

**IN IXTLI IN YÓLLOTL: A PEDAGOGY OF BELONGING**  
**CULTIVATING RADICAL IMAGINARIES FOR INDIGENOUS QUEER FUTURES**

by

Daniel Gallardo

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

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cultivating radical imaginaries for Indigenous queer futures

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the degree of Master of Arts

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in Educational Studies

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**Examining Committee:**

Dr. Margaret Kovach, Professor, Educational Studies, Faculty of Education, UBC  
Supervisor

Dr. Jan Hare, Professor, Language & Literacy Education, Faculty of Education, UBC  
Supervisory Committee Member

Dr. Harper Keenan, Assistant Professor, Curriculum & Pedagogy, Faculty of Education, UBC  
Supervisory Committee Member

Dr. Daniel Heath Justice, Professor, First Nations & Indigenous Studies, Faculty of Arts, UBC  
Additional Examiner



## Abstract

Nahua cosmology teaches us we are made of corn. As one of the strongest and most adaptable plants, corn has gifted many varieties and colours, but the voracious consumption needs of modern anthropocentric societies require monocultures of yellow sameness to control people through commodification and capitalism. For Nahua Temachtiani (teacher) Santos de la Cruz Hernández, the disrespect of the plant for modern purposes has come at a big price and the many colours of corn are now gone; Chicomexochitl (native corn) is no longer here (2019). Decolonial scholar Vanessa Andreotti interprets a similar situation by utilizing the spread of yellow corn as a metaphor for an education that presumes dominant worldviews as the only possibility for progress, development and evolution. The “myth of the yellow corn” (Andreotti et al., 2017) refers to imposed limitations by coloniality/modernity that strive towards sameness following anthropocentric views of belonging.

The present thesis explores radical imaginaries to bring back the colours of Chicomexochitl by using an analytical framework grounded on Nahua knowledge systems that oppose the sameness of “yellow corn”. As this study is situated in the context of Mexico, central to my analysis is an examination of the oppressive national agenda of mestizaje. I use yellow corn as a metaphor for analytically framing mestizaje as a hegemonic ideology that promotes white supremacy and masculine superiority. I use stories as method of analysis to examine identities mestizaje has left at the borders and margins, those that deviate from colonial formations of masculinity and whiteness.



The goal of the thesis is to introduce a pedagogy that honours the ideal purpose of Nahua education: to find in *ixtli* in *yóllotl* (face and heart). A search for one's true colours by belonging to one's self, community and land. Returning to Nahua education follows non-anthropocentric views that center land as the most important entity. I introduce a pedagogy of belonging centred on the resurgence of Indigenous knowledge systems, as a way to set forth a transformative (un)learning journey that opposes the dominance of *mestizaje* by cultivating collective healing and belonging, critical for Indigenous queer futures.



## **Lay Summary**

The present thesis contributes to the field of Indigenous informed sexual orientation and gender identity scholarship. Its study examines the ideological impact of coloniality on race and gender in the normative culture and context of Mexico by interrogating patriarchal and modern assumptions of heterosexism and gender binaries performed within education. The thesis cultivates radical imaginaries for Indigenous queer belonging through *ixtli in yóllotl*, a Nahua holistic educational theory to find one's self, community and land. Using an analytical framework based on Nahua cosmology, I explore Indigenous and Mestizx 2S/LGBTQIA+ stories that imagine otherwise and can teach us how to heal the wounds caused by the violence of coloniality/modernity. The purpose of the study is to introduce a pedagogy grounded on the resurgence of Indigenous knowledge systems, as a way to set forth a transformative (un)learning journey that opposes ideological dominance towards cultivating collective healing and belonging.



## **Preface**

This thesis is unpublished and independent work by the author, Daniel Gallardo Zamora, with the help and guidance of Dr. Margaret Kovach. My contribution to this thesis includes the entire study identification, analytical design, performance, and analysis of the research. Chapter 7 is partially based on work conducted with UBC Capacity Research Unit directed by Dr. Victoria Bungay. I work as a curriculum development coordinator creating a course for the theory and practice of outreach for the School of Nursing at the University of British Columbia. The course is shaped by the pedagogical praxis of the present thesis.

As the thesis undertakes a systematic study of secondary sources, ethics board approval has been deemed unnecessary. Photos and illustrations in this study are owned by the author or are public domain.



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## List of Abbreviations

<b>2S/LGBTQIA+</b>	Two-Spirit, Lesbian, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer, Intersex, Asexual and More
<b>BIPOC</b>	Black, Indigenous and People of Colour
<b>CDI</b>	Comisión Nacional para el Desarrollo de los Pueblos Indígenas (National Commission for the Development of Indigenous Communities)
<b>CNDH</b>	Comisión Nacional de los Derechos Humanos National Human Rights Commission
<b>CONAPRED</b>	Consejo Nacional para Prevenir la Discriminación (National Council for the Prevention of Discrimination)
<b>CONEVAL</b>	Consejo Nacional de Evaluación de la Política de Desarrollo Social (National Committee of Evaluation of Social Development Policy)
<b>COPRED</b>	Consejo para Prevenir y Eliminar la Discriminación (Council for the Prevention and Elimination of Discrimination)
<b>EDIS</b>	Encuesta sobre Discriminación (Survey about Discrimination)
<b>EZLN</b>	Ejército Zapatista de Liberación Nacional (Zapatista Army of National Liberation)
<b>ENADIS</b>	Encuesta Nacional sobre Discriminación (National Survey about Discrimination)
<b>INEGI</b>	Instituto Nacional de Geografía y Estadística (National Institute of Statistics and Geography)



<b>OXFAM</b>	Oxford Committee for Famine Relief
<b>SEP</b>	Secretaría de Educación Pública (Secretary of Public Education)
<b>SESNSP</b>	Secretariado Ejecutivo del Sistema Nacional de Seguridad Pública (Executive Secretariat of the National Public Security System)
<b>UVI</b>	Universidad Veracruzana Intercultural (Intercultural University of Veracruz)



## Glossary

**Abuelita/o** Spanish word for Grandparent.

**Altepetl** Nahuatl word meaning an ethnic, political and territorial entity where communities share language, stories and ancestors.

**Anahuac** Nahuatl word meaning close to water and represents the land of so-called America before being owned.

**Artivism** Combination of the meanings of art and activism, takes roots from the Zapatistas and Chicanx collective art.

**Ayohtli** Nahuatl word meaning squash.

**Cemanahuac** Nahuatl word meaning everything close to water and represents the universe and entire cosmos.

**Chicanx/a/o or Xicanx/a/o** Person born in the United States of Mexican descent who opposes white assimilation by being proud of their heritage.

**Chicomexochitl (ceremony)** Nahua ceremony that takes place in the milpas, at the beginning of the cultivating cycles, to ask the creators for a good harvest and sending prayers for rain.

**Chicomexochitl (corn)** Nahuatl word that means seven flower, a sacred form of naming a corn cob whose many colours provide our sustenance.

**Cintli** Nahuatl word meaning corn cob.

**Cuilonitli** Nahuatl word that means a person assigned male at birth who identifies with feminine identity and/or has a homosexual orientation. The term is being reclaimed by Indigenous and Mestizx peoples in Mexico instead of using queer or marica.



**Elotlamanaliztli** Nahuatl ceremony to thank, honour and hold deep reverence towards the creators for the arrival of cintli (corn cob) during harvest season. An expression of gratitude for our sustenance towards the land which includes food offerings, music, singing, and dancing.

**Huehuehtlacatl** Nahuatl word meaning Elder.

**in ixtli in yóllotl** Nahuatl phrase meaning face and heart which is used in a metaphoric sense to mean a holistic educational theory for belonging.

**in tlalli in milli** Nahuatl phrase meaning land and cultivation which is understood as an Indigenous agriculture knowledge system for Nahuas sustenance. (see milpa)

**Machismo** Spanish term that refers to the pride of being "a real man", a concept that associates masculinity to proving to be strong, aggressive and in control.

**Macho** Spanish word meaning a person who has characteristics or qualities that are considered manly, especially when manifested in an assertive, strong and dominant way.

**Malinalli (La Malinche/ Malintzin)** A vilified Indigenous woman who is cotemporary known as the Mother of mestizaje and is historically represented as the Indigenous traitor who sold her people to the settler conquistadors.

**Malinchismo** Pejorative expression used to express discontent to Mexicans who feel an attraction to foreign cultures and disregard their own culture.

**Malinchista** Mexicans who have been conquered and corrupted by foreign influences and now look down on their own roots.

**Matlaniliztli** Nahuatl word meaning collective work.



**Mestizaje** Modern Spanish term referring to a political ideology of national Mexican identity based on the historical, racial and cultural mixing that has worked to create a greater unified identity with no racial distinctions.

**Mestizx/a/o** Person of mixed Indigenous and settler ancestry under the lens of Colonialism.

**Mexica** Nahuatl-speaking Indigenous peoples of the Valley of Mexico who established the altepetl of Mexihco-Tenochtitlan, one of the greatest civilizations of the world.

**Milli** Nahuatl word meaning land performing an action, in this case, cultivation; cultivating land.

**Milpa** Spanish word meaning field dedicated to the cultivation of maize and at times other seeds. The word comes from the Nahuatl words, milli “inheritance” and pan “on top”. For Indigenous and Mestizx communities in Mexico, it is an Indigenous crop-growing system that involves cultivating corn, beans and squash for their sustenance. (see in tlalli in milli)

**Nahua** Contemporary term for Indigenous populations of Anahuac, which comprises Mexico and part of Central America, that speak Nahuatl.

**Nahuatl** Language from the Uto-Aztecan language family, also known as Mexikatlahtolli, the language of the Mexica.

**Nepantla** Nahuatl word meaning in-between places.

**Nomatca Nehuatl** Nahuatl word meaning I myself.

**Pocho** Pejorative term used by Mexicans to describe Chicanos, Malinchistas and those who have left Mexico for their lack of fluency in Spanish and understanding of Mexican culture.

**Temachtiani** Nahuatl word meaning teacher.

**Tlalli** Nahuatl word meaning land, soil, ground or earth.

**Tlaolli** Nahuatl word meaning maize.



**Turtle Island** Name that refers to the continent of North America for some Indigenous peoples. The name is based on Indigenous creation stories from the Northeastern part of North America.

**Whitexican** Entitled, privilege, white Mexicana that follows the mestizaje ideology by being comfortably blindfolded to Mexico's oppressive reality and take advantage of the systemic inequities.

**Yetl** Nahuatl word meaning beans.

**Zapatistas** El Ejército Zapatista de Liberación Nacional (Zapatista Army of National Liberation), an autonomous, libertarian, abolitionist, political and militant Indigenous and Mestizx community in Chiapas, Mexico.



## Acknowledgements

My Abuelita would always remind me when acknowledging an accomplishment to be grateful for its gift, she would say: look behind and fill yourself with humility, look downward and fill yourself with strength, look upward and fill yourself with inspiration, look inwardly to find balance and move forward filling others with love.

To honour my Abuelita's tradition, I start by humbly acknowledging the ones before me, my ancestors, my Abuelitxs, my parents and my family. Thank you for allowing me to fly even if it meant cutting the roots you tended so deeply. I am finally transplanting them to a place where I can cultivate my in *ixtli* in *yóllotl*. Para mi Abuelita, todo lo que soy y todo lo que podré llegar a ser, está envuelto por ti. To my Mom, thank you for teaching me how to play this crazy game by working hard and dancing harder. I don't know what I would have done without you.

As I look down and feel my feet, I am reminded of the land that sustains my growth and gives me strength. I acknowledge I am of you and nothing without you. I am grateful to Nahua Huehuehtlcatls and Temachtianis for showing me how to live a good life, thank you for taking me in and for teaching me what is meant to be awakened. Nimitzmotlazohcamachililia Temachtiani Santos De la Cruz ihuan Temachtiani Teotecpatl Santin Martinez, micc yolkakillistli. Y a los dos que ya se me fueron, gracias por creer en mi mas que yo mismo.

I look upwards to the people who have inspired me to do and be better during this journey. I would like to start by thanking my supervisor, Dr. Margaret Kovach, thank you for



making space for me, for all your patience and for trusting my vision. Your immense guidance and push forward throughout this whole process is what made me finish and I am forever grateful. I would like to offer my enduring gratitude to my committee members, Dr. Jan Hare and Dr. Harper Keenan for their constant support, advice, revisions, smiles and encouragement by allowing me to fully embrace my theoretical perspective and not be afraid of my own ideas. A special thank you to Dr. Daniel Heath Justice for examining my work, I am deeply honoured and humbled. Finally, I would also like to thank the late Dr. Michael Marker and the Professors at UBC who have taught me what it means to be an ethical, critical, and caring scholar.

As I look inwardly to find balance, I am reminiscent of the sacrifices, cheers, fears and tears that have come with this journey. I remind myself that this research was made possible by the generous support from the Joseph Katz Memorial Scholarship and UBC Capacity Research Unit directed by Dr. Victoria Bungay. Thank you for allowing me to explore a pedagogical theory that works to reach out to the borders.

Lastly, as I move forward to fill others with love, I could not have completed this work without family time, laughs, Chad's meowing, endless conversations, sleepless nights and the unconditional love of my partner in Cemanahuac. Nieves, thank you for seeing who I am before I truly saw myself. Thank you for teaching me how to swim in kindness, enjoy life to the fullest and love with no borders. Nós já viajamos tanto juntos, e você sempre acreditou na minha capacidade de chegar mais longe do que eu mesmo tinha pensado. Você me faz uma melhor pessoa. Eu te amo. E pra ser sincero, tudo entrou no jeito certo de nós dois.



Chicomexochitl mitztlaquenpa tlazque. Nimitzlatzohtla nochi noyollo.



## Dedication

*“Amo la lluvia, cuando besa la tierra, siembra su aroma (I love the rain, when kissing the ground, it sows its aroma)”*

— *Luis Gabriel Vázquez Castillo (2018)*

This work is dedicated to all my relations. To the people who live in the borders and the margins, the ones who have experienced oppression and fragmentation due to violent systemic inequities. To the people who have built the capacity and strength to refuse to play the game, to heal from painful wounds and to find collective belonging towards living a good life. I dedicate my work to all my fluent siblings, the ones who don't conform to entrenched social structures that limit our existence by creating beautiful communities that's hold each other up.

This work is for the ones who are still looking to belong, all the ones searching to discover their in *ixtli* in *yóllotl* (face and heart). You are not alone in this unfolding; your chosen family is waiting for you. Finally, this work is dedicated to the renewal of *tlalli* (land) and the resurgence of *Chicomexochitl* (sacred corn). I am of corn and I honour it with my in *ixtli* in *yóllotl*. I dedicate this work for our return to a place of sustenance, a beautiful *milpa* where all our colours flourish.



## Prologue

*“Indigenous like corn, like corn, ...the mestiza is tenacious, tightly wrapped in the husks of her culture. Like kernels she clings to the cob; with thick stalks and strong brace roots, she holds tight to the earth she will survive the crossroads”*

— Gloria Anzaldúa (1987, p. 103)

I honour Indigenous protocol by first acknowledging the traditional, ancestral, unceded and occupied territories of the xwməθkwəy̓əm (Musqueam), skwxwú7mesh (Squamish), Stó:lo and sə́lilwətaʔl (Tseil-Waututh) First Nations, from where I live, learn, work and play. As I write this thesis, I am reminded of my responsibility to bestow deep reverence to the land that sustains me and cultivate reciprocal relationships with its original stewards. Quen ocemil huiti huac, nehua notōcā Daniel Gallardo Zamora, I am a cuilontli Mestizx from Anahuac (Mexico). I am Nahua del Centro and Purépecha on my father’s side of the family and on my mother’s side of the family, I am of settler ancestry, Arab-Berber-Andalusian and French. Through our ancestors and our Nahua community, I have learned we belong to Chicome xochitl – we are people of corn.

Inside this thesis, there will be “stories that hold mythical elements, such as creation and teaching stories, and there are personal narratives of place, happenings, and experiences” (Kovach, 2009, p. 95). I will start by introducing my story and situating where my teachings come from. When I was born my parents were too young to raise a child, so the responsibility was given to both my grandparents. Most of what I learned and imitated during my childhood came from two contrasting worldviews anchored to very different perspectives of life and ways of being. My mother's parents are settlers with ancestors from Spain and France, who have



reaped the benefits and privileges of colonialism in Mexico. On my father's side, my Abuelitos are Nahua del Centro and Purépecha. My Abuelitos belong to Indigenous communities who have suffered at the expense of social injustices that continue to dehumanize Indigenous peoples in our country.

My life has always felt like walking in two different worlds. As both families come from very distinctive cultures and perspectives, they had a completely different understanding of the meaning of being human. One taught me to fit the normative neoliberal capitalist mould, while the other wanted for me to find my - in *ixtli* in *yóllotl* – my face and heart. In Nahua thought, in *ixtli* in *yóllotl* symbolizes the dynamic concept of personhood, an Indigenous philosophical concept that refers to holism. In *ixtli* in *yóllotl* represents finding harmony from the inside out, from your heart to your face. This Nahua concept is about the balance between our emotional, physical, intellectual and spiritual domains to form wholeness, wellness and authenticity. In *ixtli* in *yóllotl* is found through lessons of walking in beauty with oneself, your community and the land. An education that explains and embraces our interdependence and relationality with the world. The teachings from my Abuelitos reflected an embodied relational way of experiencing our place as human beings belonging to *Cemanahuac*, meaning the entire world and cosmos.

As I reflect back, I think about how every lesson learned was related and connected to land. An education that started in the fields and always ended in a shared table. A cycle of sustenance, reciprocity, gratitude and ceremony. The most beautiful memories I have with my Abuelita are cooking beside her, tasting food she had just prepared and hearing the question, “¿le falta sal?”. Growing up I would spend hours with her inside the kitchen helping to prepare the intricate and



wholesome meal of the day, la comida. I enjoyed the entire process of cooking, from raw gifts given by the land to a synergy of flavour and aroma that holds the ones you love tight. My Abuelita is an artist in the kitchen, I am fortunate to have learned many traditional recipes that were left by our ancestors and represent a big part of our culture. I hold tight to that knowledge and every time I cook one of her dishes, I feel their embrace.

When I was 6 years old, I moved away from my Abuelitos and would visit every other weekend. I had to move with my mother's parents to be enrolled in elementary at an English private school in order to "have a future". My mother's family believed, like many others in Mexican society, that only poor and Indigenous peoples send their children to public schools. After moving with them, my white grandparents didn't allow me to call them "Abuelitos". They used to say that they were too young to have a grandchild and that I should call them by their first name. I do until now. With my grandparents, education was about obtaining straight A's and being the best of the class. They would encourage excellence with artificial belongings. Their view of education was about studying hard, compete to win and become the best. My white privileged grandparents would always tell me that by working hard, I would amount to anything I wanted and through hard work, I wouldn't end like my father's family living in poverty. School became my entire world. Some of my fondest memories with my grandparents are coming back home with excellent grades on my report card. Their pride made me feel seen and cherished. I remember many of my report cards to be framed in celebration, all of which are now stored in a box somewhere.



At their big house, I was mostly alone. The people that would take care of me were domestic workers who reminded me of my Abuelitos. The domestic employees were usually Indigenous women who had left their hometown to look for work in the city and send back money to their community. Young Indigenous women were usually the ones hired to carry out household chores and cleaning duties while living in the same house as their employers. A modern legal form of enslavement. I remember as a child, they were the ones who would wake me up to go to school and put me to bed at night. The women who raised me were underpaid and tied to never-ending labour. Many times, during dinner I would hear my grandfather say they belonged to the family and wondered why they could only eat after we had finished our servings of the meal. At night, in their “free time”, I would go to their rooms to watch the telenovela as they ironed the clothes of my grandparents and their maid uniforms. On Sundays, they would have the day off to go to a different church than the fancy one in our neighbourhood. At the big house, I learned the meaning of us and them.

During school life, the only times I would hear about my Abuelitos Indigenous culture was in history and sometimes Spanish classes through stories. Inside the curriculum of Mexican schools, there is a lot of historical and anthropological content about the diversity of Indigenous peoples before colonization, almost nothing after. The erasure of multiple communities to a single Indigenous group is clearly seen in the history textbooks. After the conquest communities and nations disappeared, all to become Indigenous. In our classes, Indigenous knowledge systems were always represented as knowledge from the past and our current education is the natural progression towards modernity. In this modern view, the contribution of Indigenous peoples to the colonial nation mainly comes as an attraction in the form of tourism, a capitalist



façade that continues to romanticize and neglect the realities of Indigenous communities in México.

In history classes, we would be reminded about the polytheistic nature of Indigenous Mesoamerican communities in comparison to the colonial saviour version, Catholicism. Nahua worldviews do not share the individual perspective of imperialism. In Europe, during the arrival of settlers to so called “America”, the Age of Reason was in full bloom, society centred anthropocentric views which made owning land, resources and knowledge the sole focus of life. Western worldviews arrived at these lands obsessed with the idea of a single narrative: a single god, a single truth, a single language, a single nation. In Anahuac/Turtle Island<sup>1</sup>, ways of being and knowing were rooted in ontological pluralism, they are about relationality, wholeness and spirituality, notions that were discounted by rationalist settlers (Queen's University Biological Station, 2021). I remember as children, we would colour and name, without understanding the words, the Mexica “deities” and anxiously wait to know what type of superpower they each had. As an adult, I’ve learned from our Nahua community those Nahua words are not god/goddesses but actually dual fluid sacred energies of creation in relation to the land and cosmos that surrounds us, and their sacred significance can be revered through creation stories.

When I became a teacher, I remember one day during class, we read a story that my Abuelito used to tell me. A piece of the creation story of the Mexica and a widely popular public

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<sup>1</sup> The land steward by the Nahuas is known as Anahuac, also referred to as Turtle Island by many Indigenous peoples in so called North America, following creation stories by Algonquian- and Iroquoian-speaking peoples.



story for children. This story was last featured inside the 2<sup>nd</sup>-grade Spanish lecture book by the Secretary of Public Education (SEP) in Mexico from 2014 to 2018. The printed version inside this public Spanish lecture book is adapted by Ángel María Garibay, a famous Mexican historian and Catholic priest, who is usually credited for the written story (cited in Gómez Rivera, 2014). I will retell this story as it was taught to me by my Abuelito, Virgilio Miguel Gallardo. A story he learned from his community about our Mexica ancestors. The story of Quetzalcoatl and the maize ant, a Mexica creation story from Anahuac about how humans received the gift of Chicomexochitl – sacred corn.

## QUETZALCOATL AND THE MAIZE ANT

Quetzalcoatl, the feathered serpent, had brought humans back to life after recovering their bones from Mictlan, the land of the dead. In the beginning of creation, humans would only survive by eating roots and animals they hunted, but during seasons when plants didn't grow and animals would not appear, they became weak and hungry. The four coloured Tezcatlipoca creators started to get worried about the fate of humankind.

“What will the humans eat?” cried red Tezcatlipoca also known as Xīpe Totecuh

“They seem to be really hungry!” What if they vanish?”, continued blue Tezcatlipoca also known as Huitzilopochtli.

“They won't disappear! Not on my watch! I will find and bring food to them” said white Tezcatlipoca, also known as Quetzalcoatl.



Quetzalcoatl looked down to the jade green earth trying to find food. It flew swiftly across the turquoise blue sky until reaching the sacred waters of the sea. As times passed, Quetzalcoatl worried for not finding any food and stopped to reflect on what to do next. Out of somewhere, a red ant carrying an enormous corn kernel walked by. Quetzalcoatl anxiously asked, “wise red ant, where did you find that corn?”

The red ant looked at Quetzalcoatl in all its grandeur and puzzled continued walking by, ignoring its questions.

Quetzalcoatl begged, “Please the food is not for me. It is for humans who don’t have anything to eat. Help me!”

The red ant stopped and replied, “I could show you the way, but it is a treacherous small path and someone as big as you could never follow along.”

Quetzalcoatl quickly transformed into a small black ant and followed the red ant.

After walking through all types of land, they arrived to Tonacatépetl, the sustenance mountain. The red ant climbed up to a tiny crack and as they entered, a flourishing land filled with a milpa of food was revealed.

“Here you will find milpa with maize, beans, squash and chiles. Everything delicious to eat is cultivated here for everyone!” The red ant cheered.

“Thank you for guiding me to this fabulous place of sustenance” replied Quetzalcoatl as it happily climbed a stalk of maize and found Chicomexochitl.

In Spanish class, we never thought about the teachings in the story of Quetzalcoatl and the maize ant. The story is mostly used to teach Spanish grammar. Now as I try to remember the exact words my Abuelito used to tell, I better comprehend its meaning. For me, the story is about



the beautiful irony of having a tiny insect teach the magnificent creator where to find one of the most precious gifts to humans. The creator is not an almighty omnipotent being, instead, Quetzalcoatl is learning in relation to the creation. Humble lessons that remind us of our dependence to the land and ground us in relationality. The red ant gave humanity a gift that made us healthy and strong. A gift that sustains our existence. Do we ever think about what we are doing to help our older ant siblings? What is our gift to them?

Indigenous creation stories can introduce our beings to holistic perspectives of understanding our place in the world. I acknowledge that this story is not the same as when orally told and the difficulties of translating Indigenous languages. My hope in sharing this story is to imagine an education that navigates through the treacherous paths of the imperialist, white supremacist, capitalist, colonial/modern, cis-heteropatriarchal system, in order to find a place of sustenance that holds beautiful milpa where diverse colourful Chicomexochitl are cultivated by cultures of reciprocity for all our relations to be healthy, strong and whole. A place where we all belong.



## Chapter 1: Towards Belonging – Introduction

*“Tehuantin ayoc cintli totec, chicomexochitl ayoc tohuan pilitztoc (We come from an abandoned grand milpa, we are no longer of corn, Chicomexochitl no longer lives with us)”*

— *Temachtiani Santos De la Cruz Hernández (2019, 01:26)*

### 1.1 Bringing Back the Colours

The story of Chicomexochitl (corn of many colours) begins thousands of years ago in Mexico. It is a story about our relationship with the earth, a relation that grew out of values of respect, responsibility, reverence and reciprocity. For many Indigenous communities, corn is a creator, elder, knowledge keeper and provider. Chicomexochitl’s story started in Anahuac with the cultivation by Indigenous communities of an ancient grass called teosinte. After thousands of years, they bred corn into one of the world’s most important edible crops; “if we use a plant respectfully it will stay with us and flourish” (Kimmerer, 2013 p.163). The global flourishing of corn gifted many varieties, sizes and colours all around the world, but the voracious consumption needs of our anthropocentric society required monocultures of sameness to control people through commodification and capitalism. A specific type of corn, called yellow dent, was selected and became the most grown plant on earth, where over 99% of cultivated corn are all yellow (Roberts, 2008; Fussell, 1992). For Nahua Temachtiani (teacher) Santos De la Cruz Hernández the disrespect of the plant for capitalist purposes has come at a big price and the many colours of corn are now gone; Chicomexochitl is no longer here, and we are left with just junk (2019). One look at the catastrophic geopolitical effects caused by modernity’s globalized capitalism, to realize the effects of the dominance of yellow corn and how true the words of Temachtiani Santos De la Cruz are. Decolonial scholar Vanessa Andreotti interprets a similar



situation by utilizing the spread of yellow corn as a metaphor for an education that presumes dominant worldviews as the only possibility for progress, development and evolution. The “myth of the yellow corn” (Andreotti et al., 2017, p. 46) refers to controlled imaginaries and limitations that narrow our knowledge and understanding of the world. These limits are imposed by coloniality/modernity, striving towards sameness and following an anthropocentric view of belonging.

In his book, *Look to the Mountain: An Ecology of Indigenous Education*, Tewa scholar Gregory Cajete (1994) proposes non-anthropocentric views of belonging where relations between environmental ecology and spiritual ecology nourish our learning, give meaning to our world and determine who we collectively are. The implicit goal of Indigenous education, according to Nahua cosmology, of the Mexica peoples is to find and express in *ixtli* in *yóllotl* (face and heart). Nahua holistic theory is foundational to Cajete’s idealization of the purpose of Indigenous education through finding one’s in *ixtli* in *yóllotl*, meaning to “find one’s face, find one’s heart” and search for a “foundation”, a truth, a support, a way of life and work through which one could express one’s Life” (1994, p. 35). Nahua holistic theory fosters concentric circles of relationships towards authentic expression with self, community and the land. Nahua ways of being are guided through spiritual ceremonies, sacred rituals and traditional celebrations that embody cultures of reciprocity. For Nahua people, community is always the first thought of reference, a thinking that involves collective belonging and mutual accountability (Chacón, 2021). Exploring a pedagogy grounded in *ixtli* in *yóllotl* can provide conditions for the resurgence of *Chicomexochitl*, a place that goes beyond anthropocentric perspectives.



## 1.2 Indigenous Queer Futures: Purpose & Reason

The curiosity, purpose and reason for this study are to help bring back the colours of Chicomexochitl, literally and metaphorically. My goal is to introduce a pedagogical praxis for collective healing and belonging through a theoretical perspective that honours Nahua cosmology and is grounded in holistic knowledges. As Nahua ways of knowing guide my research, I use an analytical framework based on the resurgence of Chicomexochitl (corn of many colours) through in tlalli in milli (a place of sustenance) which is an analogy for the resurgence of Indigenous knowledge systems inside cultures of reciprocity. I begin by using yellow corn as a metaphor for analytically framing the experience of mestizaje. The term mestizaje is “the historical mixing of the races and cultural traditions in Latin America, sometimes as a direct result of sexual abuse and downright exploitation of Native People and African slaves by European colonial powers” (Alarcón, 2008, p. 274). Mestizaje became a hegemonic ideology based on racialized hierarchies that are established by promoting the idea of white superiority, which emanated from colonialism (Moreno Figueroa, 2010). Following heteropatriarchal agendas, mestizaje has left at the borders all identities that deviate from colonial formations of masculinity. As this study is situated in the context of Mexico, central to this analysis is an examination of the oppressive political agenda of mestizaje, i.e., white supremacy sustained through the colonality of power. Both Octavio Paz’s (1950) and Gloria Anzaldúa’s (1987, 2002) work have significantly influenced my interpretation of the development of mestizaje as ideological hegemony.

I use the ancestral knowledge system of in tlalli in milli (place of sustenance) to guide my analytical research framework and methodology towards the resurgence of Chicomexochitl (corn



of many colours) and to be in direct opposition to the yellow dominance of mestizaje. The current thesis presents and justifies the need to introduce the pedagogical synergy of Indigenous knowledge systems, queerness and differential consciousness as the seeds that bring back the colours of Chicomexochitl by creating an ontological shift in how we cultivate knowledge. For the present thesis, I explore the consequences and causes of colonial/modern monocultural forms of teaching and learning in Mexico and explain why moving to a pedagogy that sustains Indigenous queer futures is critical for a change to pluriversal forms to happen. Monoculture farming of mestizaje has led us to an unsustainable damaged maze where the only way out is to cultivate radical imaginaries, guided by Indigenous knowledges. For that reason, I undertake a systematic study of secondary sources that reflect Indigenous and Mestizx stories of self-determination and (un)belonging based on 2S/LGBTQIA+ Indigenous and Mestizx authors. Through my analytical framework in analyzing these stories, I reveal why using storytelling and visual arts as methods of analysis allows me to examine different conditions and experiences of growth. I highlight the importance of narrativity to create a shift in our imaginaries and foster Indigenous queer belonging as “[r]elationships are storied, imagined things; they set the scope for our experience of being and belonging” (Justice, 2018, p. 74).

I recognize that by utilizing Indigenous identities and knowledges in a generalized way, I risk blending distinct characteristics, cultures and understandings. Nehiyaw-Métis Scholar Tracy L. Friedel (2011) discusses the danger of oversimplifying and romanticizing Indigenous lives and experiences by falling into a colonial narrative, which believes that Indigenous knowledges are a standard grouping. These generalizations have become harmful stereotypes that exaggerate and reduce Indigeneity to a single narrative. For notable Mexican anthropologist Guillermo



Bonfil Batalla (1981), the word Indigenous is a creation for the successful establishment of the European colonial order in Anahuac/Turtle Island. Indigenous is a political word that makes possible racialized hierarchies constructed for imperial purposes. Before colonization, Indigenous was not a word used by the diverse communities that hold their own identity and spirituality in Anahuac/Turtle Island. Indigenous as a categorization had to be created by European settlers so that every colony constructed began with the assumption that the ones being colonized are inferior to them. The word Indigenous comes from an “ideology of inferiorization” (Friedel, 2011, p. 534). Mixe-Zoque Linguist and Indigenous activist Yásnaya Elena Aguilar Gil (2019) recalls she didn’t know she was Indigenous until she left her hometown. After leaving, she says, it was the first time she felt inferior to others.

My intention in using the word Indigenous is to highlight shared ways of being and knowing, especially in Anahuac/Turtle Island, before the arrival of an oppressive normative that entrapped people in boxes and distorted their world into parallel lines. I understand Indigenous worldviews as the wise knowledge left from the ancestors that steward the lands we inhabit. For Mi'kmaw scholar Marie Battiste (2005), Indigenous knowledges represent ancestral dynamic intellectual systems that are able to adapt to the changing conditions of the environment. Indigenous knowledges come from an intimate reciprocal relationship with land and community. Through this thinking, Indigenous worldviews are fluid and act outside the dominant western paradigm by recognizing and being open to different realities that “are directly related, indirectly similar, and completely diverging perspectives” (Hart, 2010, p. 7). My epistemic positioning within this study addresses and holds specific Nahua knowledge system, but I also draw on aspects, values, experiences and knowledges shared among Indigenous communities (Little Bear,



2000). I use the word Indigenous to honour the stewards and protectors of the land, the water, and the sky by working towards Indigenous sovereignty and resurgence.

Inside this thesis, I will also use the word queer to represent people outside of the binary norms of sexual orientation and gender identity and expression. The early meaning of word queer symbolized a homophobic othering slur with a pejorative use resulting in harmful abuses and assaults (Bryson & de Castell, 1993). In contemporary times, the word queer has been reclaimed, it now rejects and revolts “against homophobia” and “assimilationist tactics” (Brontsema, 2004 p. 4). Queer is now “an umbrella term that encompasses all non-heterosexual and/or non-cisgender identities” (Gottlieb, 2019, p. 23). I use the word queer to defy and dismantle the heteronormative box we are assigned at birth in order to comply to coloniality/modernity’s ontology.

Similar to an Indigenous identity, people were not queer in Anahuac/Turtle Island, Michi Saagiig Nishnaabeg scholar Leanne Betasamosake Simpson (2017) recounts, Nishnaabeg Elders not having a word like queer prior to colonization, but when asked: “if two women ever lived together intimately, without men, they will remember stories of queer couples, not as queer people, but just people who lived like that” (p. 123). Both Indigenous and queer have been reclaimed words that used to signify inferiority. Since colonization, the fields of Indigenous and queer studies have fought against the colonial heteropatriarchy separately. The present thesis aims to answer the call by many Indigenous scholars for the desegregation of Indigenous studies and queer theory, as together they hold an important reciprocal collaboration for creating decolonizing frameworks (Simpson 2017; Morris, 2017; Hunt & Holmes, 2015; Driskill et al.



2011). The linkage of Indigenous epistemologies with queerness can envision radical possibilities for Indigenous queer futures, as both regard fluidity around gender and sexuality. Unfortunately, both fields are entrapped by settler colonialism in different forms, but one can help the other unbind from the entrapments of oppressive ideologies. Indigenous knowledges support queerness retrieve from modernity's capitalist aims and queerness aids Indigeneity by dismantling heteropatriarchal boxes that entrap Indigenous worldviews in binaries.

### **1.3 Indigenous Queer Mexico**

In Mexico, according to various Mestizx scholars and their work done in the field, the crossroads between Indigenous and Mestizx 2S/LGBTQIA+ identities is one of least studied and analyzed intersections in Mexican scholarship, due to systematic negligence and prejudice woven inside society (Bautista Rojas, 2018; Mercado Mondragón, 2018; González Jiménez & García Contreras, 2016; Nuñez Noriega 2011). Public spaces become violent places where Indigenous and Mestizx 2S/LGBTQIA+ must hide their identity. The COPRED study revealed that the places where Indigenous and LGBTQ+ identities are most discriminated are jails, streets, schools and workplaces, as an average where 10 means a lot of discrimination and 0 is no discrimination, schools reported a “6.6” (2017). The National Human Rights Commission in Mexico reports that 61% of LGBTQ+ identities informed experiencing transphobic and homophobic bullying, in the report one of the participants compared the experienced of going to school to a “slaughterhouse” (CNDH, 2018, p. 63). Many participants expressed that nobody did anything to help or change as their behaviour was consider abnormal. Bearing witness to similar results and events my entire life, inside this thesis, I explore how the educational Mexican structure has been founded and continues to sustain a colonial/modern cis-heteropatriarchal



system through the dominance of mestizaje. I argue that by reproducing the discourse of mestizaje, the Mexican schooling system is not only a harmful place for Indigenous students but also for 2S/LGBTQ+ identities. Thus, there is a clear need to look for an alternative pedagogy. A pedagogy that cultivates a sense of belonging for all identities. A pedagogy that moves away from the mere inclusion of the ones who experience marginalization. Identities that are often included to be assimilated and entrapped inside the same oppressive system that produces their exclusion. An education that moves towards fostering places where people can express the authentic truthfulness of their being. Places imagined through radical philosophical shifts towards finding in *ixtli in yóllotl* (face and heart). A place where we are all healthy and whole. A place to belong.

Indigenous and Mestizx 2S/LGBTQIA+ identities have been the most fragmented when experiencing the pressure of the oppressive mechanisms of mestizaje. In 2017, the Consejo para Prevenir y Eliminar la Discriminación (COPRED), a government council for the prevention and elimination of discrimination in Mexico, released the latest results of the Encuesta sobre Discriminación (EDIS), a national survey about prejudice and discrimination. The study revealed that the groups that experienced the most discrimination in Mexico City were Indigenous peoples and LGBTQ+ identities. (COPRED, 2017). These results epitomize the words of Indigenous academic and writer, Driftpile Cree poet Billy-Ray Belcourt, “to be queer and native and alive is to repeatedly bear witness to worlds being destroyed, over and over again” (cited in Simpson, 2017 p. 119). All around Turtle Island, to be Indigenous and queer is to be constantly neglected by the state and society, a place where your existence becomes a double nightmare, where the reflection of your identity is made invisible and hypervisible. Indigenous and Mestizx



2S/LGBTQIA+ peoples are conditioned to a non-belonging state, continuously incorporated into a tyrant system through a combination of epistemic racism, forced binary ideologies, gendered violence, colonial assimilation and hegemonic control (Simpson, 2017; Hunt & Holmes, 2015).

#### **1.4 Refusing Mestizaje: Research Questions**

Decolonial theorist Boaventura de Sousa Santos (2014) highlights, in his groundbreaking book *Epistemologies of the South*, that in Latin America the European system of domination has been and continues to be not only economic but also cognitive. The use of mestizaje as an assimilation tool reproduces normative colonial/modern heteropatriarchal frameworks that are preserved by oppressive racialized ideologies constructed under western paradigms. Critical theorists have highlighted how ideological hegemony is threaded seamlessly in our everyday interactions and is even reproduced by the oppressed (Strunk & Betties, 2019; Giroux, 2011; Kincheloe, & McLaren, 2005). Ideological hegemony has created a cognitive prison where individuals are entrapped in a place that constantly reminds them of their unbelonging, in turn causing their fragmentation. Strunk & Betties (2019) argue that dominant ideologies are hidden inside the curriculum and animate an education that maintains the capitalist white supremacist heteropatriarchy where “practices are established which seem benign on their face, but they act to reify oppression and domination” (Strunk & Betties, p. 75). Similarly, Flores and Rosa (2015) write that for education to oppose racial subordination, teaching practices must be aware of how dominant ideologies circulate with subtlety and how subaltern voices are being interpreted by the dominant narrative. We are governed by an invisible narrator.



Nêhiyaw and Saulteaux scholar, Margaret Kovach (2009) reminds us in her book, *Indigenous Methodologies: Characteristics, Conversations, and Contexts* of our obligation as researchers to challenge oppressive colonial ideologies by citing the wise words of Standing Rock Sioux author, Vine Deloria “Ideological leverage is always superior to violence ... The problems of Indians have always been ideological rather than social, political or economic” (p. 93). In Mexico, the legacies of mestizaje have been sustained by dominant ideologies that continue to reign supreme and cause along the way discrimination, harm, violence and exclusion, in particular to Indigenous and Mestizx 2S/LGBTQIA+ peoples. In this thesis, I explore the theories and concepts that animate a pedagogy of belonging rooted in the concept of - in *ixtli* in *yóllotl* - a central Nahua teaching philosophy to express the authentic truthfulness of our beings. I present and justify the need to move towards Indigenous queer fluidity through the synergy of Indigenous knowledges, queerness and differential consciousness; three seeds that cultivate a pedagogy of belonging. A pedagogy to fulfill a decolonial queer praxis that refuses ideological hegemony and works towards the resurgence of Indigenous knowledge systems.

The purpose of the thesis is to introduce a pedagogical practice inspired by the EZLN’s (Ejército Zapatista de Liberación Nacional) autonomous education; Zapatista teachings, perspectives and the call to “seek a world in which there is room for many worlds” (As quoted in Sandoval, 2000). A pedagogy that cultivates places for student belonging where all individuals are regarded as knowledge holders with valuable contributions to our diversity. With a Nahua theoretical perspective, I develop an Indigenous analytical framework to examine a pedagogical shift needed to transform and oppose ideologies of mestizaje and at the root of this change is the awakening of Indigenous knowledge systems. The study described begins by wondering how to



advance the educational discourse of inclusion to one of belonging in Mexico, particularly by working to dismantle the mechanisms of mestizaje. This conceptual work introduces a pedagogy that moves beyond inclusion towards cultivating a sense of belonging for Indigenous and Mestizx 2S/LGBTQIA+ identities, and ultimately, center Indigenous ontologies with the goal of restoring cognitive justice (Sousa Santos, 2014) and bringing back the colours of Chicomexochitl.

The following research questions are presented to guide and structure the lines of inquiry needed to understand the mechanics of mestizaje and the necessary conditions to cultivate a pedagogy that aims to dismantle the oppressive machinery.

- How has mestizaje provoked the unbelonging and fragmentation of Indigenous and Mestizx 2S/LGBTQIA+ identities?
- What beliefs, principles and ideas have been necessary to reproduce gendered violence and maintain the dominance of mestizaje in Mexico?
- How does a pedagogy grounded on the resurgence of Indigenous knowledge systems set forth a transformative (un)learning journey that opposes the dominance of mestizaje and cultivates collective healing and belonging?

## **1.5 Our Journey Map: Chapter Summaries**

The following section provides a summary of the nine chapters presented in this thesis. I hope to create an interconnected spiral that gives the reader a wholesome picture of the transformative power of cultivating radical imaginaries for Indigenous queer belonging in education. Through the chapters, I have tried to include elements of storytelling and visual arts to



guide the reader. Our journey will first follow the creation of an auto-destructive monoculture of oppression implanted by the colonality of power. We will progress towards different conditions of growth that are guided by Indigenous knowledges to cultivate a place of sustenance where cultures of reciprocity are formed towards collective healing and belonging.

In chapter two, I begin the journey by introducing Mexico as the place-based context of the study and through historical events, discuss changes in the sociocultural, political and economic dimensions of the country. In this chapter, I use data from several reports and studies to illustrate mestizaje as a racialized ideology that built a socio-cultural hegemony. I follow with the introduction of interculturality in contemporary education in Mexico, created specifically for the advancement of Indigenous communities in societies. I finalize the chapter, by explaining why problematizing mestizaje in education is critical to Indigenous and queer belonging.

Chapter three serves to review the current literature on the meaning of belonging and how it has been taken in the field of education, queer theory and Indigenous studies. How has fostering a sense of belonging, through interconnected relations and holistic wellness, increase individuals' pride, self-determination, agency and place in the world? I then turn my attention to focus on issues of belonging as ownership, as an imposition of hierarchies by the colonial cisheteropatriarchy. I continue by reflecting on the colonality of power as a structure that creates imaginary borders and monocultures of knowledge. In this chapter, I also explore how these oppressive spaces are founded through assimilation practices, specifically language erasure, which produces feelings of unbelonging and fragmentation. Finally, I review how language awakening can hold the key towards Indigenous resurgence.



The fourth chapter outlines the theoretical perspective, research framework and methods of analysis for the thesis. As my theoretical perspective honours Nahua cosmology and is grounded in holistic knowledges, I start by presenting Nahua ways of being and the importance of Chicomexochitl. I present an analytical framework based on the resurgence of Chicomexochitl (corn of many colours) and use the ancestral knowledge system of in tlalli in milli (place of sustenance) to guide my research framework and methodology. In this chapter, I continue by explaining more in detail why I use yellow corn as a metaphor for analytically framing the experience of mestizaje. I finalize the chapter by explaining my method of analysis and sharing my intention to give back using the findings of the research.

Inside chapter five, I start by sharing my story. I use storytelling to self-locate and position myself in this research. I want the reader to understand the ways that I have been shaped and how it relates to this systematic study. I relate my story as a Mestizx cuilonli to others like me in Anahuac/Turtle Island and use it to examine common themes of shame, inferiority and unbelonging. Understanding the experiences of Indigenous and Mestizx 2S/LGBTQIA+ peoples allows the reader to comprehend the relation between the colonality of power and the fragmentation created inside our identities. Finally, through the scholarship of Gloria Anzaldúa, I discuss the meaning of borderlands and the painful systemic margins that have divided Indigenous and Mestizx queers in two, the destroyer and the destroyed.

Chapter six dives into the meaning of mestizaje as both a racialized and inclusive ideology. First, I will start by discussing a violent pandemic that is annihilating women in



Mexico and relate the causes to the story of the mother of mestizaje, Malinalli, a Nahuatl woman who has completely shaped the identity of Mexicans. I follow by explaining the violent expansion of two racialized ideologies, which I refer to as the Mexican m&m's, machismo and malinchismo. In this chapter, I examine how the Mexican m&m's have sustained and perpetuated the oppressive machinery of mestizaje as a tool of de-indigenization. I finalize by using a mural created by José Clemente Orozco in 1926, to explain the triangular relation of mestizaje, malinchismo and machismo.

The seventh chapter presents the seeds that cultivate a place of sustenance. I start by narrating the story of the three sisters: the story of the milpa. A metaphor of the three sisters is used to explore the synergy of Indigenous knowledges, queering and differential consciousness. In this chapter, I argue for their synergy through the process of queering Grande's (2008) red pedagogy. A pedagogy that centers Indigenous knowledge systems while opposing the dominant ideology of mestizaje and unbinding from colonial monocultural entrapments. I continue by exploring the nourishment and sustainment of a pedagogy of belonging by using the harvesting of Chicomexochitl (corn cob of many colours) as a metaphor for finding our - in *ixtli in yóllotl*. In the final piece of this chapter, I reflect on the meaning of *Nomatca Nehuatl* and imagine the cultivation of a place of sustenance, a *Nepantla* where we follow the Zapatistas call to seek a world where many worlds coexist.

In the last two chapters, we close the circle and conclude our journey by returning to the purpose of the study. Chapter eight, offers a small discussion from the findings and chapter nine works to draw conclusions, reflect on challenges and imagine further opportunities of growth.



## Chapter 2: Mexico Lindo y Querido – Context

*“I wonder how things might have been had you followed, had we led”*

— *Thomas King (2007)*

I begin this journey by introducing Mexico as the place-based context for my study and through historical and popular events, discuss changes in the sociocultural, political and economic dimensions of the country. In this chapter, I distinguish two different Mexicos created by entrenched colonial binaries and socio-cultural hegemony. Using data from several reports and studies, I illustrate mestizaje as a racialized ideology that maintains the inner borders that divide Mexico. It is important to spend time contextualizing the formation of mestizaje to understand contemporary education in Mexico. I finalize the chapter, by explaining intercultural education, a pedagogical approach introduced specifically for the advancement of Indigenous communities and why problematizing mestizaje in intercultural education is critical for Indigenous queer belonging.

### 2.1 Mexihco-Tenochtitlan: Place

For Nahua people the land now known as México is referred to as Anahuac, meaning close to water. For Nahuas, land does not have imaginary borders, they understand that water is the only one creating demarcations. The root of the word México comes from Mexikatlahtolli, the language of the Mexica, most commonly known as Nahuatl. The etymology of the word México is derived from Mexihco-Tenochtitlan, which once was the main Mexica altepetl. An altepetl is understood as an ethnic, political and territorial entity where communities share language, stories and ancestors. Aside from the social connotations, altepetl is also a relationship with land and



water. The altepetl Mexihco-Tenochtitlan stood on an island in Lake Texcoco inside a valley surrounded by mountains and volcanos. Finding this place was a long-awaited dream for the Mexica. Their arrival to the valley is a story that has been passed down by many generations. A story painted in the coat of arms of the Mexican national flag and stamped in every legal document.

The legend of Tenochtitlan tells the story of the migration of the Aztecs to the valley of México. Blue Tezcatlipoca, the sacred energy of the sun, also known as Huitzilopochtli, told the people of Aztlan to move to a new land where they would flourish. To find this land they would have to search for a sign, an eagle devouring a snake on top of a cactus. After 200 years of searching, the Aztecs found the awaited sign in the middle of an isle in the Texcoco lake, the place that would become Mexihco-Tenochtitlan (Tezozómoc, 1949). The story unfortunately is narrated through a colonial perspective and an important aspect has been lost in translation. On the peak of the eagle was not a snake but atlachinolli, meaning scorched water (Johansson, 2007; Wright Carr, 2012). Atlachinolli is depicted by the synergy of water and fire, a fluid symbol that represents the complementary duality of Nahua cosmovision. The Spaniards confused atlachinolli with a serpent and the true meaning of the story changed completely. The Nahua story centers around the landing of the eagle in a prickly pear, a metaphor for the solar zenith on top of Tenochtitlan, astronomical teachings of our world. Through the colonial lens, the focus shifted to a fight between an eagle and a snake. A battle that fitted perfectly with the Catholic creation narrative. The eagle devouring the serpent became a symbol of good vs evil, a symbol of clashing binaries, not the dual synergy atlachinolli represents.



What we know as Mexico City sits on the top of the now dried lake of Texcoco, founded on of the ruins and ashes of Mexihco-Tenochtitlan. After the Spanish colonization, scared of the alleged primitive culture of the Mexica and to “save” the natives from their barbaric ways, Spanish settlers burned most of the buildings at Tenochtitlan, Texcoco and Tlacopan to the ground, including three majestic libraries. Renowned Cherokee author Thomas King called it “an event as devastating as Julius Caesar’s destruction of the library at Alexandria” (2003, p. 98). Thousands of books of Mexica poetry, law, literature, medicine, history, and astronomy including artifacts that were used to commemorate events and record stories were lost (León-Portilla, 1992). Today, built on top of the ruins of the altepetl, is the historic center of Mexico City where a cathedral covers the principal temple of our ancestors, Huey Teuccalli. Everything else in the city now covers the once majestic Texcoco lake.

As historical recordings became ashes, the Catholic church would appropriate and manipulate Indigenous stories, traditions and beliefs to assimilate Indigenous peoples of Anahuac to settler ways. From ceremonies to celebrations, everything was given a religious twist and on top of almost every demolished spiritual place, a church was built (León-Portilla, 1959). Centuries later, even after burning everything to the ground and covering it with a colonial religious façade, the ashes of our ancestors have remained in the air through stories. In Mexico, 68 recognized Indigenous nations and more unrecognized, maintain their knowledge systems, culture and languages. Strong Indigenous nations that continue to survive, resist and fight against the never-ending fires of colonialism.



## 2.2 The Other Mexico: People

When navigating around Mexico City, one can clearly notice the imaginary borders that create its margins. In the book, *The Other Mexico: Critique of the Pyramid*, Mexican author and Nobel prize winner, Octavio Paz, writes about the existence of two different countries, one which is developed and wealthy while the other Mexico is:

poor and in misery; it also is really other. This otherness eludes the notions of poverty and wealth, development or backwardness: it is a complex of unconscious attitudes and structures which, far from being survivals from an extinct world, are vital, constituent parts of our contemporary culture. The other Mexico, the submerged and repressed, reappears in the modern Mexico. (1972, p. 74)

Similarly, in his classic work *Mexico Profundo: una civilización negada*, Bonfil Batalla (1987), contends for the existence of two different symbolic Mexicos, which were divided as a result from colonial hegemony. One Mexico is an imaginary side that neglects Indigenous peoples and culture through a nationalist agenda, while the deep Mexico is defined by the survival and persistence of Indigenous communities, the roots of the land. Mexico's partition process starts through defined colonial binaries that decide which side you end up on. Male/Female, European/Indigenous, Güero/Moreno (White/Brown), Fifi/Chairo (Rich/Poor) are some of the most common juxtapositions when speaking about privilege in Mexico. The system is made for rich white men of European descent to thrive. Meanwhile, on the other side of the same violent inequitable system, impoverished Indigenous women of colour are enslaved to serve whitexicans e.g. the story of the Mexican film *Roma* (2018), written and directed by Alfonso Cuarón.



In the last decade, a humorous critique that spotlights intersections of privilege in Mexico is the term whitexican meaning white Mexicans. A Twitter account called @LosWhitexicans, described as black humour about white people, with over three hundred thousand followers, creates social media posts of classist and racist practices happening in Mexico. With each post, the account makes evident the living legacies of colonialism by clearly demonstrate the existence of two contrasting Mexicos in one country. One for privileged whitexicans including their wannabes and followers, and the other for the ones violently affected by the colonality of power (see Mignolo, 2011, 2007, 2003, 2000; Quijano, 2000, 1991), the ones bounded to modernity's ontoepistemic entrapments (Andreotti et al., 2015; Ahenakew et al., 2014). Peruvian sociologist Aníbal Quijano coined the phrase "coloniality of power", referring to the pervasion of Eurocentrism through the idea of superior and inferior mental constructions. Quijano (2000) points out that when America was created, two new elements emerged, changing the world forever. First, the classification of people based on the idea of race, where biology established "relations of domination" (p. 216). Second, Euro-centered colonial/modern capitalism, "the most significant historical implication" (p. 218) of the coloniality of power. Capitalism gave quantitative worth to people, a game of numbers and a nefarious competition where the winners were established first by their white cover.

The results of the latest national survey on discrimination in Mexico, the Encuesta Nacional sobre Discriminación (ENADIS) point out that the most frequent reason for discrimination in Mexico is physical appearance (CONAPRED, 2017). The study also reveals that more than half of Indigenous and Afro-descendent populations consider their rights to be highly ignored or completely neglected. When focusing on trends of marginalization and



educational inequity the ENADIS study reports that people with highly melanated skin tones are the most unlikely group to finish their studies at any school level e.g. one-third of brown and black participants in the survey did not finish elementary school, 15% higher than for white participants (CONAPRED, 2017). A study in 2015 created by the Comisión Nacional para el Desarrollo de los Pueblos Indígenas (CDI), the national commission for the development of Indigenous communities, revealed similar results concerning the education for Indigenous peoples in Mexico. The data indicates that 16.6% of Indigenous peoples age 15 or older do not have any type of schooling in comparison to 6% of the entire population age 15 or older (CDI, 2015). These studies confirm that in Mexico the gap between BIPOC communities and basic human rights is far and wide. A gap that originated and has been kept open by the coloniality of power. A gap that divides the country and creates the other Mexico.

Afro-Mexican scholar Monica Moreno Figueroa (2010) contends that racism in Mexico has been normalized to the point where society denies its existence, it is “just how things are” (p. 395); she continues to argue that in our country “racism has lost its explicit links with its processes of formation and has therefore gone unrecognized” (p. 389). This normalization is perpetuated in mass media through publicity, ads, telenovelas, movies and public figures. One only needs to turn on the TV to see how white supremacy is upheld in every Mexican over the air popular channel. In a short documentary titled *El racismo que México no quiere ver* (The racism that Mexico does not want to see) (2019) produced by El País, mestizo actor Tenoch Huerta, narrates his experiences as a brown man in Mexico. Huerta tells the anecdote of asking a friend in castings, why he constantly was typecasted as poor, ignorant and violent. To what the friend replied, “because of the colour of your skin”. In the book *Salvation*, bell hooks explains



that mass media became an exploitive assault weapon that perpetuates racism through stereotypical images, stating “nothing pushed the lessons of a white supremacist aesthetic more than television, a medium where even dark haired white women had to become blondes in order to succeed” (2001, p. 76-77). Mass media has instated in the public a blonde ambition striving towards unobtainable genetic purity with high damaging costs.

At the end of the documentary, Huerta mentions that there is nothing worse in Mexico than calling someone an Indio (El País, 2019). The word Indio carries a series of negative and pejorative connotations resulting from Indigenous historical oppression (Bautista Rojas, 2018). Indigenous identities continue to be stigmatized with stereotypical assumptions of appearance, education, progress and wealth. For Bonfil Batalla (1987), “the rotund and unavoidable presence of our [Mexicans] Indigenous ancestry is a mirror in which we don’t want to see ourselves” (p. 43). Mexicans become colorblind in response to a systemic internalized racism where they not only feel inferior for having Indigenous ancestry and brown skin but also believe anything white and foreigner is worth more. This colorblindness operates through a racist political ideology that creates a national identity imposed on all Mexicans, an “updated” whiter super race who is trying to leave behind any Indigenous trace, the Mestizo identity. Moreno Figueroa (2010) argues that mestizaje is “a racial counter-discourse, promoted by the ruling elites, to ideas of purity and ‘white’ hegemonic discourses emanating from European and US scientific racism, social Darwinism and eugenics” (p. 390). The oppressive logics of mestizaje facilitate “whiteness to be experienced as both normalized and ambiguous, not consistently attached to the (potentially) whiter body, but as a site of legitimacy and privilege” (p. 387). Mestizaje is the gap that divides the country and creates white Mexico and the other deep Mexico.



### 2.3 Mestizaje = De-Indigenization: Politics

The term mestizaje is “the historical mixing of the races and cultural traditions in Latin America, sometimes as a direct result of sexual abuse and downright exploitation of Native People and African slaves by European colonial powers” (Alarcón, 2008, p. 274). According to Grande (2008), mestizaje has been used for centuries to force the integration of Indigenous communities into the national Mestizo model where the narrative of the white master is perpetuated. Both Bonfil Batalla (1987) and Aguilar Gil (2019), argue that the oppression of Indigenous communities comes from the use of mestizaje as a tool for de-indigenization, for both scholars, Mestizos are “de-indigenized Indians” (Bonfil Battalla, 1987, p. 42). According to various scholars, creating the identity of Mestizo further marginalized Indigenous peoples and caused the erasure of their native identities (Bonfil Batalla, 1987; De la Cadena, 2001; Gómez-Izquierdo et al., 2005; Gall, 2007; Palou 2014; Ríos, 2015). Mestizaje is contemplated as identity politics where everyone in Mexico is Mestizo and directed to whiteness. Mestizaje creates what Uruguayan writer, Eduardo Galeano (1971) calls the region of the open veins, a place where colonial mechanisms “through the eugenicist logic of “mixed-race” superiority” (Ríos, 2015, p. 110) homogenize Indigenous peoples and cultures as subordinate.

Mestizaje operates within the colonality of power intending to exterminate Indigenous identities. Through mestizaje, the national racist phrase of “hay que mejorar la raza” (let’s improve the race) is followed. As an ideology of oppression, mestizaje works to systemically marginalize Indigenous populations. A study by the Oxford Committee for Famine Relief (OXFAM) Mexico, titled, *Por mi Raza Hablará la Desigualdad*, begins by recognizing that,



people who speak Indigenous languages, who self-identify as part of an Indigenous, Black or Mulato community or those with darker skin tones, are less likely to advance in the educational system, progress in the labour market or move to the highest wealth quintile.

(Solís et al., 2019, p. 4)

According to the latest census of population, in Mexico there are more than 11 million Indigenous peoples, the census only identified and considered the Indigenous population to be those who spoke an Indigenous language (INEGI, 2021). The people who self-identified as Indigenous and have lost their language through colonial assimilation were excluded from the count and recognized as Mestizx. This exclusion reinforces mestizaje as a de-indigenization mechanism through language assimilation. The OXFAM study mentions that speaking a native language is the greatest detriment for the schooling advancement of Indigenous peoples and concludes by emphasizing that, “today’s inequality is fed by the discrimination and racism of the past” (2019, p. 70).

In 2021, the Consejo Nacional de Evaluación de la Política de Desarrollo Social (CONEVAL), a national committee of evaluation of social development policy that measures poverty in Mexico, revealed that 76.8% of the Indigenous population experience a situation of poverty of which 35.7%, experience extreme poverty. When facing the high levels of poverty, Indigenous peoples become vulnerable to violence, forced migration and exploitation due to organized crime, government corruption and society’s neglect. From lack of accessibility to stigmatization, Indigenous peoples in Mexico end up facing obstacles to find and attain any type of educational, occupational, and economic opportunities. Mestizo and white settlers often are comfortable climbing neoliberal capitalistic ladders, and although Indigenous peoples typically



don't bother climbing invisible never-ending ladders of control and oppression, they do experience a constant downward slide of systemic inequities. Indigenous human rights are tattered by imposing this colonial game of chutes and ladders. Indigenous peoples continue to be tested in the most difficult environments possible to humankind and still manage to adapt, find strength to prosper and maintain their traditional practices, values, perspectives and ways of being. Indigenous communities are opposing mestizaje by tenaciously holding on to their culture.

## **2.4 Moving Beyond Inclusion: Education**

In the 1920s, after the Mexican Revolution, the culture and education of the country were drastically transformed. The foundations of modern Mexico as a Mestizo-nation began to consolidate and, in turn, affected all aspects of Mexican sociocultural, economic, and political policies, especially for Indigenous peoples. The architect of Mexico's Secretaría de Educación Pública (SEP), the postrevolutionary public education system, was José Vasconcelos. Known as one of the most influential figures in the history of education in Mexico (Ocampo López, 2005) for implementing his philosophy of national mestizaje inside the schooling system. In his controversial essay, *La Raza Cósmica* (1948), he advocates for a fifth race, a superior race that comes from the mixture of the four other ones: the evolution of race. According to Vasconcelos the new cosmic race, referring to Latin American mestizaje would "abolish all racial discrimination and educate all men within equity" (1948, p. 1). Throughout the essay racist, patriarchal, white supremacist logics are embedded and hidden within his ideology of mestizaje. In the prologue, he states that Indigenous purity doesn't exist anymore, that the natives have been Latinized and their Indigeneity has fallen asleep, never to be awakened again. Vasconcelos alludes to the lack of Christianity as the main reason for the decay of other races, stating that



European religion “made Native Americans advance, in a few centuries, from cannibalism to a relative civilization” (1948, p. 3). He was also grateful to Europeans for bringing the intellectual knowledge that would create the future Ibero-American race, the Mestizo race. Vasconcelos believed that this new cosmic race would build an inclusive modern civilization, where humanity transcends notions of race and nationality, a place where people are all the same. A theory Mestiza scholar Gloria Anzaldúa refers as “one of inclusivity” (1987, p. 99). Using a Darwinian lens, Vasconcelos believed that the superior race had to absorb the inferior ones, writing that “through this luck [superior absorption], Black people could even redeem themselves, and little by little, through voluntary extinction, the ugliest lineages will make space for the most beautiful ones” (1948, p. 24). Vasconcelos makes it clear that the voluntary extinction of inferior races will come from a homogenous inclusive Mestizo education.

Postrevolutionary Mexico integrated an educational system that neglected and oppressed Indigenous knowledge systems. Schools became sites that perpetuate racist and eugenic logics by influencing students to internalize feelings of inferiority, self-hatred and shame for not falling into the normative expectation. Mexican scholar Cristina Verónica Masferrer León (2016) analyzed how official SEP textbooks constitute a space where racism is learned by reproducing stereotypes, negative assumptions and stigmas. She concludes that racism is upheld through teaching contents that maintain social hierarchies by victimizing BIPOC identities and minimizing their contributions to human understanding. Masferrer León continues to exemplify how these official textbooks link Blackness to that which is “dirty, negative and ugly” (2016, p. 10) through images and stories with single narratives. Mexican scholar Sylvia Schmelkes adds that “racism and stigmatization” are “both cause and consequence of a homogenizing basic



education curriculum” (2014, p. 131). The schooling system maintains and reproduces the coloniality of power through pedagogies that direct students towards valuing whiteness, Eurocentrism and capitalism. The Mexican school system aims to include all individuals through a model that is made to sustain mestizaje. In this Mestizo model, inclusion becomes a new form of assimilation, as late Lhaq'temish scholar Michael Marker warns us "the storytelling theater has been renovated, but the ventriloquists remain the same" (2003, p. 367). The made othered and subalterns enter places defined and shaped by capitalist objectives and modernity's desire for development. The “superior race” goals open the door for neoliberal pedagogies and a market-oriented education. These neoliberal approaches to knowledge and curriculum create conditional spaces for inclusion where “we all got a role to play”, thus inclusion to neoliberal schooling perpetuates coloniality. The same corrupt colonial/modern game with predetermined mainstream white winners.

The inclusion of Indigenous communities to the colonial/modern enterprise has been critiqued as a “branding “currency” of diversity, decolonization or Indigeneity” (Jimmy et al., 2018, p. 16). In the last decade, the Mexican schooling system has strived for the inclusion and educational equity of Indigenous peoples. A diagnostic of inclusive education in Mexico created in 2014 by SEP reports the need for strategies that reduce the educational gaps of accessibility for Indigenous communities “through a broad perspective of inclusion” (p. 31). Earl (2017) problematizes the discourse of inclusion in Mexico, as an educational approach that fosters Indigenous assimilation to dominant ways of being and continues to neglect Indigenous epistemologies. According to Earl, Indigenous peoples, activists and Latin scholars call for education to move towards critical interculturality, a pedagogy “that subverts the historical



injustices of assimilation and goes beyond just inclusion by allowing Indigenous communities to actively define and shape their own educational goals and notions of development” (2017, p. 74). Seen as a relational practice, interculturality promotes education for dialogue, mutual respect and sustainment of cultural identity.

The concept of interculturality arose in Mexico during the 1990s after tensions between the government and Indigenous social movements, mainly with the EZLN, culminated with the promise of federal education programs for the advancement of Indigenous peoples (Saldívar, 2018). The programs were created to overcome the linguistic barriers Indigenous communities faced by acknowledging the importance of Indigenous language revitalization. In 2020, for example, the *Maestriah ipan Totlahtol iwan Tonemilis*, a master’s program in Nahuatl language and culture was launched by the Universidad Veracruzana Intercultural (UVI), Intercultural University of Veracruz. For the first time in Mexican history, a graduate program is completely taught in an Indigenous language (De la Paz Reyes Diaz, 2019). The program is directed towards Nahuatl knowledge translation, intercultural teaching and language revitalization. In theory, critical intercultural education has the potential to become an interculturally revitalizing and sustaining pedagogy aiming towards Indigenous education sovereignty.

The success of interculturality as a critical and equitable approach for Indigenous peoples in Mexico has been studied, critiqued and advocated by many scholars (Saldívar, 2018; Earl, 2017; Schmelkes, 2014; Velasco Cruz, 2010; Mato, 2010). In Mexico, critical interculturality aims to foster and validate a pluriverse of knowledges and alternative models of learning by moving away from “traditional views of modernization and human capital theory” (Earl, 2017, p.



96). Mexican scholar Emiko Saldívar (2018) analyses how the uncritical use of interculturality in education can be disguised within neoliberal politics that reproduce the discourse of mestizaje. Saldívar argues that intercultural education “despite its potential to foster ethnic and cultural revival and alternative pedagogies, does not stray far from the longstanding project of mestizaje in that it does not challenge the definition of culture and ‘otherness’ offered by dominant mestizos” (p. 443). For critical interculturality to move beyond inclusion and truly contribute to decolonial and anti-racist theory, it has to center in Indigenous epistemologies while sustaining antiracist practices that resist the hegemonic effects of mestizaje, disrupt mainstream structures and oppose dominant racialized ideologies. Critical interculturality can create spaces of belonging by opposing ideological dominance where reciprocal relations are sustained through self-determination, radical solidarity, shared responsibility and respect to the land. To build these ethical places, education must forefront Indigenous sovereignty and Black liberation while dismantling racial hierarchies and privileges implanted within colonial/modern cis-heteropatriarchal structures. As a Mestizo-nation, the Mexican system puts white men and masculinity at the center of existence. The legacies of colonialism made inferior any identity that deviates from colonial formations of masculinity. In the western conception, the center was seen as primarily European, white and male and everyone else was to be left at the borders and margins.

In this thesis, I argue how even through interculturality, Mexican education perpetuates the mechanisms of mestizaje as the entire nation is soaked inside a colonial cisheteropatriarchy. This particular axis of oppression is regularly glanced over within Indigenous studies and cultural pedagogies. Feminist and queer theory highlight the importance of disrupting dominant



heteronormative frameworks (Butler, 1989, 2004; Macintosh, 2007; Loutzenheiser 2015).

According to a study by the Coalición de Organizaciones contra el Bullying por Orientación Sexual, Identidad o Expresión de Género en México (Coalition of Organizations against Bullying due to Sexual Orientation, Gender Identity or Expression in Mexico), 8 out of 10 LGBTQ+ students in Mexico feel insecure primarily because of their sexual orientation and gender identity (Baruch Domínguez et al., 2017). These results reflect the data from the Trans Murder Monitoring research project which reported Mexico as the second country with the most killings of gender-diverse/trans people worldwide (TGEU, 2021). If your identity falls outside the colonial gender box you are most likely to experience harassment, violence, exclusion, stigmatization, prejudice and even death. In Mexico, intercultural education has failed to address sexual orientation and gender identity diversity as it is entrenched in binaries that maintain bigotry, transphobia and homophobia (CONAPRED, 2017). In the following chapters, I explore how the Mexican education system has provoked the unbelonging of Indigenous and Mestizx 2S/LGBTQIA+ identities through the binary mechanisms of mestizaje. How does education work to entrap identities inside controlled heteropatriarchal boxes that neglected their existence? To answer those questions, in the next chapter, I start by providing a comprehensive summary of research on topics related to the meaning of belonging. For some an individual expenditure and for others a collective embrace, understanding the changing significance of belonging(s) is crucial to dismantle the socio-cultural hegemony of mestizaje that is reproduced through colonial heteropatriarchal frameworks and provokes the fragmentation of Indigenous and Mestizx 2S/LGBTQIA+ identities.



## Chapter 3: (Un)Belonging – Literature Review

*“Is the land merely a source of belongings or is it also the source of our sense of belonging?”*

— Robin Wall Kimmerer (2017, p. 370)

In this chapter, I am concerned with how fostering a sense of belonging through interconnected relations and holistic wellness increases individuals’ pride, self-determination, agency and place in the world. I turn my attention to focus on issues of belonging as ownership, a colonial imposition created by the cisheteropatriarchy to bring about hierarchies that put men on top. I continue by reflecting on the colonality of power as a structure that creates imaginary borders and monocultures of knowledge which in Mexico can be seen through mestizaje. In this chapter, I also explore how oppressive spaces are created through assimilation practices, specifically language erasure, which produces feelings of unbelonging and fragmentation. Finally, I review how language awakening can hold the key towards Indigenous resurgence.

### 3.1 A Sense of Belonging

The alder bark was beginning to take colour, a sign to get moving. The Elder advised that the sooner the inside of the bark is used, the brighter the orange dye will turn out to be. Elder Bruce Miller had modernized the process of preparing dye by introducing the luxury of a secondhand blender. Today, Elder Bruce was teaching Edwin (asta cHay tLi) Poulin, how to dye cedar using the inside of the alder bark. After blending up the bark, they head outside to rub the alder juice in the sun and colour the cedar. Reflecting on the day, asta cHay tLi mentions that all his life he wanted someone who would teach him. For him “obtaining the culture and obtaining and learning the traditions from Bruce that’s wealth. It has made me feel complete” (Jennings,



2009). The teachings of the Elder made him feel a sense of wholeness and belonging. After watching this heartfelt scene from the film, *Teachings of the Tree People: The Work of Bruce Miller* (Jennings, 2009), I became obsessed with the word belonging. For this thesis, I feel it is important to contemplate an overview on the meaning of a sense of belonging in education through my fixation to understand if finding a sense of belonging allows us to express the authentic truthfulness of our being? I consider the question, does fostering places of belonging help us find in *ixtli* in *yóllotl* – our face and heart?

My journey to comprehend the meaning of belonging started with the book, *Belonging: a culture of place* by Black American scholar, bell hooks (2009). Inside the book, hooks reflects on her search for a place of belonging by examining its meaning when being part of a community and when places become homes. hooks understands a culture of belonging, through the words of Carol Lee Flinders, as an “intimate connection with the land to which one belongs, empathic relationship to animals, self-restraint, custodial conservation, deliberateness, balance, expressiveness, generosity, egalitarianism, mutuality, affinity for alternative modes of knowing, playfulness, inclusiveness, nonviolent conflict resolution, and openness of spirit” (cited in, p. 13). hooks asserts the intrinsic spiritual connection of self and land, arguing that belonging is grounded in the land and spirituality is found when belonging to a place.

hooks (2009) expresses being subject to “soul-murdering assault” (p. 217) when moving from the green fields of the hills to the gray bricks of the city. This traumatic move fragmented her inner self and her sense of belonging, she writes,



In the world of the town I was faced with the politics of race, class, and gender. From roaming hills and feeling free I learned in the world of the city that to be safe as a girl, and especially as a black girl, it was best to be still, enclosed, confined... I learned that wearing homemade clothes and hand-me-downs were marks of shame. Gone was my confidence that I belonged in the world. Gone was the spirit of wildness rising in my soul each day like wind, like breath, like being. (p. 218)

hooks did not belong anymore, she became an exile, “neither here nor there / Always somewhat out of place everywhere / Ambiguous - without a sense of belonging to touch” (Carey, 1997). After being forced to part ways with the land she belonged to, hooks describe how her spirit suffocated and through this suffering, she experienced a radical realization. She realized that all that is essential and sustaining belongs to the land, “it was the field of dreams I explored to uncover the counterhegemonic culture of belonging that had made me different, able to be radically open” (2009, p. 220). At the end of *Belonging*, hooks dreams to nurture communities of care that cultivate cultures of belonging by learning “habits of being that would bring us closer together, that would help us build beloved community” (p. 223). Belonging is about the connection between our self, our community and the land we are part of. Growing strong reciprocal relations are the seeds that cultivate belonging. Growing/healing/transforming through belonging; belonging through relationality.

The exploration of a sense of belonging and the conceptualization of a pedagogy of belonging has been widely studied in education for years. From an educational ethos to a practicing place, scholars have argued that students attain a sense of belonging through inclusive, respectful, relevant, supportive and engaging teaching practices (Comber & Woods, 2018;



Brown, 2017; Edgeworth & Santoro, 2015; Thomas, 2012; Malsbary, 2012; Hope, 2012; Beck & Malley, 1998; Brendtro et al., 1990). Student belonging is increasingly taken up within inclusion discourses of education and is used to address students who experience marginalization and exclusion. A strong inclusion philosophy is one “where students of all ability belong”. (Moore, 2016, p. 14). In the video, *The Role of Place* from the series *Five Moore Minutes*, inclusive educator Shelley Moore (2021) explains the common misconception of understanding inclusion as simply being integrated into a location through compliance and without disruption; similar to assimilation practices. Moore argues that critical to inclusive education is the differentiation between location and place, specifically place from an Indigenous worldview. For Marker (2018) “place and the consciousness of landscape contain the primordial elements for the Indigenous mind” (p. 453). Indigenous peoples have approaches to knowledge that are threaded in the land and fabulous imaginaries of belonging to a place. Moore states that “place is deeply connected to the land and the identities of past, present and future communities” (2021). Moore’s inclusive aim is to cultivate places where all students can belong. Real inclusion happens when fostering a sense of belonging inside diverse communities, a collective place of belonging.

In *Braving the Wilderness*, Brené Brown (2017) tells the story of how her journey to understand belonging started by being deeply puzzled and then enlightened by a quote by Maya Angelou, said in an interview by Bill Moyers. Angelou responds “you are only free when you realize you belong no place—you belong every place—no place at all. The price is high. The reward is great” (1973). Brown went into a rabbit hole to understand the meaning of true belonging and it was the answers of eighth graders that completely surprised her. The students’ answers reflected themes of mutual accountability, relationality, reciprocity, respect and self-



determination. When coming out of the rabbit hole, Brown (2017) gave us this definition of true belonging,

the spiritual practice of believing in and belonging to yourself so deeply that you can share your most authentic self with the world and find sacredness in both being a part of something and standing alone in the wilderness. True belonging doesn't require you to change who you are; it requires you to be who you are. (p. 157)

Belonging means expressing the authentic truthfulness of your being, an interconnected relation with self, community and land. Belonging means attaining face and heart through all our relations, the Nahua concept of *ixtli in yóllotl*. I believe *ixtli in yóllotl* has similar epistemological grounds to the Nêhiyâw term *miskâsowin* which “means going to the centre of yourself to find your own belonging” (Kovach, 2009, p. 179). For Kovach (2009), *miskâsowin* is a gift of self-discovery towards our place of belonging. *Ixtli in yóllotl* wraps up the same gift. From an Indigenous perspective belonging is a holistic understating where all beings in the cosmos are part of a single whole; we are all linked and dependent on one another, and we all belong to the land. At the end of the novel, *Where I belong*, Mohawk author Tara White (2014) writes, “As long as I have the love of my family, my entire family, I will always be exactly where I belong” (p. 109). Fostering a sense of belonging in education should be about cultivating places that gift the opportunity of self-discovery for authentic expression through collective love and all our relations.

### **3.2 500 years of Belongings**

The Merriam-Webster dictionary provides two different definitions of belonging. The first, as a possession, and the second, as a close or intimate relationship (n.d.). In a modernist



ontology, the first definition of belonging has been capitalized through unequal ownership and oppressive hierarchies. Belonging as possession is a critical aspect of settler colonialism, racism and capitalism. Belonging as ownership is threaded in history with the rise of capitalism, which cannot be separated from the rise of the power of coloniality, both inherently racist institutions that are tied to the trans-Atlantic slave trade (Kendi, 2019). For Indigenous and Black peoples, the age of enlightenment was a century of obscurity and silence. The rise of modern racial capitalism was formed at the intersection of white supremacy and coloniality and has worked to commodify the meaning of belonging. Modernity has developed harmful obstacles that work to leave people in the margins and borders in order to preserve the hierarchical system. The construction of belonging as a colonial/modern capitalist phenomenon changed the value of inheritance and merit. The world became to represent a competition of who owns the most and ranking lists were created to make people follow suit by selling false hopes, unrealistic expectations and unobtainable dreams of monetary wealth.

Belonging fell into the paradox of having two contrasting meanings, on one side, finding a sense of authentic belonging, while on the other side, attaining belongings that categorize your worth and perpetuate racialized hierarchies. After 500 years since the arrival of European settlers, colonial categorizations persist all around Anahuac/Turtle Island. Colonialism has been a harmful system that perpetuates inequities by reproducing modernity's imperial project represented through "spaciality (expansionist control of lands), ontoepistemic racism (elimination and subjugation of difference) and geopolitics of knowledge production (epistemic violence)" (Andreotti et al, 2015, p. 23). Andreotti et al. (2015) argue that the dominion of the white heteropatriarchy is, in part, responsible for these colonial violences, which in turn has



silenced, fragmented and excluded to the margins identities that deviated from the western ideal. As Indigenous peoples were incorporated into a tyrant patriarchal system through forced binary ideologies, language assimilation and cognitive imperialism (Battiste, 1986), their imaginaries were entrapped to a single possibility. An entrapment required by coloniality/modernity to reproduce and continue its oppressive course.

Māori scholar Brendan Hokowhitu (2015) recounts that to survive the impacts of colonization, Indigenous peoples had to mirror invader identities and align to the “normative heteropatriarchy of the bourgeois family” (p. 84). Hokowhitu argues that this mimicking allowed settler states to better intervene, assimilate, and govern Indigenous communities. Through the assimilation process of colonization, any identity that deviated from Victorian masculine forms, such as feminine, non-European, and nonheterosexual, was seen as the inferior other. In western conceptions, a person was represented primarily by a European and male identity. Everyone else belong to a lower level inside this hierarchy. Sámi researcher Rauna Kuokkanen (2008) and Two-Spirit Kwagu’ł scholar Sarah Hunt (2018) use Gayatri Spivak’s “subaltern” concept (1988) to highlight how these deviated identities are made invisible and silenced from male-dominated centred histories and records. Athabaskan professor Dian Million (2009) explains how this othering created a radical reorganization within “Indigenous familial relations to conform to a uniform patriarchal order” (p. 56), where Indigenous men were positioned below white settler men and women, but above Indigenous women. Consequently, colonial masculine subjects not only rejected any form of feminine attributes, but also gained ownership over land, women, and children. Everything belonged to white European settler cis-men.



The work of Brendan Hokowhitu (2015) examines how authenticity and tradition have come to play a central role in Indigenous cultures subjectivities. He uses Kapa haka, a Māori performing arts practice, as an example of an authentic tradition that conceals a colonial construction. Contemporary Kapa haka naturalizes gender binaries by dividing men and women during the performance and it is seen as an ancestral tradition from Māori culture. According to Hokowhitu, the “androgynous components of pre-contact kapa haka were genderized” (p. 92). Here lies the importance of questioning, disrupting and deconstructing gender traditions to help us rethink and recognize the dangers of following homogenous narratives, more so when they are “predicated on the concept of authenticity” (p. 91). Hokowhitu prompts us to acknowledge that traditions we think of authentic to Indigenous cultures can be complicit in the heteropatriarchal oppression and dominant colonial forms.

Similarly, in Turtle Island, various Indigenous scholars have noted how traditional systems have become more conservative, taking on gendered and binary approaches to spirituality e.g., demanding women to wear a skirt during ceremonies and sweat lodges. (Wilson & Laing, 2019; TallBear, 2019; Simpson, 2017; Vowel, 2012). In Anahuac, the ceremony of Chicomechitl involves a traditional dance during May to thank and ask for rain and good harvest. During the celebration, women dance with flower arrangements on one side of the fields while men carry maize stalks on the other side. The ceremony is quite ironic, as Chicomechitl represents a dual non-binary non-discrete sacred energy for Nahuas, yet the historic spiritual manipulation by western Christianity in Anahuac, gendered maize traditions and is now represented as an authentic Indigenous binary. These Indigenous representations outline how colonialism has reshaped Indigenous conceptions of gender and relations all over the world.



Hokowhitu mentions that “European bourgeois heterosexual patriarchal masculinity came to represent humanity” (2015, p. 84) through its normalization inside Indigenous ways of knowing and being, as it confined, repressed, de-authenticated and ostracized pre-colonial Indigenous notions of sexuality, by tying sexual practices to how identity is formed. To deconstruct ideological dominance of masculinity, it is crucial to resist colonial homogeneity by engaging with the full complexity of gender diversity. Hokowhitu (2015) questions whether Indigenous masculinities have only been formed through colonial ideologies and if so, to dismantle false notions and traditions of masculinity. The heterosexual patriarchal system has to be exposed as an impediment to decolonization and Indigenous resurgence. As Two-Spirit Secwepemc professor Jeffrey McNeil-Seymour (2017) advocates “decolonization is a process that is truth-speaking, heart-centred and does not look like Indigenized heteropatriarchy” (p. 56). Rephrasing the lyrics of the song *400 years* by Bob Marley & The Wailers, it has been 500 years “of the same philosophy...and, the people, they still can’t see” (Tosh, 1973). The authentication of masculine superiority supported by religion, heteropatriarchy and capitalism has made white men acquire 500 years’ worth of belongings at expense, unbelonging and fragmentation of individuals that deviated from their identity. For that reason, key to building a movement of resistance towards gender self-determination and bodily sovereignty will be an education that nurtures, fosters, sustains and revitalizes Indigenous queer belonging.

### **3.3 Coloniality of Gender**

Coloniality/Modernity has spread toxic fertilizers, that impose upon everyone sameness. This homogenous cultivation creates a monoculture of oppression where anyone different from



the western normative is seen as an inferior other or “subaltern” (Spivak, 1988). A dominant culture in direct opposition to cultures of belonging that embody human and more than human diversity. The colonial/modern system is intrinsically tied to the patriarchal western framework working together to destroy Indigenous knowledge systems, especially of gender and sexuality (Hunt & Holmes, 2015). Settler colonial assimilation processes look to impose heteronormative Christian monogamy on Indigenous communities in the hopes to change sexual practices, familial structures, gender norms and power dynamics. Fragmenting Indigenous communities accomplished the ultimate goal of the colonial project, which was removing Indigenous peoples from kinship by erasing their languages, cultures and traditional ways of being and knowing.

The coloniality of power is an oppressive structure that has continuously marginalized, subordinated, eliminated and worked to replace Indigenous epistemologies (Mignolo, 2011, 2007, 2003, 2000; Lugones, 2008, 2007; Quijano, 2000, 1991). I specifically refer to the coloniality of power as a deeply embedded structure in our modern system because dismantling and transforming structures is a strenuous, challenging and complex process that requires going to its core. All forms of bigotry uphold the structure of the coloniality of power; legacies of colonialism that associate class to race and gender to sex. Based on Quijano’s conceptualization of coloniality, Argentinian philosopher Maria Lugones, coined the term coloniality of gender as “what lies at the intersection of gender/class/race/sexuality as central constructs of the capitalist world system of power” (2014, p. 11). The coloniality of gender at its core is the creation of the dichotomy between human and more than human beings, the sustainment of a hierarchical violent binary system of oppositions in service of white cismen (Lugones, 2014, 2008, 2007). For many Indigenous cultures, dualism is considered non-binary and non-discrete parts of a



single whole. Critical to decoloniality is a conscientization of the impacts provoked by enclosing gender into two opposing hierarchical categories where one is on top of the other.

In the book, *The Sexual Demon of Colonial Power*, Black scholar Greg Thomas (2007) insists on the separation of gender and sex categories as a fundamental step towards decolonization. He argues that understanding gender as a social construct is not enough, Thomas perceives gender as a “culturally specific, Western bourgeois social construct” (p. 49). The growing dichotomy of femininity and masculinity through colonial ideals signified evolution and civilization. Western scholars at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century argued that stronger contrasts and differences between males and females denoted a more civilized and developed race (Peck, 2021; Thomas, 1897; Krafft-Ebing, 1886). Their findings fomented the belief that sex and gender were race specific, which made white people be perceived as the most evolved form of the human species and in turn, created the standardization and idealization of identity expression. Coloniality/Modernity has an “over-infatuation with genetic purity, an impressive amount of energy put into the classification of people. A pathological obsession with the concept of race that scientifically does not exist” (Peck, 2021). Through western paradigms, the white race represented evolution, a process of natural selection where “inferior”, “savage” and “lower” races would eventually disappear. The gender binary was solidified through racialized ideologies and language structures that established a human pyramid. The “straightening” (Rifkin, 2011) of identities that deviated from settler heteronormative norms worked to reinforce the coloniality of power. Through this thinking, delinking gender from the colonial project is critical to remove binaries that have ostracized Indigenous and queer identities, and it all could start by changing the language in which we think.



### 3.4 Changing the Language in Which We Think

Cree scholar Cash Ahenakew (2019) reminds us that language is a human construction and that our current relationship with language has been entangled through modernity's desire to objectify and totalize knowledge. Stl'atl'imx scholar Peter Cole (2002) explains how settler languages can be seen as a time machine that takes us backward to false truths. He cautions that these "official" languages are forced on us in order to colonize our entire beings, thoughts and feelings. Our knowledge is biased to a colonial narrative that tells only one side of the story, "filtered through the crude language of commodification" (Marker, 2003 p. 365). We are restrained by language barriers, completely unaware of how much language has entrapped our imaginaries. Surrounded by soundproof walls created by modern/colonial architecture, the land speaks a language that has become inaudible to our ears. How could language be (re)entangled with the land, if "the voices of Indigenous people must be translated into colonial language in order to be considered valid in the context of Western knowledge systems" (Hunt, 2018 p. 290)?

Māori scholars Carl Mika & Georgina Stewart (2017) distinguish a biased narrative inside settler translations, they understand the act of translating as "the point at which the colonising machinery accelerates the process of remaking other concepts according to its own categories and methodologies" (p. 142). The authors argue that translations from Indigenous languages to settler ones carry a colonizing influence creating hegemonic conceptualizations. Mika & Stewart imply that the act of translating is "not only about words but also about ideas and their cultural frameworks or worldviews" (2017, p. 139). Translating Indigenous languages to settler ones enforced a binary categorization where almost all nouns are gendered. A clear translation



example can be seen in the colonial division of single Mexica dual sacred energies into two: a god and a goddess. When Spanish settlers translated Nahua sacred creators, they assigned a gender to each of their representations, making a single dual creator have a separate female version and male version. Religious dogmas made it impossible for settlers to conceive the idea of having a sacred dual creator with two genders in the same being (Xiang, 2018). Due to enforced categorization, Indigenous languages suffer from agonistic translations and fall under words that can't truly define their knowledges, perspectives and worldviews.

In Mexico, as with other colonial impositions, settler languages are seen by my society as a sign of superiority. The architect of Mexican Public education, José Vasconcelos (1948), believed the Spanish language gave Indigenous peoples an opportunity to become a superior race, the Mestizos. Today, this ideology is maintained in almost all Mexican schools, except for intercultural institutions, as there are barely any Indigenous language revitalization programs. The schooling system has done almost nothing to expand and sustain the 68+ diverse voices in Anahuac. These voices are treated as a sign of the past, a lost legacy. How can we afford to use the words but have no idea of their meaning or their root? The loss of Indigenous languages is an ongoing ethnocide perpetuated by the coloniality of power in order to control, subordinate, and decimate Indigenous peoples.

All around Anahuac/Turtle Island the assimilation of Indigenous peoples into settler-speaking societies has been possible through western schooling (Absolon, 2019; Hare, 2016; Kimmerer 2013; De la Cadena, 2010; Archibald, 2008; Wilson 2007; King, 2003; Cole, 2002). Failing to be the cure, schools have instead spread a catastrophic disease, literally and



cognitively (Battiste, 2013). Anzaldúa (1987) equates these assimilation practices to linguistic terrorism by remembering how during “childhood we are told that our language is wrong. Repeated attacks on our native tongue diminish our sense of self. The attacks continue throughout our lives” (p. 80). Indigenous peoples are coerced to put to sleep their language to avoid feelings of unbelonging, as a result, many Indigenous experiences and stories have been silenced, lost within settler translations. The imposition of settler languages coerces us to live within a binary frame that forces us to categorize, gender and put a worth to our belonging. As Longboat & Sheridan (2006) state “if money speaks then it speaks English” (p. 369).

### **3.5 Language Awakening**

At the beginning of *Skyborn: A Land Reclamation Odyssey* (2020), Musqueam writer and performer Quelemia Sparrow spoke of having to go back to the schooling system to learn the language of her ancestors. The irony of going back to the same system that, not long ago, had forbidden the use of hən̓q̓əmin̓əm̓ language to the xʷməθkʷəy̓əm (Musqueam) First Nation through residential schools. Sparrow’s play transmitted the importance for Indigenous peoples to reclaim their culture through the revitalization of Indigenous languages. The play envisioned an imaginary where learning the language of the land and changing colonial perspectives open spaces for different forms of understanding. The irony of schooling Indigenous peoples in a modern Western system is still a painful one, but the wounds begin to heal when realizing who wrote the story and opposing their dominant narrative. Changing the voice of the narrator can help dismantle structures that muffle the voice of the land. As we start to hear voices who historically have been silenced, we move towards resurgence by speaking the language. Could an education that aims to awaken Indigenous languages release us from our colonial entrapments?



Through revitalizing their languages, Indigenous people can grow back their stolen roots and unveil fluid non-binary perspectives, an essential step in the project of decolonization (Smith, 2008; Grande, 2008).

Māori scholar Linda Tuhiwai Smith (2008) states that the project of decolonization involves “the unmasking and deconstruction of imperialism, and its aspect of colonialism, in its old and new formations alongside a search for sovereignty; for reclamation of knowledge, language, and culture; and for social transformation” (p. 117). To unmask and transform the dominant heteropatriarchy framework we need to start from the root. Following a warning offered by Black American writer Audre Lorde, “for the master’s tools will never dismantle the master’s house. They may allow us temporarily to beat him at his own game, but they will never enable us to bring about genuine change” (1983, p. 99). It is important to notice that Lorde intentionally states it's a man's game. If our intention is to transplant the roots, it starts by changing how colonial patriarchal structures are made authentic through language binaries, identity categorizations and body standardizations. Indigenous language awakening could shift the game by interrogating binaries within our knowledge and uncovering silent voices we never heard before. I use the term awakening to distinguish how Indigenous languages are sleeping not lost. Language as sleeping honours that our ancestors and their language have always been with us and are waiting to be awaken.

Culturally sustaining and revitalizing pedagogies prioritize the restoration of Indigenous knowledges and languages (McCarty & Lee, 2014). Quechua scholar Sandy Grande’s (2008) red pedagogy, for example, promotes education for decolonization rooted in Indigenous knowledges



and critical consciousness that centers Indigenous languages, arguing that “just as language was central to the colonialist project, it must be central to the project of decolonization” (2008, p. 248). Through Grande’s pedagogy, we can work towards a transformative decolonial praxis, critically reflecting on the assumptions we have, even the ones embedded in the language we were taught to speak. McNeil-Seymour (2017) states that Indigenous resurgence starts with decolonizing our minds by acknowledging that everything we see, think, hear and do is imposed upon by the hegemony of settler languages. As a tool that shapes and constructs our systems of knowledge, language can develop a differential oppositional consciousness that combats cognitive imperialism (Battiste, 1986) and (de)translates the dominant narrative written with imposed words.

In *Indigenous Methodologies*, Nêhiyaw and Saulteaux scholar Margaret Kovach (2009) reminds us of the importance of awakening Indigenous languages as they shape our entire being. She asserts that the fluidity of Indigenous thought exists outside the colonial box of control, it can see beyond and across binaries and categories. Kovach (2009) argues that language is a central component of the construction of knowledge, culture and social organization. She continues to explain that “in many Indigenous cultures the language constructs suggest a nonbinary, complementary philosophy of the world” (p. 59). Could having a non-binary philosophy of the world open the door to Indigenous self-determination and sovereignty? Could language be the key? Many Indigenous languages, for example, do not divide the world into masculine and feminine and do not assign gender to nouns, people and more-than-human beings (Aguilar Gil, 2021; Kimmerer, 2013; Wilson, 2008; León Portilla 1963).



Nahuatl is not a gendered language, the binary between male and female is not represented in the language. When referring to another person's pronouns they do not exist. Nahuatl does not have he/him/his or she/her/hers. In comparison to settler languages, Nahuatl is tied to the animacy of the land, it forms polysynthetic words that become poems of earth. Nahua Temachtiani (teachers) remind me that when speaking Nahuatl, the words must flow like the wind. For Nahuas, language is a spirit, and we are taught to bring life to that spirit. For that reason, teachings of Elders and knowledge keepers are essential when learning Indigenous languages. Traditional ways of being and ancestral systems of knowledge are being handed down through their stories. Central to a Nahua pedagogy is the revitalization of local languages and intergenerational learning, as both affirm the epistemic structure of relational knowledge that is derived from the land. The hirstory of the land tells its story through language and our Abuelitxs.

### **3.6 Old Keys Open New Doors**

The original purpose of schooling was to “kill the Indian and save the man” (Brayboy, 2005, p. 430), through assimilation and the erasure of language. With the momentum of language regeneration and the potential to reclaim knowledges that give alternative stories of place (Smith, 2008), we can awaken the legacy of our ancestors. Their legacy has never truly died, we can find them in the roots of the land. The land connects us to the wisdom of our ancestors through shared knowledges, ceremonies and practices through intergenerational learning using oral traditions. Language describes our existence, it “is the heart of our culture; it holds our thoughts, our way of seeing the world” (Kimmerer, 2013 p. 50). Czyzewski (2011) argues that transformative restorative education can be achieved by awakening Indigenous languages. Education can flip the tortilla around by teaching Indigenous languages. With the aim of language awakening



schooling can now be used as a powerful tool for decolonization meant as “political and disruptive” (Smith, 2008, p. 121). A powerful tool used to reveal the past and unsettle the current status quo for Indigenous resurgence.

Unfortunately, we continue to allow the destruction of the legacy of our ancestors, the legacy of how they viewed their place in the world. According to Kānaka Maoli Candace Kaleimamoowahinekapu Galla, 97% of the population speaks 4% of the world’s languages while, 3% of the population speaks 96% of the world’s languages (TEDx Talks, 2020). Anthropologist Wade Davis describes language as “a flash of the human spirit. A vehicle through which the soul of each particular culture comes into the material world. Every language is an old-growth forest of the mind, a watershed of thought, an ecosystem of spiritual possibilities” (2003). By giving preference to colonial languages, humanity’s diversity is disappearing. If we lose language, we lose part of our being; we lose our place of belonging since “the centrality of place in the Indigenous thought-world is explicitly conveyed through tradition and language” (Grande, 2008, p. 245). Language teaches us a philosophy of how we are to live and how to form reciprocal relations with self, community, more than human beings, land and the wider cosmos.

In the film *Our People Will Be Healed* (2017) by Abenaki filmmaker Alanis Obomsawin, schoolteachers speak of the importance of students’ learning their native language as a decolonizing tool against oppression. Awakening Indigenous languages questions and transforms our binary understanding of the world by uncovering false truths from the dominant narrative that rule our reality and revealing a fluid philosophy that counters colonial/modern ideologies



that are seen as authentic to Indigenous cultures and required to be upheld. Recognition, restoration, and use of Indigenous languages, expanding their availability and educating not only Indigenous speakers but anyone in ancestral lands, should be the starting point of a decolonizing process. A change in the schooling system will only be through policies that start to immerse Indigenous languages inside the classrooms, as we do other settler languages, if not our cultural and linguistic diversity will be lost.

I believe Indigenous languages should be expected in each corner of the place that created them and that the relational aspect of learning Indigenous languages is essential to awaken them. With that in mind, inside this thesis, I try to incorporate a little of Nahuatl language with the intention to question and reinterpret how we think. I hope my journey to awakening the language of my Ancestors becomes one of resurgent decolonial action that helps transform our monochromatic view of the world. The awakening of Indigenous languages is a key to a door that holds a different way of perceiving beings and life on earth (León Portilla, 1959). A powerful old key that ignites a decolonial process within our mind. Opening a new door that reveals a transformative path leading to Indigenous queer fluidity, a place where the meaning of belonging is not commodified by the insatiable capitalism but is grounded in relationality.

After the colonization of Anahuac/Turtle Island, assimilation and translation practices established anthropocentric views of understanding the world (Aguilar Gil & Cumes, 2021). Settler languages entrap our thoughts to a single way of describing and understanding the world around us. A world known to holding belongings that could be earned, discovered and possessed. Settler languages affected and controlled the way we think by imposing binary limitations to how



we see and structure the world. These limits worked to normalize and authenticate the superiority of men, which in turn, imposed their affirmation to control and own everything. As “official” languages in so-called America have centred men as the most important beings on earth, they continue to provoke the unbelonging of any identity who deviates from colonial formations of masculinity. When the axis of Mexico’s nation-state started to spin around men, it created a competition of who has the most belongings that tore the country apart. Understanding how the heteropatriarchy has systemically centred itself in the structure of mestizaje is critical for the study of this thesis. In the next chapter, I will explain the analytical framework that will help guide an exploration of the impacts of coloniality/modernity and possibilities for transformation.



## Chapter 4: Chicomexochitl – Analytical Framework

*“Maize works as a medium to obtain life: the act of birth is possible through our mayor creator, Chicomexochitl.”*

— Victoriano De la Cruz Cruz (2015, p. 140)

The present systematic study of secondary sources develops an analytical framework based on a variety of concepts formulated within Nahua philosophical perspectives. The intention of conducting my chosen analysis is to provide a wide and deep understanding of both the colonial/modern mechanisms that maintain the ideological dominance of mestizaje in Mexico and how the cultivation of a differential position rooted in Nahua holistic theory can dismantle these oppressive mechanisms. My understanding of mestizaje as a socio-cultural ideological hegemony is informed by the perspectives and stories of the groups that have been left on the borders of Anahuac/Turtle Island. As the foundations of Mexico as a nation-state were established by coloniality/modernity largely through the development of mestizaje, my analytical framework represents mestizaje using the metaphor of the dominance of yellow corn. The analytical framework includes the resurgence of Chicomexochitl (corn cob of many colours) a radical imaginary grounded by Nahua epistemologies through a desire to return to fertile ground of healthy growth and belonging. The analytical framework starts by illustrating the fragmentation and oppression caused by monocultures of yellow sameness and ends by imagining different forms of cultivation through the call of Chicomexochitl (corn cob of many colours). A call to oppose mechanisms of forced inclusion towards cultures of reciprocity and belonging leading to in tlalli in milli, a place of sustenance.



#### 4.1 Nahua Cosmology and Theoretical Positioning

In Nahua cosmology all practices, spiritual elements and contributions are rooted in the land and cultivated through relationships that form who we are and allow us to experience our place in Cemanahuac (entire cosmos). For Nahuas, the connection between place and cosmos is the base of life. An awareness of the entangled relations between self, animate/inanimate beings, the land, the water, the movements of astronomical bodies, the stars, the moon and the sun. Nahua cosmovision and spirituality are simultaneous, a thinking that goes along with what Tewa scholar, Gregory Cajete (1999) explains as becoming a complete human being through Indigenous education. An embodied learning where “each individual should be transformed through the process of education and find that special “place” where reside one’s...true relationship with oneself, with one’s community, and with the natural world.” (p. 194). That place is a portal to a paradigm shift where teachings aim towards collective belonging by supporting everyone “express their face, express their heart, and express the authentic truthfulness of their being” (Cajete. p. 194); express their - in *ixtli in yóllotl* -.

In *ixtli in yóllotl* (face and heart) demonstrates the dynamic concept of personhood, a Nahua philosophical and pedagogical theory that symbolizes holism. Stó:lō scholar Q’um Q’um Xiiem Jo-ann Archibald refers to the concept of holism as “the interrelatedness between the intellectual, spiritual (metaphysical values and beliefs and the Creator), emotional, and physical (body and behaviour/action) realms to form a whole healthy person” (2008, p. 11). For Nahuas, holism is found through relationality, through lessons of walking in beauty with oneself, your community and the land. In *ixtli in yóllotl* represents finding harmony and belonging from the inside out, from your heart to your face. A Nahua education that explains and embraces our



interdependence with the land and each other. Teachings that reflect an embodied relational and reciprocal way of experiencing our place as human beings belonging to Cemanahuac (the entire cosmos). Cree scholar, Cash Ahenakew summarizes our belonging to the land with these beautiful words,

In these [relational] Indigenous ways of being, it is the land that commands the body, because the body is part of the land. Language, thoughts, songs, and dreams also come from the land. The unconscious is located in the land. My body is the land, the other-than-humans are the land, the plants are the land, the earth is the land, the wider cosmos is also the land. (2019, p. 21)

Many Indigenous communities in Anahuac see themselves as the *hijxs del maiz*, the people of Chicomexochitl, the ones who were created from corn (Rocha, 2020; De la Cruz Cruz, 2015; Kimmerer, 2013; Rios, 2012; Diaz et al., 1993; León-Portilla, 1963). Corn is very significant in many Indigenous communities around Turtle Island, in particular to Nahua cosmology, Chicomexochitl is a crucial member of the creation story, an elder, a knowledge keeper and a teacher. Every year Nahuas have spiritual ceremonies, sacred rituals and traditional celebrations connected to rain and agricultural cycles to commemorate Chicomexochitl. Many of these ceremonies occur during various Christian patron saints' day, a appropriation tactic used by Spanish priests to assimilate Indigenous peoples with their own traditions, fortunately, they remain grounded in the land. Two of the most important offerings are the Chicomexochitl and Elotlamanaliztli ceremonies. The ceremony of Chicomexochitl is a ritual that takes place in the milpas, at the beginning of the cultivating cycles, to ask the creators for a good harvest and sending prayers for rain. Nahua scholar Victoriano De La Cruz Cruz (2015) narrates that at the



end of the ceremony the Huehuehtlactl (the Elder) speaks to the land by hitting the ground, saying, “Nican tiitztoqueh, nican timitzmactialiah nochi tlen moaxca (Here we are, here we give you everything that belongs to you)” (p. 139). The ceremony of Chicomexochitl reminds us that we belong to the land; we are the land.

When the rainy season ends and the milpas bear their gifts, the ceremony of Elotlamanaliztli, the celebration to thank for the arrival of cintli (corn cob) begins. During harvest season, white, yellow, purple, and red kernels beautifully paint the cobs. Nahuas believe that those colours are the four creators that give us life and sustains us. The colours represent the sun, the moon, the water and the land, beings that guard Chicomexochitl’s growth. The ceremony of Elotlamanaliztli honours and holds deep reverence towards the creators. An expression of gratitude for our sustainment towards the land which includes food offerings, music, singing, and dancing. The ceremony is led by the Huehuehtlactl (the Elder) and begins with a *limpia* (smudging), a practice to purify and cleanse our entire beings (De la Cruz Cruz, 2015). The Elders are recognized as the wisest *Temachtiani* (teacher) and play an essential role in the rituals guiding us towards balance and harmony. Elotlamanaliztli is an intergenerational holistic, embodied experience that reminds us to live a good life.

My theoretical perspective honours Nahua cosmology and is grounded in Indigenous holistic understandings to live a good life. I have noticed how the colours of Chicomexochitl resemble the colours of the Medicine Wheel and I don’t believe it to be a coincidence. Chicomexochitl feeds our being with gifts that bring us balance, wholeness and wellness. Anishinaabekwe scholar, Kathy Absolon (2019) uses the Medicine Wheel “as a tool to depict



Indigenous wholistic theory” a theory that is “whole, ecological, cyclical, and relational” (p. 25). The Medicine Wheel illustrates interconnections with self, community and land within the four dimensions of a person, a representation of the meaning of *in ixtli in yóllotl*. For this thesis, I understand the cultivation of *Chicomexochitl*, a *cintli* that holds many colours, as a metaphor for the resurgence of - *in ixtli in yóllotl* – a Nahua educational holistic theory central to cultivating belonging. My theoretical perspective derives from the embodied experience of cultivating native corn using ancestral seeds. To plant seeds of maize “is not a passing survival instinct...but is instead a response to deep connections to the land based on material—bodied— experience” (Rios, 2012). Cultivating *Chicomexochitl* is a bond so mysterious and profound, it is impossible to fully comprehend. A relation with the land that makes you transcend the limitations that impede us from having a good life; a relation that grows roots that connect us to our body, mind, heart and spirit. It is by harvesting true corn that a serpent grows its feathers. It is by cultivating ancestral knowledges that *Chicomexochitl* resurges with all their colours. That is our responsibility as people of corn, as Kimmerer reminds us “[o]f all the materials, why is it that people of corn would inherit the earth...? Could it be that people made of corn are beings transformed? For what is corn, after all, but light transformed by relationship?” (2013, p. 343).

#### **4.2 Analytical Framework of *Chicomexochitl*: *Chicomexochitl* (corn cob of many colours/belonging) & in *tlalli in milli* (place of sustenance/relationality)**

The analytical framework of this thesis is guided by Nahua ways of knowing. The thesis will undertake a systematic study of secondary sources using an analytical framework based on *in tlalli in milli* (place of sustenance) for the resurgence of *Chicomexochitl* (corn cob of many colours). *In tlalli in milli* encompasses Nahua perspectives, principles, practices and values, that



guide my research methodology. I use the teachings of in tlalli in milli as a sustainable relational framework that involves the entire cultivation process starting from preparing the land, planting seeds, harvesting and giving back. The cultivation of in tlalli in milli is as a metaphor for the resurgence of Indigenous knowledge systems represented by a corn of many colours, Chicomexochitl.

My method will include a systematic study of secondary sources from Indigenous and Mestizx 2S/LGBTQIA+ stories of self-determination, relationality and belonging that are based on Indigenous, Mestizx and xicanx authors. As method of analyses, I use storytelling and visual arts to examine how to transform the conditions of growth and highlight the importance of narrativity as an empowerment tool.

Using the analytical framework of Chicomexochitl ([Figure 4.1](#)), I will explore two contrasting concepts of cultivation. First, based on the “myth of the yellow corn” (Andreotti et al., 2017, p. 46), a cultivation created by the coloniality of power which has caused the fragmentation and unbelonging of Indigenous and Mestizx 2S/LGBTQIA+ and, the problematization of mestizaje as a political agenda that reproduces oppressive monocultures that are responsible for that violent sameness. Second, using in tlalli in milli (place of sustenance), I will explore the synergy of Indigenous knowledges, queerness and differential consciousness: the three sisters of a pedagogy of belonging. A pedagogy that works towards the resurgence of the Nahua concept - in ixtli in yóllotl – an educational Indigenous holistic theory central to cultivating belonging by finding our face and heart.



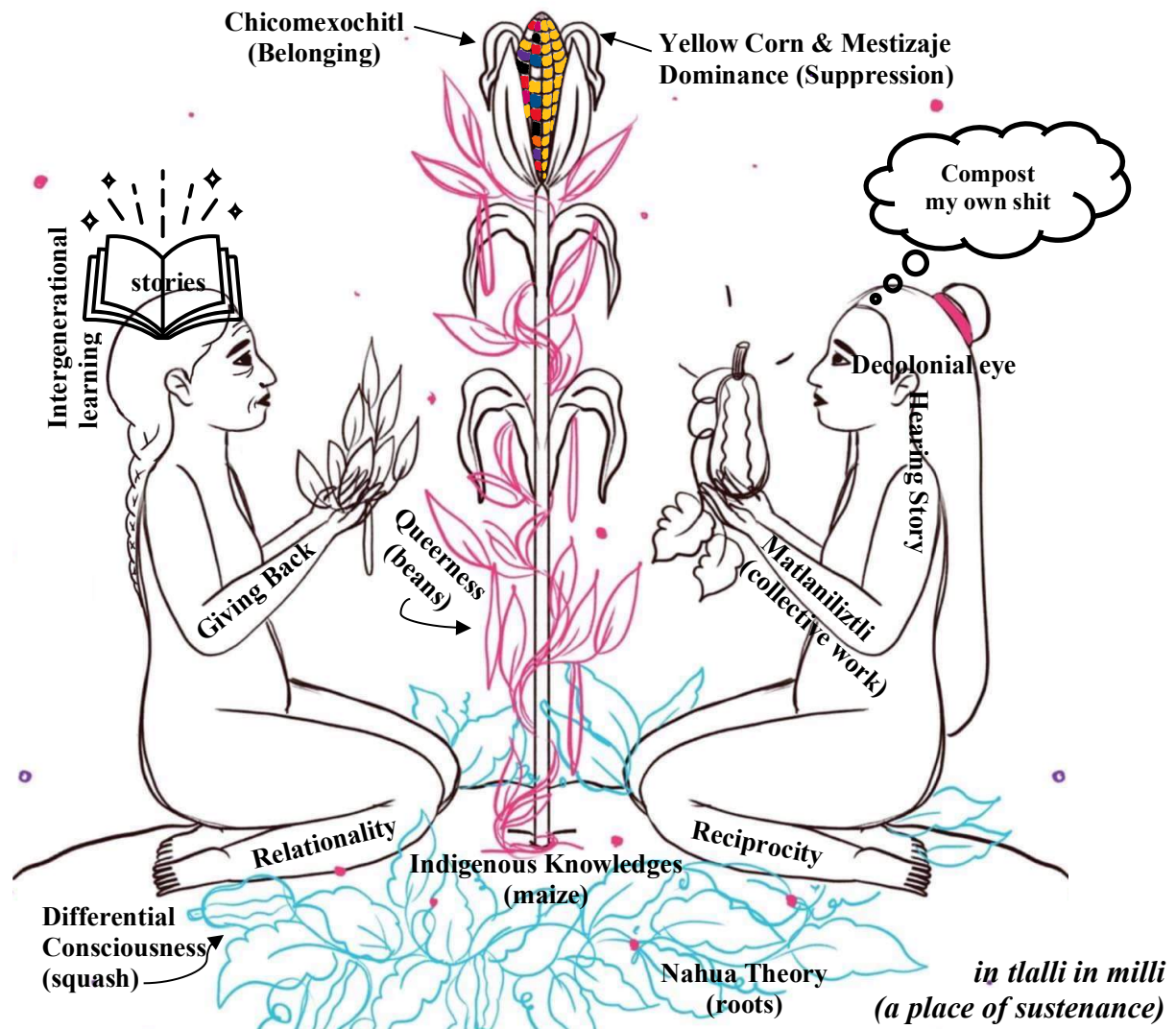


Figure 4.1 Analytical Framework of Chicomexochitl. Illustration by Mestiza artist, Montserrat Solano (2021)

The analytical framework of Chicomexochitl (Figure 4.1) is rooted in Nahua theory relying on cultures of reciprocity and relationality to nurture the growth of an education that moves towards the resurgence of Indigenous knowledge systems. It is an analytical framework of holistic cultivation that involves planting, ceremony, tending, harvesting and giving back. And it begins by “composting my own shit” (Gesturing Towards Decolonial Futures Collective as cited in Ahenakew, 2019, p. 30), a process by which we prepare our entire beings for the renunciations



of entitlements, habits and comforts that are necessary to develop circular reciprocal relations with all human beings, more than human beings, the land and wider cosmos. As an analytical research framework, Chicomexochitl has as central element, a commitment to “reciprocity of life and accountability to one another” (Hart, 2010, p. 9). We must hold ourselves accountable and “do so with critical eyes wide open in relation to the agendas of institutions and to our own imperfect translations” (Ahenakew, 2016, p. 337). Holding ourselves accountable means that before we help to dismantle the oppressive structures, we have to deconstruct ourselves. Instead of using a magnifying glass we ought to use a reflective mirror to reflect the assumptions, biases and stigmatizations within us (Marker, 2003). Opening a critical decolonial eye in our thinking questions how our habits of being help the colonial pesticides maintain oppressive extractive monocultures.

After composting, the analytical framework follows the circular process of *in tlalli in milli* which continues with preparing the land and planting the seeds. In Nahua, *matlaniliztli* refers to the collective work during cultivation and harvest. It is a critical step where everyone gives a hand and lifts each other up. *Matlaniliztli* is about understanding that *in tlalli in milli* is never individual labour, but radical solidarity towards growing cultures of reciprocity. The planting of the seeds will be a metaphor for Indigenous knowledges, queerness and differential consciousness. I argue for the synergy of these three theories as fundamental for the resurgence of *in ixtli in yóllotl*. The analytical framework of Chicomexochitl is committed to self-determination, Indigenous sovereignty and collective belonging. With its many colours, Chicomexochitl resists and disrupts the confinement of a single dominant paradigm. It is a transformative, ethical, ecological and healing framework that opposes the dominance and



yellow sameness of mestizaje. As dismantling mestizaje is critical to my analytical framework, next I discuss the dominance of the yellow corn in further detail prior to discussing my method of analysis.

### **4.3 They Were All Yellow: Analytically Framing Mestizaje (dominance) through the Myth of the yellow corn.**

When thinking of Chicomexochitl (corn/maize), one might tend to automatically picture a yellow cob. Thinking of yellow is a cognitive limitation created through consumption demands required to sustain our capitalist society. Humans grow the same type of corn more than any other plant on earth (Roberts, 2008; Fussell, 1992), hence “there is every reason to believe that [yellow] corn has succeeded in domesticating us” (Pollan, 2006 p. 23). Decolonial scholar, Vanessa Andreotti has frequently utilized the spread of yellow corn as a metaphor for an education that presumes dominant worldviews as the only possibility for progress, development and evolution. The “myth of the yellow corn” (Andreotti et al., 2017, p. 46) refers to controlled imaginaries where we can only picture the cob to be yellow, limitations that narrow our knowledge and understanding of the world. These limits are imposed by coloniality/modernity striving towards sameness by silencing other knowledges. The myth of the yellow corn exemplifies Kuokkanen’s (2008) concept of “epistemic ignorance,” where our practices and discourses “enable the continued exclusion of other than dominant Western epistemic and intellectual traditions.” (p. 60). Nigerian storyteller, Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie has famously referred to this dominance as “the danger of a single story” (2009). A single narrative framed through the lens of the ones with power, the only ones who get to write (his)story. Stories that tell us that the corn can only be yellow.





**Figure 4.2 Sembrando Amarillo by Mestiza artist, Montserrat Solano (2021)**

In the present thesis, I will use yellow corn as a metaphor for mestizaje. Through this scenario, modernity's agroindustry synthesizes Eurocentric, racist, heteropatriarchal seeds that use colonial fertilizers to grow monocultures of yellow corn, hindering the livelihood of Indigenous peoples around the world. I use the "myth of the yellow corn" (Andreotti et al., 2017) as an analogy representing the political homogenous agenda that demands of mestizaje to create a partition in Mexico, a split between the ones who embrace the sameness and the ones who



resist it by choice or force, deemed deficient and inferior. The illustration “Sembrando Amarillo” (2021) by Mestiza artist, Montserrat Solano ([Figure 4.2](#)) represents how the use of colonial fertilizers and the non-stop growth of dense fields of corn are destroying the land and polluting the waters. In the same sense, mestizaje is destroying Indigenous identities and polluting ancestral knowledge systems. Monoculture farming of yellow corn has led us to an unsustainable maze where we are entrapped by modernity’s dead-ends. Mestizaje as yellow corn has become a thickening agent that prevents the deformation of colonial/modern toxic monocultures of sameness.

Our modern world is surrounded by fields of yellow corn and the oppressive dominance has come at a big price. The capitalist needs of the global colonial/modern power are destroying the place we belong to both literally and cognitively. The analytical framework of my thesis aims to bust the myth of yellow corn and other monochromatic impositions; deconstructing the dominant narrative by changing the conditions of growth to bring back the colours of Chicomexochitl. Our livelihood in this world depends on the reciprocal relationships we have between all beings. Ahenakew (2019) reminds us that “by hurting the land we are hurting ourselves—shutting down our life support system by harming the living entity whose labour is the most invisible but who gives us everything that we need to survive for free” (p. 73). Using in Chicomexochitl as an analytical framework grounded in tlalli in milli (place of sustenance) can help heal the sick metabolism of which we are a part. The monoculture aims of colonialism have already exterminated much of our diversity. The “myth of the yellow corn” (Andreotti et al., 2017) exemplifies how Indigenous communities went from tending/caring for the land to become salaried Mestizo employees who complicitly operate the modern mechanisms of the coloniality



of power. Two contrasting forms of cultivation, one for sustainment and revitalization that grows cultures of reciprocity and collective belonging, and the other an auto-destructive model that does not return anything to the land, it just takes. To return to in tlalli in milli (place of sustenance) we must confront the dominance of the “Yellow Corn”. One way to confront the myth of yellow sameness is to learn from stories that have experienced the repression of mestizaje. Stories that can empower a transformative (un)learning journey towards new imaginaries.

#### **4.4 Method: Learning from Story**

In tlalli in milli (place of sustenance) is an Indigenous knowledge system that has been passed down through stories. The analytical framework of Chicomexochitl uses storytelling as an Indigenous methodology grounded in Nahuatl ontologies, land-based protocols, honouring ceremonies, intergenerational learning, relational accountability, cultures of reciprocity, radical solidarity, language awakening and at the base, stories that give us a sense of belonging. Kovach (2009) emphasizes the importance of hearing stories as an Indigenous method.

Stories remind us of who we are and of our belonging. Stories hold within them knowledges while simultaneously signifying relationships. In oral tradition, stories can never be decontextualized from the teller. They are active agents within a relational world, pivotal in gaining insight into a phenomenon. Oral stories are born of connections within the world, and are thus recounted relationally. They tie us with our past and provide a basis for continuity with future generations. (p. 94)

With this thinking, it is easy to make meaning of the words of Cherokee writer, Thomas King “the truth about stories is, that’s all we are” (2003, p. 2). Storytelling as methodology shares and



explores place and creation stories as well as transformative journeys and experiences. It follows the thinking of Anzaldúa (2002) when speaking of how transformative learning experiences urge you to share this “*ajá*”/knowledge, writing that “by redeeming your most painful experiences you transform them into something valuable, *algo para compartir* or share with others so they too may be empowered” (p. 540).

Critical to an Indigenous methodology is applying a decolonizing lens, Kovach (2009) states that “we can call it decolonization, we can call it Indigenous praxis, or we can call it resistance” (p. 93), but the emphasis is on the contribution of critical consciousness as a beneficial practice to Indigenous peoples. Kovach (2018) continues to discuss the transformative pedagogical possibilities of stories to enact anti-colonial shifts in our consciousness, she states that story “is where social justice starts. Story is how we will decolonize teaching and research. Story is how we will decolonize the academy...” (p. 52). Kovach (2009) also asserts that “story as methodology is decolonizing research” (p. 103). Applying a decolonial lens supports the use of radical and performative methods such as storytelling, poetry and visual arts “as vehicles of growing resistance to Western, neoconservative, and positivist paradigms” (Swadener and Mutua, 2008, p. 41). A shift to an oppositional praxis that pushes against an ontoepistemic monoculture of knowledge, hegemonic narratives and colonial binaries that are socially constructed to exclude non-normative identities, can be told through stories.

I believe storytelling to be intrinsically linked with art. A single image can paint an entire story and the more you return to a piece of art the more you learn about yourself, just like a story. To support the presentation of the findings, I will utilize visual arts to provide another form of



telling stories with themes of fragmentation, oppression and transformation in relation to this systematic study. In chapter 5, I present a photographic series that represents Indigenous and Mestizx queer fragmentation. In chapter 6, I display the work of an important Mexican muralist and his representation of mestizaje. In chapter 7, I show the illustration by a Mestiza artist of a place of sustenance that harvests corn cobs of many colours. Visual arts allow us to express what we sometimes can't say with language. As a method, visual arts can contribute to a radical alternative that implements and facilitates Indigenous, decolonial, queer, critical race and border theories (Finley, 2005; Denzin, 2000). Martineau & Ritskes (2014) argue that Indigenous art is created from relationships with community and land, it “unbinds Indigeneity from its colonial limits by weaving past and future Indigenous worlds into new currents of present struggle” (p. X). Throughout their lives, artists like Tlaxcalteca Desiderio Hernández Xochitiotzin (1957-1995) and Tz'utuhil Maya Mario Gonzalez Chavajay (2008) have portrayed stories of deep reverence and relation with Chicomexochitl. Their telling of the story weaves Indigenous ways of knowing and being, their paintings are stories that reflect on an intimate bond with the land and enable us to imagine radical spaces for self-determination, sovereignty and belonging.

Being aware that research practices are “inextricably linked to European imperialism and colonialism. The word itself, ‘research’, is probably one of the dirtiest words in the indigenous world’s vocabulary ... It stirs up silence, it conjures up bad memories, it raises a smile that is knowing and distrustful.” (Smith, 1999, p. 1). An - in tlalli in milli – methodology follows the principles of Indigenous Storywork by Q’um Q’um Xiiem Jo-ann Archibald as an ethical research framework opposing harmful and damage centred practices. Archibald (2008) writes that the principles helped her “get to the “core” of making meaning with and through stories.” (p.



140). The seven principles of Indigenous storywork are respect, responsibility, reciprocity, reverence, holism, interrelatedness, and synergy. As an ethical research framework, I am grateful for Q'um Q'um Xiim's gift of a storywork basket to become "story ready" and use the storywork principles to make meaning of stories that speak of traditional ways of knowing and transformative journeys. The seven principles allow us to understand "the power and beauty of Indigenous stories for educational purposes" (Archibald and Parent, 2019, p. 4).

Storytelling as methodology centers Indigenous perspectives and worldviews. Kovach (2009) states that an Indigenous methodology is about relationality, a combination of ideas and principles in relation to us, to our community and the land. Indigenous methodologies are about the knowledge we choose to cultivate, the stories we deeply listen to and the language we awaken. Withing the systematic study of secondary sources, I will analyze three different stories that speak about Indigenous queer fragmentation, colonial/modern dominance and oppression and the synergy of cultures of reciprocity towards the resurgence of Chicomexochitl. According to Nêhiyaw (Cree) scholar Michael Hart (2010), Indigenous methodologies "permit and enable Indigenous researchers to be who they are while they are actively engaged as participants in the research processes" (p. 9). An Indigenous research methodology applies a decolonizing lens, integrates critical reflexivity through story and values "self-in-relation" (Kovach, 2009, p. 33). Anishinaabe author, Richard Wagamese reminds me that "we're all storytellers, really. That's what we do. That is our power as human beings. Not to tell people how to think and feel and therefore know – but through our stories allow them to discover questions within themselves" (2016, p. 172). As a form of locating myself in the research and empowering others to heal, in Chapter 5, I will start by telling my story. In Chapter 6, I analyze the story of the mother of



mestizaje, Malinalli, a Nahua woman who has completely shaped the identity of Mexicans.

Finally, in Chapter 7, I present the story of milpa, a story about three sisters who teach about the power of relationality and reciprocity.

#### **4.5 Finding Meaning in Story using a Chicomexochitl Analytical Framework.**

You realize it's the process that's valuable and not the end product, not the new you, as that will change often throughout your life...Your story's one of la búsqueda de conocimiento, of seeking experiences that'll give you purpose, give your life meaning, give you a sense of belonging. It's a quest story of ordeal and distress, cyclic life-stages, and identity transformations. Like the heroine in a myth or fairy tale, after an arduous struggle in the dark woods, you return, bringing new knowledge to share with others in your communities. (Anzaldúa, 2002, pp. 562- 563)

The present thesis focus contributes to the field of Indigenous informed sexual orientation and gender identity scholarship. Its research involves the ideological leverage of coloniality and its impacts on race and gender in education by interrogating patriarchal and modern assumptions of heterosexism and gender binaries performed within the normative culture and context of Mexico. With this thesis, I hope to cultivate radical imaginaries for Indigenous queer belonging through Nahua holistic education. My aim is to explore stories, my own and those found in secondary sources, to arrive at broad themes in line with my Chicomexochitl analytical framework. This includes exploring Indigenous and Mestizx 2S/LGBTQIA+ experiences, learn how we have embraced our fragmented identity and collectively heal the wounds caused by the violence, pain and trauma of coloniality/modernity.



The analysis of the thesis examines the transformative power of stories as they ignite a shift in our consciousness and cultivate a desire for belonging. Cherokee scholar Daniel Heath Justice articulates throughout his book, *Why Indigenous Literatures Matter* (2018), the importance of Indigenous stories to find our place of belonging. For Justice the fundamental reason why Indigenous stories matter is because,

they [stories] reflect the truths of our [Indigenous] survival and our own special beauty in the world to which we belong...They remind us that we're the inheritors of heavy, painful legacies, but also of hope and possibility, of a responsibility to make the world better for those yet to come. (p. 210)

Stories that nurture Indigenous queer belonging and intend to give back, don't shy away from the violent and harmful impacts of the coloniality of power. These stories instead bring hope by revealing the scars and by forming a collective support for the ones who are still entrapped. The knowledge shared from story is meant to start a rumble of opposition where systemically silenced voices, such as Indigenous and Mestizx 2S/LGBTQIA+ peoples, resist and push back against places designed to exclude and neglect their existence. Sharing stories is meant to assist others finding places that nurture and foster their belonging.

The analysis of transformative stories of belonging can support Indigenous and Mestizx 2S/LGBTQIA+ people begin a (un)learning process to free their identity from the colonial binaries and ideological hegemony of the oppressive heteropatriarchy. Stories of belonging can oppose colonial dominant narratives and sustain an education to become a complete human by expressing the authentic truthfulness of our being. An education to find our in *ixtli* in *yóllotl*, grounded on Nahua holistic theory, can flip the tortilla around by using stories that imagine



otherwise. Education can now be used as a powerful tool for decolonization “linked explicitly with the resurgence of Indigenous systems of gender and sexuality” (Hunt & Holmes, 2015, p. 169). In this thesis, I explore the necessary conditions to nurture, sustain and revitalize a pedagogy based on Nahua holistic theory to critically account for how Indigenous and Mestizx 2S/LGBTQIA+ communities continue to live with, fight, and resist oppression under coloniality/modernity. In order to set forth a transformative (un)learning journey, a pedagogy for Indigenous resurgence and sovereignty must critically exercise non-hegemonic thinking and prioritize Indigenous queer self-determination. It is a pedagogy created from stories, meant to hold space to reflect and question the way we think, what we feel, whom we want to be, where we are and who sustains our existence. A pedagogy for cultivating the Nahua concept of *in ixtli in yóllotl*, which imagines a place where peoples express the authentic truthfulness of their being. A place where we are more than included, a place where we all belong.

The intention of the Chicomexochitl analytical framework is to understand how to dismantle colonial/modern mechanisms of fragmentation and subjugation through stories that accounts for the lived experiences of repressed and racialized Indigenous and Mestizx 2S/LGBTQIA+ peoples. Gifting stories of transformation, resistance, strength, and self-determination could empower these individuals to resist, oppose and emancipate their identity from the colonial oppressive heteropatriarchy. According to Ritenburg et al. (2014) stories narrated by Indigenous voices that speak about resisting cultural inferiority and liberation from the margins, give hope and have transformative possibilities. My research methodology is guided by stories that “give our life meaning” (Kovach, 2018, p. 49) and “offer the warmth of belonging” (Kovach, 2009, p. 62). Stories that can offer an anti-oppressive antidote and help



begin a transformative process towards belonging, based on a desire to find our face (character) and our heart (mind), our in *ixtli* in *yóllotl*.

#### **4.6 Giving Back by Presenting Findings**

My desire is that the present thesis inspires Indigenous and Mestizx peoples to express their in *ixtli* in *yóllotl* – their face and heart. An essential part of this systematic study is how you to give back the findings to community. According to Kovach (2009) doing Indigenous research in a good way requires to be grounded in community needs through acts of reciprocity, she mentions that “dissemination of the research is a central issue, and it is important to ensure that the research is available to community in a manner that is accessible and useful” (p. 149). As a way to give back by presenting the finding of this study, I am creating and designing a children’s book in Nahuatl, Spanish and English, illustrated by Mestiza artist Montserrat Solano who painted part of the beautiful artwork from this thesis. As a form of reciprocity, this thesis seeks to contribute to our collective responsibility to heal ourselves and the land.

In general, I hope that this thesis inspires people who live in the borders and the margins, the ones who experience oppression and fragmentation due to violent systemic inequities to radically imagine an education for collective healing, self-determination, authentic expression of being and belonging. In order to explore this desire more deeply, first, we have to understand the obstacles and hardships Indigenous and Mestizx 2S/LGBTQIA+ identities encounter when trying to express the authentic truthfulness of our being. To begin, in the next chapter, you will find my story.



## Chapter 5: Fragmentation – Experience

*When those who have the power to name and to socially construct reality choose not to see you or hear you...when someone with the authority of a teacher, say, describes the world and you are not in it, there is a moment of psychic dis-equilibrium, as if you looked into a mirror and saw nothing.*

— Adrienne Rich (1986, p. 199)

### 5.1 Hiding in the Cupboard

#### HIDING IN THE CUPBOARD

They are standing centre stage when all of the sudden the lights blind them. As the first track start to play, they immediately know which song it is, a Nahua classic, “Icnocuicatl”, a song of nostalgia, written by Nahua poet Natalio Hernández Xocoyotzin and interpreted by Mixtec singer, Lila Downs. They know the words, but they do not know their meaning. It will be a set of 8 songs that will end with a powerhouse, “Vengo” by Chilean rap artist Ana Tijoux. A very rebellious concert. As they finish the performance and open their eyes, the fantasy fades away and they are left alone inside the cupboard. They hide in the cupboard to create a place where they belong, a place where they could express parts of their being that on the outside, they were taught to be ashamed of. An imaginary place of fabulousness that would always disappear when hearing someone else coming. They had learned that



sometimes you can't express who you truly are and that it is best to conceal that which makes you different.

Leaving the cupboard was always difficult, especially during ceremony days, but they knew it was time to come out and start helping with the preparations. Today was the last day of a sacred ceremony to feed the land, an act of deep reverence to ask for rain and good harvest. Everyone in the pueblo would go up the hill to the milpas to give thanks to Chicomexochitl. Abuelita had already begun cooking the food to offer to the land. She was making atole, tamales and their all-time favourite, mole negro. The delicious smell made them hungry but today they had to fast, so they quickly left the kitchen. Abuelito was outside preparing some of the flower arrangements used for the celebration. The arrangements reminded them how much they dreaded the dancing portion of the ceremony. During this particular ritual, women would carry the hand flowers, while men carry maize stalks wearing a collar of flowers. The dance forced a separation where they would end on the outskirts of their assigned side feeling out of place, wanting to disappear.

As the time for the celebration got closer, they had to change to a more traditional white attire. They open the cupboard to look for the new clothes Abuelita had sewn, but something was wrongly right. They run to the kitchen and eagerly ask Abuelita if this was a mistake. Abuelita looks into their eyes and smiles confirming that it wasn't. With nervous excitement, they change to a beautiful dress with flowers on the collar and on the hem, it fits perfectly. As they leave the house, Abuelito gives



them hand flowers to carry for the ritual. The flowers are beautiful and even resemble the ones embroidered in the dress. Reaching the base of the hill, they listen to music in honour of Chicomexochitl. A magical music trio is playing, Tacuatzin (tlacuache) with the jarana, Coyotl (coyote) with the violín, y and Tochtli (rabbit) with the huapanguera. The Huehuehtlcatl (the Elder) begins the spiritual ceremony with prayers and smudging. Everybody starts dancing along the beat of the music yet this time, there are no divisions, they are standing at the centre, surrounded by all, twirling around on the land.

The previous story is an imaginary retelling of my childhood memory. A narration of events that happened and situations I imagine to be different, maybe how I wish they were. As I child, from everyday practices to ceremonies and celebrations, I was required to choose a gender, to choose where I belonged. During many traditional dances, I had to wear typical apparel for boys, a traditional shirt and pants, sometimes with a morral (bag) and a paliacate (bandana). Before going out to the dance, I would watch the girls line up parallel to the boys. The girls would twirl with their flowy skirts and I couldn't help but wonder if I was in the correct place. When I returned home, I would grab towels and bedsheets to imitate the dances the girls had just performed. By then I already knew I had to act like a macho and reject any form of femininity within me. The only way to twirl around was by hiding. My imagination became the place where I could show the other side of me, the one I thought I could never allow others to see. I always felt in between, fluid, non-conforming, someone who identified as something else, neither masculine nor feminine. Someone looking for another option even though it was never a possibility within the heteropatriarchal Mexican narrative.



In the story, I deliberately decided to use the term hiding in the cupboard, instead of a closet, as it better represents the reality of Indigenous and Mestizx LGBTQIA+ in Mexico. I borrow the use of the term “cupboard” from Driskill et al. (2011) as a metaphor for the limited spaces Indigenous and Mestizx 2S/LGBTQIA+ peoples have to express their authentic beings and desires. For Driskill et al., the cupboard not only represents the marginalization of Two-Spirit and Indigenous queer peoples but also the continued dispossession of Indigenous peoples from their land. Simpson (2017) makes a similar point by adding that these identities have the most “experiences with acute heteropatriarchy as expansive dispossession” (p. 144). The cupboards become the holistic entrapment of Indigenous queer realities but also, the only place they belong to. Indigenous queer peoples “do not have the space of a closet to hide our sexualities, since we have been physically, culturally, mentally, and spiritually pathologized and forced into modern representation by scientific and philosophical discourses” (Driskill et al., 2011, p. 212).

I acknowledge that many Indigenous and Mestizx 2S/LGBTQIA+ peoples don’t have the possibility of coming out of anything. For me the journey, not the destination, has been completely accurate, one which reflects on my experience as a light-skinned Mestizx cuilonli (queer). I was assigned male at birth, raised to be a Mexican macho and although I knew I would never fit that box, I tried acting like one. My gender identity has never matched the colonial constructions of appropriate expressions for the gender I was assigned at birth. Acting as a macho was a performance for self-preservation to blend with the “dominant heteronormative framework that defines the boundaries of authenticity and recognizability” (Macintosh, 2007, p.



36). White feminist theorists like Judith Butler (1989, 2004) and Simone de Beauvoir (1949) have argued that gender is a social construction; it is performative, meaning nobody has a gender from birth they are taught how to act as one. Rephrasing Simone de Beauvoir's (1949) statement related to becoming a woman, in Mexico, one is not born a man but rather proves to be a macho.

As a way to guard up, every time I left the cupboard, I felt the need to become someone different than myself. I began by imitating the ideals of the cis-heteronormative binary created by the colonial dominant narrative of mestizaje in Mexico. A performance I had to learn, to avoid feeling embarrassed or afraid. The performance didn't stop in my imagination. It is an act of a lifetime. As the saying goes, if you want to play in the circus sometimes you have to dress like a clown. An act I continue to portray to be safe. An act I put for others but not for myself. At times I like going back to the cupboard; it is a safe place of fabulousness where I can be me, where I feel belong, where I'm my most authentic self. Justice (2018) reflects on a similar experience when being safe at home, he would immerse "in fantasy worlds and imagine belonging someplace else, someplace where geeky misfits of diverse heritage could be lauded as heroes, where genderqueer boys could love gentleness and beauty without shame" (p. 184-185). I would also deeply immerse myself in these imaginary places of fabulousness, dreaming of the time I would be part of a community of misfits that were fantasizing of finding someone just like me, a broken queerdo who was forced to comply to a settler neocolonial perspective and although they are continuously de-indigenized by the politics of modernity, they have learned to become faboriginal by taking a stance against the sameness and letting their queer flag fly high.



Upon reflecting on my own story and experiences, I realized that the only way to survive the wilderness was to hide my true colours. Feelings of shame made me buy yellow paint to colour myself and blend into the sameness of mestizaje. Fluid possibilities were left inside the cupboard and my expression of self was contained through a heteropatriarchal “yellow corn” standard that dictated my way of being and thinking. Living inside the colonial/modern sameness makes you feel painfully numb – a yearning desire inside a comfortable demise. Being out in the wilderness brings shattering feelings of desolation, uncertainty and unbelonging, but when finding others outside in the borders and margins a collective opposition of chosen kinship and belonging starts to grow and prosper. In Mexico, the dominance of mestizaje has created monocultures of yellow corn that impede the belonging of Indigenous and Mestizx 2S/LGBTQIA+ peoples and continues to trap them inside. It is a vicious game, one that works by controlling our imaginaries, limiting our knowledge and understanding of the world around us. Impositions created by coloniality/modernity to spread sameness by obstructing other possibilities of being.

## **5.2 Out in the Wilderness**

The experiences of Indigenous peoples coming out as LGBTQ+ and the consequences of being who they truly are in Mexico are strikingly narrated in the documentary film *Oasis* (2014) by Alejandro Cárdenas. The film discloses the story of three Mayas living in a shelter home called Oasis San Juan de Dios. Three Maya who have been ostracized by their communities for their sexual orientation and gender identity, after being thrown away, struggle to earn respect for their Indigenous identity. The documentary spotlights stories of social exclusion, discrimination and harassment. *Oasis* reminds the viewer of a painful Mexican reality: the ones who suffer the



most never fit the colonial/modern standard of the white heteropatriarchy. A critical aspect of the film is that it also celebrates the joy, solidarity, strength and dignity of a fabulous community of survivors. It highlights stories that dignify the resistance and fight of Indigenous LGBTQ+ identities in a country where the system is nothing but violent to their existence.

One of the stories narrated inside *Oasis* (2014), is the story of Gerardo Chan Chan. During the documentary, Chan Chan spoke about being known in his community as K'ÉEK'EN, which means pig in Maya. After coming out to his family, Gerardo was forced to live half a year in a piggery. His father decided he belonged with the pigs because of his sexual orientation and being diagnosed with HIV. In the film, Gerardo blames the inherited macho culture for the violent treatment he received. He talks about feeling completely rejected by his family and wanting to disappear. His sister ends up taking him to Oasis, where he started his healing through building community and self-love. He left Oasis to live with his partner and now works as a gardener. Gerardo Chan Chan has become a Maya activist that brings awareness and highlights the dangerous intersection of being Indigenous and part of the LGBTQ+ community in Mexico. His goal is to open spaces where every identity belongs. This thesis shares that goal.

Various Mexican scholars maintain that the crossroads between Indigenous and Mestizx 2S/LGBTQIA+ identities in Mexico is one of least studied and analyzed intersections in scholarship (Bautista Rojas, 2018; Mercado Mondragón, 2018; González Jiménez & García Contreras, 2016; Nuñez Noriega 2011). The documentary *Oasis* has been one of the few projects that have brought awareness to this systemic vulnerability. Mexican scholar Nuñez Noriega (2011) has also explored these intersections with the stories of four Indigenous men reflecting on



their sexual diversity and vulnerability. The study highlights the impact of colonial ideologies in the construction of identity and belonging. One of the participants in the study expressed the impossibility of being themselves due to the systemic compounded terror of “coming out”, by saying, “imagine that apart from being called Indians, they call us maricones (queer) or perverts” (Nuñez Noriega, 2011, p. 17). In Mexico, to be Indigenous and Mestizx 2S/LGBTQIA+ is to be constantly neglected by the state and society, it means living a constant state of fear looking for the best hideout. For some Indigenous and Mestizx 2S/LGBTQIA+ existence becomes a double nightmare, as we have to conform to living in a place where the reflection of our identity is made simultaneously invisible and hypervisible, provoking painful, traumatic and dangerous experiences that fragment our identity.

The abandonment of Indigenous and Mestizx 2S/LGBTQIA+ in Mexico has been largely sustained by the public sector and education system. The latest results of EDIS revealed that the groups that experienced the most discrimination in Mexico City are Indigenous peoples and LGBTQ+ identities (COPRED, 2017). According to the COPRED study (2017), the place where the invisibility of Indigenous and LGBTQ+ identities is, for the most part, maintained is inside government spaces and schools. The Mexican schooling system is a harmful place for Indigenous and Mestizx 2S/LGBTQIA+ students as it continues to be rooted and perpetuates the imperialist, white supremacist, capitalist, colonial, cis-heteropatriarchal system. Inside the blog of the Asociación por las Infancias Transgénero (Association for Transgender Childhood), Trans Nonbinary Afro-Mexican Author Morado Cuevas (2020) recounts how their experience growing up inside the school system was torturous, not only for being seen as “difficult” by their peers but also by the school authorities. Cuevas shares how the school director mocked their gender



neutrality which opened the door to become the permanent joke of the school, they state “her hostility [the director] disguised as a joke led to being attacked without mercy until the last day of school”. Cuevas reflects on how the school had no support for non-binary or trans identities and that only when leaving the system, they would be able to exist freely (2020). Indigenous queer peoples are conditioned to a non-belonging state, being incorporated into a tyrant system through a combination of epistemic racism, forced binary ideologies, gendered violence, colonial assimilation and hegemonic control (Simpson, 2017; Hunt & Holmes, 2015; Driskill et al., 2011).

Indigenous queer peoples living in the margins spend their entire lifetime surviving systemic oppression where their choices are based on suffering not opportunity. Many times, the choice comes from reflecting on what will cause less suffering, what will hurt the least. The study of Nuñez Noriega (2011) revealed that Indigenous 2S/LGBTQIA+ peoples had to choose between being Indigenous or being 2S/LGBTQIA+ as their identities become mutually exclusive. Similarly, Driskill et al. (2011) contend that many times when Indigenous queer and Two-Spirit peoples “come out”, they face the same choice. Indigenous queer peoples end up with the choice of having to cut their roots to have wings. This partition discourse has fragmented the identities of Indigenous queer and Mestizx cuilonli peoples all around Anahuac/Turtle Island. In the dissertation of Neyonawak Inniniwak scholar, Alex Wilson (2007), reports that nearly all Two-Spirit participants in their study “encounter[ed] racism, homophobia and/or sexism at a relatively young age. Their sense of belonging began to diminish and their sense of self began to fragment” (p. 83). The fragmentation of Indigenous 2S/LBTQIA+ peoples has been ripped apart by the colonality of gender through mechanisms of domination that create opposing



dichotomous categories (Lugones, 2007, 2008). The binary partition is crucial to maintain the colonial/modern mechanisms that sustain the white heteropatriarchy.

### **5.3 Shame, Shame, Shame**

One of the pivotal mechanisms of coloniality/modernity is shame. From a very young age, we learn to feel it. Shame is a cognitive negative emotion of self-worth and belonging constructed by the way we understand the world to be. Walker (2017) argues that shame is central to our formation and the person we become, she states that shame is “the gap between who we want to be and who we appear (or think we appear) to be” (p. 359). Similarly, in *Borderlands/La Frontera*, Anzaldúa (1987) notes that Gershen Kaufman was instrumental in her understanding of shame as “a wound left from the inside, dividing us from ourselves and from one another (cited, p. 64). Critically acclaimed Black author, bell hooks, understands shame as a growing psychological wound, writing that “children who are constantly shamed cannot build healthy self-esteem. And if this shaming continues into their young adulthood it often leads them to significant breakdowns in mental health” (2001, p. 82). Shame causes fragmentation. Many people grow up being ashamed of whom they are, living through psychologically painful experiences that remind them to cover up behaviours that other their identity. To feel shame is to fear not belonging. Fear of being inferior and rejected for not fitting into the normative oppressive mould society constructed. A feeling that makes you want to become invisible, a fear that makes you want to hide.

Shame is taught to individuals to uphold social constructions and reproduce identity boundaries that demand compliance. Shame is a systemic practice meant to debilitate, hurt and



control identities that fall outside the colonial/modern box. According to hooks, shame is a central component of racism and “all other dehumanizing practices” (2001, p. 82). Shame is a tool of oppression (Walker, 2017). It can be employed to crush and destroy extraordinary characteristics of the ones who do not fit the colonial binary system (Simpson, 2017). hooks asserts that shame “is one of the deepest tools of imperialist, white supremacist, capitalist patriarchy because shame produces trauma and trauma often produces paralysis” (New School for Liberal Arts, 2013). A paralysis that takes away the freedom from being who you truly are and makes you comply with the dominant oppressive system. Shame is the guard of our own prison as it is intrinsically interlinked with belonging and creates emotions of self-doubt and unworthiness. Shame is internalized by social and cultural ideologies that construct the normative that guides and limits our identity. As a limiting tool, shame makes invisible anything that deviates from the normal to control and reinforce the bounds of what is possible. By boosting these oppressive practices, shame brings along many forms of violence for compliance. Keenan (2017) argues that “shame turns increasingly violent and hostile when a person appears to be outside the categories society sees as valuable, like whiteness and masculinity” (p. 538). From systemic to symbolic violence (see Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992), shaming creates an embodied entrapment where each person holds the mould of the key to their own liberation and collectively we can help forge its creation.

The effects of shame have created the partition of humanity through fears of unbelonging, but when being cognizant of the mechanics of shame, there is an opportunity to put back together the broken pieces. Understanding shame as a colonial/modern violence can change the dominant narrative that reproduces it. Differentiating shame as an emotion that is perpetuated to oppress



who we are, can transform our binary perspective on those feelings. Through reflective thinking and self-discovery, “shame can be a catalyst for transformative learning” (Walker, 2017 p. 367). For Indigenous and Mestizx 2S/LGBTQIA+ the transformative lesson starts by opposing the colonial/modern heteropatriarchy that has taught us to be ashamed of who we are. When shared and embraced collectively that which brings us shame can become a “useful virtue” (Jung as cited in Walker, 2017, p. 366). Through collective belonging, embracing shame can lead to self-determination and liberation, it can lead to finding our face and heart – finding in *ixtli* in *yóllotl*.

#### **5.4 The Destroyer & The Destroyed**

In Mexico, Indigenous and Mestizx 2S/LGBTQIA+ peoples are consumed by oppressive ideologies that force them to neglect and crush their identity. Growing up, I could only understand being Mestizx and *cuilon* (queer) as shameful. “*Halfbreed*” and “*I am the Destroyer & the Destroyed*” are the powerful phrases that continue to linger in my head after watching Sparrow’s (2020) masterpiece, *Skyborn: A Land Reclamation Odyssey*. The play was a spiritual journey, one that identified with, as I reflect on my damaged fragmentation. I have realized that the de-indigenization process of *mestizaje* has been self-inflicted and that I am an accomplice to the mechanisms of the power of coloniality. As a light-skinned Mestizx, I was forced to grow in a neoliberal system that taught me to shame anything that was not white, Christian and of European ancestry. I learned to hide both my Indigeneity and my queerness, I understood that if I revealed who I truly was, I would be seen as less. I created a fantasy world based on telenovelas and lied through this imaginary about the heritage of my family and the things we owned. I wanted to paint the perfect family portrait, one that resembled the ones I saw in the media; I wanted to belong.

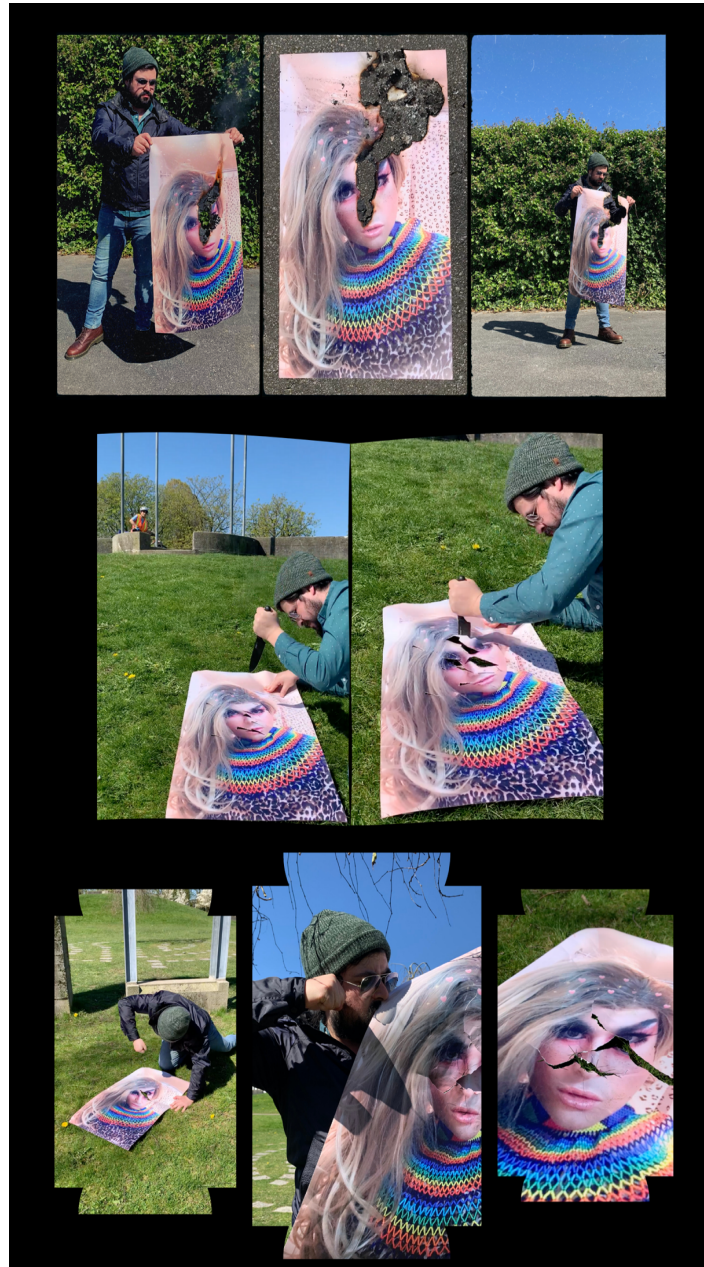


Mestizx writer, Rodrigo Chacón (2021), in an essay titled, *El no ser mestizo* (To not be mestizo), starts by writing “I am not Nahua. I have Nahua ancestors, but I am not anymore. The state operated in me and in my family, just as planned. We were emptied, de-indigenized, and in exchange, we obtained relative privileges in the social hierarchy”. As Chacón, I share the same feelings and perspectives, I am not Indigenous, I have Indigenous family/ancestors, but I am not. I had to leave behind community and land-based practices to be in a bricked place surrounded by privileges and opportunities, what according to the colonial/modern paradigm would make me successful. I also had to part ways from any aspect that would reveal the femininity and queerness in me. I had split myself open and grab the parts that would float in the colonial heteropatriarchal sea while sinking the ones that deviated from that binary frame. Through modernity’s entrapment, I become both the destroyer and the destroyed of my own identity.

For Chacón (2021), being Mestizx is not a mixture of race but a painful fragmentation. He explains being de-indigenized by the violent impacts of mestizaje through the metaphor of a picture with holes that keep getting bigger with everyday scissor cuts, leaving the face of the one who appeared unrecognizable. For Indigenous and Mestizx 2S/LGBTQIA+ those holes were done with bullets and knives, not scissors. The colonial heteropatriarchy through mestizaje has made sure that enough weapons are produced to inflict the necessary damage. In the artwork, *The Destroyer & The Destroyed* (Figure 5.1), I tried to represent with a photo narrative the pain, the emptiness, the dispossession and the shame of being a Mestizx cuilonli (queer).



TRIGGER WARNING



**Figure 5.1 The Destroyer & The Destroyed by Mestizx cuilontli, Daniel Gallardo (2021)**

The holes were self-inflicted, and it was a painful and violent process. I burnt, stabbed and punch all traces of Indigeneity, femininity and queerness in me. The artwork also represents a femicide



state that allows the ongoing pandemic of the missing and murder Indigenous women, girls and Two-Spirit peoples all around Anahuac/Turtle Island. I stand in solidarity with them, refusing to continue portraying the part of the macho man inflicting the pain. I am looking to heal through relations that embrace mutual respect and reciprocity. I uphold my responsibility to act with deep reverence towards the land and help restore the hidden truths that are changing the dominant narrative, as Justice (2018) has taught us, “shame and silence were no match for story; the suppressed truths couldn’t remain hidden forever” (p. 85). The violent holes created by the colonial/modern arsenal can be healed through our stories of self-determination.

Blackfoot researcher, Leroy Little Bear (2000) claims that colonization changed the perspective and identity of Indigenous peoples, to a mixture of an Indigenous and settler worldview. I would argue the same for many Mestizx peoples and add that the view must resemble the story of *Coyote's Eyes* written by Terry Tafoya in Jo-ann Archibald Q’um Q’um Xiiem's *Indigenous Storywork* (2008), where one of Coyote’s eyes is big and dominant (colonial perspectives) and the other one is small and can barely see (Indigenous perspectives). Little Bear states that “[Indigenous] consciousness became a random puzzle, a jigsaw puzzle that each person has to attempt to understand” (2008, p. 8). Could solving our identity puzzle help us revitalize our severed sight? I am reminded of an anecdote told by Cajete (1999) where he explains cultural schizophrenia through a clay piece a student had created to represent their experience of partition. The head of the clay piece was split in half to portray a rapture between opposing worldviews. The split was an analogy to show the anxiety and fragmentation the student was feeling for being both Indigenous and complicit to modernity. I also grew up feeling



fragmented, split into two worlds but tight inside a single straight jacket, waiting to be released even if it meant falling into pieces. The following poem I composed represents those feelings:

Straight(Jackets)

The day I was born I was put in a straight(jacket)  
To confine the fabulousness of my being  
Tight boundaries on the allowance of my expression  
Meant to restrain me to the normality of the patriarchy

What made me a man?  
Is it the testosterone running through my body?  
The Y chromosome that determines my sex?  
A constructed box created for me to check?

I'm standing in front of a mirror  
Hiding externalities that were assigned to me  
What am I now?  
Because I've never felt like a macho man

Invisible borders hold me captive  
And as I try to dismantle my entrapment  
Shame locks me in  
So, I keep twirling around my own prison

I tear my straight(jacket) apart  
I fly away, freeing from this binary oppression  
As I look down at the world that bounded me  
Am I truly free without it?



Plant me back to the land where I am not othered

Awaken the words that know no gender

Let me heal by belonging

Put my fragmented pieces back together

We live in a world made of straight(jackets)

Granting as little movement as possible

Forced to comply with colonial structures that immobilize us

We walk around feeling like abnormalities

How can we abolish categorizations?

When will we unstrap our sovereign sexual bodies?

How do we deconstruct our identity and transcend gender?

Could we move beyond binaries, borders and even further?

## **5.5 Borderlands**

In *Borderlands/La Frontera*, Gloria Anzaldúa (1987) defines borders as open wounds with never-ending hemorrhages that create a partition to distinguish humanity. Boundaries made of policies and laws that divide humanity and worst of all, these divisions become normalized and believed to define the human race. With colonial idealizations, borderlands become smaller and smaller, so all these partitions are actually disposessions and destructions. People who are “othered” live in the borderlands, “the squint-eyed, the perverse, the queer, the troublesome, the mongrel, the mulato, the half-breed, the half dead; in short, those who cross over, pass over, or go through the confines of the normal” (p. 25). Subaltern identities navigate through the boundaries of the colonial/modern system and when crossing the border, an alarm turns on to spotlight their deviance. As Driskill et al. (2011) remind us “queer Indigenous people have been



under the surveillance of white colonial heteropatriarchy since contact” (p. 212). Through coloniality/modernity, Indigenous and Mestizx 2S/LGBTQIA+ peoples are defined by a racist/sexist lens that views them as deficient structures in need of a western fix; they are perceived as incomplete humans (Andreotti et al., 2017). The borderlands are filled with Indigenous and Mestizx 2S/LGBTQIA+ peoples who have experienced a “psychic disequilibrium” (Rich, 1986, p. 199) caused by the coloniality of power. This living white Eurocentric structure has violently ripped open borders and demarcations that impose racist/sexist hierarchical orders causing the unbelonging of any identity that moves away from the colonial matrix.

Inside the collection of poems, *This Wound Is a World: Poems* by Driftpile Cree poet Billy-Ray Belcourt, one of the poems, in particular, has deeply resonated with Indigenous scholars (Justice, 2018; Simpson, 2017). The poem *Sacred* (2017) is a narration of the heartbreaking partition many Indigenous 2S/LGBTQIA+ peoples experience when facing the coloniality of gender. Belcourt narrates being refused by another man during a round dance and having to dance alone, he writes “i dance with my arm hanging by my side like appendage my body doesn’t want anymore” (p. 17). For Anzaldúa (1987), rejection creates wounds, “rejection strips us of self-worth; our vulnerability exposes us to shame” (p. 110). These feelings of fragmentation come from the rejection and exclusion caused to Indigenous queer belonging by authenticated binaries. Justice (2018) highlights how Belcourt’s poem emphasizes the “deep cultural wounding” (p. 109) caused by colonial disruption. Belcourt further shares “the time an elder told me to be a man and to decolonize in the same breath” (p. 17). The coloniality of gender has worked to “police our embodied beings” (Justice, 2018, p. 109) and distort traditional



norms that impede the imaginary of Indigenous queer belonging. Belcourt ends *Sacred* by writing words that broke me into pieces. He reflects on the painful reality of Indigenous queer peoples, “and even though i know i am too queer to be sacred anymore, i dance that broken circle dance because i am still / waiting for hands that want to hold mine too.” (2017, p. 17). I extend my arms looking to hold his hands, but imaginary borders prevent our embrace, so I’ll keep waiting too.

Borders demarcate the limitations of belonging. Borders are instated to create the separation of us and them, who belongs and who doesn’t. Places are now defined by borders. According to Marker (2018), “place, in this Modernist ontology, has been abstracted, divided, and bordered into a component of reality rather than the progenitive holism that Indigenous knowledge systems begin with” (p. 453). These binary mechanisms of division and exclusion send to the margins identities who exist and stand in direct opposition to the colonial/modern normative and also those who deviate from homogenous categories. Shame and rejection makes it impossible for Indigenous and Mestizx 2S/LGBTQIA+ peoples to authentically integrate into the colonial/modern system. It creates an injury that erases your sense of belonging, “as if you looked into a mirror and saw nothing” (Rich, 1986, p. 199). A wound that causes the partition of self, what Black poet Claudia Rankine refers to as the “worst injury” when “feeling you don’t belong so much / to you—.” (2014, p. 146). These internal damages have torn us apart and create boundaries that entrap our identity trying to make us comply to the heteropatriarchy. But after finding a way out, the scarred wounds have formed a tough skin that has an impressive capacity of strength and resistance. Relatedly, Justice (2018) recognizes “how formative these ruptures have been to who we are and how we abide in the world” (p. 185). The violent injuries



against Indigenous and Mestizx 2S/LGBTQIA+ peoples have been multiple but, within the borderlands, they have started to scar, forming a collective opposition that holds each other up. Our collective embrace is what will deconstruct the borders that have limit our capacity to imagine otherwise.

To explore the homogenous machinery that reproduces the fragmentation of Indigenous and Mestizx 2S/LGBTQIA+ identities in Mexico, the next chapter will focus on the stories of the original creators of the Mestizo race. The mother of mestizaje is the most fitted historical character to retell the story that began a culture of gender-based violence. The story of how mestizaje became a racist heteropatriarchal ideology. Deconstructing and dismantling this iron-fisted machinery is essential to putting our fragmented pieces back together and form an Indigenous queer collective that cultivates radical imaginaries for self-determination through the resurgence of Indigenous knowledges systems.



## Chapter 6: The Mexican m&m's – Oppression

*“The strange permanence of Cortes and La Malinche in contemporary Mexican's imagination and sensibilities reveals that they are something more than historical figures: they are symbols of a secret conflict that we have still not resolved”*

— Octavio Paz (1950, p. 111)

### 6.1 ¡Ni una más! (Not one more)

If you ever find yourself walking beside the Government Palace of the City of Chihuahua, Mexico, you will find a plaque commemorating the life of Marisela Escobedo Ortiz and the place where she died. The plaque is inscribed with the following words: “Here, on the 16 of December of 2010, Marisela Escobedo Ortiz was murdered for demanding justice regarding the femicide of her daughter Rubi”. Marisela was gunned down while protesting in front of the government offices that had failed her daughter by freeing her murderer, regardless of his confession of the crime. Marisela was assassinated after making waves that exposed the unchecked impunity and corruption gripping Mexico's institutions at every organizational level. Her tragic homicide ended the tireless fight of a mother against a system that has allowed the rampant growth of gender-based violence across Mexico; a country where you can get away with murdering women. The ongoing indifference for femicides in Mexico makes two things clear: women face a growing epidemic of violence and the country is in a state of ideological decomposition tearing itself apart, perpetuating the destroyer and the destroyed discourse (see Figure 5.1).

Across the street, from the inscribed plaque of Marisela Escobedo Ortiz in the Plaza Hidalgo at the historical center of Chihuahua, you will find an activist installation called the Cruz



de Clavos (Nails Cross) which represents the “ferocious testimony of deaths without an answer, without a reason, without accountability. The voices that narrate the inconclusive history of an extermination” (Campos Madrigal & García Chávez, 2010, p. 9). The Cruz de Clavos became a national symbol for femicide after a wave of such crimes hit the border city of Juarez in the 1990’s (Campos Madrigal & García Chávez, 2010). Femicide is the violent murder of a woman by a man for reasons concerning to her gender. It is a hate crime in which killers use extreme violence to deprive women of life and denigrate them even after their deaths. These gender-related killings “are the extreme manifestation of existing forms of violence against women that are culturally and socially embedded and continue to be accepted, tolerated or justified” (Laurent et al., 2013, p. 17). The Cruz de Clavos is a symbol that stands at the center of various mobilizations to protest against gender-based violence and demand justice for the missing and murder Indigenous and Mestiza women and girls in Mexico. The Cruz de Clavos is the first memorial of the victims of femicide in our country, since its inception in 2002, the number of names added to the installation grows exponentially. When looking at the memorial, one will read the names of Marisela Escobedo Ortiz and her daughter Rubi. Nailed to the middle of the cross is a sign that reads: “¡Ni una más!” (Not one more!), a wishful hope, that for now, is an unobtainable reality.

Gender-based violence is one of the most difficult issues to address in Mexico as it ties together the way femininity is regarded within Mexican culture influenced by the colonial heteropatriarchal legacy of men’s superiority and women as belongings. Marcela Lagarde y de los Ríos explains that femicide “lies in gender dominance: characterized by both the male supremacy and the oppression, discrimination, exploitation and, above all, social exclusion of



girls and women...all these are legitimized by a devastating, hostile and degrading social perception of women” (2005 p. 1). The growing wave of femicides is engulfed by a deeply rooted dominance that has violently dispose of women’s bodies. The second trimester report of 2021 about violence against woman by the Secretariado Ejecutivo del Sistema Nacional de Seguridad Pública (SESNSP, 2021), the Executive Secretariat of the National Public Security System estimates an average of 10 women are murdered a day in Mexico. According to the SESNSP information on violence against women, 2020 marked a new overall homicide record and the trend in 2021 continues to be on the rise. The data from the Trans Murder Monitoring research project reported a similar trend ranking Mexico as the second country with the most killings of gender-diverse/trans people worldwide, most of which were trans women (TGEU, 2021). In Mexico you can find a way to kill or rape a woman, using loopholes in the law caused by corruption and impunity, a country where the most distributing part is the absence of guilt and the silence of complacency.

## **6.2 The Story of Malinalli**

The activist project called *Malinche Malinches* (2020/21) by La Máquina de Teatro in the Museo Universitario del Chopo started as a response to the growing number of femicides in Mexico and the urgency to bring to light the rising violence against women, especially during a pandemic. This project seeks to oppose the hegemonic discourses that have left women at the margins of his-story through an inferior social perception. The purpose of the project is to open lines of inquiry on the corrupted story of an Indigenous woman that is embedded within Mexican identity. *Malinche Malinches* is named after one of the most controversial, brave and vilified characters in Mexican history, a Nahua woman known as La Malinche. For some, her death



came through a European disease. For others, the disease was white men, and her death is seen as notorious femicide in Anahuac/Turtle Island. A murder that lies in impunity and maybe will never be recognized as one. A femicide that creates a common thread in Mexican culture, male dominance.

La Malinche's actual name is Malinalli, from the Nahuatl meaning grass, and moving forward I will refer to her as such. Malinalli was an enslaved Nahua woman who was taken away by Spanish conquistadors from the Chontal Maya of Potonchán after being defeated in battle in 1519 (Cypess, 1991). She belonged to a Spanish settler called Hernán Cortés and was forced to translate both Maya and Nahua to Spanish. Historians have repeatedly argued that her language translations were crucial in the Spanish conquest of the Mexica Empire (Paz, 1950; Cypess, 1991). In the 4<sup>th</sup>-grade history book from the Public Secretary of Education in Mexico, children begin to learn about Malinalli and her key role in the colonization of Mexico, she is described as an intelligent woman who served as the interpreter and counsellor of conquistador Hernán Cortés (Reyes Tosqui et al., 2014). In regard to her historical representation, Malinalli is first considered an interpreter/counsellor and then, as an afterthought, a slave/prisoner.

In contemporary Mexican culture, Malinalli has become a symbol of betrayal, a traitor who helped settlers destroy Indigenous ways of life, languages and culture. Anzaldúa writes that Malinalli “became known as la Chingada - the fucked one...Whore, prostitute, the woman who sold out her people to the Spaniards” (1987, p. 44). This narrative fits perfectly with heteropatriarchal colonial notions and western worldviews of gender dominance in which an Indigenous woman became a type of “Mexican Eve”, blamed for the downfall of Indigenous



peoples after being seduced by evil. Engrained is a reproduction of the discourse that an Indigenous woman is the one to blame for being sinful; so, Mexicans passively accept and forget her enslavement, while still shaming and sexualizing her persona with the belief that she got what she deserved, in this case, her own death. The Mexican Eve narrative has pushed down Indigenous women to the bottom of the barrel, left to suffer violent consequences. The reasons for this vicious thrust are clearly expressed inside *The Labyrinth of Solitude* by Mexican poet Octavio Paz where he writes,

If the Chingada is a representation of the violated Mother, it is appropriate to associate her with the Conquest, which was also a violation, not only in the historical sense but also in the very flesh of Indian women. The symbol of this violation is Doña Malinche, the mistress of Cortes. It is true that she gave herself voluntarily to the conquistador, but he forgot her as soon as her usefulness was over. Doña Marina becomes a figure representing the Indian women who were fascinated, violated or seduced by the Spaniards. (Paz, 1950, p.110)

Paz (1950) identifies the enslavement of Malinalli as the first historically known transgression of the Mexican female body which gave origin to a deep intergenerational trauma that is consequence of and is enacted through violence. Paz's account of Malinalli portrays the mythologized version of a conniving and manipulative woman who opened her body and land to belong to settlers, not that of strength and capacity of one who was enslaved and raped and still manage to survive. By pointing Malinalli as the mistress of the conquistador that voluntarily gives herself, Paz (1950) disregards racial, gender, cultural and age conditions that played part in the role of Malinalli during the conquest.



According to many historians, when Malinalli was given to the Spaniards, she was approximately 14-20 years old (Cypess, 1991; Townsend, 2006). Painting Malinalli only as Cortés's interpreter, counsellor and mistress, not only oversimplifies the reality of her situation but also enhances her traitor representation by falling into an Indigenous homogenization, where being native forced her to be in alliance with other Indigenous communities she had no relationships with. As Townsend (2006) questions, "Whom was she betraying? What should she have done when she was given into the hands of the armed Spanish men? Would her critics seriously recommend suicide, as an affirmation of herself and her people?" (p. 3). Even after her death, the survival of an enslaved child came at the cost of her reputation. Reflecting on the image of Malinalli, Chicana scholar Cherrie Moraga mentions that her figure "wrestles inside the collective unconscious of every Mexican female. She murmurs in a distant indiscernible voice that the official story is not the whole story" (2019, p. 16). The bravery and resourcefulness of Malinalli to endure and resist a violent invasion is a tale not always told. The following story is an excerpt from the novel, *Malinche* (2006) by Laura Esquivel. It is a counter story about portrayals of Malinalli, a story that opposes her vilified "Yellow Corn" version and opens imaginaries outside of the colonial/modern dominance.

## MALINCHE

Malinalli had risen earlier than usual. All night long she had not been able to sleep. She was afraid. In the coming days, for the third time in her life, she would experience a complete change. After sunrise, they were going to give her away once again. She couldn't imagine what was so wrong with her deep inside that they would treat her like such a burdensome object, for such was the ease with which they



dispensed of her. She made an effort to do her best, not to cause any problems, to work hard; and yet for whatever strange reasons they would not allow her to take root anywhere. She ground corn almost in the dark, lit only by the reflection of the moon.

Since the day before, when the songs of the birds had migrated, her heart had begun to shrink. In complete silence, she had watched as the birds in their flight took away with them through the air a part of the weather, of light, and of time. Her time. She would never again see the dusk from that place. Night was approaching, accompanied by uncertainty.

What would her life be like under her new masters? What would become of her milpa? Who would plant the corn anew and harvest it for her? Would the field die without her care?

A few tears escaped from her eyes. Suddenly she thought of Cihuacóatl, the snake woman, the goddess also known as Quilaztli, mother of the human race, who at nights wandered through the canals of the great Tenochtitlán weeping for her children. They said that those who heard her could not go back to sleep, so terrifying were her mournful, anxious wails for the future of her children. She shouted out all the dangers and devastations that lay in wait for them. Malinalli like Cihuacóatl, wept at not being able to protect her harvest. For Malinalli, each ear of corn was a hymn to life, to fertility, to the gods. Without her care what would become of her



milpa? She would never know. From this day forward, she would begin to journey through a path that she had traveled before: being separated from the earth she had grown attached to.

Once again she would arrive at a foreign place. Once again be the newcomer, an outsider, the one who did not belong. She knew from experience that she would quickly have to ingratiate herself with her new masters to avoid being rejected or, in more dire cases, punished. Then, there would be the phase when she would have to sharpen her senses in order to see and hear as acutely as possible so that she could assimilate quickly all the new customs and the words most frequently used by the group she was to become a part of—so that, finally, she would be judged on her own merits. (Esquivel, 2006, p. 17-18)

I chose this particular excerpt from the novel, *Malinche* (2006) by Laura Esquivel because it is one of the few retellings that is told from the perspective of Malinalli before the arrival of Spanish settlers and has been noted as the revindication of Malinalli's story (Jaramillo Taba, 2012). Esquivel's story opposes the vilified historical notion that has been taught to Mexicans since we were children. It does not objectify her persona but humanizes her character by bringing to light her thoughts, priorities and concerns of what is to come. The excerpt from Esquivel's novel does a wonderful job portraying the relation of Malinalli and the land. Malinalli's biggest worry was the growth and sustainment of her milpa. It is one of the few stories that reminds us that this was not her first day at the rodeo; dispossession was not new to her. She had already learned to adapt, assimilate and survive in a new land. The Mexican public education system



curriculum teaches about Malinalli only after being a slave of the Spanish, only when she becomes La Malinche (Malintzin), nothing about who she was before. Her relationship with Cortes has been thoroughly denounced in education, art and media, all of which, have helped reproduce the “Eve” narrative Malinalli carries in Mexico’s creation story. The biggest proof of her sin is bearing Cortes’ illegitimate son, who is considered the first recorded Mestizo, a person of mixed European and Indigenous ancestry (Paz, 1950; Cypess, 1991; Townsend 2006).

*Malinche* (2006) by Laura Esquivel although a new retelling of Malinalli’s story still falls within a modern/colonial paradigm as the novel romanticizes her life and death. In Esquivel’s attempt to rescue Malinalli’s reputation, she further victimizes her Indigenous persona. Inside the book, Malinalli develops a type of Stockholm syndrome after being raped by Cortés and starts venerating him as divine. The novel is a combination of bad romance, spiritualism and conquest which fails to touch on issues of race, gender, class, age, slavery and colonialism. By the end of the book, Esquivel paints a peaceful death for Malinalli, one tied together with colonial religious syncretism that begs for the rendition of her Indigenous perspectives to Judeo-Christian ones. In reality, Malinalli died 10 years after being enslaved by the Spaniards. After being baptized in the Catholic church as Marina, she spent the first five years with Cortés. A year after given birth to their son, she was arranged in marriage to another Spaniard named Juan Jaramillo with whom she spent the last five years of her life until she died of unknown reasons. There are no records that account for her death, it is as she disappeared from history. The only known fact is that the year Malinalli died, Juan Jaramillo married a Spaniard woman (Townsend, 2006). Many historians believe she was betrayed and murdered by Cortés or Jaramillo (Cypess, 1991), others say that she succumbed to a foreign disease (Townsend, 2006). I chose to acknowledge Malinalli



as a missing Indigenous woman, one whose last days were conveniently erased from history. Another name to be added to the Cruz de Clavos (Nails Cross) memorial.

### **6.3 Inferiority Complex**

The story of Malinalli and the ideological legacies that came with it exemplifies the coloniality of gender. It represents the hierarchical dichotomous domination of a white settler male towards a brown Indigenous woman who is historically classified as a wild sexual seductress. Chicana feminists have argued that the depiction of Malinalli as a “traitor whore” has maintained heteropatriarchal structures built since colonization (Moraga, 2019; Anzaldúa, 1987; Sosa-Riddell, 1973). These structures have been modernized in contemporary Mexican culture and reproduce through violence. When Malinalli’s body was taken away, so was the land, allowing for settlers to exploit both Indigenous women’s bodies and their territories. As Anzaldúa crudely reminds us,

The dark-skinned woman has been silenced, gagged, caged, bound into servitude with marriage, bludgeoned for 300 years, sterilized and castrated in the twentieth century. For 300 years she has been a slave, a force of cheap labor, colonized by the Spaniard, the Anglo, by her own people...For 300 years she was invisible, she was not heard. (1987, p. 44-45)

The body/land transgression has been a crucial factor to the advantage of the coloniality of power. Extracting the land and exploiting women’s bodies are ongoing violences that keep maintain colonial structures that reproduce the national discourse of *mestizaje*. According to Paz (1950), Mestizo identities are based on being the *hijos de la chingada* (children of the fucked one), the ones who are never enough. Even through acculturation and assimilation, the copy will never surpass the original version. The foundational story of Mexico starts with a betrayal at a



specific intersection, Indigenous/female. The effects of coloniality of gender have instigated a rejection of Indigeneity and femineity, as both are conceptualized as being inferior. Symbolic violence that turns into a systemic one where fatal markings manifest in the endemic murdering of women.

Growing up in modern/colonial Mexico, Mestizx and Indigenous peoples are taught early in their lives to neglect and hide their Indigenous heritage due to these ongoing violences. In a study done to identify racism by Corona Berkin & Le Mûr (2017), they analyzed 522 visual representations of the Indigenous peoples in the Mexican school textbooks published by the Ministry of Education from 2012 to 2015. Their study focused on the “continuity of stereotypes and indicators of racism in the school textbooks” (p. 11). Corona Berkin & Le Mûr noticed that in all the SEP textbooks they examined, “Indigenous peoples are labeled as different and uneven by the majority population: the textbooks are written by and for “us” and always, without exception, the textbooks refer to Indigenous peoples as “them”. That is how borders are marked” (2017, p. 30). Inside these colonial educational framework, Indigenous people play the “other” and their diversity is lost as everything that is not of European descent is Indigenous. By imposing a homogenous culture of inferiority, Mexican people are taught to cut their Indigenous roots and look down on their people while looking up towards and imitating western European worldviews. This common thinking in Mexico frames Indigenous knowledges as inferior, not worth as much as the ones from more developed, European and wealthy countries. A thinking that makes Mestizx and Indigenous people feel embarrassed for being subordinates of the so-called third world. The term that defines this Indigenous shame and inferiority complex comes from La Malinche, known as malinchismo.



Malinchismo is a pejorative expression used to express discontent to Mexicans who feel an attraction to foreign cultures and disregard their Indigenous culture (Gómez de Silva, 2006; Paz 1950). Malinchista is used to “denounce all those who have been corrupted by foreign influences. The malinchistas are those who want Mexico to open itself to the outside world: the true sons of La Malinche, who is the Chingada in person” (Paz, 1950, p. 110). The expression applies to Mexicans who believe that foreign values, ideas, and products are superior, of better quality and worthy of being imitated. Malinchismo becomes a deep-rooted Indigenous inferiority complex, in which Mexicans instead of realizing the internalized racism and sexism embedded deep inside, continue to disregard Indigenous perspectives and contributions. For Bonfil Batalla (1987) the mestizo embodies the malinchista figure by being entrapped in a colonial/modern imaginary Mexico. Mestizos are taught to become malinchistas, to internalize that they will never be as worthy as the ones who conquered them. The meaning of malinchismo is related and can be understood through Indian scholar Gayatri Spivak’s (1999) concept of the arrogance of the European conscience, and Palestinian American academic Edward Said’s (1978) Orientalism, in which the conquered othered is conceptualized as inferior and uncivilized. The conquered are looking to be rescued by European ideals and ways of living. Andreotti et al. (2017) argue that the dichotomy between the racialized othered and the European subject is caused by epistemic violence and modernity’s ontology where Europe is conceived as the centre of the planet and for colonized countries to progress, they must imitate the dominant narrative of the imperial “north”.

Since the 1970’s, Chicanx and Mestizx feminists have oppose the Malinche myth and have call for its rewriting (Moraga, 2019, 1983; Jaramillo Taba, 2012; Quiñonez, 2003; Anzaldúa,



1987; Alarcón, 1983; Sosa-Riddell, 1973). Rewriting the story of La Malinche requires us to collectively rethink and reimagine through a critical perspective Malinalli's image. One that acknowledges the female body and land as historically characterized by violence, oppression and dispossession. Through the retelling of Malinalli's story, we can oppose the ingrained inferiority complex that has left at the borders Indigenous and female identities in Mexico. The reproduction of the Malinche myth has been seamlessly incorporated inside Mexico's dominant ideology starting with the abandonment of our "raped mother" and the internalized inferiority complex and shame of Indigenous identities (Anzaldúa, 1987, p. 52). The Malinche myth is continuously exemplified in the enslaved labour of Indigenous women all around the country.

Part of rewriting the story of Malinalli is to oppose the term Malinchista and reclaim its meaning from the discourse of "traitor to her race by contributing to the genocide of her people" (Moraga, 1983, p. 113), which is what Chicana collective Raza Womyn has done. To reclaim the term malinchistas, Raza Womyn defines the word as a "strong, intelligent woman who rejects the negative aspects of her culture" (Tijerina Revilla, 2004, p. 90). An emancipatory perspective of a person who has been idolized and reduced to a single destructive narrative. The reclamation of the story of Malinalli is not about a fight for equality, it is about opposing the root of femicides: epistemic and embodied violence influenced by colonial heteropatriarchal paradigms. To oppose, rewrite and reclaim the term Malinchista we must also identify the system of beliefs, principles, habits and ideas that perpetuate the impunity in femicides. A colonial ideology where men have to constantly prove that they are superior and the ones in control. An ideology that has been sustained by capitalism and religious repression, through oppression, manipulation, violence and domination, the proud son of the heteropatriarchy: machismo.



#### **6.4 The oppressive state is a macho rapist**

During the 2019 International Day for the Elimination of Violence Against Women in Santiago, Chile, LASTESIS, a Chilean feminist performance collective, protested against gender-based violence through an intervention called *Un violador en tu camino* (A Rapist in Your Path). On that day, more than 2000 women danced and sang lyrics that oppose victim blaming and slut-shaming through chants like “The oppressive state is a macho rapist” (Tolokonnikova, 2020). The performance refuses profoundly taken-for-granted notions that are constructed into the heteropatriarchal structures that govern us and that shape the way we think. LASTESIS counter the modern Malinche discourse imposed to shame women perpetuated by machismo. Their participatory performance became a viral feminist anthem worldwide because, sadly, all around the world women experience the same oppression and can relate to those words. LASTESIS protest intervention against gender-based violence, femicide and machismo has been performed, replicated and translated by feminist movements in more than 50 countries (Tolokonnikova, 2020). Demonstrating how machismo engenders a global pandemic of femicide.

Machismo is based on colonial constructions of femininity and masculinity, represented as fixed and binary expressions. It is an oppressive ideology with an aim similar to the heteropatriarchal normative, in that both set out to “destroy, control, and manipulate difference into hierarchies that position white, straight, cis-gendered males as normal, and everyone else as less” (Simpson, 2017, p. 129). As stated before, in Mexico, one is not born a man but proves to be macho. Mexican philosopher Samuel Ramos points out the deepest and most profound wish



of Mexican men is to become a macho “who predominates over all others in courage and power” (1951, p. 55). According to Paz (1950), “the ideal of manliness is never to “crack,” never to back down. Those who “open themselves up” are cowards. Unlike other people, we [men] believe that opening oneself up is a weakness or a betrayal” (p. 51). Being a man is to show no sign of inferiority which includes all aspects of what is considered femininity. Paz (1950) adds that femininity is subservient because they naturally submit themselves to be opened up, mentioning that their inferiority “resides in their sex, their [women’s] submissiveness, which is a wound that never heals” (p. 51). Paz continues by explaining that in Mexico women are seen as “a domesticated wild animal, lecherous and sinful from birth, who must be subdued with a stick and guided by the reins of religion” (p. 58). Part of proofing to be macho is getting yourself a woman. The penetration of femininity, at any means possible, from marriage to rape, is the quickest way to legitimate yourself as one. These harmful validations of dominance represent how “the trauma of colonialism erupts in the minds and bodies of men, who then bombard the lives of women and girls, two-spirit peoples, and queers” (Belcourt, 2020, p. 15).

According to bell hooks, ideologies like machismo upheld by the colonial heteropatriarchy demand men to “become and remain emotional cripples” (2004, p. 27). hooks asserts that “the first act of violence that patriarchy demands of males is not violence toward women. Instead, patriarchy demands of all males that they engage in acts of psychic self-mutilation, that they kill off the emotional parts of themselves” (p. 66). To be macho, men have to tear themselves apart and become a fragmented version that meets the standards of the colonial project. In Mexico, learning to become a man is embedded with diverse forms of violence, which in turn have blocked away men from collective love, openness and vulnerability.



Māori scholar Brendan Hokowhitu when referring to postcolonial formations of Māori masculinity, exemplifies how “Māori men were said to have women like characteristics, they talked a lot, were emotional, were over emotional and did women’s work, even, and therefore, they even wore women’s clothes...in general were too womanly and not stoic enough” (University of Waikato, 2016). The dichotomous relation of masculinity and femininity has been created and sustained by colonialism, the need for men to feel and express their emotions is essential to disrupt modernity’s binary entrapment and dismantle the heteropatriarchy.

In Nahuatl, for example, the meaning of macho has been lost in modernity’s translation. Macho is now considered as aggressively showing pride in one’s masculinity at the expense of others. For Paz (1950), macho represents the masculine side of life, macho is “*el Gran Chingon*” (p. 33), the fantastic one, the badass, the closest resemblance to the Spanish conquistador. Our understanding of macho is based on a European language that genders and fixes everything to a binary. For Mestiza author, Gloria Anzaldúa (1987) machismo “is the result of hierarchical male dominance” (p. 105). Anzaldúa argues that modernity has corrupted machismo’s meaning, in *Borderlands* she recounts growing up thinking of macho as the one who protected and supported the family. In Nahuatl, for example, macho has a similar meaning to Anzaldúa’s concept. As Nahuatl is not gendered and the binary between male and female is not represented in the word macho. Macho in Nahuatl means “to be known” or “handed-down wisdom” (León-Portilla, 1963), its meaning has nothing to do with gender. The connotation of macho in Nahua thought is about sharing knowledge through traditions. For Nahuas, macho is not a man; it is cultivating knowledge. I want to be a Nahua macho.



The Mexican schooling system has done almost nothing to transform educational environments to support self-determination and diversity surrounding sexual orientation and gender identity in schools. The Ministry of Education in Mexico, SEP, mandates that children start learning about gender and sexuality in elementary. The problem is that in the school textbooks, of Civic and Ethical Formation, the gender binary is maintained in every aspect of the content, and this subject is where students learn about who they are in relation to themselves, community and land. From titles and definitions to diagrams and illustrations, when referring to gender, everything is split between man and woman. Nothing inside the textbooks acknowledges a possibility that moves beyond the colonial binary of gender. In exercises about identity, for example, students are only given the choice between male/female (SEP, 2020). In the 6<sup>th</sup> grade textbook of Civic and Ethical formation 2019-2020 (Conde Flores, 2019), which is the last grade of elementary school in Mexico, students learn about changes from childhood to adolescence in the first module. Inside the module, gender is defined as “knowing and acting like a man or like a woman” (p. 28). In the first lesson, *My growth and development*, a diagram (Figure 6.1) is shown to explain “the awakening of sexuality” (p. 15) and identify emotional and physical changes that happen during puberty. The diagram not only reproduces the dichotomous relationship of being a woman or a man, but it also links specific body parts to gender identity. The diagram perpetuates the colonality of gender by conjoining sexuality and gender, children learn that their body parts define who they are. The SEP textbook defines gender as split, fixed, assigned and dictated by our genitalia, which in turn, dictates our sexual orientation. Mexican school textbooks are soaked in heteronormative frameworks of being and continue to make invisible the identities of Two-Spirit, trans, queer, non-binary and all other non-conforming identities.



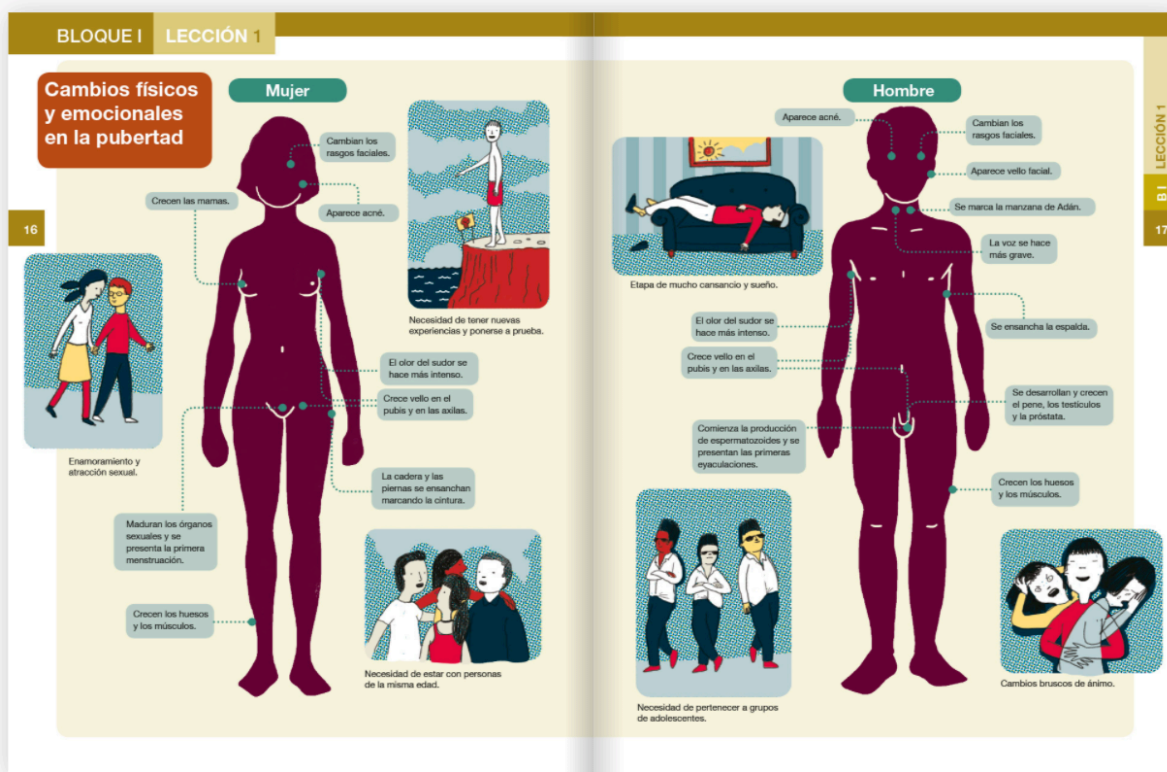


Figure 6.1 Physical and emotional changes in puberty diagram. 6<sup>th</sup> grade textbook of Civic and Ethical formation 2019-2020. SEP (2019 p. 16/17)

## 6.5 The Birth of Mestizaje

If you ever find yourself walking up one of the stairwells at the Antiguo Colegio de San Ildefonso in Mexico City, you will find in the ceiling a Mural in Fresco by José Clemente Orozco (1926) titled *Cortés y La Malinche* (Figure 6.2). The painting illustrates a very white Cortés in a dominant posture with a menacing gaze detaining a submissive Malinalli that is looking down avoiding Cortés's eyes. At the bottom of the mural, at Cortés's feet, lies facing down an Indigenous body. Their triangular relationship represents the white European male dominating a subjugated Indigenous woman on top of the conquered and defeated Indigenous race. Clemente's painting depicts modern/colonial Mexico's creation story: the emergence of



mestizaje. The image of Cortés y La Malinche reminds us that mestizaje is the “direct result of sexual abuse and downright exploitation of Native People...by European colonial powers” (Alarcón, 2008, p. 274) and that the creation of the Mestizo identity has continuously marginalized Indigenous peoples and caused the erasure of their identities (De la Cadena, 2001; Gómez-Izquierdo et al., 2005; Gall, 2007; Palou 2014; Ríos, 2015).



**Figure 6.2 Cortés y La Malinche by José Clemente Orozco (1926).**  
**Escuela Nacional Preparatoria San Ildefonso, Mexico City, Mexico. Photo: Daniel Gallardo Zamora**



In Mexico, the legacies of mestizaje have been sustained by oppressive ideologies that continue to reign supreme and cause along the way discrimination, harm and violence, in particular to Indigenous and feminine bodies. I refer to these ideologies as the Mexican m&m's: machismo & malinchismo which have provoked a “psychic dis-equilibrium” (Rich, 1986 p. 199) in Indigenous and Mestizx minds, as when looking at their reflection and feeling they're not enough. These oppressive ideas are the foundations of places that impede Indigenous and queer-femme belonging. Clemente's *Cortés y La Malinche* mural demonstrates how colonial mechanisms like malinchismo and machismo have been the necessary, sufficient and pervasive conditions that maintain and reproduce the ideological hegemony of mestizaje. Framed by a colonial heteropatriarchal logic of male and mix-race superiority, mestizaje has worked to subordinate and make inferior feminine, non-European, non-white, transgender and queer identities.

Mexican decolonial feminist Karina Ochoa Muñoz coins the term Indigenous feminization as a crucial process to the success of colonialism, Indigenous peoples had to be bestialized, like women were in Europe during the witch-hunts, in order to be dominated. Ochoa affirms that the “dehumanization of the Indigenous peoples has as a central axis, the feminization and use of gender-based violence, misogyny and genocide against the populations colonized and conquered” (2014, p. 16). The European heteropatriarchy was constructed with the genocide of women and that violence became the basis of the colonization of Anahuac (Aguilar Gil & Cumes, 2021). Together heteropatriarchy, coloniality and capitalism have joined forces to reproduce, secure and maintain modernity's violent ontoepistemic entrapments (Andreotti et al.,



2015; Ahenakew et al., 2014) which allow the ongoing dispossession of Indigenous bodies, lands and knowledges. Gloria Anzaldúa (1987) relates malinchismo to machismo by arguing that the dominion of male culture is responsible for the entitlement and violence towards Indigenous women. This culture of violence is represented in the dichotomous impressions of being female or male by Octavio Paz (1950), who writes “the chingón is the macho, the male; he rips open the chingada, the female, who is pure passivity, defenseless against the exterior world. The relationship between them is violent, and it is determined by the cynical power of the first and the impotence of the second” (p. 100). The hegemony of mestizaje is sustained by malinchismo and machismo as together they reproduce Athabaskan scholar Dian Million’s meaning of radical reorganization (2009) by maintaining a colonial patriarchal hierarchy where Mestizo men are below white settlers (malinchismo) but above Mestiza woman (machismo). The binary discourse of both machismo and malinchismo obstructs a sense of belonging and originates painful, harmful and violent experiences for Indigenous, feminine and queer identities within Mexico.

In an interview with Maya Kaqchikel researcher Aura Cumes by Mixe-Zoque linguist and Indigenous activist Yásnaya Elena Aguilar Gil, Cumes explains that in comparison to western European paradigms, Indigenous communities around Anahuac/Turtle Island did not locate gender as a central axis of social-cultural formations, instead, spirituality was centred within Indigenous perspectives. When responding about her ontological beliefs, Cumes answers that “in the creation of life, we [Mayan] never find men at the center in solitude. The generation of life is a pair...the creation reflects the “pluri”: we are a world founded in the plural” (2021, p. 23). Western European thinking has been focused on individual categorizations and labels instead of relationality, reciprocity, belonging and solidarity. The his-story of Mexico was written, produce



and directed by European white men and the principal roles were all given to men too. Chicana scholar Cherrie Moraga reminds us that “in chronicling the conquest of Mexico and founding the Catholic Church there, the Spanish passed on to the Mestizo people as legacy their own European-Catholic interpretation of Mexican events” (Moraga, 1983, p. 101). Understanding mestizaje as a political agenda that reproduces colonial monocultures to maintain ideological hegemony is necessary to oppose dominant mechanisms of violence and oppression enacted through patriarchal racist hierarchies.

Modern Mexico has been shaped by coloniality, whiteness, heteropatriarchy and capitalism; systemic structures of extraction that are woven inside the myth of mestizaje. Afro-Mexican scholar Monica Moreno Figueroa (2010) contends that the shadow to understanding mestizaje as the national identity is a history of racialization and privilege, for mestizaje “operates as complex form of whiteness...When mestizaje became ‘the national’, its characterization as historically racialized and national became blurred and the national prevailed, dominated, pervaded and consolidated a shift towards racelessness” (p. 399). The invention of a Mestizo identity embodied false ideals of racial equality and gender solidarity, in reality, it has intensified symbolic and systemic violence towards the most vulnerable populations.

In considering my analytical framework of Chicomexochitl, this chapter explores themes of gendered violence against Indigenous women through the dominant culture of mestizaje. Mestizaje can be explained through a metaphor of a combine harvester where the engine is racism, and the machine is driven by the heteropatriarchy owned and created by a White western European company. The rotary thresher represents the Mexican m&m’s: machismo and



malinchismo, racialized ideologies that reap all crops from the ground and provide the necessary conditions to grow entire fields of yellow sameness. The Mexican m&m's sustain and maintain the oppressive machinery of mestizaje as a tool for de-indigenization.

The monocultural hegemony of mestizaje is far from being dismantled as it perversely remains entrenched in contemporary forms of representation and identity. In *El fracaso del mestizo* (2014) the idea of undoing the Mestizo is set forth by Mexican writer Pedro Ángel Palou. The author opposes the mythical and superior interpretations of mestizaje and recognizes its cannibal aspects in consequence of the consumption of Indigenous peoples' identity by the narrative of the white master. Palou's (2014) work looks to radically question the existing dichotomy of us/them and unsettle from false ideals of racial blindness and cultural sameness. Opposing the institutionalized identity of mestizaje opens new imaginaries that blur the lines of categorizations and return to social relations and spiritual interpretations that allow further exploration of identity. In the next chapter, I will imagine how changing the conditions that maintain and reproduce the hegemony of mestizaje in Mexico can cultivate pluriversal, horizontal, borderless and ethical places of sustenance that nurture post-colonial formations of identity politics by engaging with intersections of gender, sexuality and race.



## Chapter 7: in tlalli in milli (a place of sustenance) – Transformative

*From the in-between place of nepantla, you see through the fiction of the monoculture, the myth of the superiority of the white races. And eventually you begin seeing through your ethnic culture's myth of the inferiority of mujeres. As you struggle to form a new identity, a demythologization of race occurs. You begin to see race as an experience of reality from a particular perspective and a specific time and place (history), not as a fixed feature of personality or identity.*

— Gloria Anzaldúa (2002, p. 549)

### 7.1 Milpa: A Story of Three Sisters

For the Spanish language dictionary of the Real Academia Española (RAE, 2021), milpa means a field dedicated to the cultivation of maize and at times other seeds. According to the Spanish dictionary, the word comes from the Nahuatl words, milli “inheritance” and pan “on top”. When translated to Spanish the meaning of inheritance is associated with ownership, making milpa a place that belongs to an individual. For Nahuas, milli is not represented as a belonging. In Nahuatl, the most common words for land are tlalli and milli. Tlalli literally means land, soil, ground or earth. Milli means the land performing an action, in this case, cultivation. As Nahuatl is a primarily verb-based language, the translation would actually be ‘cultivating land’. The difference with Spanish, though subtle, is profound, in Spanish, milpa is a noun, a thing, an object. In Nahua, milpa is a verb, denotes action, an intention. This particular action is based on spiritual and physical nourishment, not only to each human being but to the broader community, animate/inanimate beings and Cemanahuac (entire cosmos). A milpa indicates more than the growth of a crop, it demonstrates an intention to tend and nurture yourself, your



community and the land. Milpa is revered as a being that provides our sustenance and, as I have learned from our Nahua community, we belong to milpa, not the other way around.

For Nahuas, milpa is not a property, it is an inherited ancestral knowledge system known as in tlalli in milli (place of sustenance). A Nahua knowledge system that has been passed down by communities in Turtle Island for millennia through oral traditions. Milpa holds the place to cultivate what Potawatomi botanist, Robin Wall Kimmerer (2013) refers to as the “genius of Indigenous agriculture” (p. 129), a story she shares known as the Three Sisters,

### THE THREE SISTERS

Some stories tell of a long winter when the people were dropping from hunger. Three beautiful women came to their dwellings on a snowy night. One was a tall woman dressed all in yellow, with long flowing hair. The second wore green, and the third was robed in orange. The three came inside to shelter by the fire. Food was scarce but the visiting strangers were fed generously, sharing in the little that the people had left. In gratitude for their generosity, the three sisters revealed their true identities—corn, beans, and squash—and gave themselves to the people in a bundle of seeds so that they might never go hungry again. (p. 131)

The Three Sisters narrated by Robin Kimmerer is a well-known popular story all around Anahuac/Turtle Island. A beautiful lesson of reciprocity combined with a system of knowledge that continue to sustain all beings. The beautiful synergy of the sister plants: tlaolli (maize), yetl



(beans), and ayohtli (squash), “feed the people, feed the land and feed our imaginations, telling us how we might live” (Kimmerer, 2013, p. 129). A synergy of reciprocal relations where the plants rely on each other to survive, grow and prosper. Kimmerer (2013) explains that when settlers arrived at Turtle Island and saw Indigenous gardens, they deduced that Indigenous people did not know how to farm. For European settlers, cultivating plants had to be done in parallel monocultural rows. Consequently, the connotation of milpa changed to settler ways of knowing, so now when thinking of the word, we are taught to picture straight rows of yellow corn (see [Figure 4.2](#)). From a Nahua perspective, milpa is about the beautiful messy relation of beings that belong together, an Indigenous knowledge system that represents cultures of reciprocity (Kimmerer, 2013). In *tlalli in milli* (place of sustenance) is designed as a miniature representation of our relationship with self, community, land and Cemanahuac (entire cosmos), a place where the collective “transcends the individual” (Kimmerer, 2013, p. 140).

Kimmerer writes that the Three Sisters offer a metaphor of relationality, they teach us lessons of reciprocity to cultivate a “polyculture of complementary knowledges” (2013, p. 139). The illustration *in tlalli in milli* (2021) by Mestiza artist, Montserrat Solano ([Figure 7.1](#)) paints the resurgence of Chicomexochitl, corn of many colours cultivated in a pluriversal place that fosters, nurtures and sustains a holistic relation with self, community and land. The illustration depicts the holistic teachings of the Three Sisters by painting a child learning from an Elder about the cultivation of and reverence to milpa. The resurgence of Chicomexochitl, a corn cob of many colors inside a milpa represents a differential consciousness to habits, beliefs and ideas that maintain and reproduce the dominance of the myth of the yellow corn (Andreotti et al., 2017).





Figure 7.1 in *tlalli in milli* by Mestiza artist, Montserrat Solano (2021)

The illustration of *in tlalli in milli* (2021) shows the cultivation of milpa inside pluriversal places where together with the land we guide, support and protect each other's growth. The rewards come full of intense and imperfect colours, as strength that is given to us directly from the roots of the land. At the bottom of the illustration, diverse coloured cobs are included to point out that not all cobs will be the same, and that even if most are still yellow, the endless combinations of



colours is a possible and cherished imaginary. The coloured cobs shown in the illustration represent a pluriversal place of sustenance that honours the Zapatista call for “a world in which there is room for many worlds” (As quoted in Sandoval, 2000).

## **7.2 Hearing from Story: The resurgence of Chicomexochitl**

The resurgence of Chicomexochitl (corn of many colours) is a metaphor for finding our in *ixtli* in *yóllotl* (face and heart) by expressing the authentic truthfulness of our being. In 2017, *Mujeres de Maiz*, a Chicana ARTivist and wellness collective, presented their 20th anniversary through an exhibition about women’s relationship with corn. The painting, *Mujer de Maiz* (Woman of Maize) by Xicanx, Debora Kuetzpal Vasquez illustrated a woman being embodied by the corn representing our entire beings belonging to Chicomexochitl. When explaining the importance of corn in many Anahuac/Turtle Island communities, Gregory Cajete recounts that his grandmother used to tell him, “we are all but corn” (TEDx Talks, 2015). Through this thinking, coloured corn cob is an analogy for the structure of a community and the kernels are individuals that make up the community. The colourful kernels are all different but close together, they lean up against each other and support one another. An understanding that even when diverse, we are still united and belong together; we are all kernels in the same cob.

The combined meaning of a face and a heart – *ixtli* in *yóllotl* is a Nahua concept that Mexica people taught prior to the colonization of Anahuac and a practice that continues today with many Nahua communities (Rios, 2012, 2015). In *ixtli* in *yóllotl* is central to Nahua education and philosophy, inside *Cantares Mexicanos*, the largest Nahuatl song and poems collection recorded, *Nezahualcoyōtl* a Mexica *tlatoani* (the one who speaks) Nahua philosopher



and poet, wrote about in *ixtli in yóllotl*. According to various scholars, Nezahualcoyōtl portrayed this Nahua concept in his poems to represent becoming a complete human (Garibay, 1961; León-Portilla, 1963; Ríos 2012, 2015). León-Portilla (1963) defines in *ixtli in yóllotl* as the notion of a balanced character and an embodied expression of self. This Nahua concept is about the human development of self (face) and mind (heart) through a holistic education of “both what it means to acquire knowledge and what it means to be human” (Rios, 2012 p. 114).

Gregory Cajete (1999) explains that becoming a complete human happens through an embodied learning where “each individual should be transformed through the process of education and find that special “place” where reside one’s...true relationship with oneself, with one’s community, and with the natural world.” (p. 194). That place is a portal to a paradigm shift where teachings aim to support everyone “express their face, express their heart, and express the authentic truthfulness of their being” (Cajete. p. 194); express their in *ixtli in yóllotl*. Alfredo López Austin further defines in *ixtli in yóllotl* as a pedagogy "where sensation, perception, understanding, and feeling unite in order to integrate a complete consciousness that is found in communication with the outside world" (cited in Leyva 2003/2004 p. 101). Chicana scholars, Gabriela Raquel Ríos (2012, 2015) and Yolanda Chávez Leyva (2003/2004) have used in *ixtli in yóllotl* as a pedagogical framework to help students express their face and heart. For both Chicana scholars, this Nahua teaching reflects the interconnectedness of being human with the entire cosmos and the importance of relationality and reciprocity with animate and inanimate beings. Leyva reflects that “the idea of a wise face and a wise heart, is both a profound and functional model for education” (2003/2004, p.119).



As an interdependent concept, in *ixtli in yóllotl* has a similar meaning to “coming in”, a theory by Neyonawak Inniniwak scholar, Alex Wilson. Through the process of “coming in” to their identity, Wilson states that Two-Spirit/ Indigenous queer people come to “understand their relationship to and place and value in their own family, community, culture, history and present-day world...it is simply presenting oneself and being fully present” (2008, p. 197). When you “come in” to yourself you are able to express your in *ixtli in yóllotl*. You can show your true colours and oppose the monotone dominance of the colonial/modern paradigm, transforming the yellow corn to one of many colours. To bring back the colours and allow ourselves to “come in”, I argue we need to change the forms of cultivation and plant three seeds that together can change how we think and feel. These three seeds are cultivated inside in *tlalli in milli* (a place of sustenance) that fosters and nurtures the growth of our in *ixtli in yóllotl*. They are the three seeds that bear *Chicomexochitl* (a corn cob of many colours): Indigenous knowledges (*tlaolli*/maize), queerness (*yetl*/beans), and differential consciousness (*ayohtli*/squash). In the following sections, I will explain each of the seeds and argue for their synergy as fundamental to express our in *ixtli in yóllotl*

### **7.3 Hearing from Story: Returning to Tlaolli/Maize: Indigenous Knowledges**

For Nahuas, the seed of *tlaolli* (maize) represents the creator’s most precious gift, our sustenance to survive. When explaining the three sisters, Kimmerer thinks of corn as “traditional ecological knowledge” which creates a “physical and spiritual framework” (2013, p. 139) to guide the two other plants. Centred inside the *milpa*, corn as the eldest sister is the first one to grow. Indigenous ways of being will be represented by the seed of corn. Indigenous knowledges “sense being as grounded in relationality, a form of woven entanglement that involves intellect,



emotion, body, and spirit” (Ahenakew, 2019, p. 21). Indigenous knowledges represent ancestral dynamic intellectual systems that are able to adapt to the changing conditions of the environment (Battiste, 2005). They “are processes and encapsulate a set of relationships rather than a bounded concept” (Brayboy & Maughan, 2009, p. 3). According to various Indigenous scholars, intrinsic to Indigenous knowledges are non-anthropocentric perspectives values and practices of relationality between one’s self, with our community, animate/inanimate beings and the land (Absolon, 2019; Pidgeon, 2016; Hare, 2012; Kelly, 2010; Archibald, 2008; Cajete, 1994, 1999, 2000; Brendtro et al., 1990).

The four beautiful colours that the harvest of corn brings resemble the colours of the Medicine Wheel. Anishinaabekwe scholar, Kathy Absolon (2019) uses the Medicine Wheel “as a tool to depict Indigenous wholistic theory” a theory that is “whole, ecological, cyclical, and relational” (p. 25). The Medicine Wheel illustrates interrelationships with self, community and land within the four dimensions of a person, emotional, spiritual, physical and intellectual, a framework that encompasses the meaning of *in ixtli in yóllotl*. For Mi’kmaq scholar Michelle Pidgeon, Indigenous wholistic frameworks represent “Indigenous ways of knowing and being...not only the philosophical underpinnings of Indigenous knowledges but attempts pictorially to represent the complexity of wholistic interconnections that we have as individuals, to our communities, nations, and global communities” (2016, p. 80). The illustration *in tlalli in milli* (Figure 7.1) works as an Indigenous holistic framework as it reflects the seven principles of Indigenous storywork: respect, responsibility, reciprocity, reverence, holism, interrelatedness, and synergy (Archibald, 2008). A place where the corn of many colours, as the medicine wheel,



feed our beings with balance, wholeness and wellness, a place meant for individuals to express their in *ixtli* in *yóllotl* (face and heart).

Indigenous holistic frameworks are enacted through the art of teaching and its goal is to Indigenize education. When thinking of Indigenizing our teaching practices, I envision an ontological shift that consists of human, ecological and spiritual reciprocity aiming for the cultivation of relationships at all their capacity. A system of relationships with ourselves, our communities, and land. Anishinaabe scholar Jan Hare defines "Indigenous pedagogies as the learning practices and processes that transmit a system of knowledge reflecting Indigenous histories, stories, values, and ways of knowing shaped by Indigenous experiences and worldviews" (2016, p. 199). Indigenous pedagogies build capacity and strength to reawaken and revitalize local Indigenous knowledge systems, languages and practices for collective belonging (Holmes & Gonzalez, 2017). Indigenizing must be positioned as an ongoing process as it refers to more than understanding Indigenous knowledges, it is about doing the good work. As noted by various scholars central to an Indigenous pedagogy is the resurgence of Indigenous knowledge systems, Indigenous language awakening, Indigenous self-determination and sovereignty, land restitution, transformative decolonial praxis, and, at the heart of knowledge mobilization, place, land and ecological understandings (McCarty & Lee, 2014; Simpson, 2017; Gaudry & Lorenz, 2018).

#### **7.4 Hearing from Story: Yetl/Bean: Queerness**

“The corn takes care of making light available; the squash reduces weeds. What about the beans? To see her gift you have to look underground” (Kimmerer, 2013, p. 132) and



underground you will find queerness. The seed of yetl (bean) is understood through the words of queer of colour icon, José Esteban Muñoz, as he writes "queerness should and could be about a desire for another way of being in both the world and time, a desire that resists mandates to accept that which is not enough" (2009, p. 96). When thinking of queering our pedagogical practices, I picture a transformative, emancipatory, liberating praxis carried by a desire for self-determination and recognition. Hunt & Holmes (2005) state that queering "emerged as a critique of essentialist constructs and identity politics. As a verb, queering is a deconstructive practice focused on challenging normative knowledges, identities, behaviours, and spaces thereby unsettling power relations and taken-for-granted assumptions" (p. 156). The discourse of an actively queering pedagogy is maintained by Bryson & de Castell (1993), according to whom, queering as an action challenges stereotypes and stigmas providing a pedagogical opportunity for radical disruption of heteronormative systems.

As the bean queerness is the one that disrupts modern/colonial fertilizers and pesticides that reproduce dominance. According to Keenan & Hot Mess (2021) "queer theory can be used to examine how often-impossible standards of normalcy are formed, not only through institutional categorizations of gender and sexuality, but also through social expectations produced through the racialized structures of capitalism" (p. 5). Loutzenheiser (2015) adds that queer theory uncovers and disrupts cisnormativity and heteropatriarchy by not conforming to the binaries and by denying the notion of a fixed or immutable identity; being queer throws "that binary organization into chaos" (p. 102). For Muñoz, queerness is about a refusal of the present and a future created by radical imaginaries for the possibility of a different world. Muñoz reminds us that "we may never touch queerness, but we can feel it as the warm illumination of a



horizon imbued with potentiality. We have never been queer, yet queerness exists for us as an ideality” (Muñoz, 2009, p. 1). Being queer is a radical imaginary.

Queerness fosters places for constant transformation and innovation by occupying the in-between spaces created through radical imaginaries. A queering action requires an ontological shift that refuses dominant heteronormative frameworks by challenging knowledge we uphold (Loutzenheiser, 2007). Queerness opens up to liminality revealing the decolonial philosophical concept of *Nepantla* which comes from a Nahuatl word meaning in the middle. *Nepantla* has been taken up by decolonial and Chicana scholars, primarily from Walter D. Mignolo (2000) based on the scholarship of Gloria Anzaldúa (1987). For Anzaldúa, *Nepantla* is a zone of possibility experienced through a fluid reality, “the overlapping space between different perceptions and belief systems, you are aware of the changeability of racial, gender, sexual, and other categories rendering the conventional labelings obsolete” (2002, p. 541). *Nepantla* is an in-between-ness concept that allows for multiple worldviews to coexist by dissolving boundaries; a world where many worlds belong. *Nepantla* is a pluriversal borderless borderland, a queer place between paradigms where worldviews emerge, collide, resurge and oscillate in tension. “You realize that “home” is that bridge, the in-between place of *nepantla* and constant transition” (Anzaldúa, 2002, 574). To move to *Nepantla* we must strive to queer oppressive boundaries and entrapments of modernity’s ontology by embracing radical imaginaries. A place beyond imposed limitations and monocultural dominance that allows the idealization of an Indigenous queer fluidity.



## 7.5 Hearing from Story: Ayohtli/Squash: Differential Consciousness

The seed of ayohtli (squash) represents differential consciousness by working as an opposing force and protector against weeds, creating an “ethical habitat for coexistence and mutual flourishing” (Kimmerer, 2013, p. 139). Differential consciousness is conceptualized by Chicana scholar Chela Sandoval inside *Methodology of the Oppressed* (2000), which is based on Freirean concepts of education for critical consciousness,

Represents a cruising, migrant, improvisational mode of subjectivity... prodded into existence by an outsider's sensibilities: a lack of loyalty to dominant ideological signification, combined with the intellectual curiosity that demands an explosion of meaning (in semiotic or deconstructive activities), or meaning's convergence and solidification (in meta ideologizing), for the sake of either survival or a political change toward equality. (2000, p. 179)

Differential consciousness emerges from a conscious refusal against hegemonic ideology while remaining aware that one is still located within it and has to constantly question, rewrite, oppose and let go of modernity's entrapments. Inside Sandoval's differential consciousness, one finds an opposing praxis that resists and refuses binary identity categorizations imagining fluid understandings of being. The concept is inspired by “the spirit of civil rights movements that have reclaimed disparaging slurs and racist terminology and turned them into a vocabulary of pride and empowerment” (Gómez-Peña, et al., 2021, p. xv). In particular, Sandoval emphasizes differential consciousness in the acts of US Third World feminists during the Chicano/a Movement. Their opposition has rewritten, reclaimed and embraced the meaning of being Chicano, clearly seen when using with the phrase “Chicano/a power”. Other examples like this can be seen all around our contemporary herstory with movements, interventions and phrases



like: “Un violador en tu camino (A Rapist in Your Path),” “Idle no more,” “Girls like us,” “Black is beautiful,” and “We’re here. We’re queer. Get used to it.”

A fabulous example of differential consciousness is the pedagogy of La Pocha Nostra, a transdisciplinary arts organization that refuses and rewrites the meaning of the border identity “pocho” which refers to a malinchista type of figure, “a person of Mexican heritage who has lost their culture to US influence – a sort of traitor to national identity. They [La Pocha Nostra] expropriate it, queer it, and connect it to all international deterritorialized peoples” (Gómez-Peña, et al., 2021, p. xv). Through embodied learning, the eclectic Pocha Nostra lives in the borderless land in the borderlands refusing to comply to the oppressive colonial/modern paradigm, having “systemic allergic reactions to empty orthodoxies and essentialisms that force us to contest binary and vertical models whenever these arise” (Gómez-Peña, et al., 2021, p. xv). Differential consciousness enables people who have been excluded to the margins and borders to unveil from the oppressive sameness that is covering us all, through a praxis committed to emancipatory and radical imaginaries.

Differential consciousness helps create ethical pluriversal borderless habitats towards horizontal coexistence and collective solidarity and belonging. For Indigenous Elder Willie J. Ermine from the Sturgeon Lake First Nation an ethical space is created by “contrasting perspectives of the world, entertains the notion of a meeting place, or initial thinking about a neutral zone between entities or cultures...to detach from the cages of our mental worlds and assume a position where human-to-human dialogue can occur” (2007, p. 202). Reflective dialogue allows us to bear witness to our complicit beliefs, habits and knowledges that reproduce



the mechanisms of dominance. By opposing shameful meaning-making and shifting harmful narratives of self, differential consciousness can act as a holistic practice that provokes transformative meaning-making. It shifts emotional, physical, intellectual and spiritual reactions and interpretations embedded inside dominant ideological systems, allowing an ontological shift in the perception of ourselves, our community and the world around us. Removing the colonial/modern weeds to protect our milpa, requires a collective opposition invested in dismantling dominant colonial ideologies and it starts with self-awareness. These emancipatory coalitions work towards “decolonizing the social imagination” through a revolutionary resignification process that operates together to form what Sandoval (2000) calls “physics of love” (p. 183). For Sandoval, love as social movement is enacted by a collective emancipatory belonging that unbinds from oppressive entrapments, “a love that can access and guide our theoretical and political ‘movidas’—maneuvers toward decolonized being” (p. 140).

## **7.6 Hearing from Story: The Synergy of Queering Red Pedagogy**

When cultivated together the synergy of the three seeds: Indigenous knowledges, queerness and differential consciousness undergoes a process I call, queering red pedagogy. Based on the educational theoretical perspective and ground-breaking contribution of Quechua scholar Sandy Grande (2008, 2015), *Red Pedagogy* promotes education for decolonization at the crossroads of Indigenous perspectives and critical consciousness. By being critical, I refer to the idea of “analysing power and ideology and how these conspire to constrain us” (Formenti & West, 2018), the initial step towards differential consciousness. The idea of queering red pedagogy is based on the call for the desegregation of Indigenous studies and queer theory, as together they hold an important reciprocal collaboration for creating decolonizing frameworks (Simpson 2017;



Morris, 2017; Hunt & Holmes, 2015; Driskill et al. 2011). Indigenous epistemologies are linked to queer belonging and diversity, as both regard fluidity around gender and identity. Kovach (2009, 2018) states that the fluidity of Indigenous perspectives exists outside the colonial box of control and oppression, it can see beyond and across binaries and categories. Working underground, joining from the borders, queerness has been deconstructing those colonial heteropatriarchal boxes as well. Through a decolonial lens, queerness is a vital intersection between the juncture of Indigenous knowledges and critical consciousness.

In the 10<sup>th</sup> anniversary edition of Sandy Grande's book *Red Pedagogy* (2015), various Indigenous scholars pointed out the critical intervention of queerness in the field of Indigenous studies. Chickasaw scholar, Jodi Byrd (2015) argues that queer and feminist Indigenous critique interrupts and redefines identity as it considers "more precisely and more politically for how heteronormativity and heteropatriarchy work in tandem with racism and colonialism to further Indigenous dispossession and loss of identity and culture" (p. 171). It is important to note that racialized hierarchies are part of the formation of queer theory so it must be informed first and in partnership with Indigenous epistemologies. Inside *Red Pedagogy*, Unanga scholar, Eve Tuck (2015) urges for the engagement of an Indigenous informed queer theory as a way to challenge "the hegemony of settler colonialism in queer theory" (p. 219). Queer scholar, Mark Rifkin offers a similar warning, reminding us that committing to queerness against heteronormative frameworks "does not necessarily entail challenging settler frames, nor does it inherently involve a commitment to engaging Native sovereignties and struggles for self-determination (2017, p. 42). As the stem of the corn carries the vines of the beans, without the sturdy support of Indigenous knowledges queerness gets entangled inside coloniality/modernity's paradigm.



Neyonawak Inniniwak scholar, Alex Wilson forefronts the philosophical and pedagogical praxis of queering Indigenous education within a course at the University of Saskatchewan's Department of Education called *Queering Indigenous Land-Based Education*, the course "examines and disrupts settler colonialism and challenges normative, essentialist, hierarchic, Eurocentric or Judeo-Christian narratives, constructs and practices relating to cosmology, gender, sexuality and other aspects of individual and collective identity that are embedded in mainstream education systems" (Wilson et al., 2021, p. 220). In a pedagogical sense, Wilson's meaning of queering is meant to examine, challenge and disrupt heteropatriarchal frameworks, ideological hegemony, racialized hierarchies and entrenched binaries that hide inside authenticated and traditional Indigenous ways of being. She quotes Hawaiian scholar Kalaniopua Young in her understanding of queering as "transforming poison into medicine" (as cited in Wilson et al., 2021, p. 220). Queering Indigenous pedagogies embrace pluriversal notions of complex relations that are in constant motion and radically oppose straight rows of controlled sameness and violent repression.

Queering red pedagogy aims for individuals to reexamine and reframe emotions and thoughts entrapped by the dominant framework through differential consciousness. A synergy of reciprocity forming a "radical social critique" (Hunt & Holmes, 2015, p. 156) and an Indigenous resurgent action working to dismantle the colonality of power. Hunt & Holmes (2015) view the interconnection of queering and decolonization as a decolonial queer praxis essential to Indigenous sovereignty "linked explicitly with the resurgence of Indigenous systems of gender



and sexuality” (p. 169). A decolonial queer praxis actively challenges and disrupts “systems of knowledge that do not fully account for the lives of Indigenous people, queer and trans people, and many others whose lives are erased through epistemic and material violence” (Hunt & Holmes, 2015, p. 159). The triangular relationship of a differential Indigenous queer conscientization is essential for reconstructive and healing practices with self, others and the land. The evident call for queering red pedagogy is supported by Wilson et al. as they call for,

The pairing of queer/queerness/queering with radical critique and action by both Hunt and Holmes...echo Quechua scholar Sandy Grande’s (2004) call (in a text that does not refer to queering!) for radical pedagogies that both sustain Indigenous epistemologies and lifeways and challenge the complex power relations that shape the material conditions of Indigenous people’s lives. (2021, p. 223)

As a cultivating practice, queering red pedagogy is "continually reshaped by a practice of relational accountability, reciprocity, radical listening, and a readiness to unlearn and learn anew from and with the land and each other" (Wilson et al., 2021, p. 229). A place where not a single harvest is supposed to be the same. Queering red pedagogy is created by reciprocal relations through radical imaginaries that centre Indigenous cosmologies entangled with queerness and protected by differential consciousness. A pedagogy that moves towards a pluriversal place of collective belonging where we can express our in *ixtli* in *yóllotl* (face and heart).

### **7.7 In *ixtli* in *yóllotl*: A pedagogy of belonging returning to in *tlalli* in *milli* (a place of sustenance)**

As a Nahua pedagogical philosophy in *ixtli* in *yóllotl* aims to cultivate a place of sustenance through polycultures of reciprocity that harvest collective belonging. For Brown



(2017), belonging is to share “your most authentic self with the world and find sacredness in both being a part of something and standing alone in the wilderness” (p. 157). Belonging means attaining in *ixtli* in *yóllotl* (face and heart) through all our relations; walking in beauty with oneself, your community and the land. Belonging happens when we can disclose our true colours without feeling ashamed of not fitting within a monotone sameness. Finding in *ixtli* in *yóllotl* is a holistic journey that resembles the resurgence of *Chicomexochitl* (corn cob of many colours) inside a *milpa* (place of sustenance), a metaphor for a kinship journey to find balance between the emotional, physical, intellectual and spiritual realms of an individual. The transformation of the myth of the yellow corn (Andreotti et al., 2017) to the corn of many colours is a process of ideological unbinding and holistic healing in which we realize “we are also entangled and complicit in violence and harm” (Ahenakew, 2019, p. 72). Unbinding from the oppressive entrapments of the power of coloniality and healing from the painful fragmentation of modernity’s violence is a collective relational affair. The pedagogy for *ixtli* in *yóllotl* brings awareness to the damage caused by coloniality/modernity’s violence and grows “the stamina to face the difficulties of scarring the soul wound together” (Ahenakew, 2019, p. 74). A pedagogy that implements relational and holistic perspectives that are interdisciplinary, that honour students’ knowledge and sense of self and that invites the student to engage in self-assessment which includes critically reflecting on our habits of being, even the ones embedded in the language we were taught to speak and the emotions we were taught to feel. A pedagogy where students can search for their in *ixtli* in *yóllotl*: a pedagogy of belonging.

Indigenous queer belonging requires a healing process induced by refusing and disrupting colonial/modern constructions that oppress the formation of identity. By mapping an



oppositional worldview, a pedagogy of belonging to find – in *ixtli* in *yóllotl* opens up to liminality, to a place where people can express the authentic truthfulness of their being: an interconnected relation with self, community and the world around us. This *Nepantla* place is nurtured and sustained by Indigenous ontologies while being protected underground by queerness and on the ground by differential consciousness. *Nepantla* is a pluriversal borderless place that interprets the world as more than one socio-natural formation, a world which is composed of a complex culture–nature entity, not a singular system but a plurality of beings: holding a perspective of more than one and less than two (De la Cadena, 2010). This plurality produces an ontological shift that aligns with Nahuatl cosmovision through the understanding of *Nomatca Nahuatl*, in which we see ourselves as part of the entire cosmos, as part of the land. No separation exists between the individual self and *Cemanahuac* (entire cosmos) (Alarcón, 2008). When translated to Spanish, the meaning of *Nomatca Nahuatl* is “I myself”, it becomes individual. As Nahuatl is a polysynthetic language, the phrase merges with other words to form a meaning of more than one and less than two, it is a collective. The meaning of *Nomatca Nahuatl* can be seen in the cultivation of a place of sustenance emphasizing that everything in *Cemanahuac* (entire cosmos) is related and interdependent. *Nomatca Nahuatl* highlights non-anthropocentric worldviews of Indigenous knowledges, a reminder that reciprocal relations are formed with human, more than human beings and the worlds around us. Everything is given by the land and nothing can survive without it. We are a very small part of a single whole where everyone belongs to the land. We are all kernels in the same corn cob.

In the context of Mexico, a pedagogy of belonging works to heal the fragmented self of Indigenous and Mestizx 2S/LGBTQIA+ identities by dismantling oppressive mechanisms



created by the socio-cultural hegemony of mestizaje. The discursive construction of mestizaje as the foundation of a racially undifferentiated and culturally homogenous society has seamlessly thread violent mechanisms to Mexican societal habits, beliefs and ideas. A pedagogy of belonging sets forth a transformative journey where Indigenous and Mestizx 2S/LGBTQIA+ dig out their roots from colonial/modern monocultures and transplant them to Nepantla, ethical pluriversal borderless places that are nurtured and sustained by cultures of reciprocity, relationality and solidarity. Indigenous and Mestizx have been taught to be ashamed of their Indigenous roots, to view masculinity as superior and move towards whiteness. The transformative journey begins by understanding our involvement within the political agenda of mestizaje as a colonial tool used to hegemonize Indigenous peoples into the dominant status quo. Through heteropatriarchal hierarchies and entrenched binaries, mestizaje has historically neglected and made inferior Indigenous knowledges, languages and ways of being. The differential praxis of queering Indigenous education guided by Nahua holistic theory opposes, reconceptualizes and rewrites the meaning of mestizaje.

A pedagogy of belonging is exemplified by various Mestizx scholars, specifically when reframing mestizaje to a term that acknowledges the self-inflicted fragmentation and historical oppression caused by coloniality, as well as the opportunities for transformative collective belonging when opposing the hegemony of mestizaje (De la Cadena, 2010; Alarcón, 2008; Grande, 2008; Anzaldúa 1987, 2002). Mestizx scholar Francisco X. Alarcón's (2008) concept of *mesticismo* opposes the cultural borderlands of mestizaje where Indigenous people are forced to live as the marginal. *Mesticismo* "sets out a fluid ontology in which any notion of self must include the others, equally trespassing upon neat demarcations like subject/object, human/nature,



us/them and other similar dichotomies common of western thought” (Alarcón, 2008, p. 274). Mesticismo initiates an inquiry specific to Indigenous historical and cultural perspectives and shows how the process of coloniality/modernity has filtered and altered the truths we believe to be real. It takes a political and oppositional stance against mestizaje by resisting and disrupting colonial/modern systems and centring and reclaiming Indigenous knowledges, stories, fluid perspectives, values and languages through conscientization (Alarcón, 2008; Grande, 2008).

Alarcón’s (2008) *mesticismo* relates to the oppositional stance concerning mestizaje of Indigenous-Mestiza scholar Marisol De la Cadena (2010), in which she explains that plurality is an essential step to disrupt the dichotomous relation of Indigenous and Mestizo. As Mestizx people we are not split in half, we are not two different beings but understanding we are part of each other, our separation is impossible, “neither Indigenous nor Mestizo, it is an Indigenous-Mestizo aggregate that we are talking about: less than two, not the sum of its parts” (De la Cadena, 2010 p. 348). A pedagogy of belonging looks to support Mestizx people, oppose feelings of an inferior “halfbreed” and of “the destroyer & the destroyed” through collective work, relational accountability, radical solidarity, cultures of reciprocity and ethical spaces. Indigenous and Mestizx 2S/LGBTQIA+ peoples can build kinship systems that disrupt oppressive mechanisms and cultivate radical imaginaries. Through kinship we transform individual shame into collective belonging: the resurgence of *in ixtli in yóllotl*.

The teachings to find in *ixtli in yóllotl* are cultivated in ethical, pluriversal, borderless habitats of *Nepantla*. A place that continuously regenerates from ontoepistemic colonial/modern monocultures. As an ethical space, *Nepantla* becomes a “theatre for cross-cultural conversation



in pursuit of ethically engaging diversity and disperses claims to the human order” (Ermine, 2007, p. 202). Nepantla is a pluriverse where we can be more than one, yet less than two (De la Cadena, 2010), a transition space to critically self-reflect about our identity. For Anzaldúa (2002), “Nepantla is the site of transformation, the place where different perspectives come into conflict and where you question the basic ideas, tenets, and identities inherited from your family, your education, and your different cultures” (p. 548). A pedagogy of belonging returns to ancestral and earth-based knowledge systems by cultivating Nepantla which involves healing wounds from the violent hegemony caused by coloniality/modernity through non-anthropocentric learning approaches that center Indigenous knowledge systems entangled with queerness and differential consciousness.

Nepantla as a pluriversal, borderless, ethical place grounded by Nahua holistic theory sets forth a transformative journey that changes conditions of growth. A pedagogy that moves from the inclusion to monocultures of colonial sameness towards belonging to polycultures of reciprocity, relationality and solidarity. The coloniality of power has entrapped our imaginaries, but when belonging, radical imaginaries become a possibility. I imagine the in-between place of Nepantla to be what Zapatistas call a world where many worlds coexist. A place guided by *Nomatca Nehuatl*, the Nahua understanding that our beings have always been a collective, where our reflection includes all animate/inanimate beings that make us who we truly are. Nepantla can become a place where we all belong, where we see ourselves in each other’s eyes by expressing our most authentic face and heart, our *ixtli* in *yóllotl*. A place where together, leaning and holding on each other, we paint the coloured cob of *Chicomexochitl*.



## Chapter 8: How can we return to a corn of many colours? – Discussion

*Kinship is the complex, embodied practice of sovereign belonging. It's not just about our ties to one another, but to the willing, intentional recreation and reaffirmation of those ties in daily interactions—we choose to be kin, and we're chosen...Belonging is relational and reciprocal, not unidirectional.*

— Daniel Heath Justice (2018, p.104)

In this thesis, across stories, and through an exploration guided by my analytical framework of Chicomexochitl, I have discussed themes of fragmentation, oppression and transformation. Themes critical to comprehend when working to collectively dismantle the ideological hegemony of mestizaje entrenched to the colonality of power. The violent mechanisms that preserve mestizaje, like machismo and malinchismo have spread due to anthropocentric desires that maintain monocultures of sameness. Mestizaje reproduces “the myth of the yellow corn” (Andreotti et al., 2017) by provoking cognitive limitations that entrap our imaginaries in colonial/modern paradigms. By envisioning radical imaginaries, we can change the cultivation practices of corn, bust the myth of mestizaje and bring back cobs of many colours. I imagine all these to be the resurgence of Chicomexochitl, a place grounded on Nahua holistic educational theory. A Nepantla (in-between) place where the ideal purpose of education is to find in *ixtli* in *yóllotl* meaning to “find one's face, find one's heart” and search for a “foundation”, a truth, a support, a way of life and work through which one could express one's Life” (Cajete, 1994, p. 35). Nahua holistic theory holds concentric circle of relationships towards authentic expression with self, community and the land. Circle of relationships that break away from



anthropocentric perspectives of individual gain and move to kinship practices for collective belonging, meaning we are part of a single whole.

To move beyond singular inclusion towards pluriversal belonging, the change has to come from the roots. Our journey toward wholeness begins by composting our own shit (Ahenakew, 2019), a process of understanding how we are complicit in our own fragmentation and oppression of others. In the context of Mexico, mechanics of inferiority, shame and fragmentation are caused by mestizaje to perpetuate colonial ideological dominance and provoked the unbelonging and partition of Indigenous and Mestizx 2S/LGBTQ+ identities. When incorporated into a tyrant system through a combination of epistemic racism, forced binary ideologies and hegemonic control, a psychic disequilibrium is engendered within Indigenous and Mestizx 2S/LGBTQIA+ identities. Mestizaje has designed places to exclude and neglect our existence, which has led to fragmented identities and the destroyer/the destroyed discourse. For people trying to put the pieces back together, the healing process requires collective resistance and solidarity. From the borders, Indigenous and Mestizx 2S/LGBTQIA+ identities are creating a rumble of opposition, fighting against oppressive colonial heteropatriarchal bindings and entrenched binary racialized ideologies that have violently broken our identities.

In Mexico, the beliefs, principles and ideas that have been necessary to maintain and reproduce the dominance of mestizaje are what I call the Mexican m&m's: machismo & malinchismo. The historical origin and ideological legacy of the nationalist discourse of mestizaje was founded by the vilified story of an enslaved Indigenous woman to build, what



many believe to be, a homogenous and racially undifferentiated Mexico. When in reality, mestizaje has helped to authenticate colonial binary ideologies directed to whiteness, that are upheld as traditional and have divided the country in two. The construction of a gender binary has completely shaped Mexico, and the idea of gender fluidity and expression has been suppressed. Before the colonization of Indigenous land and the introduction of Judeo-Christian European social constructs, fluid notions of being were widely accepted and celebrated in Anahuac/Turtle Island. Machismo and malinchismo have forced Indigenous and Mestizx 2S/LGBTQIA+ communities to feel inferior, to hide their true colours, to shame who they are and discriminate against their own. The Mexican m&m's reproduce coloniality/modernity by establishing a Eurocentric binary structure that violently maintains racialized hierarchies. Imposing white heteropatriarchal frameworks through modernity's ontology causes the epistemicide of Indigenous knowledge systems and (un)belonging of Indigenous and Mestizx 2S/LGBTQIA+ identities. As a political project, the triangular relationship of mestizaje, malinchismo and machismo builds invisible borders to impede the recognition, reverence and integration of different understandings of gender and human embodiment. With the Mexican m&m's, mestizaje perpetuates oppressive systems that create colonial enclosures and lock us in heteropatriarchal boxes within modernity's metaphysical entrapments (Andreotti et al, 2015).

A pedagogy aiming to find in *ixtli* in *yóllotl* (face and heart) awakens Indigenous knowledges to nurture an epistemic change of habits, beliefs, ideas and practices that are maintained by coloniality/modernity. A pedagogy meant to dismantle ideological hegemony and entrenched binaries within settler social constructs opens a critical decolonial eye in our thinking by questioning our habits of being. Our ways of thinking and being, produce colonial pesticides



that maintain oppressive dominant monocultures and impede the sustainment of Indigenous queer belonging. Indigenous holistic knowledge systems can be the “thirding of dichotomized categories” (Tuck, 2009 p. 419), a third space that embrace a non-binary reality and refuses the pesticides. A pedagogy of belonging seeks to hold a liminal space out of the colonial dominance, where a fluid pluriversal possibility exists. As colonialism continues to fuel fear and prevent Indigenous queer self-determination, a pedagogy for collective belonging must be grounded in Indigenous sovereignty. Honouring Indigenous sovereignty relies on the recognition of self-governance in regard to spiritual ways, culture, language, bodily integrity, social systems, political structures, and stewardship of the land, the water, and the sky. The resurgence of Chicomexochitl (corn cob of many colours) is imagined through a “polyculture of complementary knowledge’s” (Kimmerer, 2013, p. 139) towards “sovereign belonging” (Justice, 2018). A place where Indigenous and Mestizx 2S/LGBTQIA+ peoples “come in” to themselves (Wilson, 2008) through the Nahuatl teaching of - in *ixtli* in *yóllotl* which includes relational accountability, reciprocity, self-determination, wholeness and solidarity.

In this thesis, I propose a pedagogy of belonging grounded and guided by Indigenous holistic theory using the intergenerational story of the Three Sisters, an Indigenous knowledge system that offers teachings grounded in relationality and reciprocity cultivated in a place of sustenance. The seeds of these three plants grow roots in the land, a reminder that everything starts there, and nothing comes out without it. Planting the seeds together set forth a transformative (un)learning journey that changes the conditions of the land to fertile and healthy ground. Their synergy creates a bond where they protect one another, there is no need for colonial toxic fertilizers and pesticides that fragment the land and ourselves. I use the sister



plants to metaphorically represent Indigenous knowledges, queerness and differential consciousness and their synergy is a journey I call queering red pedagogy. A process to begin transforming our monochromatic and anthropocentric views of the world. A pedagogy grounded on the resurgence of Chicomexochitl (corn of many colours) seeking for a place where people express their in ixtli in yóllotl (face and heart). Nahua holistic theory translates to an appropriate pedagogical framework of relationality and reciprocity to foster, nurture, sustain and revitalize Indigenous queer belonging.

Using the “physics of love” (Sandoval, 2000, p. 183), a pedagogy of in ixtli in yollot aims to cultivate an anti-oppression antidote by unbinding from colonial monocultural entrapments and provoking an ontological shift to collectively free our beings from ideological hegemony and the colonial binary of the heteropatriarchy. To dismantle this oppressive hegemonic machinery, we must be aware of how “dominant ideological practices and discourses shape our vision of reality” (Kincheloe & McLaren, 2005, p. 310). This unbinding and dismantling are possible from *Nepantla*, an in-between place that allows for multiple worldviews to coexist by dissolving boundaries aiming to “evolve into an era of indigeneity and kincentrism” (Nelson, 2017, p. 60); evolve into a world where many worlds belong. *Nepantla* holds space for differential consciousness to not only critically reflect on the way we think, who we are, where we belong and who sustains our existence, but also to oppose aspects that are made to harm our being. As a pluriversal, ethical, liminal, borderless place, from *Nepantla* “you see through the fiction of the monoculture, the myth of the superiority of the white races. And eventually you begin seeing through your ethnic culture’s myth of the inferiority” (Anzaldúa, 2002, p. 549). Through this



(un)learning process we begin cultivating reciprocal responsibility to protect, sustain and support all beings belonging to the land and Cemanahuac (entire cosmos).

Nepantla is guided by Nomatca Nehuatl, the Nahua understanding of being kernels of the same corn cob. We are the people of corn, “this is not just a metaphor; corn is your sister – made of corn... We recognize ourselves as part of the universe. There’s no separation between self and the universe” (Alarcón, 2008, p. 282). Nepantla requires committing to collective healing in a way that centers the land. Remembering that the land is the most important element of our existence, as the land holds our web of relations. Nepantla aims for the discovery of our most authentic face and heart – in *ixtli in yóllotl*, by understanding the meaning of living a good life, which according to Cajete (2000) is “thinking of one’s self, one’s community, and one’s environment ‘richly’ – essentially, a spiritual mindset in which one thinks in the highest, most respectful, and most compassionate way, thus systemically influencing the actions of both individuals and the community” (p. 276). The resurgence of the colours of the corn cob is possible by living a good life. An imaginary where communities are similar to corn cobs of diverse colours, all uniquely different leaning on each other forming collective belonging. By planting, nurturing, tending and protecting the growth of *Chicomexochitl* (corn cob of many colours), we heal ourselves and the land. The harvest of *Chicomexochitl* in Nepantla is nurtured and sustained by polycultures of reciprocity and relationality. Nepantla cultivates Indigenous queer belonging through radical imaginaries that hold us accountable for one another. A place of sustenance where we can all admire our true colours. A place devoted to kinship where we collectively discover, heal and express our in *ixtli in yóllotl*.



## Chapter 9: Cultivating Belonging – Conclusion

*ma quicacqui tonacaz in ayac quinequi quicacquiz*

*ma quitta tix in mochin quinequi quinayaz*

*ma quihtoa tocan in nelli tix ihuan toyolloh*

*(may our ears hear what nobody wants to hear*

*may our eyes see what everyone wants to hide*

*may our mouths speak our true faces and hearts)*

— *Francisco X. Alarcón (1992, p.115)*

The time has come to close the circle and conclude our journey by returning to the purpose of the study. This chapter works to draw conclusions, reflect on challenges and imagine further opportunities to give back.

### 9.1 A Sea of Relationships (Conclusions & Challenges)

Our life is all about relationships, we are swimming in what Tewa scholar Gregory Cajete calls “a sea of relationships” with the natural world (2000, p. 178). Reflecting on Cajete’s words, Anishinaabe scholar Jan Hare argues that inside that sea, “knowledge is accumulated” (2012, p. 407). Knowledge can be given through stories to navigate, respect and care for both the seen and unseen. Stories provide ways to think about the complexity of knowledge and how interconnections of self, alter our narratives of truth. As they say, they are always two sides to every story. The story we tell ourselves maintains balance to our physical, intellectual, emotional and spiritual realms, but the knowledge we hold as true can sometimes be harmfully inaccurate. Ahenakew et al. (2014) remind us that “there is no complete knowledge; we all teach, learn and



keep changing: it is a path without an end” (p. 227). With this thesis, I looked to interrogate and problematize taken-for-granted assumptions within our knowledge and uncover voices we never heard before. Mark Twain, Will Rogers and other writers, are all famously accredited for saying the quote: “it isn’t what we know that gives us trouble, it’s what we know that ain’t so” (cited in Keyes, 2006). No one knows who said it first, but does it matter? A great quote to conclude our journey and a sweet reminder that knowledge lies in the eyes of the beholder.

The intention of the present thesis is not to provide a complete formula or stoic answer. My purpose is to imagine otherwise by planting seeds of resistance, solidarity and humility towards cultures of reciprocity and relationality. Cultivating teachings that transform ownership claims of the land into understanding we are and belong to the land. A pedagogy of belonging through the synergy of queering red pedagogy is knowledge that is growing, adapting and transforming. A pedagogy grounded on in *ixtli* in *yóllotl* is a practice of cuddling the land, discovering your face and heart involves building relation with community and the land. A holistic understanding that includes our individual responsibility for the collective, our responsibility to sustain the system of relationships that comprise our humanity inside the earth, understanding “we are her caretakers, not her owners” (Ahenakew et al., 2014, p. 227). Attaining face and heart is a mutual endeavour of respect extensively grounded in placeness, located within oneself, in community and inside the cosmos. My desire is that the present thesis contributes to our collective responsibility to heal ourselves and the land. I hope a pedagogy of belonging guided by in *ixtli* in *yóllotl* fosters a sense of belonging by cultivating places in education for collective healing, self-determination and authentic expression of being.



For Andreotti et al. (2015), coloniality is a harmful system that perpetuates oppressive inequities by reproducing “modernity’s imperial project” represented by three violences “spaciality (expansionist control of lands), ontoepistemic racism (elimination and subjugation of difference) and geopolitics of knowledge production (epistemic violence)” (p. 23).

Coloniality/modernity is bricked inside the construction of Mexico in many different forms, for the purpose of my thesis, I focus largely on the opposition of mestizaje through differential consciousness and collectively embracing our authentic self. The biggest challenge comes when considering opportunity. Who has the opportunity to embark on this journey? How will it be made available for the ones living in the borders and the margins, where this pedagogy comes from? How long will the cultivation of belonging be in a land that is owned? We have to realize that every day we are still playing a colonial/modern game and following its rules. Is the desire to do better enough? Will doing the best we can change the game we play? The challenges must be solved collectively by spreading, shifting to, teaching with, acting upon narratives with stories where the land is the narrator and main character.

When speaking about having a pedagogy for collective emancipatory belonging where people refuse and oppose their current subjugation, what happens if they can’t? What if you cannot unbind from your entrapment? What if you are modernly enslaved, working nineteen hours a day? What if the conditions of survival do not permit an exit? If we have to be part of the system, how do we change it? When you are in a store deciding between buying one organic fruit or four manufactured items including m&m’s, who are we to judge how one chooses to survive? One of the biggest challenges to discuss ahead is the meaning of poverty and understanding the necessity of poverty to maintain the global north and south discourse. The challenge that comes



when trying to move beyond the oppressive inclusion of mestizaje towards ethical pluriversal borderless places is a collective endeavour and it must address the financial architecture of our globalized world.

## **9.2 A Rebellious Land (Giving Back)**

There are several philosophical and pedagogical practices that could reasonably follow this thesis, I would argue that many of them have to do with curriculum development. Currently, I am working as a curriculum development coordinator creating a course for the theory and practice of outreach at the School of Nursing in the University of British Columbia. The team includes an interdisciplinary unit of researchers and organizations working together to develop, test and inform practices, programs and policies that positively affect the well-being of people who regularly experience social inequities. The course we are creating is shaped by community-based participatory research and its curriculum is threaded with a pedagogy of belonging grounded by Indigenous holistic theory cultivating the process of queering red pedagogy. The course involves land-based, experiential, intergenerational, holistic learning, and narrativity, performance, arts-based and embodied-pedagogy, the perfect conditions for *Nepantla*. A place where students have the opportunity to involve in deep self-assessment about entrenched assumptions, biases and stigmatizations that are reproduced without being aware of the harmful and violent effects they cause. The course navigates towards the meaning of radical solidarity, collective healing, self-determination, fluid perspectives, transformative justice and capacity to love. It is a beautiful example of the pedagogical possibilities of *ixtli* in *yóllotl*. Further research involves examining the transformative learning experiences of the students who enroll in the outreach course.



As a way to give back by presenting the finding of this study, I am creating and designing a children's book in Nahuatl, Spanish and English, illustrated by Mestiza artist Montserrat Solano who painted part of the beautiful artwork from this thesis. Her featured artwork will beautifully illustrate the pages of a children's book about corn. The book follows the framework of Chicomexochitl through a story of cultivation. The story will narrate the teachings of an Abuelita (grandmother) to her grandchild on how to cultivate Chicomexochitl – native corn of many colours. The journey will include understanding how modern forms of growing corn are harming and fragmenting the land. Abuelita will show her grandchild, how she has learned to grow corn through old teachings and stories. The journey will include all practices and protocols required to harvest a corn cob of many colours and refuse the sameness of yellow corn. The story is centred around themes of diversity, Indigenous knowledges, land-based learning, community, reciprocity, relationality and belonging. The book hopes to inspire children who feel on the outside to imagine places where they can express their authentic colours.

Growing up I was not able to express my authentic self, I wanted my femininity and Indigeneity to disappear. I learn to conceal and blend my identity into the dominant normative to feel that I belonged. It took me some time but eventually, I became an artist of hiding in plain sight. I contoured myself to someone else's story. Learning how to become the normative standard, accomplish what I wanted, to disappear. My journey of (un)learning through transformative experiences has been guided by stories and points to a landscape of belonging and healing. Refusing, rewriting, and reclaiming multiple layers of symbolisms that have made me feel inferior or ashamed has been critical to that journey. This thesis hopes to reframe dominant narratives to ones that are often overlooked or rendered invisible by centralizing Indigenous



holistic theory and imagining Indigenous queer futures. I am inspired by and try to reference inside this thesis all my relations, all the ones who are part of my stories. I have learned that stories are a gift from our relations and the land; they are our most valuable treasure. I grew up hearing stories about everything linking back to Chicomexochitl (coloured corn cob). We are all one corn cob, and we are the ones who paint her colours. Cultivating relationships at all their capacity, with ourselves, the land, the cosmos, and our communities is what brings the colours back. It is a story in the telling and we are narrating it together.

This thesis brings into consideration questions about how to create radical imaginaries for Indigenous queer futures and my hope is to inspire others to express their - in *ixtli* in *yóllotl* – their face and heart. This thesis was inspired by the EZLN (Zapatista Army of National Liberation) and the Zapatistas autonomous education. An education to survive in harsh conditions and fight against coloniality/modernity by maintaining Mayan ancient culture and preserving the environment. They stand for the re-awakening of consciousness and awareness of Ancient Maya spirituality (Forest, 2008). I have learned from the Zapatistas to appreciate the gifts of the land with generosity and kindness by resisting corrupt governments and fighting for Indigenous sovereignty. A fight for the land. A beautiful example of a pedagogy of belonging, is the intervention of the Zapatistas 421st Squadron composed of seven Zapatistas who departed from Tzotz Choj zone to Europe by boat. For the Zapatistas, this travel is an act of refusal, reclamation and rewriting of dominant narratives. Subcomandante Insurgente Galeano explains the purpose of the travel by saying,

Thus, our first footstep on European soil (assuming of course they even let us disembark) will not be that of a man, nor that of a woman, but that of an other [otroa]. In what the late



SupMarcos would have called a “slap in the face of the hetero-patriarchal left,” it has been decided that the first person to disembark will be Marijose. Upon stepping for the first time on European soil and recovering from seasickness, Marijose will shout:

“Surrender hetero-patriarchal pale-faces who persecute those who are different!”

Nah, just kidding, but that would be cool wouldn’t it?

Rather, upon landing, the Zapatista compa Marijose will solemnly say:

“In the name of the Zapatista women, children, men, elderly, and of course, others, I declare that from now on this place, currently referred to as “Europe” by those who live here, be called: SLUMIL K’AJXEMK’OP, which means “Rebellious Land” or “Land which does not give in nor give up.” And that is how it will be known by its own people and by others for as long as there is at least someone here who does not surrender, sell out, or give up. (2021)

The oppositional stance of the Zapatistas and the forefront of Marijose to be the first Zapatista to step on European land, breaks colonial heteropatriarchal frameworks and ignites imaginaries for the pursue of Indigenous sovereignty and self-determination. By shifting dominant narratives and settler binaries, the Zapatistas are breaking socially constructed hegemonic realities that work to oppress Indigenous and Mestizx 2S/LGBTQIA+ identities. The Zapatistas are merging Indigenous knowledges, queerness and differential consciousness, they are deepening and widening ruptures in the colonial/modern normative towards a transformative path, revealing through the cracks an Indigenous queer belonging.

The intention of the thesis is to give back a pedagogy of belonging rooted by in ixtli in yóllotl, an embodied learning where “each individual should be transformed through the



process of education and find that special “place” where reside one’s...true relationship with oneself, with one’s community, and with the natural world.” (Cajete, 1999, p. 194). That special place is a place of sustenance, a rebellious land, a portal to a paradigm shift created through an Indigenous queer imaginary and the resurgence of Indigenous knowledge systems. An imaginary where you belong to a community that embraces fluid notions of being through a commitment to Indigenous resurgence and collective healing by redressing legacies of colonialism. A process of critically reflecting on the assumptions we have, even the ones embedded in the language we were taught to speak and the emotions we were taught to feel. A place of sustenance devoted to kinship helps transform individual fragmentation and shame into collective healing and belonging. For Brendtro et al. (1990), significance is “nurtured in a cultural milieu that celebrates the universal need for belonging” (p. 35), and belonging requires honouring kinship bonds with everything we relate to, all our relations, “the great ring of relatives” (p. 37). They add that realizing we belong to each other including all animate/inanimate beings, is a transformative experience that has to do with being loved and returning love. And as Black musician Bill Withers reminds us “love not related to romance but a love that says simply: I am human so are you. We need each other to survive and grow” (1972).

In concluding, Nepantla as an in-between place, fosters an education to become a complete human by expressing the authentic truthfulness of our being within cultures of reciprocity and relationality, meaning one understands their gift to the world and knows the deep responsibility to give back to the earth in the best way they can; “whatever our gift, we are called to give it and to dance for the renewal of the world. In return for the privilege



of breath” (Kimmerer, 2013 p. 384). A pedagogy of belonging guide by Nahua holistic theory cultivates a *Nepantla* as a place of sustenance, which can be imagined inside *Trees Holding Hands* by the late Mi’kmaw Spiritual Leader, Healer, and Chief Charles Labrador, he shares, “Go into the forest, you see the birch, maple, pine. Look underground and all those trees are holding hands. We as people have to do the same” (cited in Iwama et al., 2009, p. 3). Earth shows us how to be wrapped up in kinship, we just have to follow, this is how we find in *ixtli* in *yóllotl* (face and heart), this is how we belong.

Chicomexochitl mitztlaquenpa tlazque. Nimitzmotlazohcamachililia.



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