Madalena Tiacapan was also dictating her testament in the barrio20 of Tlachuac, Tenochtitlan. Her case resonates with Angela Poqui’s because of her deep concern with the destiny of the land once she passed away; however, Madalena’s reasoning denoted a very careful reflection about what the land means to the people of Tenochtitlan. After enumerating her possessions and their rightful inheritors – several houses left to her daughters, and a salt deposit for her husband Antonio Tlaui– she declares that the land over which she has presided in her position of authority belongs to Ciuayztitzin, which very probably is a different spelling of ciuhatzitzintin (collective of

20 Its meaning is roughly similar to neighborhood in English.
women), the members of Tlachuquac more capable of maintaining its legacy for future generations. Not content with mentioning the latter once, she repeats at the end of her testament that the soil over which her houses stand belongs to the grandchildren of Ciuayztitzin, not just her blood-related family or closest allies. In particular, Madalena seems to be interpellating her daughters, reminding them with concise figures and precise measures where all their properties, plots and chinampas are located at, as well as their responsibilities as new caretakers.21

Doña María Salomé, from Tzacualco, Cuauhtitlan, also specified that her houses, temazcal, chicken barn and several plots of land would be held by her daughter so her granddaughter Ana Pilantli could benefit from them in the future. Here, she seems to bring attention to her granddaughter because her daughter Bárbara Mónica appeared to be sick and she probably feared her death. However, her lands with magueyes were not to be sold, naming her granddaughter as sole inheritor given that she had no other family left. In the meantime, presuming that Ana was very young at the time, the products from these lands could be sold to the church only to pay for hers and her two husband’s masses. Other lands and properties were left to a man by the name Andrés Leonardo and his wife, whose relationship with the testator is not specified. The remaining lands were to be sold to other unspecified buyers, but their purpose was delineated as making use of their produce to pay for tributes, leaving some individuals of her community and surrounding ones as witnesses so that this would materialize (Feliciano, n.d.).

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21 Chinampas or chinamitl are a Nahua agricultural technology that consists in building man-made extensions of farmland into a lake. Each chinampa is measured in matl, a standardized measure that covers from the edge of one arm to the other stretched, including the torso. The chinampa was very common during the sixteenth century and before, and the city of Tenochtitlan was entirely built with this technology. Nowadays, chinampas are commonly used in the boroughs of Xochimilco and Milpa Alta, Mexico City.
Madalena Tiacapan’s testament reveals an emerging form of ‘double consciousness’ (Du Bois 2007, 8) produced by the political pressures of colonization, and its response in the need to assert political sovereignty by Indigenous peoples. On the one hand, the sense of continuity—or relationality—between women’s bodies as caretakers, the land as mother and base for all human and non-human activities, and the political-institutional order, is asserted through the consolidation of a registry system that allows people to preserve a sense of identity and independence. On the other, by registering most important events and installing an institutional framework conducive to this, the ‘regulationist’ imperative of modern colonial states, that is, the need to quantify, calculate, and control the flow of bodies inside a particular territorial area, is introduced to Nahua power relations, eventually acquiring a reproductive logic of its own.

Increased consciousness of the imperative to quantify and calculate were also evident to Nahuas in high positions of authority. For don Juan Francisco de Ychinoco this seems to have happened around the time when the Inquisition required him to give away a portion of his people’s land, the year of 1554. His divine majesty, as he calls Charles V in his testament, and the Holy Burial of Christ, or the Catholic church, were to be given whatever was left after the limits, responsibilities, and conditions of Ecatepec—the name of his pueblo—were sorted out first. His two houses and all the lands with magueyes had to be taken care of by his wife (María Christina), daughter (Juana Beatriz), sister (María Francisca), and brother (Juan Bernardino), and the latter in particular was tasked with the responsibility of supervising that the land required by the church would be given appropriately. Afterwards, Juan Francisco considerably changes his tone and begins listing,

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22 W.E.B. Du Bois defines double consciousness as “at once a deprivation (an inability to see oneself except ‘through the eyes of others’) and a gift (an endowment of ‘second-sight’, that seems to allow a deeper or redoubled comprehension of the complexities” (Du Bois 2007, xiv, 8) of our modern, racialized identities.

23 A species of plant from the family of Asparagaceae, from which mezcal, pulque, and quiote, among many other things, are produced.
with relational and cartographic precision, all the plots of land associated with his family: lands at the end of the main road in Sotolco, in the community of Cohuatitlán, behind an orchard, in Tzapotitlán, Comisco, Nextlalpan, Tepetlac, and Guahuei. What relates all these seemingly scattered places and landscapes are neighbors, friends, and relatives who attended Juan Francisco’s testament dictation, including Miguel Sánchez, listed as mayor. This web of relationships cuts through ‘modern’ conceptions of public versus private life and acquires, from the perspective of Juan Francisco and his kin, an epistemological consistency that connects land, family, community, city, and government, and highlights the personal in the political.24 The precise location of each site was determined by the names of those who lived proximately: the orchard besides Petronila’s, magueyes by Juan Bernardino’s house, and crucially, the lands of Tzapotitlán and Comisco, which he left to Juan Bernardino and Matheo Francisco –a neighbor– to supervise and deliver to the church. Relationships denote a network of Indigenous political influence that did not only extend to the confines of a single community or pueblo and its forms of internal sovereignty: 182 years later, in 1736, interpreter Matheo Daniel de Rojas translated don Juan Francisco de Ychinoco’s testament to Spanish because of a land dispute carried by members of the same community (Xacobo, n.d.).

Thus, the durability of new forms of documentation, and their distribution across huey altepemeh, provided tools for political sovereignty and institution-making while constraining relational conceptions of land through the emergence of a new grammar focused on liminality. Juana Hernández and Jhoana de Sancta Ana, both from the barrio of Sancta Ana Huitzila, Tenochtitlan, employ cardinal points to design the spatial limits of their respective estates, and enumerate with precision all their material possessions.

24 Against modernist discourses that insist on dividing mind from body, and rationality from emotions, the testaments narrated so far assert their inseparability. Therefore, politics are always-already emotional and embodied, collective and familiar.
Whereas Juana –writing or dictating in 1574– stresses that no other person can have their land except for her daughters, as well as her interest in posterity and future generations; Jhoana –doing the same just two years later– opted for a clear division of her estate among individuals, and carefully assigned particular items to her sister, daughter, and nephew (García, n.d.; Ceberino, n.d.). I argue that both movements –or displacements– encapsulate the contradictions taking place in the transformation of Nahua political institutions, straddling between an emerging instrumental understanding of land and its ‘resources’, and a relational, ‘holistic’ mode of living that acknowledges embodied, familiar, and collective responsibilities at the same time.

Indeed, doña María Gerónima de Ateponazco placed an emphasis on the precious technology contained in her lands: an irrigation canal\(^{25}\) that cut across her barrio of San Pablo, Tenochtitlan in 1592. Most people in San Pablo used it to navigate from their barrio to the larger calzadas, and some of them required it to bring supplies from the towns at the shores of the lake. Without hesitation, María Gerónima asserts that all of the above belongs to her family’s estate, given that it was acquired with the sweat and hard work of her son Diego Salvador. Immediately afterwards, her sense of confidence and entitlement is modulated by an acknowledgement of the responsibilities it carries: the canal must be kept open and available to the barrio. She names each of her witnesses and requires them to carry out her wishes, defiantly announcing that she would be buried by her sons in a huipil\(^{26}\) (Miguel, n.d.). “Save and take my things into account”, some of María Gerónima’s last words, were also vindicated more than 100 years later, when, in a grievance against criollos,\(^{27}\) her testament was employed at the General Court of Indians to resolve her

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\(^{25}\) Testaments call irrigation canals acequias. Besides their function as an irrigation system, acequias are also employed as canals, where many people transport goods and merchandise on canoes (chalupas).

\(^{26}\) Traditional Mexican dress employed by diversity of ethnic groups. Each region –and regions within regions– has a different style, and invaluable cultural-historical significance.

\(^{27}\) Descendants of Spaniards born in Abya Yala. According to the Spanish Empire’s casta policy, criollos were located a step below Spaniards, or peninsulares.
However, the larger the land to be accounted for, the more difficult it was to negotiate its registration and determine who the rightful caretakers were. In some instances, both traditional and emergent forms of inter-ethnic solidarity flourished, whereas in others, rivalries among ethnic groups consolidated protracted processes of land and political contestation. Both effects of colonial duress\textsuperscript{28} were generally framed in testaments as the destabilization of power relations between pipiltin and macehualtin, given that the first tended to see their privileges and material wealth increased during the first century of colonization, whereas the second commenced a long, difficult, and often violent struggle to reclaim political sovereignty. Don Alonso de la Cruz Thezozomoc was at the forefront of this process in his role as cacique of Azcapotzalco in 1590, when his testament was dictated. A descendant of former respected tlatoque of Azcapotzalco, including Tezozomoc—who presided over the most influential period of his altepetl in the Anahuac—(Chimalpáhin 1998, II:210–29), Alonso spends some time listing his ancestors and all the leadership roles they had in the past, including governors, mayors, regents, and judges. For him, governing the people was a matter of loving them as sons and being charitable, that is, of securing their happiness and wellbeing. But his preoccupation for ‘good government’ was accompanied by an anxious sense of entitlement reflected in his calls to magnify status differences between pipiltin and macehualtin: the latter were to be treated properly, but not

\textsuperscript{28} I employ this term according to Ann Laura Stoler’s definition. For her, ‘duress’ designates the “temporal, spatial, and affective coordinates” of colonial domination. It is “a trace but more often an enduring fissure, a durable mark” that manifests “the hardened, tenacious qualities of colonial effects; their extended protracted temporalities; and, not least, their durable, if sometimes intangible constraints and confinements”. Finally, duress “is neither a thing nor an organizing principle so much as a relation to a condition, a pressure exerted, a troubled condition borne in the body, a force exercised on muscles and mind. It may bear no immediately visible sign or, alternatively, it may manifest in a weakened constitution and attenuated capacity to bear its weight”. Duress is “tethered to time but rarely in any predictable way” (Stoler 2016, 6–7).
sufficiently well so that they were indistinguishable from ‘principals and caciques and governors’, as well as their descendants (García Cortés Moctezuma, n.d.).

On the other hand, and seven years later, don Martín de la Cruz was more preoccupied with communal accountability in his role as mayor of Tecamachalco. Without providing a particular reason—but most probably because of the labor demands from colonial exploitation—, Martín was required to send most of his ‘naturals’ to the town of Tlacotepeque, urging his daughter and granddaughter to supervise their stay and represent him with the authorities of that pueblo. Whereas he also treats those under his rule as ‘sons’ and ‘vassals’, his concern for a safe transition and adaptation of his macehualtin workers to the new pueblo’s conditions is not an accidental feature of many Nahua testaments from high-ranking individuals (Hernández Maldonado, n.d.). María Tiacapan, whose testament is estimated to have been written in 1579 (León-Portilla 1976, 12–13), had no consanguineous children to inherit her large estate, and decided to divide responsibilities between three of her nephews: Gaspar Cuetli, Melchor Tlezannen, and Lorenzo Yaoxochiquitl. However, no one could disrupt this balance nor desire to do so, and objections should not be met with an answer from her family (Cline and León-Portilla 1984, 2:20–23, f. 4v, 5r). María’s case is much more relevant because of how it was met with an almost opposite answer from another influential woman of Culhuacan, María Salomé. Dictating her will in the same year, and delineating with precision the territorial limits of the estate, she exhorts her community, neighbors and strangers, to continue supervising her descendant’s roles and responsibilities in Culhuacan. A house, 27 chinampas, 5 plots of land, and a cultivated field were left to daughter María Ana, nephew Juan Yaomitl, and husband Juan Téllez, who under the watchful eye of the public would

29 The gendered dimension all too visible in Nahua testaments will not be analyzed in detail here. However, it remains an essential component to understand the social and political history of this time, as well as the process of (post)colonial state formation (López Hernández 2012; López Hernández and Echeverría García 2011; Schroeder 2014; Seed 1988; Silverblatt 1995).
attempt to stabilize all signs of conflict arising from land transferal (Cline and León-Portilla 1984, 2:27–29, f. 10v).

Juan Téllez would go on to become the fiscal or ‘attorney general’ of Culhuacan, and in his testament he auctions most of the estate received from his ancestors. However, he provides a detailed list of all beneficiaries, including their names, pueblo or barrio, and relationship to other acquaintances, revealing that most of them were also pipiltin. Martín Tlacatepecanecatl, Antonio Xallacatl, and Jacobo de Maldonado were to supervise fray Juan Núñez of the church in the process of land acquisition, employing once more all the networks of power available to maintain control of a territory that was threatened because of the untimely demise of its rulers.

The same can be said of macehualtin inhabitants of Culhuacan, like Juan Tezca, who left his estate—mostly inherited from his grandfather Francisco—of a house and 2 chinampas to his wife Juana. He suddenly changes topic to speak about an issue with collectively owned land in Xilomanco, and the measures required of its solution. The church had requested resources from a quarry controlled by Culhuacan, and Juan asked all the other landowners to assemble and determine the portion of stone that belonged to his share. Afterwards, they would employ this share to pay the church and aid in the construction of the temple of Transfiguración30, a solution that accounted for the value of labor and translated it to the quantitative measure of a single item, in this case stone. Whether Juan Tezca’s solution was eventually applied or not pales in comparison with the fact that most testators of this time felt the need to carefully address political issues. Without the approval of collective governing bodies and important political leaderships, significant changes in the landscape could not be executed, including individuals who could apparently—given

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30 The text reads: “nonemac tetl tlallan ca oncan monequiz yn teopan transfiguration” (f. 13r), which loosely means ‘all stone that has been given to me and found below the land will be used for the only purpose of the temple of transfiguration’.
their social standing—‘freely’\textsuperscript{31} decide what to do with their estates (Cline and León-Portilla 1984, 2:33, f. 12v, 13r).

An early example of testament writing (1546), don Marcos de San Pedro Matlahualcaltzin was a prominent \textit{pilli}—singular for \textit{pipiltin}—from Tlayacac who administered lands “from where the sun rises to where it sets”. After the conquest and because of his services to a don Bernardo Cortés, Spanish colonist, he received nineteen stables with horses, dedicating his time to breeding them. However, his role extended to much more than a ‘collaborator’, and he appeared to have been actively involved in solving controversies over land and political sovereignty for a long time, propelling his position in colonial bureaucracy. Marcos Matlahualcaltzin spoke in a sophisticated, ornate style in Nahuatl and Spanish, denoting a deep knowledge of both languages’ codes and forms of expression across multiple contexts. The Nahuatl version of his testament contains rich and meticulous descriptions of the landscape where most of his lands sit, making constant use of composite words and metaphors.\textsuperscript{32} In a sense, they hide particular codes and messages that would not have been intelligible to a reader not acquainted with the land and the people referenced. When ‘catholic beliefs were not around’, he argued, the bossy neighbors of Tlalnahuac secured most of their previously existing territories because of his intervention with Spanish authorities. His son, Pedro Jorge de Hinojosa, as well as his ‘tributary sons’—inhabitants of Tlayacac and Tlalnahuac—had to start helping each other to secure tribute payments to the colonists.

With precise instructions and detailed locations, don Marcos speaks about notable landmarks in the territory, describes the qualities of certain rocks, creeks, trees and

\textsuperscript{31} In the context of Spanish colonization (and colonialism in general), there is no such thing as ‘freely’ giving away anything. However, I employ the term as a real abstraction, that is, as a formal, textual, and juridical category that takes a historically concrete form (or has material effects).

\textsuperscript{32} Nahuatl is a language of ‘particles’, which means that concepts can be composed of a combination of words.
canyons, and establishes limits between groups. He also employs metaphors to compare pathways with animal shapes, different states of putrefaction, the symbol of a hand common in Nahua cartography, and many other things. His goal was to leave a clear registry of all there was and had to be accounted for, even though his son Pedro already knew very well where everything was. A warning or a statement of fact, Marcos Matlahualcaltzin’s calculative operation ends up with a note of authority, requesting that if anything wrong were to happen to his people, they could request an audience with ‘the lord of Tenochtitlan’, the mayor or the lieutenant governor. For as long as the world lasts, don Marcos concludes, his children would have the lands, and no one had the right to take them away (Morales, n.d.).

‘Novelty, curiosity, and rootedness’: Towards a relational reading of coloniality

In the decades following the ‘conquest of Mexico’, Europeans held a precarious balance of forces in which alliances with certain Indigenous groups was essential. With no clear hegemonic bloc presiding over the Anahuac, let alone the rest of central Mexico or Mesoamerica, the testaments of Nahua pipiltin and macehualtin illustrate the complexities associated with establishing a form of rule adequate to colonial pressure and subordination. In this sense, resilience and adaptation, and their uneven, contradictory assertion in the texts are useful to have a glimpse at the conditions that Nahuas themselves were able to impose on the colonizers. As Danna Levin Rojo argues, Europeans have been endowed with full agency in most academic discourse, creating the sense that all colonial interactions were inconsequential to them, or that they stand as “impervious and refractory subjects” (2007, 24).

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33 ‘Ymatzi ynehmolhuilin yn quexquiuh’ in the original, which can be translated as ‘for the same amount of time as the land has existed’.
34 The limits of the viceroyalty of New Spain were ‘finally’ settled in 1587.
However, early attempts at colonial governance in the Anahuac show that “in asymmetrical transcultural encounters” we can speak of more than domination, conquest, objectification, inferiority, and finally elimination or marginalization (Levin Rojo 2007, 48). “In the process of colonization and conquest” she continues, Spaniards were also “receptive to Indigenous reality and its form of understanding and perceiving the world”. ‘ners’. Whether they did so willingly or not, the shock of colonial interactivity transformed the colonist’s sense of self and certainty, and made Indigenous peoples actively appropriate elements of “the culture that was being imposed” (Levin Rojo 2007, 49). But the sphere of intercultural struggle and transformation –or ‘intersubjective space’, as Levin Rojo calls it (2007, 31)– in which both Nahuas and Spaniards developed their representations of the colonial condition also had particular material and institutional effects. I will focus on the apparition of títulos primordiales, or ‘primordial titles’, in the Anahuac as one of the multiple strategies that Nahuas appropriated from Spanish juridical and political traditions to weaponize their claims to political sovereignty. In a context of turbulence and existential confusion, such strategies operate as ‘political means of production’, that is, the capacity to relatively determine or shape the constitution of the political and institutional structure of the state.
CHAPTER 3

From títulos primordiales to the possibilities of a decolonial state theory

“Gods remain unchanged by the process of creation and, it was said, can think only of themselves. [...] Craftsmen change matter while changing themselves in the process of creation”

(Shanin 1983, 32).

The frenetic pace and profundity of changes occurred in central Mexico during the first one hundred years of colonization (1519-1620s) reached everyone. No one could escape the effects of a transcultural encounter that produced new institutions, economic practices and cultural norms, but also massive destruction, death and misery. Nahuas –as well as other Indigenous peoples– and Spaniards alike endured what the Aymara and Quechua have called pachakuti, that is, a new way of being produced by a period of radical transformations that turned the world upside down ever since.35 Pachakuti allows us to see that Spaniards were not impervious to its consequences and that the ‘victorious party’ did not have free will in imposing their norms. Immutability and absolute power are rendered meaningless when confronted to the rhythms of pachakuti, which consists in the disproportion of all relations, their inversion and enclosure. However, it is also the space were multiple processes of interaction, combination, and the modelling of experiences about state-making first emerged in the early colonial period. These experiences were later on incorporated into broader mobility circuits and discourses on colonial governance, just as much as they appear on anticolonial rebellions and assertions of political sovereignty elsewhere in Abya Yala.

35 Pachakuti “conjures the idea of a truly epochal change outside of a linear conception of time. The word is derived from the melding of two words: pacha, which means space-time, and kuti, which means overturning or turning back” (Gutiérrez 2012, 62, n. 1).
As Irene Silverblatt argues, the “Spanish experience – fashioned out of colonial efforts and European conflicts – colored all the West’s state-building projects”, bounding from the outset “imperial expansion” to modern institutions and government (2004, 4). From the space inaugurated by the process of colonization, the modern state emerged as a thoroughly unintended consequence. Accordingly, I believe it is mistaken to speak of the latter exclusively as a ‘Western’ project, only ‘colored’ by the course of ‘imperial expansion’. This is why pachakuti is better suited to capture the complexity of such a large-scale event, because it sensibilizes us to its inherently dynamic character and brings us closer to think of it ‘through the eyes’ of the actors who experienced it, that is, as a political conjuncture in which the outcomes were entirely unknown for all actors involved. A blueprint for colonial policies was non-existent, as well as previous experiences of colonial settlement, opening up space for extremely conjunctural and sometimes precarious forms of domination. In this sense, both Nahuas and Spaniards were not fully in charge of what we now call state-building, or even aware that this was their final goal. Granted, particular forms of thinking and governing practices that eventually crystalized in the institutional configuration we now call the modern state appear at this point, and coalesced into a relatively coherent form of political power. But this does not mean that ‘Westerners’ inherently saw these as state effects, and modeled them in consequence. Such a move would grant them virtually absolute agency. Rather, what I propose is a more relational and historically grounded analysis of the emergence of the state, that confers much more agency to those who have been traditionally seen as ‘mere victims’, passive recipients, or disinterested, parochial, and apathetic beings.

This does not mean at any rate that colonialisms and their deep histories of oppression and destruction are not relevant. On the contrary, assessing them through the lens of the actors involved allows us to highlight their problematic and complex character, avoiding the traps
of what Silverblatt calls ‘state fetishism’. For her, this means “transforming the “state” into an entity with a life and power of its own”, a mode of structuring political life that “casts a wide net: it obscures the subjection of people, and it also obscures the subjection of nations”. It generates the “historical illusion that European nations developed autonomously, with pasts independent of the larger world community”, encouraging “the fiction that European countries (make that northern Europeans) were self-made” and that their so-called global ascendancy was “rooted in their preferred position on civilization’s highway – apart from any integral relationship with peoples outside their borders”. Against this, Silverblatt calls us to understand the state in relational terms, where “states and colonies were party to each other’s creation, including the re-creation of structured inequities”, honing in the process the state’s “basic mechanics of rule”. In sum, state fetishism “denies history” (2004, 15–16), or selectively picks those histories and actors that suit its pre-established narrative of Eurocentrism.36

For Silverblatt, the state as an idea and a form of governance emerged in the seventeenth century, when philosophers and colonial administrators began to talk about the responsibilities that the state owed to its subjects and the importance of employing a new form of rationality associated with bureaucratic regulation (2004, 9). However, my point is that the Anahuac provides sufficient evidence to suggest that the emergence of bureaucratic rationality occurs earlier, during the first half of the sixteenth century. Notions of ‘policía’ (police) or policing the manners and ways of thinking of individuals, as well as assessing their behaviors to determine whether or not they could be considered ‘proper’ members of a polity emerged at the time, linking bureaucratically regulated bodies to processes of institutionalization and surveillance. More specifically, policía operated as a form of ethnogenesis in colonial discourse, amalgamating a “heterogeneous mosaic of indigenous

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36 Fernando Coronil described this worldview as ‘Occidentalism’. See (Coronil 1996).
forms of life” and rendering it “homogeneous” under a single identity: ‘Indian’ (Nemser 2015b, 337). The consolidation of state power was thus colored from the outset by the ‘racializing gesture’, or the regime of intersubjective and material representation that divides human groups according to ‘racial’ lines, an assumed genetic or ‘blood inherited’ characteristic that supposedly determines cultural, political, moral, and intellectual traits of human beings.

However, policía was also a bitterly contested and dynamic process which included the formulation of ambivalent practices of government, most notably the idea of ruling as an inherently beneficent activity. The acquisition of means to produce knowledge about the ‘arts of governing’, and to access positions of power in the emerging state were not exclusive to Spaniards. This is the reason why I emphasize land and its role in the assertion of an ‘autonomous’ sphere of power concentrated in Nahuas’ hands. In my view, the modern state is inextricably based on land, transforming it into a calculable, geometrically regulated, and politically saturated site for the accumulation of power (Nemser 2014; 2015a). The internalization of “social categories that organize power by making them appear to be intrinsic to life” (Silverblatt 2004, 12), and the structuring of inequality through race, gender, religion and class have to be thought through the lens of land. Land, in the way it has been understood so far, is the inseparable underside of modern state rationality, revealing some of its most repressive and productive capabilities. Following Nicos Poulantzas (2000, 54–69), it could be said that the material emergence of the state lies in the expropriation of what I would term the ‘political means of production’ of everyday life. This process, which for Poulantzas inaugurates a differentiation between the manual and the intellectual, or land-labor on the one hand and knowledge-power on the

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38 Nowadays, racialism is translated into politics through the narrative of endemic corruption and the seeming naturalization of the ‘trait of dishonesty’ in peoples –and more specifically rulers– of the Majority World or Global South.
other, is fundamental to assemble an ‘autonomous’ sphere of state institutions and their independent bureaucratic rationality. Consequently, the state is the combined effect of a process of racialized primitive accumulation –what Nemser calls ‘primitive mestizaje’ (2015a, 337) for the Mexican case– and the relative monopolization of knowledge production and its moral categories.

“Huel monema yhuehue yn ilama yn itlatlol”:39 *Titulos primordiales* and the narrative of ‘spiritual disease’ as political means of production

Paula López Caballero and Kelly S. McDonough have brought attention to the *titulos primordiales* or ‘primordial titles’ that many communities across the Anahuac started to employ after the onset of colonialism to determine the boundaries of their lands (López Caballero 2003; López Caballero and Acevedo-Rodrigo 2018a; K. S. McDonough 2017; K. McDonough 2018). A product of syncretism between Nahua and European formalisms, primordial titles are pictographic documents produced by elders and their *tlacuiloque* that contain multiple teachings for members of a community, *pueblo* or *barrio*. According to McDonough, many of these documents also contain warnings against giving or showing them to colonizers, “and none directly address Spanish court officials” (K. S. McDonough 2017, 23, n.6). Alongside their employment of European juridical categories and forms of representation, many titles mirror the narrative structure and strategies characteristic of Nahua epistemologies of relationality. For example, the title of the *pueblo* of Cuixinco (present-day San Matías Cuijingo) that McDonough carefully examines incorporates several “micro-stories” about important events and persons, arranged in a way that appears to lack “a coherent narrative of a people’s long-term occupation of a particular territory” or its boundaries. Instead, most of the stories relate “to the pre-Hispanic and post-conquest histories of indigenous communities”, along with “elders

39 “It is truly your inheritance, the knowledge and words of the elders” (K. S. McDonough 2017, 8).
dispensing advice and warnings to the people” in a style that resembles the “huehuehtlahtolli, or elder-speech”. For her, “some primordial titles include stories that at first glance seem to be misplaced in a document that would be used to prove land rights”, like “stories about other peoples altogether” and “lengthy tracts dealing with the community’s choice of a patron saint”. However, “taken together they form a solid and compelling macro-story of how and why the people were […] tlalmaceuhque, a people meriting, or deserving, of their land” (K. S. McDonough 2017, 7–8).  

Primordial titles are thus much more than juridical tools to resist the mounting pressures of colonial duress. They teach lessons about the appropriate actions to become “worthy, deserving, of the land”, including theorizations about balance in the world and how it can be achieved. In this sense, I follow McDonough in asserting that titles “are complex and deeply instructive modes of knowledge work and action”, or the “intellectual unfurling of how Nahuas reflected and created their world(s) through the word, both spoken and written”. They are a form of “indigenous thought, self-representation, and teachings that enable survival in times of crisis” (2017, 8), and more specifically, opposition to colonial policies of forced Indigenous displacement and concentration, or what is known as congregación.

Starting in 1545, the policy of congregación attempted to concentrate a portion of the Indigenous population of central Mexico in newly designed orthogonal towns on flat valleys not very far from original Indigenous settlements (Fernández Christlieb and Urquijo Torres 2006). The main objectives were to facilitate evangelization and keep Indigenous bodies under the watchful eye of colonial authorities, or at least that is what...

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40 In contrast, McDonough remarks how Nahuas referred to the conquistador Hernán Cortés as cuimotlaniltlanli, or ‘land-taker’ (2017, 24–25, n. 17).

41 “Chronology does not organize these texts; the relationship between event, people, and places provides the general structure” (K. S. McDonough 2017, 10).
colonizers and priests thought at first. The first wave of congregaciones was carried out from 1545 to 1564, and could be considered a failure on the grounds that most Indigenous peoples actively resisted the process by refusing to relinquish their lands to colonial officials or escaping to more ‘remote’ areas in order to avoid persecution and forced labor. A second wave of congregaciones was imposed by a different viceroy in the late sixteenth century, extending to 1625. Once again an attempt to foster ‘orderly’ living and Christianization of Indigenous peoples, congregación became from the colonists’ perspective a way of ordering the use of land under the ultimate jurisdiction of the King, unless “specifically awarded” as “a merced, repartimiento, or encomienda”, something that was mostly not the case as late as the early seventeenth century. At the same time, as McDonough argues, whether “in response to mounting tensions on the ground” in Mexico or, “as a shrewd mechanism to fill the royal coffers”—considering that the Spanish crown had declared bankruptcy four times only in the sixteenth century— the Spanish King ordered a program of composición that would consist in providing “legalized titles of land ownership” to Spaniards and their descendants. Nevertheless, Indigenous peoples “astutely recognized the opportunity to protect their landholdings”, filing “scores” of petitions “to temporarily halt any redistribution of their lands while seeking legal title to the same” (K. S. McDonough 2017, 9–10).

As some ethnohistorians have noted (Carrasco 1996; Cline 1986; De Rojas 2017; Kellogg 1986; Lockhart 1991; Townsend 2017), Nahuas had no particular reason to abandon their epistemology of relationality through the inclusion of several, even competing, perspectives. This allowed them to “speak simultaneously to the intertwined indigenous and Spanish politico-religious legitimizing mechanisms of colonial Mexican society” (K. S. McDonough 2017, 17), having access to political resources to shape the destiny of the majority. In consonance with the emergence of the state as an apparatus composed of a
heterogeneous set of institutional, political, cultural and juridical elements with no clear hegemonic bloc, Nahuas (and other Indigenous groups) did not exist in mutually segregated social space, having little to no ‘intercultural’ contact. Rather, they constantly negotiated, interacted, and resisted on a daily basis in an “inherently heterogeneous colonial space” (K. S. McDonough 2017, 17). On the other hand, the social and cultural composition of colonizers –especially during the first decades after colonization– was far from homogeneous and well disciplined. The category of ‘Spaniard’ or ‘Spanish’ was not readily available at the time as an identity formation, stretching internal European hierarchies “precariously” (Silverblatt 2004, 19–20)\(^{42}\) in terms of regional and ethnic divides. According to Gruzinski –based on his analysis of texts from sixteenth century Spanish chroniclers–, the “social milieu embodied by the conquerors” was composed of “a jumble of different kinds of people”, including many “rootless, delinquent characters” with social differences “compounded by regional disparities: Castilians, Basques, and Extremadurans cordially detested one another and had a great deal of difficulty getting along” (Gruzinski 2002, 41). This created a situation were authority was constantly challenged and fissured, including that of the King. The supposedly “new sovereign authority” represented by the Spanish monarch “was limited, not to say nonexistent”, during the first decades after 1519, with many colonizers –including Cortés himself– seeking to employ land as their personal fiefdom. At the same time, many of their “habits were transformed by American seasons and food” (Gruzinski 2002, 45), constant interactions with Indigenous peoples, their traditions and languages, altering –for Gruzinski– the colonizers’ sense of self. “Like prisoners in a maze” he concludes, “Amerindians and Europeans advanced step by step, progressively resolving the difficulties and choices facing them” (Gruzinski 2002, 50).

\(^{42}\) See also (Martínez 2004; 2008).
The colonists’ response to such a conjuncture was mainly characterized by skepticism and suspicion of Indigenous subjectivities. As McDonough notes, “the Crown held a negative view of Native lords, whom the Spaniards found to be overly litigious and disturbingly adept at learning and applying the tricks of the Spanish courts” (2018, 70). In their bid to accommodate to a new reality and maintain status while halting encroachment, pipiltin appeared to the Spaniards as uncannily interested and able to learn not only the Castilian language, but European juridical traditions and political philosophies. Some individual pilli would constantly send letters to the Spanish crown requesting the full restitution of their sovereignty over the people, and complaining about being treated even worse than vassals. Strategically, pipiltin used to portray themselves as faithful Christians and subjects to the King because Spanish juridical tradition dictated that all ‘pure’ and ‘good’ –i.e. Christian instead of Jewish or Islamic– citizens would be granted full rights and privileges (K. McDonough 2018, 90). In response, colonial authorities in the Anahuac increased the amount of tribute owed to them and abolished the privilege that pipiltin had of tribute exemption. Another contradictory and unintended consequence emerged from the decision to raise tribute to Indigenous rulers: just as pipiltin progressively began to lose their status inherited from pre-colonial society and joined others in what increasingly appeared to be “a single level and condition” (Gibson 1964, 153) for most Indigenous peoples, macehualtin rebelled against an unsustainable situation, demanding more land and reduced tributary charges (K. McDonough 2018, 72–74). The tendential socioeconomic homogenization of Nahuas meant that macehualtin began to acquire more prominence in pueblos and barrios, reconfiguring previously existing hierarchies among Indigenous peoples. Eventually, according to Emilio Kouri, macehualtin would appropriate most lands owned collectively by pueblos and barrios, erasing most distinctions between classes in Indigenous populations (2017; 2018).
What might seem on the surface as a relatively seamless acceptance of Spanish colonial rule and ‘Europeanization’ from the part of pipiltin reveals a quite different story. Because of their dramatic fall in social standing particularly during the second half of the sixteenth century, pipiltin started to dispute “the entire moral, religious, and juridical basis of the Crown’s relationship to Indigenous vassals in colonial Mexico” (K. McDonough 2018, 76).

In 1560, several renowned pilli sent a letter to the Spanish King requesting an improvement in their living conditions, which included an exemption from tribute as well as full restitution of their political sovereignty. What appears to be another case of pipiltin dissatisfaction meant something deeper, considering that all the claimants and signatories to the document belonged to the most powerful altepetl of the Anahuac, those of the by then extinct Triple Alliance (Tenochtitlan, Texcoco and Tlacopan). A sign of Nahua unification that resembled their imposing military might of previous decades, compounded with the fact that “Indigenous peoples far outnumbered Spaniards in New Spain” – just as it happened throughout the entire colonial period –, colonial authorities started to wonder if “a rebellion in the making” was underway (K. McDonough 2018, 78).

A few years earlier, other pipiltin had sent letters to the crown complaining about Spanish authorities interfering in Indigenous affairs through attempts at naming Spanish council members in Indigenous governing bodies. Bitterly criticizing colonial officers with thick descriptions of their actions, these pipiltin were not interested in praising the Spanish monarch and his representatives, and noted that anything less than the accomplishment of their demands was an attempt to strip away their right to rulership and sovereignty over land (Connell 2011, 37–40).

43 McDonough remarks that the “summaries of the Indigenous letters and petitions […] show that the house of Tenochtitlan believed they should receive at the very least the same treatment as the Spaniards now living in New Spain” (2018, 79).
Earlier decades of colonial expansion were just as complicated, especially if one looks at friar’s accounts of the conquest of the Anahuac. Toribio de Benavente Motolinia, for example, compared them to the ten plagues in Egypt that appear in the Christian bible, noting that Spaniards were constantly fighting each other and jeopardizing their rule over Mexico. Motolinia writes that the tenth and final plague was that of

“the divisions and factions that existed among the Spanish that were in Mexico, which was the most dangerous because the land could have been lost [...] and these differences and factions caused some Spanish to be killed, and others were confronted and banished. Other were injured when they reached their [other Spaniards’] hands, not having anyone who could pacify them, nor anyone who could put themselves in between, if it wasn’t for the friars, sometimes preventing conflict, others intervening after a fight had started, considering the violence and weapons they fought with, and sitting on their horses; because besides having to make peace so the land would not be lost, we knew that the Indians were gathering for war and had built garrisons, waiting for news to come, that the captain and governor Hernando Cortés was going to be killed by them in the road of the Hibueras, because of a treason that the Indians had organized with all that joined them [...] and here in Mexico they were waiting for the Spanish to wreck each other, to find all that remained and kill them with their knives, which God did not allow…”

(Motolinia 1971, 20–21).

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Notes in parentheses added. The original text says: “La décima plaga fué las divisiones y bandos que hubo entre los Españoles que estaban en México, que fué la que en mayor peligro puso la tierra para se perder [...] y estas diferencias y bandos fueron causa de que se justiciaron algunos Españoles, y otros fueron afrentados y desterrados. Otros fueron heridos cuando llegaron á las manos, no habiendo quien les pusiese en paz, ni quien se metiese en medio, si no eran los frailes, porque esos pocos Españoles que había todos estaban apasionados de un bando ó de otro, y era menester salir los frailes, unas veces á impedir que no rompiesen, otras á meterse entre ellos después de trabados, andando entre los tiros y armas con que peleaban, y hollados de los caballos; porque demas de poner paz
Alarming accounts were amplified even further by the likes of Bernardino de Sahagún, who saw these events as an indication that ‘Indians’ suffered a ‘spiritual disease’. His perspective was less violent than that of Motolinia, but also understood Nahua subjectivity with inherent suspicion. When Indigenous *pueblos* started to introduce traditional ceremonial customs into imposed Christian rites (1938, II:XXXVI, 5–6), Sahagún suggested that it was necessary to learn and understand the language and beliefs of Indigenous peoples to be able to perceive more thoroughly the saturation of Christian rites with ‘pagan’ ceremonies (1938, II:XXXVI). A crucial shift in perspective occurred here because Sahagún consciously decided to make use of medical language to refer to the imperative of ‘extirpating idolatry’ from Indigenous peoples:

*The medic cannot rightly apply medicine to the sick (without) first knowing what humor, or what cause produces the disease; so that it is convenient that the good doctor is well versed in the knowledge of medicines and diseases, to conveniently apply to every disease its opposing medicine, (and because) preachers and medical confessors are of the souls, to cure spiritual disease it is important that they have experience in spiritual medicines and diseases […]. Among these people […] many sins amongst them are very serious and in great need of remedy: the sins of idolatry and idolatrous rites, idolatrous superstitions and omens, and beliefs and idolatrous ceremonies, have not been entirely lost (Sahagún 1938, II:5).*

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45 The original text says: “El médico no puede acertadamente aplicar las medicinas al enfermo (sin) que primero conozca de que humor, o de que causa proceda la enfermedad; de manera que el buen médico conviene sea docto en el conocimiento de las medicinas y en el de las enfermedades, para aplicar conveniblemente a cada enfermedad la medicina contraria, (y porque) los predicadores y confesores médicos son de las ánimas, para curar las
He then went on to argue that to preach against ‘idolatry’, it was important to know how traditions had been used before colonization, given that in the presence of Spaniards, Indigenous communities did ‘idolatrous’ things without them knowing it. Knowledge of Nahua spiritualities could be achieved, according to Sahagún, by learning the languages, and studying the ‘human’ and ‘natural’ things of the ‘new world’. His intention was to have an accurate assessment of culture, politics, gastronomy, animal species, the landscape of Mesoamerica and any other relevant piece of knowledge that could be gathered to make more ‘humane’ and informed decisions about the ‘wellness’ of Indigenous peoples.

I argue that the space opened by resistance from Nahuas to colonial policies, compounded by an increasing sense of suspicion about Indigenous political motivations from Spanish colonists, is an early example of what Michel Foucault has termed governmentality. Its biopolitical operations that implement a set of institutions and discourses (2007, 166) whose goal is to secure the ‘wellbeing’ of a flock or a people, clearly appears to be delineated in the conflict between Nahuas and Spaniards. When Foucault proposed to situate the state as part of “a general technology of power” which would reveal its “mutations, development and functioning” (2007, 165–66), he emphasized the role of ‘pastoral power’ in early Christianity as a main component of what would come to be seen as the regulatory role of modern states. In Foucault’s account, pastoral power individualizes bodies and incorporates them into an artificial totality, constructing the ‘flock’ that needs to be taken care of and divided into duties and activities. The modern state, then, does not come from a process of “secularization, by which forms tied to Christianity gradually disappear and are replaced with state apparatuses, but of the expansion and intensification of the pastoral

enfermedades espirituales conviene (que) tengan experiencia de las medicinas y de las enfermedades espirituales […]. Entre está gente […] muchos pecados hay entre ellos muy más graves y que tienen gran necesidad de remedio: Los pecados de la idolatría y ritos idolátricos, y supersticiones idolátricas y agüeros, y abusiones y ceremonias idolátricas, no son aun perdidos del todo”.

46 It is not an accident that for some Bernardino de Sahagún has to be considered the father of ethnography in America. See (Klor de Alva, Nicholson, and Quiñones Keber 1988).
beyond the sphere of the spiritual—a process of governmentalization by which the ratio pastoralis or ‘pastoral of souls’ becomes the ratio gubernatoria or ‘government of men’” (Nemser 2015a, 338). Following Daniel Nemser, I argue that the beginning of a process of employing both the ‘extirpation of idolatry’ and, more importantly, ‘titulos primordiales’ as political means of production, gave rise to a terrain of struggle where the circulation of bodies, commodities and knowledge, was imbricated with racializing procedures and identities (Nemser 2015a, 348–49), giving rise to a new built environment that materially condensed the balances in power relations between colonists and Nahuas.

The perpetuation of the altepetl and its forms of political organization through strategies like testaments and primordial titles was an uneven, combined and contradictory process of state formation properly speaking. With sovereignty operating as the main driver behind Nahuas’ actions of refusal, all policies that attacked their land base and political institutions was interpreted and denounced as an attempt to turn them into slaves of the Spanish (K. McDonough 2018, 78).47 Employing Spanish categories and ways of thinking to maintain political control and acquire a wider space for maneuver were the reasons why Spanish colonists saw ‘Indian’ subjectivity with suspicion and borderline paranoia.48

After the systematic application of extremely repressive and genocidal measures of domination from the church and colonizers, the actions of Nahuas prompted the crown to prohibit its officials from “sitting in judgment over Indians”. Nevertheless, “indigenous beliefs and practices did not go unmonitored. Church mandates put Indians under the direct surveillance of local bishops and, sporadically throughout the seventeenth century – at different times and in different places– those bishops sponsored missions to investigate

47 During this time, Christian doctrine postulated that any vassal to the crown could not be kept as a slave, with the penalty being mortal sin.
48 In another letter to the Spanish King, members of the Azcapotzalco ruling class remind him that “it is incumbent upon the ruler to listen to and remedy the concerns of the people, and to fail to do so calls into question the legitimacy of the ruler himself” (K. McDonough 2018, 86).
whether heresies still poisoned the souls of their native congregation” (Silverblatt 2004, 8). However, fear of Indigenous subjectivity and its motivations became here a permanent feature of colonial discourse and policy, reaching to this day. The ‘historicist’
understanding of Nahuas that friars developed, that is, the idea that linear time existed and Indigenous peoples were in a previous, pagan and idolatrous stage of humankind, inaugurated an entire tradition of colonialist political thinking that would extend to all imperial trajectories of the past 500 years.

The discourse of historical backwardness and infancy as a form of governance through domination is crucial to reveal the racial foundations of modern state-making. As David Theo Goldberg notes, modern states “struggle always with the tension between “obvious” racial differentiation, heterogeneity, and heterodoxy and their seemingly necessary drive to the civilizing imperative of a created homogeneity, a structured sameness” (2002b, 86). However, my case demonstrates that the imperative of sameness does not precede the practice or existence of heterogeneity; that is, the historical-structural heterogeneity of all societies (Segato 2014). Instead, modern (colonial) states harbor a radical tension, since their inception, of both the materialities of heterogeneity and structured sameness. Since pachakuti inaugurated a new configuration of power relations structured by coloniality (Maldonado-Torres 2007; Quijano 2007), states consolidate their power but become incapable of ‘amalgamating’ every single body into their practice of ‘homogeneous’ political and racial rule. As Goldberg remarks, colonialism always negotiates “if mostly all too unhappily, the space between required conformity and rebellious dissent” (2002b, 87). The state, then, in its modern and colonial dimension, is also fundamentally a racial project. It can include multiple forms of racial ordering –or what Goldberg and others have called ‘racial formation’– without losing any of its racialized character. On the contrary, it

49 For a description of this notion of historicism as applied to the colonial state, see (Goldberg 2002b, 43).
reproduces this regime of representation through a combination of technologies of governance and the institutionalization of forms of political organization (Goldberg 2002b, 101). The ‘possibilities’ that racialization opened up in the early colonial period for the constitution of new, specifically modern subject-positions is deeply ambiguous. It projects state power as an inherently destructive and repressive force, while maintaining at the same time a high degree of ‘productivity’, that is, the proliferation and appropriation of identity formations for anticolonial projects. Where does this productivity come from? The multiple hurdles constantly faced by Indigenous actors involved in the pachakuti of state-making, forced them to deploy a form of “special receptiveness”, as Gruzinski suggests. It included engaging in remarkable forms of “flexibility in social practices, fluidness of eye and perception, and an aptitude for combining” what many would describe today as “highly diverse fragments” (Gruzinski 2002, 51). When such relational capabilities are applied to the task of survivance, the historical-structural heterogeneity of Indigenous (and ‘non-Indigenous’) forms of life reveals itself as the principal driver behind political transformations, instead of the state as a unitary will with a clear purpose beyond and above the people that populate it.

Ugo Rossi writes that “Foucault used the term ‘dispositif’ to refer to the heterogeneous set of institutional, cultural and juridical elements (discourses, scientific statements, laws, prisons, police measures, architectural artifacts, etc.) strategically inscribed in any power relation and acting as a network within a context of disciplinary society” (2013, 350). Understood in this way, the state is a dispositif or apparatus—in a set of state apparatuses, to use Althusser’s term (2014), conducting ‘itself’ as the main regulator of social life, from the most macro to the micro-processes of ‘ordinary’ peoples. However, when considering its colonial and racial dimension, it becomes clear that the ‘consistency’ of the apparatus is mostly achieved when the state apparatus(es) is grafted onto an already existing form of
land-based political sovereignty or nationhood, denying the definition of ‘apparatus’ as a mere activity of regulation and governance devoid of any reference to social beings.

In other words, even if the ultimate goal of a state apparatus is that of producing obeying subjects while implementing a structure of accumulation, the process to accomplish it is permanently contested and never complete, precisely because heterogeneity and adaptation constantly exceed the state’s capabilities for regulation. Consequently, the peoples who are put in a position of subalternity vis-à-vis the state apparatus are actually negotiating with and shaping it permanently, in a much higher degree than we might be used –or willing– to think. In sum, the colonial state apparatus does not invent anything ex nihilo, but is constantly reproduced by frictions and reactions to its measures (Rossi 2013, 359), de-centering itself and managing dissent. As Daniel Zamora argues, “with his genealogy of governmentality, Foucault began to show how techniques of the Christian pastorate shaped modern forms of power and, at the same time, how they would come to generate, within this very field of power, several kinds of ‘counter-conducts’ as movements of insubordination and Resistance” (2018, 8). Foucault was thinking about power as always having “the immanent possibility of a counterconduct”, in other words, of “power and resistance” as “always ‘interlocked’”. The immanent possibility of resistance, counter-conduct, and anticolonial mobilizing, acknowledges that these ‘events’ have also been fundamental in shaping the modern state and the field of power relations it consolidates, no matter how limited and ineffectual this margin of action might look like for scholars. Otherwise, I believe we always risk falling into an either/or position that asserts colonialism as a one-way process of European domination and imposition (with its caveats, of course), or a denial of colonialism as a relevant reality. An attention to resistance is able to trace how peoples “remain within and agitate against” colonialism, producing ‘critical counter-
conducts’ that “attempt to use elements of” that structure “in a transgressive and destabilising way against their dominant meanings” (Zamora Vargas 2018, 9).50

This is why governmentality, even for Foucault, “first appears as an analysis of the state, not something that lies beyond the state” (Dean and Villadsen 2016, 17). ‘Remaining within while agitating against’, or contradictorily arranging what are seen as ‘dispersed fragments’ institutionalizes a form of what Bob Jessop has called ‘structural selectivity’ (2010), that is, the predisposition of certain organs of the state to attend particular demands instead of others. However, selectivity is a highly historical specific trait of states, and in the case of early colonial Mexico, it was reflected by the prominence of a ‘plebeian’ form of power with a considerable degree of influence and autonomy. By the late sixteenth century, “viceregal officials seemed reluctant to intervene directly and proactively in the composition of cabildos [city councils] and with the election and succession of governors” (Connell 2011, 63) in Indigenous pueblos and barrios,51 who stipulated that to access a position of power it was necessary to be considered –or become– a natural or ‘native’. In practice, this meant adopting a strategic and malleable definition of nativeness that included many individuals who would have been considered non-Indigenous according to colonial racial classifications. Numerous ‘mestizos’, for instance, held governorships and other prominent positions, in what superficially appears to be a displacement of Indigenous peoples in favour of more ‘Westernized’ or ‘domesticated’ rulers. However, as William F. Connell notes, mestizo leaders “were hardly distinguishable culturally from native rulers”. The image of the mestizo as a ‘ladino’, that is, a Spanish-speaking person who was culturally European or criolla but phenotypically ‘not European’, and whose political-

50 By ‘dominant meanings’ I understand a hegemonic, but always contested, form of interpreting and living in a structure of colonial domination like the state.
51 Cabildos were councils that governed a particular pueblo or barrio. The members of these were generally picked by a ‘community of electors’, and most cabildos in the sixteenth century were entirely Indigenous (Pérez Zevallos 1984; Pizzigoni 2012; Premo and Yannakakis 2019; Reyes García 1996; Ruiz Medrano and Kellogg 2010; Salazar-Rey 2018; Seijas 2018).
structural position is that of Indigenous elimination and replacement, does not fit at all with the lives and trajectories of most colonial mestizx leaders.

Colonial racial divisions were further complicated by the fact that, during at least the first half of the sixteenth century, the process of so-called ‘mestizaje’ understood as “the blending or mixing of cultures and peoples often described by the antiquated term “race-mixing””, did not actually exist. In fact, it was later on introduced by the Spanish based on their experience with “non-Christians in Iberia”, which led them to consider that the cases of ‘intermarriage’ between Spaniards and Indigenous peoples created ‘mestizos’, who could (and should) “not fit into either the native world or the Spanish one”. Segregated institutions were created to try to regulate mestizaje and stop it from happening, including convents or colegios were bodies perceived as mestizos were incarcerated and indoctrinated in Christianity. Mestizaje was thus not a positive sign in the colonizer’s eyes, and the “very existence of separate institutions for mestizos, natives, and Spaniards demonstrates that viceregal and ecclesiastical authorities understood” it “as a problem”, going as far as to consider mestizo bodies not fit for either the Spanish or Indigenous peoples (Connell 2011, 66–67). This was not an attitude shared only by friars and low-level bureaucrats, because as Connell explains, Spanish rulers also saw mestizxs as inherently dangerous. Viceroy Mendoza and Velasco, for instance, considered mestizaje “a source of

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52 This argument has been made more recently by American studies scholars from the United States (Castellanos 2017; Speed 2017).
53 I would go as far as to say that the image of the mestizx as inherently ‘white in culture but brown in appearance’, or as a ‘settler of color’, is a racist stereotype. It flattens and ignores the multiple positions occupied by all of those bodies that have received the label of mestizx according to a colonial logic of racialization, repeating the much-criticized operation of silencing subaltern voices through legislation provided by academic discourse.
54 I make the argument that, according to extant evidence, mestizaje as a ‘biological’ fact of widespread ‘race-mixing’ between Indigenous peoples and Spaniards is a myth, in the sense that it never actually occurred as the most common narrative of ‘mestizaje’ wants to make us believe. If ‘race-mixing’ is to be considered a foundational component of (post)colonial Mexico, it would have to emphasize those innumerable instances of Indigenous and African, Asian, and Middle Eastern mestizaje, which were (and are) far more common than Indigenous and European ‘interchange’.
trouble” because of how it would create, in their view, “potential for sedition” from a new class of people that would be able to wield both European and Indigenous tools (2011, 234, n. 59).

A case among many is that of ‘mestizo’ governor of Mexico-Tenochtitlan don Gerónimo López, who Connell employs as a prototypical example of the contradictions of the colonial racial state. Ruling the city from 1600 to 1608, Gerónimo López was “technically a mestizo and the first apparent nonnative to hold the office of judge-governor”. Fully literate in Nahuatl, López was indistinguishable from other Indigenous governors and politicians, and presided over community disputes with full knowledge and employment of Nahua laws and principles for ‘good government’. The fact that he was born and raised in a different altepetl than Tenochtitlan did not seem to be an obstacle either, because in Connell’s words he was “culturally like the Tenochca over whom he ruled” (2011, 66) and considered one of them.

On the other hand, ‘intermarriage’ meant an entirely different practice from the Nahua point of view, and was practiced systematically before colonization. Dominant altepetl, in their attempts to “further cement ties with conquered peoples, used marriage to unify lineages”, making “marrying into promising Spanish families” a “good strategy that followed native tradition” (Connell 2011, 67), especially during the first years of colonization and after the war of conquest. Thus, my argument goes beyond a merely ‘biological’ understanding of the mestizo dynamics at play in the colonial state of the Anahuac, that is, the mythical ‘reality’ of Spanish and Indigenous transculturation through child-bearing. Instead, I suggest that mestizo acts pre-exist colonialism and were widely

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55 María Elena Martínez has extensively studied the racialized obsession with ‘blood purity’ in the colonial period of Mexico, including the role of mestizos as ‘agents’ of disorder (2004; 2008).
practiced by multiple Indigenous groups in central Mexico regardless of its colonial formulation under Spanish dominion.⁵⁶

As Goldberg has noted, “The racial conception of the state becomes the racial definition of the apparatus, the projects, the institutions for managing this threat, for keeping it out or ultimately containing it –but also (and again paradoxically) for keeping it going” (2002b, 24).⁵⁷ This contradiction is at the heart of the process of constitution of the modern, ‘mestizo state’, not just the curtailment of diversity in its multiple manifestations. As I have suggested, the fundamentally racial character of the state apparatus, and the conditions for its constant renewal, is premised on – “if mostly all too unhappily” (Goldberg 2002b, 87) – securing the existence of racial ‘proliferation’, of multiple racialized subjects and identity-positions that confer the state its particular, or unique and ‘cohesive’ character. This proliferation took the form of an assertion of Indigenous sovereignty and the consolidation of institutional processes –like testament-writing and the production of primordial titles, but also pressures to the Spanish crown– that I situate as a form of ‘plebeian’ power with state-making capacities of its own right. Disputes –both external and internal– over land and the imposition of a system of racialized hierarchies provided the conditions for a reconfiguration of Nahua traditions of sociality, including the deployment of multiple, apparently competing narratives to determine the tlalmaceuhque of each pueblo and barrio.

A clear example of this has been given by Enrique Rodríguez-Alegría, who has gathered archaeological evidence in Mexico City since 1996 (2005; 2016). His analysis departs “from models of cultural continuity”, instead explaining change “in terms of people actively

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⁵⁶ At the same time, I do not reject the fact that all the “new human beings of the modern world –español, indio, negro, mestizo, mulato, sambo– were born out of the same upheaval that made "nations", "bureaucrats", "slavers", “global merchants”, and “colonies”” (Silverblatt 2004, 5).

⁵⁷ Emphasis in the original.
negotiating power and using strategies other than rejecting the material culture of the other”. In what he describes as ‘interethnic feasts’ during the colonial period, he finds that even if “some Spaniards pursued a strategy of separation from indigenous people and wanted to reproduce a Spanish lifestyle”, others “sought to form alliances with indigenous people for their own social, political, and economic gain. They became cultural intermediaries, sometimes adopting aspects of indigenous material culture and practices, to negotiate and obtain the favor of indigenous people” (Rodríguez-Alegría 2016, 64). Not even colonizers were exempt of practices of intercultural exchange, however stringent Spanish norms might appear when looking at sources from colonial authorities. This approach takes into account the relevance of Indigenous power in everyday life, and how it constituted material culture and relations of power. Consequently, the state emerges with some of these features at the core of its apparatus.58 A calculative technology of power, race operates through its sedimentation in material and infrastructural practices, and becomes transmissible across generations precisely through this process of naturalization. However, the colonial state of the Anahuac was constantly exceeded by ‘racial’ heterogeneity and fluidity, even though it remained firmly anchored to vicious processes of racialization.

Michael Omi and Howard Winant warn us that an “effort must be made to understand race as an unstable and “decentered” complex of social meanings constantly being transformed by political struggle”, instead of a fixed reality or essence, on the one hand, or a mere ‘illusion’ or ideological construction on the other. Thus, their proposed definition of race is “a concept which signifies and symbolizes social conflicts and interests by referring to different types of human bodies” (Omi and Winant 2002, 123).59 This definition understands race as a ‘grid of intelligibility’ for the classification and

58 Rodríguez-Alegría has recently extended his evidence to support this model by adopting a ‘mixed epistemologies’ method that gathers and studies historical, archaeological, faunal and botanical evidence. See (Rodríguez-Alegría 2016, chap. 2).

59 Emphasis in the original.
mobilization of bodies, which historically situates projects for ruling and regulating societies. I believe that we must add to this account a second, also crucial component: the quite material or infrastructural effects that such complex of meanings and struggles produce, that is, institutions and modes of social relations based on the production of spaces for political life. It is not only about struggles and modes of representation themselves and how these structurally transform the meanings of ‘race’, but also about their condensation into particular regimes of racial ‘everydayness’. These will not change just by de-reifying our understanding of what race means in a particular sociopolitical milieu, because race also engenders spaces inhabited by peoples, and these have a strong durability beyond forms of (discursive and structural) representation. In this sense, the *pueblo* and the *barrio* – and their forms of political organization – are racial formations but of a very particular kind, ones that reproduce the notion of what ‘being Indigenous’ means in dynamic, contested, uneven ways. This mode of ‘beingness’ for Indigeneity is quite literally expressed in spaces of everyday life that go from the allocation of houses, roads, and temples, to the accessibility from different groups to positions of power and land tenure. Understanding Omi and Winant’s notion of racial formation in this way can allow us, in my view, to situate it as a regime of governance which routinizes race by introducing it to the very texture of everyday life and its operations. Conceptions of race expand their influence to every sphere of human life, and become extremely durable or persistent, impossible to overcome by a mere process of conceptual demystification because they appear to be natural, commonsensical ways of constructing the world and situating others within it. Racial ‘signifiers’ are visible to us in the very materiality of our lives, in how spaces and institutions are built and how they dispose of our bodies, channeling and appropriating them in multiple ways.

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60 “Thus we should think of race as an element of social structure rather than as an irregularity within it: we should see race as a dimension of human representation rather than an illusion” (Omi and Winant 2002, 124).
Likewise, the state as an inherently racial structure of political power whose origins I situate in the emergence of colonialism in Abya Yala brings to the fore its colonial durability, or what I have termed –following Ann Stoler– ‘duress’ (2016). The fact that race is understood as a ‘socially constructed’ process initiated with the clash between Europeans and Indigenous peoples in this continent means to me that, following Omi and Winant, the field or terrain of politics is the most suitable one to understand racial formations (2002, 128). An essentially incomplete process, colonial racial governance mobilizes bodies to turn them into workers –or ‘productive subjects’ from the perspective of the ruler–, tying them to punitive measures if they resist. It also links ‘subaltern’ peoples to colonial practices of extraction, like coercive forms of tribute or taxation, and introduces juridical forms of regulation that seek to administrate land but also survey domestic or ‘private’ lives (Comaroff 1998, 330). Penetrating deeply into micro-social processes, the state is said to regulate all forms of interaction and transform its subjects into a radically different version of what they once were.

However, this description seems overly linear for an understanding of early colonial state formation in the Anahuac. I argue that what occurs in this case has much more to do with spatially (and temporally) uneven and combined forms of domination that are highly dependent on the subjects it supposedly controls, making political rule far more contingent. This is why accounts based on the study of the state as a colonial mode of power and regulation –and the institutionalization of these forms– can only go so far. Through racial and productive (or labor) regulation, states certainly reproduce their own conditions of possibility by routinizing and internalizing the very principles they impose. Forms of governance proliferate in their attempts to manufacture hierarchy through difference and the universalizing logic of ‘modernity’, as well as the practical, day to day management of these operations. Consequently, theorists establish a schism between ‘metropolitan’ and
‘colonial’ states, posing the latter as part of a Majority World that does not really concern the Global North. The difference –another manageable difference– is explained in terms of how the ‘metropole’ is concerned with “sameness”, and the need to engender “a horizontal sense of fraternity”, whereas ‘colonial states’ manage and reproduce hierarchical difference and essentialize racial inequality (Comaroff 1998, 329). However, this narrative eschews all operations carried forward by those who are ‘managed, reproduced, mobilized and regulated’. Their histories, lives and practices disappear from sight, and written discourse falls into the trap of reproducing a ‘miserabilist’ view of Indigenous and ‘subaltern’ peoples at large.61 Their crucial role in shaping the state through negotiation, accommodation and resistance is completely overseen, and the state is turned into a behemoth whose purpose is always-already the same. Binaries like colony-metropole, citizen-native, and state-peoples reify colonially produced forms of difference, using as an explanation that which was supposed to be explained. I believe this is a far more productive way of engaging with Comaroff’s description of the colonial state, which posits it not as “a thing but a genus of forms and processes, and of historically fluid, evanescent ones” that “cannot be typified or theorised in the singular, in the indicative mood, or in the continuous past or present tense”. All generalizations about the (colonial) state are bound to “deconstruction” (Comaroff 1998, 336) and interrogation, as well as regional specification. This is why I speak of colonialisms in the plural, and comparative analyses of struggles against them as a politically useful alternative.

In synthesis, it should not be controversial to say that the state depends on a set of specific conditions for the transmission of its dictates and for its very existence. However, these dimensions vary and have radically different concrete consequences, including the

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61 Comaroff himself recognizes this shortcoming, remarking that “capillary processes of governmentality, while obviously important to take fully into account, pose a paradox of their own: the more comprehensive they were, the more persuasive in explaining colonial domination, the less colonial states ought ever to have encountered any resistance, any antagonistic forces at all. They did, everywhere” (1998, 335).
edification of anticolonial, Indigenous forms of political and social reproduction in the Anahuac. The instrumental, institutional, violent, symbolic, diffuse and positive measures a state adopts are subject to the volition of its rulers and ruled, as well as the conjunctural situation in which these measures are implemented. Far from instilling self-discipline and total subjection, the state plays “a great part in sparking the dialectics of challenge and riposte, of action and counter-action, of transgression, transformation, and hybridisation; greater than did the brute exercise of imperial instrumentalities” (Comaroff 1998, 338-40). Subsequently, “the more elaborate colonial states became –the wider the reach of their formal authority, the greater the extent to which they monitored and managed the life worlds of those over whom they ruled– the less effective they appear to have been in making ‘natives’ into acquiescent subjects, in stifling dissensus and defiance, sometimes even in sustaining the coherence of their own modes of governance” (Comaroff 1998, 344). As Frederick Cooper states, “power in colonial societies was more arterial than capillary – concentrated spatially and socially, not very nourishing beyond such domains, and in need of a pump to push it from moment to moment and place to place” (1994, 1533). This is the main argument of the next chapter, which will examine the history of the transition from altepetl to Indigenous pueblos and barrios as an instance of contested, and complex, political domination.
CHAPTER 4

Beyond the state as alterity

In this chapter, I examine at the institutional level the transition that Nahua *altepetl* suffered to become *pueblos de Indios* or Indigenous *pueblos* and *barrios* during the second half of the sixteenth century in the Anahuac. As a complementary policy to *congregación,* *reducciones* were intended to forcibly remove a considerable portion of the Indigenous population in the region to concentrate them in orthogonally-designed towns on flat valleys, with the aim to facilitate the administration of tribute and evangelization of peoples. However, through a reconstruction of the events that ensued, I will argue that in the process of transformation from the *altepetl* to Indigenous *pueblos* and *barrios* many key components of the former were preserved and extended in the latter. The political dynamics that land and politico-institutional control produced in the new configuration of power relations structured by coloniality were always infused with ‘pre-colonial’ elements. They included forms of collective discussion –that would often last for decades– about the destiny of resources, lands, and bodies; exposing the porousness and flexibility of Nahua forms of politico-institutional organization and sovereignty. From this perspective, Indigenous *barrios* and *pueblos* are interpreted not just as sites of irreparable cultural loss tied to the production of the notion of ‘Indianness’ (2017), but as productive, contested, and contradictory spaces teeming with state-building capacities and ‘political means of production’. *Barrios* and *pueblos* are thus privileged sites to deploy the connections

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62 The difference between *pueblo* and *barrio* is nominal and depends on the rural (for *pueblo*) or urban (for *barrio*) location of a settlement.
between ‘local’ struggles for land and sovereignty, and ‘global’ processes of state formation in the early colonial period.

According to Emilio Kourí, with the transition from the altepetl to colonial Indigenous pueblos and barrios, local “forms of social organization decisively shaped the initial constitution of the pueblos”, extending their influence to the subsequent process of municipalization “laid out by Spanish legislation in the wake of the conquest”. For him, the altepetl did not simply disappear in the colonial discourse of terra nullius and its devastating effects, but was “essentially reprised” when reducciones were ordered by the Castilian monarch to ‘organize’ Indigenous ways of life (2018, 32). One fundamental component of this reprisal is the affirmation of a relational epistemology of political and social life through the incorporation of inter-ethnic forms of collaboration and ‘transculturation’. Reducciones did not limit themselves to either the urban centers of the Anahuac or the ‘remote’ villages of Mesoamerica, but entangled them with the emergence of global circuits of commerce and exchange that transformed the role of the pueblo and barrio while turning it into a fertile ground for Indigenous dissidence, negotiation, and rebellion. The barrio and the pueblo were thus capable of shaping and influencing the global forces that began to emerge while remaining deeply influenced by them in return. Emerging urban centers across central Mexico received an outpour of immigrants from multiple Indigenous ethnicities, including peoples from African, Asian and Arab origins who served as slaves or indentured laborers. Despite formal rules that forbade the ‘intermingling’ of castas or hierarchically-organized racial groups, many pueblos and barrios operated as hubs for political, cultural, and ideological struggles over the meaning of political sovereignty, Indigeneity, and the colonial condition.63

63 A more recent example is that of cholos, punketos and metaleros in contemporary Mexico. Most of these urban identities –especially when practiced by ‘popular’ sectors of the population, which make the large majority of the country– are entangled with Indigenous customs and ways of being, because most of their practitioners in barrios
After 1545, sets of new pueblos “arose not from the independence of established sujetos but from new settlements populated by migrants” of Indigenous origin. Migratory waves, both seasonal and permanent, were a common phenomenon even in pre-colonial times. Against what Kourí defines as “the “closed” and “localocentric” character sometimes ascribed to colonial village corporations”, the social boundaries of Indigenous pueblos were in constant flux, with inclusion of outsiders and changes in the social status of long-standing members as part of daily life. Kourí argues that “even full-fledged membership in a pueblo did not always imply permanent residency”, resembling the way in which rights and obligations were acquired in the altepetl. Some other Indigenous peoples even ‘colonized’ or ‘settled’ lands of “uncertain ownership”, establishing completely new pueblos. The peoples joining these newly formed communities were Indigenous, but also ‘mestizos’ and ‘mulatos’, all “moving along the widening interstices of an increasingly complex colonial economy”. What we would see today as ‘informal settlements’ grew in size, became organized, and attained the status of ‘pueblo de indios’ or Indigenous towns (Kourí 2018, 37–39), notwithstanding the official racial ascription of their members. All Indigenous pueblos retained, then, their pluriethnic character and even incorporated other previously unknown peoples, particularly Africans.

are descended from the histories of ‘transculturation’. However, scholars would be hesitant to study them as ‘urban Indigenous identities’, given the pervasiveness of binary understandings about ‘urban’ and ‘rural’ life. For a superb historical analysis of Indigeneity in urban Mexico, see (Castro Gutiérrez 2013). Another recent example is that of the barrio of San Francisquito in the city of Querétaro. Its inhabitants are opposing the gentrification of their neighborhood on the grounds that it is a sacred site of Indigenous heritage for the city (https://www.diariodequeretaro.com.mx/local/demandan-proteger-al-barrio-de-san-franciscoquito-3352320.html).

64 Indigenous migrants were also very common during the colonial period, and colonial authorities referred to them as ‘extravagant Indians’ (‘indios extravagantes’) (Jalpa Flores 2010).

65 I use the words ‘colonized’ and ‘settled’ with full consciousness of the implications they have. However, I do that to stress how these terms are unable to capture the positionality of these migrants and ‘settlers’ in the Mexican context.

If land tenancy did not dramatically change hands during this period, property and power relations can help understand the deep transformations in sociopolitical context. Official and common lands acquired a great importance for the sustenance of Indigenous pueblos, even though some of them started to be managed as de facto private property. During the second half of the sixteenth century, pipiltin started to steadily lose power, with a rising wealthy class of macehualtin replacing them (Kourí 2018, 39). This did not change forms of government and Nahua representation, but propelled important reconfigurations in the “social and institutional landscape” that included disappearance, merging, moving or even founding and growing pueblos throughout the territory. The form and character of governance would actually remain almost unchanged until the end of Spanish colonialism (Kourí 2018, 34).

Luis Reyes García observes that one source indicates how in 1568, macehualtin attempted to break into the political landscape by demanding inclusion in the administrative apparatus as officials (1996, 34). A letter from the Tepeaca Protocols dated in September 25, 1568 remarks that macehualtin were unhappy with the fact that pipiltin would always get elected as officials of their communities. They detailed how they suffered abuse from them and lacked any institutional power to protect themselves, proposing that “to stop the aforementioned [pipiltin], because between the Mexican naturals of this city and other parts have received power so that in the elections of such officials half of them

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67 Kourí understands most tenancy agreements as “de facto private property in nominally communal lands” (2018, 43). Without denying the fact that private property was constantly implemented by the pueblos, this argument seems to contradict his overall approach that proposes a highly uneven and variable regime of land tenancy in colonial Mexico.

68 On the contrary, Luis Reyes García asserts that when macehualtin or campesinos (as he calls them) started to replace pipiltin as owners of land, they “paid a very high price: their ethnic atomization imposed by colonial interests” (1996, 33). But his account focuses entirely on this as main explanatory element, without examining the patterns of property relations and how they actually developed during the time. Besides, such an account assumes that macehualtin were powerless in every instance, although Reyes García remarks that “communal land was obtained through litigation that lasted decades, centuries and still today” (1996, 33).
come from the principals [pipiltin] and the other half from the macegoales [macehualtin]” (Reyes García 1996, 34). For Reyes García, this demonstrates a long process of Nahua subversion that produced uneven and complicated institutional results, especially surrounding communal land tenancy (1996, 35).

What explains this complaint, and its call to restructure pueblos, and more generally, Indigenous representation among classes? Kourí mentions that at stake was the very own “effective preservation” of autonomy, with many actors fiercely defending their assets and jurisdiction “even as they took private advantage of them”. Pipiltin and macehualtin could would at times act together, “making “the collective enterprise of survival” an endlessly renewable source of fundamental village cohesion” (Kourí 2018, 50–51).

Values commonly associated with so-called ‘tradition’ required pueblo and barrio collectivities to uphold the “pride of self-government, the pull of a rooted group identity, the ritual performance of social cohesion”, and “the ability to stage collective action” (Kourí 2018, 52). However, none of these forms of everyday life inside a polity were associated with basic ‘membership’ requirements, excluding Castilians and other Europeans who were formally outside their jurisdiction. The partial dissolution of pipiltin and macehualtin inequality ended up with the slow, incredibly elastic, creation of a multi-ethnic vastness of campesinos or, following Armando Bartra, campesindios (2008). This social class, the ‘popular’ sector or ‘los de abajo’, would then prove to be one of the most important actors in all subsequent periods of (post)colonial Mexican history, due to its “complex and mutable base” of structural diversity (Bartra 2008, 10). For historians like Kourí, the sudden demise of some pipiltin alongside the rise of macehualtin signal the

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69 Notes in brackets added.
70 I employ the term campesino instead of the English peasant because of the particular histories, subjectivities, cultures, and struggles that the term campesino reflects. Formally speaking, campesino is a word similar in meaning to peasant and farmer in English. However, as Bartra notes, the meaning of campesino in the Mexican context cannot be disentangled from its association with Indigeneity and Indigenous ways of being (2008, 10).
starting point of a renewed base for Indigenous political relations that needed to accommodate the needs of several ethnic and racial groups living in the same space. At the individual level, it was entirely possible to move from a position of power and privilege to complete destitution in just a couple of decades, which generated widely uneven effects in wealth distribution, land concentration, and property relations, especially regarding the possibility of enslavement and indentured labor (Kourí 2018, 52). I take these multiple and complexly woven trajectories to reflect on the possibilities for a decolonial reading of colonial state formation in the Anahuac. My emphasis on agency and a strategical understanding of the colonial structure by Indigenous peoples tries to overcome what Paula López Caballero has called the analysis of Indigeneity as alterity (López Caballero and Acevedo-Rodrigo 2018b). For her, one of the greatest issues faced by those who study colonialism is their understanding of all Indigeneity as tacitly ‘other’, that is, as either a set of ‘authentic’ practices and customs that always belong to subaltern –and minoritarian– sectors of a population, or as the sphere of peoples who only resist in the micro-political realm of everyday life, ultimately inconsequential to the ‘great issues of our time’. However, to overcome the principle of Indigeneity as alterity, she warns us that it is not necessary to fall into the trap of “evaluating what is really indigenous or assessing the degree of authenticity of some group, person, practice, or discourse”. What we need is to privilege “the social issues and contexts” in which the identificatory categories associated with the term ‘Indigenous’ acquire a meaning of their own, that is, a notion of Indigeneity that is more relational in the sense described so far. For this, López Caballero remarks, it is imperative to avoid reducing the variability of Indigeneity “to a predefined trajectory, because the category indigenous is a permanent field of negotiation and dispute whose

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71 Kourí highlights that wherever pipiltin lost influence and standing, “local power passed into the hands of a class of relatively well-to-do commoners” (2018, 43) with the privileges and responsibilities that this entailed.
meanings are always volatile and elusive” (2018b, 5–6). Indigenous peoples of the Anahuac, like other ‘colonial subjects’, “lived in the present, with all of its combinations and contradictions”, deploying “multiple materialities and rhetorical strategies” that speak “to their acute understanding of the diverse signs of legitimacy that circulated in the colonial world” (K. S. McDonough 2017, 18). The altepetl, and subsequently barrio and pueblo, are thus “a relational field of governance, subjectivities, and knowledges” that connects Indigenous and non-Indigenous peoples to the “making and remaking” of “structures of power” (de la Cadena and Starn 2007, 3).

As Verónica Gago argues, “the enshrined stereotype” of Indigeneity results in its negation of the peoples’ “own project of modernity”, forcing them “to accommodate” permanently “in the small boxes of minorities, as finally recognized noble savages”. However, the character of such confinement is purely rhetorical, and “limits and flattens the indigenous to the occupation of rural space and to an “almost theatrical deployment of alterity”” (2017, 60). In contrast, an emphasis on the historical variability of Indigenous strategies recognizes “the intersection and overlap between scales of analysis […] as a central element of explanation” (López Caballero and Acevedo-Rodrigo 2018b, 8–9), where everyday life and the institutional condensation or materialization of fields of struggle collide to produce contested political forms. The literally mobile base of Indigenous pueblos and barrios, and the fact that they emerged, fell, and were reconstructed in short periods of time shows how the violence of colonization shattered countless lives. At the same time, it reveals the dynamicity of political institutions that puts into question narratives of Indigenous peoples.

72 Emphasis in the original. It is also important to consider that the principle of Indigeneity as alterity tends to oversee diasporic Indigenous identities, given that it always –surreptitiously– assumes Indigeneity exists only in its home territory.

73 One example is the study of ‘institutional revolutionary communities’ in Chiapas by anthropologist Jan Rus. In it, he demonstrated that the presence of the state was consolidated precisely by perpetuating, instead of eliminating, local traditions and customs (Rus 1994). The process occurred, obviously, not without many problems and contradictions.
as constantly secluded and ignorant or disinterested in state politics (Chevalier 1963; Van Young 2003).

However, during the long sixteenth century—which I understand chronologically as occurring from 1519 to around 1692—of colonial state formation in the Anahuac, the role of *pueblos* and *barrios* as collective political actors with state capacities is essential to understand the difficult emergence of colonial institutions and their bureaucracies. The colonial polities of central Mexico engaged in constant negotiations over the extension of their territories, the acquisition and regulation of land, and the introduction of new members from different geographical and cultural provenance. They informed—and in many instances inaugurated—bureaucratic practices that account for, register, and measure peoples, lands, and rights, deploying an entire institutional history and culture that entangled itself with, and pushed against the limits of, Castilian juridical-political traditions based on bureaucratic-aristocratic rule and its thirst for imperial expansion. I argue that from such an unintended entanglement, or ‘path-dependent’ interaction, and at the core of the (ant)agonism between differing epistemological (i.e. institutional, bureaucratic, and governing) practices, a slow process of institutional condensation of the state began to emerge. I define the latter, following but extending Poulantzas, as the condensation of a relationship of forces (2000, 125) among racialized groups and fractions within those groups that takes a particular—‘historically determined’—form: the colonial state in the Anahuac. On a broader scale, the frictions and entanglements of epistemological practices taking place in this lush Valley and its surroundings would be ‘exported’ to the extending colonial ventures of the Spanish, including the steep and lavish mountains of the Andes. Here, another entanglement with the numerous and powerful Andean peoples would further complicate the institutional condensation of the state, making for this account a potentially regional and global reading of state formation.
The distinctiveness of the state-form I am describing here comes from its fundamentally colonial-racial character, that is, its *modern* character. I treat these terms as equivalent in this context because of two major reasons. First, at an epistemological level, modern power relations emerge with the sign of colonization and all the material, affective, and symbolic weight it carries, configuring subjectivities that are traversed and inflected by coloniality, or what Nelson Maldonado-Torres has called the ‘coloniality of being’ (2007). Second, at an institutional level, emerging colonial technologies of power (accounting for, registering, calculating, *policía*) reconfigure and test the resistances of extant governing practices and conceptions, stretching them –often precariously– to accommodate the internal contradictions that come with securing ‘good government’ while regulating peoples’ bodies and turning them into populations or, more specifically, laborers. Thus, the protracted process of institutional partition between a Republic of ‘Indios’ – composed mostly of *pueblos* and *barrios*– and a Republic of ‘Spaniards’ – composed mostly of European settlers– can be read, from a decolonial perspective, as the result of the exertion of a majoritarian, autonomist power and will emanating from Indigenous (and other racialized, or *casta*) peoples against colonial encroachment. Even if the outcome of such a conflictual, extremely repressive, genocidal, and debasing process ended up transmogrifying political sovereignty by introducing colonial logics of domination, a sphere of ‘autonomous’, yet relational power materialized and has existed ever since alongside, within, and against coloniality. The schism between state apparatus and state power that Poulantzas regards as essential to understand the modern, capitalist state (2000, 133), is literally reflected in the institutional condensation of two Republics for two peoples.

**The Mestizo State**

Besides structuring populations according to different *casta* categories, the ‘two Republic solution’ installed a political regime based on the *difference* of its subjects. Some
were, by virtue of their *naturaleza* (nature), ready to become full-fledged modern subjects and members of the public, while others, by virtue of the same, were still children in need of guidance. The amount of guidance required by children to reach full adulthood does not seem to have been specified ever, only the pace with which adulthood could be reached by specific Indigenous groups instead of others. But how did Indigenous peoples themselves grapple with the installment of difference –not relationships– as the structuring principle of political life? How to understand the role of Indigenous *pueblos* and *barrios* in recomposing forms of political sovereignty that would allow wielding power vis-á-vis the colonizer’s Republic?

In her superb book *Alien Capital: Asian Racialization and the Logic of Settler Colonial Capitalism*, as well as her article *Being or Nothingness: Indigeneity, Antiblackness, and Settler Colonial Critique* (2015; 2016); Iyko Day discusses that, in the settler colonial context, Indigeneity and blackness should be understood in terms of “an ecology of power relations rather than a linear chain of events”. The issue with models that employ (linear) causality to understand the political economy of empire miss the fact that, for Day, instead of interpreting colonialism as an “inherited background field” in which different forms of domination converge, they reproduce the base-superstructure metaphor from orthodox Marxism by positing that all forms of oppression, as well as their flows and transformations, derive from a ‘settler colonial base’. Instead, she offers to put “colonial land and enslaved labor at the center of a dialectical analysis”, in which “blackness is neither reducible to Indigenous land nor Indigeneity to enslaved labor”, but both interact within the “dual logic” of settler colonialism that seeks to “eliminate Native peoples from land and mix the land with enslaved black labor”. For Day, both logics –elimination and enslavement– “work together to serve a unitary end in increasing white settler property in

75 Glen Coulthard makes the same argument in his introduction to *Red Skin, White Masks* (2014).
the form of land and an enslaved labor force”, altering the racial content of both Indigeneity and blackness to make the former “entirely dissolvable and eradicable” and the latter infinitely capable “to contaminate” (Day 2015, 113).

I extend and problematize Iyko Day’s analysis by positing the question: what happens when the ‘racial content’ that she assigns to Indigeneity and blackness are concentrated into one single racialized subject, that of the ‘Indio’ of Spanish colonial discourse? How to think through this ‘dialectical relationship’ between contamination and eradication within the body of ‘the colonized’ themselves, in the epistemological constitution of their (and our) power relations? For me, the ‘infinite capacity to contaminate’ that Day locates as an effect of settler colonialism, or more precisely, as a marking that particular bodies receive instead of others, lies precisely in the body of the ‘indio’, of Indigenous peoples and their capacity to ‘contaminate’, to ‘Indigenize’ or decolonize other bodies through their cultural, affective, and reproductive (or ‘child bearing’) capacities. Colonial preoccupation with having different institutions for both ‘mestizxs’ and Indigenous peoples reflects another turn in the colonizer’s discourse about the character of Indigeneity, and how to continue its reproduction –because of the need for Indigenous labor for the viability of colonial society– while containing its effects over what started to be perceived as ‘differently’ racialized bodies. In sum, ‘mestizx’ –and other ‘casta’– bodies are ultimately already ‘contaminated’, and the labor of colonial domination consists in artificially reproducing the minoritarian, or inconsequential, character of such ‘contamination’.

Consequently, my understanding of mestizaje and the role it performs in the reproduction of colonial racial formations is cognizant of its foundational entanglements, interactions, interactions, interactions.

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76 This is one of the reasons why the United States and its governmental apparatus never cease to reproduce a racist imaginary of Mexican bodies as rapists, criminals, drug addicts, and gang members, and engages in the systematic criminalization and cultural assimilation/commodification of ‘Mexicanness’. An excess of visibility of ‘Mexicanity’ in mainstream settler society produces its diametrical opposite: appropriation, dilution, and depoliticization.
and unevenness. As Serge Gruzinski has noted, Abya Yala’s mestizaje has rarely been studied as it appears to us. Instead, scholars “hastily” reorder and sort “the various elements allegedly making up the whole”, “shattering” the reality of mestizo bodies and politics, and introducing “filters, criteria, and obsessions that exist only to our Western eyes” (2002, 9). A relational account of modern colonial state formation in the Anahuac (and Abya Yala) requires thus an entire re-evaluation of the discourse and practices of mestizaje. Traditionally understood in the Global North as a simple and straightforward process of (biological and cultural) whitening whose purpose is to erase Indigenous cultures and bodies, mestizaje is seen as a localized or particular manifestation of the universal of settler colonialism and white supremacy. However, relational accounts from Abya Yala have started from a radically different point of departure. Laura Segato, for instance, defines it as an in-betweenness that moves in predominantly two directions: “whitening ideologically built as the kidnapping of non-white blood by “whiteness” and its cooptation in the process of successive dilution of the trace of the black and the Indian in the whitened criollo world of the continent”; and “blackening”, which she defines as “the contribution of white blood to non-white blood in the process of reconstruction of Indigenous and Afro-descendant worlds, collaborating with their reconstitution process”. The second project, for her, reformulates mestizaje as “the navigation of non-white blood, through centuries of clandestineness, as cutting from the inside and through white blood, until it resurges from its prolonged concealment in the ample process of re-emergence of peoples that the continent is experiencing”. Again, mestizaje is here the threat of infinite contamination that unsettles the racial regime of (post)colonial Latin America, making

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77 Gruzinski speaks here as a French scholar.
78 See, for example (Castellanos 2017; Speed 2017). Some Abya Yalan scholars educated in Canada and the United States have also started to adopt this position. See (Covarrubias-Cabeza 2018).
79 Some notable examples are (Echeverría 2000; 2008; 2010; González Navarro 1968; López Austin 1974; Navarrete Linares 2016; Rivera Cusicanqui 2010a).
visible a history of at least 500 years of collaboration, ‘transculturation’, and the uneven implementation of racialized power relations (Segato 2011, 29–30).

On the other hand, Mexican historians have questioned for decades the ‘veracity’ of the myth of mestizaje as the convergence of European and Indigenous peoples that ‘produced’ a new kind of being, the ‘mestizo’, now in charge of the republican regimes all across Abya Yala. Instead, by looking at historical records, they have argued that the ‘biological’ or ‘demographic’ approach to mestizaje, that is, the idea that most bodies inhabiting Mexico are the product of ‘intermarriage’ or ‘miscegenation’ between Spaniards and Indigenous peoples, does not have sufficient evidential support. Most Europeans chose not to ‘mix’ with Indigenous peoples out of fear of losing their status in colonial society, and their demographic presence in Mexico tended to be minoritarian throughout the colonial period. Moisés González Navarro, for example, suggests that at no point in colonial times Spaniards were a visible majority compared to other casta peoples, including Indigenous (Borah and Cook 1969; González Navarro 1968). In any case, Federico Navarrete notes, ‘transculturation’ and ‘intermarriage’ between Indigenous peoples and Africans, Asians, and Arabs was actually far more common (2016), making the official discourse (both colonial and republican) of mestizaje devoid of any positive content and artificially constraining.

Indigenous peoples of central Mexico had long established traditions of ‘intermarriage’ between different groups and a very dynamic conception of the contours of their ‘ethnic’ ascription (Duverger 2007; Connell 2011, 67; 2016). These traditions, I argue, are precisely what allowed for Nahua to sustain the viability of Indigenous barrios and pueblos, and to

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80 Furthermore, the first official population census done in independent Mexico showed that between 65–70% of the population were native speakers of Indigenous languages (Navarrete Linares 2016). Borah and Cook find that, by 1646, only 1.3% of the population were ‘mestizos’, whereas 86.3% of the population were Indigenous (Borah and Cook 1969; Navarrete Linares 2016). This is considering that colonialism had been going on for about 127 years.
incorporate other peoples into their circuits of commerce, cultural change, and governance, remaining majoritarian and effective in developing state-making capacities. *Mestizaje* then reveals itself as a relational *and* contradictory strategy of survival in the face of colonial destruction (Echeverría 1994; 2000). The effects of colonialism in the constitution of *mestizaje* as a form of ethnopolitical rule cannot be ignored, but its outcomes are highly contradictory, not to say ‘incoherent’: some incredibly oppressive, and others relatively emancipatory. Hence, to employ a model of causality to understand racial formations in this context, or to ‘hastily arrange’ its multiple elements into a presumably concise and contained order, is to miss the effects of its doings and confuse its outcomes with something else entirely: *mestizaje* cannot be ordered according to filters, criteria and obsessions that exist only to Westerners’ eyes.

Finally, Silvia Rivera Cusicanqui has proposed to employ a different term to grasp the ambiguous and difficult character of *mestizaje*:81 ch’ixi (2006; 2010a; 2010c). An Aymara term, ch’ixi denotes for Rivera Cusicanqui the capacity of several social groups to fuse their features and those of their ancestors with those of other groups (2010a, 70). Ch’ixi depicts a reality “in which indigeneity is present amongst, but not subsumed by, the modern” (Anthias 2017, 269).82 In the Aymara language, ch’ixi means “a color that is the product of juxtaposition, in small points or spots, of two opposed or contrasting colors”, from which “the parallel coexistence of multiple cultural differences” emerges in a terrain that does not extinguish any of them but instead relates or connects them in antagonistic and complementary terms (Rivera Cusicanqui 2012, 105). In this sense, ch’ixi or *mestizx* societies –probably inadvertently– support multiplicity in a way that “seems to prevent hegemony as an expansive totality without cracks”, reproducing partialities, or partial

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81 I also recognize that some of the scholars that I will cite here would reject the notion of *mestizaje* precisely because of its oppressive colonial past *and* present. However, I am proposing to find common threads across varying perspectives without assuming that any of them is more important than the others.
82 Emphasis in the original.
subject positions, that have no other recourse but to affirm themselves as such. Even if the efforts among ‘partialities’ are not sufficient to interrupt and dismount the onslaught of colonialism, they nevertheless “imprint[…] a nonclosed character” to its logics of reproduction, articulating or rendering legible its “disarticulated overlapping” (Gago 2017, 63). The results are far from insignificant, because in their apparent disarticulation they point towards the possibility of convergence and transversality, of multiple fluidity and interaction, and possible paths for decolonization.

As Goldberg argues, the internalization of racial homogeneity within European states was not paralleled by an imposition of the same to their colonies (2002b, 16). Thus, ‘racial heterogeneity’ was turned into a sign of ‘underdevelopment’ or ‘backwardness’ that had to be extirpated with the same measures adopted in Eurocentric conceptions of race. *Mestizaje* was understood by these ‘critics’ as just another form of homogenization modeled after ‘Western’ projects of racial segregation or elimination. Without denying that this has definitely happened in different moments of history and across different geographies,83 *mestizaje* has also survived by reproducing a heterogeneous racial formation that harbors incessant forms of resistance and subversion.

It could be argued from here that all interpretations of *mestizaje* that want to see it as a unidirectional process remain trapped in an imaginary of ahistorical racism, that is, of the uninterrupted permanence of a particular racial formation and its characteristics.84 They pose two possible outcomes to it: a) the homogenization of otherwise diverse populations by a mythical identity that looks upon whiteness as the ultimate horizon, and b) the dismissal of *mestizaje* as an impure tactic of cultural ‘miscegenation’ that ends up

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83 *Mestizaje* in the Mexican case has been particularly anti-black. This is an issue that has been addressed only recently (Gandarilla Salgado and Ortega Reyna 2017).

84 What I mean by this is that they always operate under the assumption that racism as practiced and reproduced in some parts of the world –mainly the US and Canada, but also Europe– applies to everywhere during any period of history. For a detailed defense of this position, see (Bonilla-Silva 1997; 2015).
reproducing white racial and cultural norms. Rather, *mestizaje* reverses in some instances the narrative by engaging in a detailed historical and cultural analysis of how racial formations have actually been practiced. I want to clarify that my conception of *mestizaje* clearly departs from popularized conceptions of it that flourished particularly at the end of the nineteenth century as part of some *criollo* nationalist imaginaries of the time. Instead, I provocatively suggest to recover Bolívar Echeverría’s point of departure –that *mestizaje* is a strategy of survival, of “living the unlivable” (2000, 37)– to move away from (linear) causal models that are only able to see either exclusively white supremacy, or ‘racial indeterminacy’ and incoherence. I will develop this argument in the conclusion to this work, by putting in dialogue two conceptions of autonomy: Nahua practices of political sovereignty, and the ‘autonomist hypothesis’ of Marxist *operaismo*. In a context of ‘fractured’ power and ambiguous hegemony, the possibilities for a decolonial theorization of the state appear to be much more possible.

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85 For a critique of the nineteenth century model of nationalist *mestizaje*, see (Zermeño 2011).
Conclusion

The autonomist hypothesis: fractured power, ‘subaltern’ struggles, and the decolonization of ‘the state’

Understanding the emergence of the colonial state in Abya Yala and its multiple entanglements needs careful work of recomposition, in other words, of reworking the categories and epistemological devices employed to study the phenomenon. The emergence of the colonial state in sixteenth century central Mexico with the category of *mestizaje* provides a nuanced alternative to traditional narratives of colonization and what it entails. The latter have emphasized one single form of labor regime and arrangement as the overarching principle that structured the state and everyday life in early modernity. By focusing on *encomienda* and the labor extracted from it as a form of widespread Indigenous dispossession and disappearance, analyses of colonization in Mexico mirror traditional accounts of orthodox Marxism that privilege a unique form of wage-labor to derive the entire history of the emergence of capital and its logic of reproduction. Likewise, they render *mestizaje* a linear process of imposed ‘whitening’ and ‘Westernization’ that has its roots in colonial domination.

The idea that a single and specific form of labor acts as “the fundamental institution of an entire historical period” (Banaji 2010, 106) should appear suspect to most of us by now, given the high adaptability that both ‘employers’ and laborers have shown throughout different periods in history itself. The case of the Valley of Mexico is, of course, not an exception. Generally, scholars of early colonization in central Mexico have argued that the most important –even the fundamental– form of labor has been the *encomienda* system and its regime of forced work, focusing entirely on its development and practice from the
perspective of the colonizers. However, this approach ignores all ‘previously’ existing forms of labor that Nahua society had, as well as their transformation and adaptation to the requirements of the colonial state, in favor of a narrative that sees them as disappearing almost right after the Spanish arrived. More nuanced interpretations tend to mention the existence of already existing forms of labor, most prominently *tequitl*, but argue that their importance became minor and eventually disappeared (Stern 1992; Townsend 2003).

In contrast, my account tries to reverse these terms by arguing that multiple forms of labor operated as the fundamental institutions without which the colonial enterprise could not have been possible. This is not to say that *encomienda* was not important at all, or had a minor role, but that the practical experience of all the peoples involved in this period show a much more complicated picture than an emphasis in *encomienda* alone allows to see. The *encomienda* system grafted itself onto multiple forms of Indigenous labor, which in turn determined the formers’ shape, organization and transformations. But *encomienda* was not an already pre-designed method of resource extraction via the use of Indigenous labor that was simply added as another piece of the puzzle to an already existing mosaic of practices. The notion of combination acquires special importance here because it leads to an understanding that this particular form of labor was produced from the interaction between different conceptions of land and its resources as well as cultural and political forms of life. Out of this entanglement, *encomienda* emerged as a contested and negotiated

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86 The classic works here are (Chevalier 1963; Gibson 1964), without ignoring the fact that they contain very convincing and seminal postulates. For a more recent example, see (Prem 1992).

87 Which in Nahuatl means ‘work’ in general, but more precisely, all types of labor directly related to the land and their forms of organization.

88 Which is a very bizarre claim to make given the continuing existence (and decisive importance), to this day, of forms of labor and land tenure that already existed back then. The most prominent of these is the *ejido* (Bartra 2008), existing in most rural areas of Mexico, but *tequitl* is still practiced by most autonomous municipalities in the states of Oaxaca, Guerrero, Chiapas, Veracruz and the State of Mexico.
form of regulation and extraction of Indigenous bodies and lands, with their corresponding political institutions.

This might seem as a veiled form of economism from my part. But it is only the case if we understand land, labor, culture and politics as intrinsically separate, discrete domains that affect each other, with some of them determining the others in certain conjunctural situations. My approach denies these separations because it attempts to employ a Nahua ‘epistemology’ of sociality that sees all of these spheres as interconnected and permanently co-emergent. Following Jairus Banaji, the way in which a combination of forms of labor occurs can be characterized as a ‘logic of deployment’. For him, if different forms of labor exist—which I would say is the case all the time—the way production is organized is “bound to reflect an essential flexibility” limited by the availability of labor(s), making the whole regime “shift back and forth between different types of deployment” (2010, 106). If such a concept appears to be very helpful to conceptualize how encomienda actually operated, I would expand it to include not just forms of interaction between different labors and how they are deployed, but also the emergence of new forms of labor (hence forms of culture and politics) produced by these interactions, in consonance with what I call mestizaje.

Banaji highlights the importance of the case of laborers in colonial Mexico to understand the variegation of work-forms in the creation of a colonial-capitalist system. For him, the fact that “workers did fight back […] by the repeated litigation brought by Indian labourers before the General Indian Court” combined with “the recruitment of wage labor bound by debt”, signals the reality of laborers as “coerced but not enslaved” (2003, 79). This

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88 But, as Jairus Banaji states, “Behind the apparent determinisms of economic life, the inflexible evolution of whole forms of economy, were countless concrete decisions about the use of labour” (2010, 108).
89 Banaji’s emphasis in this text is on the operations and perspective of landowners in twelfth and thirteenth century Europe. However, my analysis focuses on the perspective and practices of Indigenous ‘landowners’ facing a context of colonial pressure, changing the way in which I deploy Banaji’s concept.
90 Emphasis in the original.
definition acts in contradistinction to traditional understandings of labor in colonial Mexico, who see it as just another form of slavery that justifies the position of the colony operated as a feudal regime.\(^{91}\) I would argue that this coercion without enslavement also comes from a twofold process: first, that ownership of land was assumed by the Nahuas and inherited to their descendants, holding considerable control over resource extraction and labor, and secondly, that the room for maneuver allowed by such a situation was decisive in the construction of institutions like the ‘Indian courts’ and continued presence of Indigenous peoples in positions of authority inside their Republic.

Increasing divisions between pipiltin and macehualtin can also be understood according to this principle. The emergence of a ‘working class’ or a class of ‘dispossessed’ laborers was not as pristine and clear as it may appear in this case, precisely because it was shrouded in the complicated, plural and combined history of Indigenous multiplicity and forms of labor. In this sense, pipiltin and macehualtin acquired a very similar status sociologically speaking, eventually obliterating all distinctions between strata. But socioeconomic divisions increased and remained, turning previous ‘strata-based’ separations into more ‘class-based’ or class-like ones. As Banaji suggests, “the working class is not a product of capitalism specifically, unless there is a sense in which class itself is peculiar to capitalism, so that workers before capitalism fail to constitute a class in the same sense as workers under capitalism” \(^{92}\) Rejecting this perspective seems to be commonplace because of a shared, albeit denied or unconscious, belief in what Banaji calls ‘primitivism’. This imaginary poses that “Wage-labour” must be “a peculiarly modern institution”, because the precapitalist world, “indeed all periods of history before capitalism, are seen as

\(^{91}\) Banaji uses a very useful distinction that allows him to clarify the issue of slavery and its relation to capitalism when he states that at “the level of individual capitals, it is accumulation or the ‘drive for surplus-value’ that defines capitalism, not the presence or absence of ‘free’ labour” \(^{92}\) (2003, 81) (emphasis in the original). In contrast, at the level of total social capital, ‘free’ labor is necessary because it secures its mobility.

\(^{92}\) Emphasis added.
intrinsically impervious to any of the institutions that characterise capitalism” (2010, 126), and by extension modernity as such. This does not mean that that ‘free labor’ is not necessary for the constitution of modern capitalism, but that we need to undermine the commonly held assumption that capital and wage-labor have an exclusive link that explains the emergence of capital (Banaji 2010, 128).93 Finally, I am not attempting to argue that colonial Mexico in the sixteenth century was ‘indeed capitalist’, but that a focus on ‘subaltern’ agency is essential in understanding the production of a system ruled by capital. This agency is not the particular to a universal by the name of capital, but an essential component that the latter cannibalizes and without which its abstract, falsely posited universal logic cannot exist.94

Furthermore, the increasing divide between strata in Nahua society during the first century of colonial rule could be explained by the demand of a specific type of ‘free’ labor (Harootunian 2015, 50). This is not the classical Marxian category based on the ‘liberation’ of producers from their means of production, but rather a modification of it were the ‘freedom’ of labor resides in its capacity to produce tribute at any time under arbitrary conditions. That is, ‘free workers’ are still proprietors (of land), but they are constantly pushed to provide taxes and resources for colonial authorities. In other words, what happens is that the hitherto inseparability of being a proprietor and a member of a stratum is increasingly diluted in favor of a stratification that pretends to classify peoples according to racial ascriptions. Does this pave the way for a subsequent crystallization of labor power as commodity? All I could say is that, retrospectively, it does resemble one of the ‘preconditions’ for the creation of labor as a ‘free’, racialized mobile force abstractly

93 Many other scholars have held this point, including Marxist Feminists in the tradition of social reproduction theory, or critical development scholars like Banaji himself. My argument attempts to add more elements to this ongoing discussion.

94 I owe this formulation to Bolivar Echeverría’s concept of realist ethos, and its subsequent application to the imposition of ‘whiteness’ (or blankness) as a principle of modernity and universality in capitalism. See (Echeverría 2010).
separated from its capacity to produce that resides in concrete, actually existing bodies and their ways of life bodies. Meticulous historical analysis confirms, in my view, that the full realization of capital, its absolute or ‘fully developed’ form, does not exist. Capital is a universal that is always in the making, and that never comes, it is an aspiration more than a realization (Harootunian 2015, 248 n. 120).

In effect, so-called primitive accumulation can be considered “coterminous” with the construction of the colonial state and its regimes of racialization. As Harry Harootunian asserts, they share a common background “that ultimately grounds their kinship and thereby implicates each in the other”. Furthermore, formal subsumption is relevant to understand the ‘entirety’ of the process because of

*its capacious aptitude for appropriating what it found near at hand,*

*thus designating a division between what was outside of it, what was seen as “different,” and what was inside, and incorporating and combining it with the capitalist production process as if it naturally belonged there, literally metabolizing it in such a way that it was retrojected back and seen as an “always-already” presupposition of capital’s claim to a natural history* (Harootunian 2015, 13–14).

In our context, this means that even if it is not my interest to speak ‘clearly’ of capitalism occurring during the period under scrutiny, there is an intense process of combination of different forms of life and social reproduction that have later been incorporated to capitalism as if they were natural components of its operation. Consequently, “the structure of capitalism is not reducible to a “categorical beginning” but instead constitutes a constant mixing of the historical material” and its more ‘conceptual’ logic from the outset, “which points to incommensurate temporalities” (Harootunian 2015, 14) that overlap, interact and coalesce in a process of ch’ixi *mestizaje.* Nahua forms of life and
temporalities operate here, following Gago, as “the communitarian aspects” with multiple, “flexible meanings” that “compose a landscape” of uneven and combined plurality “which is simultaneously political, neighborly, familial, and delocalized”. This concrete landscape pumps blood into capital’s arteries, “as inputs for adapting and reinventing forms of production, circulation, and consumption” (2017, 45).

Nahuas and other Indigenous peoples of central Mexico, facing pachakuti, mobilized across the territory, leaving their communities of origin in many cases and adapting to an emergent situation that ferociously twisted anything in its way. However, they “still retained the undisturbed memory of who they had been and what they had done before”, making possible what Harootunian clumsily calls “the undisturbed accompaniment of older modes of work and tools, along with customs and religious beliefs that were seen as vital to or indistinguishable from work”, which ended up blunting “the direct consequences of both expropriation and exploitation” or at the very least masking “their harshness” (2015, 62). I argue that this approach is true but has not been taken to its ultimate consequences, since my case demonstrates that ‘older modes’ of life did not only blunt the consequences of expropriation and exploitation, but determined their historical course and influenced their reception, reproduction and results. As Harootunian himself argues, if the implementation of subsumption can retain “traces and residues from earlier practices in the future and actively reproduce them”, the difficult obstacles posed by this tendency are to be overcome by a “social formation capable of embodying multiple, coexisting, and contradictory modes of production or even a conjunctural gathering that brings together such fractured heterogeneity” (2015, 66). This ‘conjunctural gathering’ is none other than the state, and its function as a ‘momentary unity’ that it has historically received. In synthesis, “unevenness was omnipresent everywhere capital prevailed, constantly reminding every present of the vast contradictions that people in modern
society lived daily and that lay at its heart. But it was precisely this reminder that reinforced the state’s desire to impose an image of a smooth and undisturbed social countenance, the evenness of an eternal present” (Harootunian 2015, 67).

The true ‘eternal present’, to use an inappropriate expression, are the multiple, plural and constantly shifting agencies represented by concrete and historically determined ways of life, forms of being and structures of political organization. In very broad terms, the change that colonization brought to the Valley of Mexico can be understood better by employing Marx’s concept of “formal subsumption”. According to Jason Read, precapitalist forms of production are “subordinated to the reproduction of a particular form of life, and particular structures of subjectivity”. This subordination indicates that the reproduction of systems of knowledge, beliefs and traditions are ultimately linked to the very form and process by which production is realized, in other words, by a direct relationship to the land and its resources. Without this connection, the particular structures of subjectivity and forms of life proper to the Nahuas (and Indigenous peoples all over the world) are systematically put in jeopardy. In contrast –and this is when formal subsumption comes to the fore–, with the experience of colonization production is increasingly decoupled from the reproduction of land-based knowledges and traditions. Subjectivity is now founded on an “abstract subjective potential” (Read 2003, 10) that makes it productive and usable to the purposes of exploitation and extraction.

My argument is that this abstract subjective potential is only materially possible and thinkable through the production of the idea of race. ‘Race’ is the signifier around which all the practices, discourses and infrastructures coalesce to form a supposedly stable conception of groups of people belonging to a particular category inside the social

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95 One has to take into account here that the notion of ‘mode of production’ is considerably much more expansive for Read than orthodox readings of it. Instead of an analytic device, Read –following Althusser– considers ‘mode of production’ to operate as a problematic (Read 2003, 10–15).
hierarchy. To use Nemser’s terms again, race is a ‘grid of intelligibility’ (2017) with which the colonial project activates its goal of producing subjects acquiescent to the structure of domination. This would not be achievable without the state as an apparatus of capture and contested unification of strategies of regulation and management of power relations. In this sense, the emergence of colonialism and its regimes of racialization are only possible with the state’s invocation of race as the master category that rules everyday life. Formal subsumption helps in understanding the creation of a new mode of production, but it cannot be fully realized without the simultaneous production of race and the state, or the racial state.

However, and following Read, the process of decoupling carried out by colonization should not be confused with “a functionalist understanding of society”. It is not like colonialism “produces the sort of subjects it needs in an infinite act of self-production”, and as the only sovereign that dictates how history will unfold. Rather, what Read –as well as Althusser and others– call for is to recognize, as applied to my case, the structure of coloniality as a form of immanent causality. This means that the subjective effects of the structure are not simply a manifestation of an essence or principle that colonialism possesses beforehand, but that subjectivity is “simultaneously effect and cause”, that the production of subjectivity “always simultaneously exceeds and falls short of the demands of the specific” (Read 2003, 11; 2002), in our case, the structure of colonial domination.

This reinterpretation makes possible a reversal of terms, where the assertion of subjectivity as not merely an effect but also a cause leads me to suggest that resistance “precedes and prefigures the transformations and development” of the colonial state. In my view, colonialism is the pretension to implement a universal that never comes, and in this sense colonialism cannibalizes already existing histories and plural worldviews. The colonial structure, then, is not the agent behind transformation, changing the cultural, social and
governmental dimensions of society to accommodate the supremacy of Europe, eventually covering the entirety of the world. Rather, colonialism is a permanent reaction and accommodation to its “antagonistic confrontation” (Read 2003, 13) with the power of the subjective, with already existing, concrete histories and worldviews. True productive power resides in them, whereas the colonial is devoid of any history beyond those which it systematically appropriates.96

Resistance to the colonial structure is what ultimately transforms it, from the micro-scale of the practice of writing and incorporating testaments to the ‘tradition’ by tlacuiloque in order to maintain control over land, to its extension beyond the confines of peoples’ homes to encompass the macro-scale of colonial policy. The transformation of colonialism is “the effect and displacement of prior conflicts” (Read 2003, 14), as shown in my discussion of how mendicant friars developed an almost instant overarching desire to produce the ‘Indian’ race as a flock of ‘good, Christian people’ useful for the purposes of extraction, both spiritual and material. This necessity did not come out of a spontaneous decision or conviction from missionaries to teach the ‘superiority’ of their doctrine, but from the anxiety, suspicion and even paranoia produced from seeing how the Nahuas incorporated Christian symbols and practices almost seamlessly into their ‘pagan’ beliefs.

This does not mean that the abstract subjective potential necessary for the reproduction of colonialism is inexisten. Instead, it is an ideal type that is always in the making but never

96 This reversal is an adaptation to my case of what Read calls ‘the autonomist hypothesis’, inspired in the autonomist Marxism (operaismo) of activist-thinkers like Silvia Federici, Mariarosa Dalla Costa and Mario Tronti (Read 2003, 13). As Harootunian argues, “The operation of formal subsumption set up the temporal structure of every present, through its mission to appropriate what it found useful in prior practices and procedures. If capitalism seeks to establish the force of the value form and achieve a sameness in the commodity relation, it paradoxically also produces the very difference it is trying to eliminate with its propensity to challenge every present with a new content in part derived from the past and the shadowing trace of primitive accumulation” (2015, 13).
fully realizes itself. To prevail, it needs to constantly make reference to those cultural and political excesses that it sees as ‘traces’ or ‘remainders of the past’, as ‘traditions’ that need to be expunged to achieve modernity or development. This is why formal subsumption, as well as the racial state, require the constant use of violence to assert their predominance, and why colonialism is an inherently violent form of social reproduction. But to remain stagnant in this assessment of things is to pessimistically deny the agency, productivity and potential of those who resist, and the way they have actually shaped our past and present. The outcomes of colonialism are not seen by the actors who live within it in their present, but always remains as a potential to come. In this sense, colonialism’s development is riddled with unintended consequences and results instead of “its continual self-perfection” (Read 2003, 17), and a reinterpretation of its past also holds the potential to change the way in which we live colonialism’s multiple presents.

Such a mechanic and historically linear conception is precisely what I argue we must abandon in favor of the complexity, heterogeneity and variegation that Navarrete Linares himself highlights. Mestizo colonialism points to the demographic majority of Indigenous peoples—and in the case of this study, Nahuas—of central Mexico and their resistance, creativity and contradictory adaptation to a colonial regime that was constantly forced to admit fundamental elements of Indigenous culture and politics as part of ‘society’. However, it is true that mestizaje in its colonial dimension has always sought the

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97 Though some, like Bolívar Echeverría (2010) argue that it does in the culture of whiteness (blanquitud) of the ‘realist ethos’ of modernity, or in my interpretation, of white settler colonists. However, this does not change the fact that such identities are always in a process of becoming, never fully realized.

98 As Navarrete Linares (2016) demonstrates, by 1850 a large majority of the population of Mexico were still native speakers of Indigenous languages. One hundred years later, this majority shrunk to around 10 percent. For Navarrete Linares, this was the result of intensive capitalist development and its homogenizing practices of industrialization and migration, combined with the establishment of an authoritarian one-party state that maintained power for around 70 years. The consequences of his analysis are very powerful, as I have noted throughout this work: mestizaje as a biological tendency towards racial admixture never occurred, but rather a process of cultural and linguistic change where the Indigenous majority became Spanish-speakers and relatively ‘Westernized’.
‘whitening’ of ‘Indians’, and not the ‘Indianization’ of whites, and the tension between this tendency and the most emancipatory qualities of mestizaje is what the term mestizo colonialism tries to encapsulate.

This is why plurality and entanglement, but also unevenness and combination, can be easily attuned to narrative strategies based on Nahua ‘epistemology’. I believe it is a matter of making unevenness and combination sensible to the principles of variety and alternation, of a world composed of multiple worlds that coalesce and can live together.

However, my goal has not been that of producing a detailed historical analysis for the sake of historical curiosity. In Zamora’s reading of Foucault, historical problems are “never exclusively ‘historical’”. Rather, they can be linked to an attempt to “’interrupt’ the ‘permanence’ and the historic ‘stability’ of the present” (2018, 5). This has been my objective so far, from an assumed position and under the terms of my own voice, which I intend to add to the chorus of voices that speak about a shared past in a plural way. I am not interested in the sixteenth century per se, but in its connection with us today, and the potential it holds to reinvent our relationships. It also reveals the deep coloniality of state structures and its foundational character to define politics, race and culture in contemporary Mexico as well as Abya Yala at large.
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