

Language, Power and Art: Towards an Embodied Praxis for Language Reclamation  
in Language Teacher Education

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## Dedication

Para mis hijos, Valentina,  
Ilán Yuuí y  
Elfrida

Y mis abuelas, Margarita y Olga  
Por darme vida con sus historias

## Abstract

Language reclamation, usually connected to the efforts of a linguistic community to bring back their language, is seldom associated with language teacher education programs. Indeed, schools and universities, including teacher education, have a longstanding history as central sites of linguicide and epistemicide, the violent erasure of languages and systems of thought (Ngũgĩ wa Thiong’o, 2009; Skutnabb-Kangas & Phillipson, 1996). Yet this very history underscores the need to foreground Indigenous languages, cultures and ways of knowing as a path towards language reclamation and decolonization of language teacher education.

This dissertation draws from the experience of a class I facilitated at a language teacher education program in Oaxaca, Mexico’s linguistically and culturally most diverse state. The class, titled ‘Lengua, Poder y Arte,’ aimed to nurture and create spaces for language reclamation through critical embodied pedagogies, a holistic praxis that questions power and creates alternatives through any language, art form and movement.

Embracing theory as praxis and the intersections between critical pedagogies (Boal, 2000; Freire, 2005; hooks, 2014), language reclamation (Leonard, 2012) and decolonizing methodologies (Mignolo & Walsh, 2018; Smith, 2012), I ask how a critical embodied pedagogy can foster language reclamation by empowering students and future language teachers to question hegemonic ideologies and actively (re)create spaces for Indigenous languages and cultures within and beyond the university.

The dissertation approaches the question from three angles through three separate chapters. The first chapter examines the possibilities of language reclamation through the interrelated processes of remembering, reading, storytelling and revitalizing (Smith,

2012), making a case for broadening our conception of language reclamation beyond language teaching and learning to a process of knowledge production that contests hegemonic policies and linguistic ideologies.

The second chapter employs found poetry, a literary collage and arts-based research strategy (Furman et al., 2007), to explore questions of identity as it relates to language reclamation, asking how researchers and educators should approach language reclamation when, as within a teacher education program in meeting ground city, students come from multiple places, have different heritage, linguistic histories and experiences. The chapter calls for scholars and educators involved in language revitalization/reclamation efforts to attend to the nuanced ways that people inhabit and negotiate identities in different settings and in interaction (Urrieta, 2017), and to engage actively with how pedagogical practices can constrain or enable identity positions that encourage the (re)appropriation, (re)creation and (re)invention of indigeneity.

The third chapter, “Art,” looks at how performance operates as a mode of embodied analysis and critique, providing a space to critically question, feel and analyze the meanings ascribed to languages and bodies and a platform for struggle and rehearsal where empathetic reflection (Nagar, 2019), hartazgo and joy can generate ideological, implementational and actual spaces for Indigenous languages.

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## Preface

It is difficult to trace where this journey started. One could say it started from the encouragement of my mother to create and use the imagination, the drawer full of markers, paper, cardboard and fragments of threads ready to become something else. It could have started earlier, when my mother, then ten years old, asked her brother how to color the animals on her coloring book and he replied by saying it was up to her, for she could (re)create the world on her page. It could have originated in the long afternoons that my mother spent in her father's studio creating miniature worlds out of wood and yeast with Don Paco. Like my mother, I always found comfort in imagining my own worlds, spending hours alone drawing or enacting stories with dolls.

Human relationships posed greater risks and fears. I learned to guard my soul by being silent when, at age four and having recently moved with my family back to Mexico from the U.S., I was called a gringa. My body and heritage place me at the intersection of multiple privileges and curses. Beyond a gringa, the foreigner par excellence, both hated and admired (Navarrete, 2017), my German roots and white skin place me as a güera, a term that underscores the pigmentocracy that associates whiteness with beauty, privilege, power and wealth in contrast to moreno or dark skin, associated with ugliness, marginality and poverty (Navarrete, 2017). The doors to elite spaces opened effortlessly by social capital and simple appearance. My father, a tall white man who values efficiency, always seemed to attract special service lest to provoke his ire. In those moments, as he seemed to grow in size, I became smaller around him, looking at the floor and tugging at his pants, begging him to stop.

I learned to move my gaze and look down when other children knocked on the car window on our way back to school, asking for money, or when I sensed my mother's fear at seeing my little sister playing with the children who usually spent their days on the street, on our side of the gate. My best friend, Luisita, had been kidnapped with her sisters. A friend of my cousin, too, had been kidnapped, his body found on a garbage dump.

The walls became higher and I guarded my soul by pushing the discomfort and fear down my throat into my stomach, where it occasionally takes root and attempts to grow like a creeper around my body, into my mouth and over my eyes. Over the years I have learned that the only way to move is by pulling at the branches, picking out and tearing down walls. By being vulnerable and taking risks.

I aimed to break away from the walls that organized my life. As part of my endeavors, I enrolled in a theater class at the Casa del Teatro in Coyoacán which challenged me in ways that I had not been before. I remember a task where we were asked to embody our adolescence in one act. At seventeen, I was one of the youngest in the troop and with my soul still pushed deep inside my stomach, I felt the ache and the promise of a shell starting to crack open.

I did not continue with theater after that year, but the longing to explore my own and the worlds' insides through storytelling and bodies in relationship remained. It was a personal yearning, one I had not yet connected to the work I started doing in language learning classrooms or to my emerging work as a graduate student, yet it guided my future choices. It attracted me to classes like narrative and arts-based-research and to the work of Veronica Quillien who, unlike most graduate students who learned and followed

the art of the academic trade, embraced her story as a place of praxis and theorization, pushing the boundaries of our department. Veronica did not separate her story from her research and work. It was personal, political and vulnerable.

These experiences, my stories and my academic dreams also began to converge in gradual, confusing and sometimes painful ways. It was December of 2014 when we sat in the critical pedagogies class with Tim Lensmire sharing our learning from the semester that I burst into tears. I was mourning, for the first time, the murder/disappearance of the 43 Indigenous student-teachers from Ayotzinapa just a few months back. Far away in a cold, well-lit classroom, the experiences and (un)learnings at the university started taking me back to the cradle of my upbringing, marked by silences and cotton candy. Presiding from a position of power in the organizational committee for the 1968 Olympic games, my grandfather, on whose name the family lore is carved—all memories before him gone or erased—, held a staunch silence over the matanza de Tlatelolco, another student killing that took place only 10 days before the inauguration of the games, almost 50 years before Ayotzinapa. I started feeling the world in my body and that fall, along with the forty three, I mourned the loss of an unborn child.

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There is something about Oaxaca that pulls you in. The art on the walls of the old colonial buildings, the daily parades of music and dancing that claim the streets and the thick roots of the trees spreading under and above ground, breaking the sidewalk and any attempt at subduing the landscape. In the summer of 2016, my friend Eric Benitez picked me up from the airport in Oaxaca City, where I had arrived from Mexico City, welcoming me to “the city of resistance.” The airport had riot police lined up at the

entrance, checking IDs. The teacher's union, of which Eric is and continues to be an active member, had been demonstrating against the standardized assessments imposed on teachers as part of the newest reforma educativa, referred to in Oaxaca as the "deforma educativa." Teachers had blocked the highway to Mexico City and to the Isthmus and occupied a perimeter along the historic center of the state's capital.

Only one year earlier I had worked at an internship in the Mexico City headquarters of the newly formed INEE, the national institution in charge of designing and implementing the standardized evaluations the teachers were demonstrating against. I was then trying to understand the process of assessment design and investigating how government officials involved in implementing national and international assessments legitimize assessment in relation to equity.

The institute was full of good intentions. However, if you asked people discreetly, you also found the recognition that the teacher evaluations, which acted as new gatekeepers into the profession, did not and could not evaluate good teaching. I had been at the INEE when members of the teachers' union surrounded it and it was evacuated under threats of fire and I was in Oaxaca a few days later, giving a talk on formative assessment at the Indigenous Education Conference, where I had been invited by Eric, a member of the CEDELIO (Centro de Desarrollo de las Lenguas Indígenas de Oaxaca).

Now, a year later, I had come on a fellowship to spend the summer learning Zapotec in the Isthmus. My husband, Sandro and my daughter, Valentina were there to see me off and we were walking the streets of downtown on June 19th when we saw groups of people gathered around the TVs hanging from the cafes around the main square. The images showed a battle between police and hundreds of protesters on the

Mexico City-Oaxaca highway that would leave six dead and over 100 injured. Around us, protestors, including teachers and students' parents, moved in their tents, preparing for a counteroffensive.

That night, as we stayed in a windowless room within the perimeter of the occupied city, we listened to the cohetes go off all night, keeping protestors from leaving their watch. We heard the shouting and the burning tires at the end of the road. I thought about Eric and the Mixe preschool teachers I had met a year earlier at the conference outside in the struggle while I lay in my windowless room. That summer the University offered to evacuate me out of Oaxaca (though they would leave my husband and my daughter) and I changed my plan to go to the Isthmus, which would have required walking around a few blockades and finding new transportation on the other side, to study Mixtec and stay in Oaxaca City. I often questioned my cowardice during these events and wondered if things would have been different had I not been a mother and had I not been there with Valentina. Would I have gone to the Isthmus? Would I have become more involved in the struggle? Would I have taken the risks or would the fear have enveloped me all the same, leaving me always a few steps away in the comfort of my position as a güera and an academic?

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Back in Minneapolis, I enrolled in an experimental film class and a theater for social justice class led by Sonja Kuflinec where I could turn to the arts to explore the questions that haunted me, to find the questions I still needed to ask and to learn new tools and pedagogies that I could start adopting in embodied explorations of linguistic histories and ideologies. These experiences gave me many of the tools that I have used

before and during the class I taught as part of this dissertation research. Yet it was a Spring 2017 class called ‘Stories, Bodies, Movements’—which built on decades of movement building and theater building work with thousands of peasants, laborers and artists of Sangtin Kisan Mazdoor Sangathan and Parakh Theatre (see Nagar, 2019)—that bridged my personal longings with what I was searching through my academic work and dreams, and it shaped my own explorations and pedagogies in important ways.

Through the work of movement building in political struggle and on the stage and page, Richa Nagar (2019) develops the metaphor of ‘hungry translations’ as “an ever-present hunger to ethically mediate across the unevenness of our social locations.” Hungry translations, she notes, are ever-evolving and “can only emerge from solidarities situated in place, time, and struggle” and “require a collectively honed praxis of radical vulnerability, which can enable ever-unfolding relationships across incommensurable landscapes of struggles and meanings” (p. 213). It is this praxis and the space of ‘Stories, Bodies, Movements,’ that named my yearning, gave direction to my explorations, and made me part of a collective with whom I could embark on the communal co-learning that would lead to the journey of ‘Lengua, Poder y Arte’ three years later.

Facilitated by Richa Nagar with theater artist Tarun Kumar, ‘Stories, Bodies, Movements’ did not teach me/us strategies or tools to implement on others. Rather, it demanded that I/we immerse ourselves into a praxis of learning with and from one another’s stories and build trust through radical vulnerability—a relational practice where we learn to see each other as “co-constitutive with the other,” recognizing that “whatever we learn, whatever we come to be, becomes deeply contingent on what each one of us is

prepared to give to the collective journey that brings the i/I and we together with the *you* and *they*” (Nagar, 2019, p. 212).

In this journey of surrendering ourselves and retelling our tales, I offered the story of my grandmother Olga, which came to be owned by all in the class as each student combined it with fragments of their own stories and embodied transgenerational memories. During the course of the semester, my grandmother’s story became a polyvocal script (p.213), a moving play called *Telling Dis/appearing Tales* (Stories, Bodies, Movements’ Class, Spring 2017, 2021). In this journey, I was pushed to embrace the risks of vulnerability. Offering my struggles and my complicities, I recognized my own story and hungers as inseparable from my personal and collective processes of knowledge making, and I felt the power of moving and learning collectively and in relationship, aware of the disagreements and tensions, and all of that which remains untranslatable (Nagar, 2019, p. 212).

*Playing with Fire* (Sangtin Writers & Nagar, 2006) can be seen in many ways as the foundation on which ‘Stories, Bodies, Movements’ emerges. It illuminates how knowledge is produced through intertwining stories and making connections between the intimate and the global, the personal and the political, and the protagonist and the antagonist that resides in each one of us. These embodied understandings became the cornerstone in the work and journey of ‘Lengua, Poder y Arte’. These insights also allowed me to work through my own burdens and complicities, and to explore the ways in which my own inherited stories and life were entangled with class, colonialism, gender, language and race. As I wrote in a journal during the class, “making these connections, sharing and listening to others’ stories and seeing how they connect and

weave within these sociopolitical dimensions feels refreshing and healing. The burden of the stories that are entangled with ‘Maria’s story’ is no longer only mine. They live outside me as they live within me and they are infused with new meanings as they become legitimized as knowledge” (Musafeir, Nagar & Schwedhelm, 2021).

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*Telling Dis/appearing Tales* looked for gaps and silences in our stories, and it led to the class’s collective remembering, feeling, wording, and enacting of the story of Carlotita, a missing figure in Olga’s initial story. Carlotita took care of my mother as an infant and until adulthood; yet her story was buried inside me until ‘Stories, Bodies, Movements’ class inspired us to flow with and unlearn and relearn our stories and selves by surrendering our egos, by co-owning our histories, and by building a shared authority.

Like Carlotita’s buried story, the research story (re)told through this dissertation also entails many gaps and silences, insights, processes and experiences that have grounded this work but have not always been acknowledged. From nobody have I learned more about comunalidad, a praxis and way of being that guides the analysis in this dissertation, as from Marisol Velázquez Estrada, the woman who raised me alongside my siblings in Mexico City while leaving her own children behind with her mother in Tetela del Volcán, a town on the slopes of the volcano that overlooks the Valley of Mexico. I listened intently to her stories about life in Tetela. While Nahuatl is only spoken in the surrounding towns, Tetela retains a practice of comunalidad in the form of fiestas and rituals that thread the fabric of the community. Through Marisol I learned about rituals to accompany the dead and support new mothers after birth. I learned about the practice of compadrazgo, serving as a madrina for her daughter’s 15th birthday party. I learned about

the joys and the responsibilities of the mayordomías, planning for events and feeding sometimes hundreds of people. And I witnessed the clash between comunalidad and the pressures of a neoliberal economy as my parents, her employers, complained about her ‘reckless spending’ instead of saving up for a house.

My journey with ‘Stories, Bodies, Movements’ continued in the Fall of 2017 with a second polyvocal script and performance, *Fractured Threads* (Stories, Bodies, Movements’ Class, Fall 2017, 2021), and my co-travelers, Richa Nagar and Sara Musafeir’s trip to Mexico City in March of 2018 (Musafeir, Nagar & Schwedhelm, 2021). Through these experiences and relearnings with my co-travelers, I have developed a persistent awareness for the gaps and untold fragments that inhabit all of our stories, including the stories I tell about my research in this dissertation. This preface is an attempt at acknowledging these gaps and burdens, even as I recognize that any such attempt at retelling is an ever-evolving and ever-incomplete hungry translation, for it is in the ongoing grappling with ethical retelling that the hope of doing justice to a story resides (Nagar, 2019).

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The roots of the making of the found poem, a collage of the voices of ‘Lengua, Poder y Arte’ that became the cornerstone of the class community at the center of this dissertation can be traced back to multiple people, sites and experiences, illustrating the many voices through which the pedagogy emerges.

I met Mario López-Gopar at an applied linguistics conference in 2014. I was interested in working in Oaxaca as a linguistically diverse state with a long history of resistance, most recently against the new reforma educativa and so I visited him at the

Facultad de Idiomas at the University in Oaxaca during that initial trip to look for potential sites for collaborations. I returned during my summer of language study in 2016 and then, in early 2017, knowing I would be back in Oaxaca for a second summer of Mixtec study, I proposed to teach a two-week workshop at the University on digital storytelling that would combine strategies and processes recently learned as a student in experimental film, theater and ‘Stories, Bodies, Movements.’ Mario was supportive of my proposal that combined digital storytelling as a pedagogical strategy and critical language awareness through the exploration of personal linguistic histories, and soon I found myself in a classroom at the University with a group of students. The first exercise was to create an “I come from” poem following a number of prompts. The exercise, developed by writer and teacher George Ella Lyon (<http://www.georgeellalyon.com/where.html>) had been adopted by Sonja Kuflinec in ‘Theater for Social Justice,’ where I encountered it for the first time as an initial community-building exercise. The first few sessions of the workshop when the group learned more about each other through the poems were deeply enriching, but the days passed, the semester ended and the focus of the workshop became more technical (focused on the making of the videos). The numbers dwindled and by the end of the workshop only a few students remained. Mario suggested then that I teach a one-semester elective class to encourage attendance, and having experienced the generosity, openness and rich and diverse histories that students brought with them, I jumped at the invitation to continue working at the Facultad de Idiomas. It was a rich opportunity to keep developing and growing the praxis beyond individual digital storytelling projects to a collective labor of co-learning through storytelling, performance and art-making.

In the Spring of 2020, as the semester started amidst the pandemic and I found myself re-thinking the syllabus on a day-to-day basis, I asked students to reply to the prompts: “Where do I come from? Where are my seas and my mountains? Who are my people?” We had just created the Facebook group, which all twenty-six students had access to and which gave us a platform from which we could share work in multiple modalities. The prompt would allow us to get to know each other beyond names, year in the program and interests which we had exchanged during our first and only in-person meeting and in short video introductions. This was similar to the prompts leading to the “I come from” poem that I had used during the workshop, with less structure and a wider freedom to choose modes of expression, lending itself well to the context of remote work. I learned this prompt from Sara Musafeir, my friend and co-traveler in ‘Stories, Bodies, Movements,’ during a retreat for the Board of Women of Language Attitude, an organization founded by Veronica Quillien of which we are both a part. It was a powerful experience that grounded us as individuals and as a collective. Later, I learned from Sara about its origins as inspired by *pepeha*, a Māori practice of linking people and identity to land (Murton, 2012), which made it more powerful as I thought about land as tied to identity and language.

Finally, it was the polyvocal script and practice of co-authorship lived in ‘Stories, Bodies, Movements’ that inspired my creation of the found poem as I engaged with students’ stories in awe of their creativity, imagination and vulnerability. Despite being physically apart and working individually on our responses, students engaged with the others’ texts and one act of vulnerability inspired another and yet another. While I, along with much of the world had questioned the meaning of embodiment through virtual

interaction, these stories—in all their generosity and radical vulnerability—were an evidence of the ways in which the mind, body and spirit cannot be fragmented.

The stories populated our Facebook group in an ever longer thread. Earlier postings were lost below the screen as I longed to bring them all together, putting them in conversation. Only through crafting a poem that foregrounded the affect conveyed in these stories did I feel I could do justice to them. I was familiar with the genre of the found poem from arts-based research and so I set to make sense of the stories, de-textualizing and entextualizing lines of text and creating new interweavings and meanings. This was a different process from the polyvocal script that emerged in *Telling Dis/appearing Tales* and *Fractured Threads* in that I was the sole editor of the found poem. Nevertheless, by sharing it with the group and reflecting about the experience of engaging with the edited and compiled poem, one which contained all of our voices, we began to find trust and build a sense of community as an emerging collective in the virtual classroom.

This work and the commitments that drive it, are never finished. The making of this dissertation is only a phase in a long journey that started for me well before I entered graduate school, and well before I encountered the arts and performance as languages and avenues for meaning-making. The pages of this dissertation are also founded on decades of movement building and parallel but separate struggles in different continents. Thus, my companions and co-creators are communities, organizations, collectives, movements—some of whom I have cited and others whom I can never adequately know or acknowledge because they have been erased or marginalized in the texts and practices of the academy that privilege individualism (Nagar, 2019). I have internalized their

teachings, but I am no longer able to tell where the learning began. Like the found poem, woven together through my typed words, these pages emerge from countless lives, struggles, histories, and dreams.

## **Lengua, Poder y Arte: An Introduction**

The spring semester of 2020 started with a strike by a coalition of University members that delayed the start of classes until March. Just as a resolution was reached and the University opened, the Mexican government announced the beginning of a lockdown as a response to COVID-19 that would send us (and much of the world) into re-inventing our educational practices in a virtual environment. I had traveled from Minneapolis to Oaxaca with the intention of facilitating a class at the Facultad de Idiomas (Department of Languages) at the University of Oaxaca that would serve as data for my dissertation. I dreamed of using the arts, including performance pedagogies to question hegemonic ideologies, imagine equitable multilingual practices and create spaces for the reclamation of Indigenous languages. Yet as it became clear that we would not return to campus, the syllabus I had imagined and put together, the performances and other embodied activities, all had to be reinvented.

On March 19th, a few days before the nationwide lockdown took effect, teachers at the Facultad de Idiomas were given the opportunity to meet with our groups in person for just one time to get everyone's contact information and start forging a path for learning together, yet apart. I didn't know how many students had signed up for my elective class, which I had titled 'Lengua, Poder y Arte,' so when I saw thirteen students, six of whom I knew from the Zapotec class I was auditing, I was filled with joy (thirteen additional students would enroll during the next week, to a total of twenty six). I introduced myself as a PhD student from Mexico City residing in Minnesota, and talked about my goals for the class and the attached research. I talked about the arts as a medium and a language to explore our and our ancestors' stories and to create new knowledge,

connecting the past to the present and future. From this perspective, I said, we are all artists.

We then formed a circle and one by one, we shared our names, our languages, interests, stories and hopes for the class. We talked about our artistic interests and leanings, our anxieties and possibilities for class projects. I mentioned the importance of sharing in community, of learning with and from each other and my own anxieties about how an embodied pedagogy based on trust and relationships would manifest remotely. Not only did I/we have to reimagine the classroom-based practices and embodied activities, but also the processes of relationship building so central to critical, embodied pedagogies.

Working together synchronously would not be easy. Not everybody owned a laptop and Internet connection can be fragile, especially during the rainy season. Other teachers at the University started working asynchronously, sending assignments through WhatsApp. Some used Google Classroom to assign and manage student work. Students mentioned Facebook Live, which is accessible, no data plan required. We tried it once, but I felt my lone voice getting lost in the stratosphere of the Web, a short list of names to remind me that there was an audience somewhere. I intended this class to be based on dialogue, and comments on Facebook were not enough. After exploring different modes of interaction, we settled into a routine that involved several platforms, synchronous and asynchronous, communicating through WhatsApp, meeting through Zoom and sharing work and class recordings on Facebook for those who could not connect live.

Despite the anxiety of the moment, the sudden and complete shift in context brought with it an unexpected lightness, lifting the load of the pre-determined, the

pressure from my own expectations that this should be something great, a model of emancipatory, embodied pedagogy, even though I knew there is no strategy, no exemplar or tale that captures a generalizable “best practices.” By forcing me to re-invent the syllabus on a day-to-day basis based on our technological affordances and their possibilities for interaction, COVID allowed me to deconstruct that tale and embrace an ever-present praxis of exploration, creativity and self-reflexivity.



Figure 1: Street art in Oaxaca City. Girl with hat covering her face reading “2020”

### **The Seeds**

The seeds for the class and this dissertation were planted in the fall and spring of 2016 and 2017, when having taken all the required coursework in my department, I ventured out of the school of Education to take classes in the Theater, Arts and Global Studies departments. I had been struggling with identifying the purpose in the work that I was doing and connecting it to action and transformation. More and more, I saw myself becoming enveloped and growing frustrated with discursive circles that did not commit to

or engage in purposeful action. On the other side, I became drawn to the work of Mary Hermes, Veronica Quillien and later, Richa Nagar and Sonja Kuflinec, whose research draws from their practice, and in many cases is inseparable from action.

The arts were a clear point of call. I yearned to immerse my hands in clay, and use all the senses to feel and do what I could not express with words alone. The idea of ‘Lengua, Poder y Arte’ developed slowly through experiences living, doing and trying different strategies that I threaded into a syllabus aimed at questioning hegemonic power structures and reimagining equitable worlds. The syllabus foregrounded language as inseparable from its speakers, deeply entangled with questions of race, gender, social class, land and politics of knowledge production (See Appendix A).

Just as I was inspired by mentors, colleagues and practice, I drew inspiration from decolonial, Freirian and critical pedagogy as well as Indigenous and feminist theory and praxis, a theoretical promiscuity as put forward by Audra Simpson and Andrea Smith (2014) that is based on solidarity and seeks to advance coalitions and engagement among disciplines and scholars with compatible intellectual and political goals. Like the work I draw from, my praxis-oriented research is premised upon a transformative agenda that seeks to encourage self-reflexivity and empowerment. Empowerment not as something I “have” or “give” to students, but, as Lather (1991) describes it, “a process one undertakes for oneself,” through “analyzing ideas about the causes of powerlessness, recognizing systemic oppressive forces, and acting both individually and collectively to change the conditions of our lives” (pp. 2-3).

This dissertation seeks to answer what happened during our class in relation to these intentions and how that relates to language reclamation. Did transformation and

empowerment take place, and if so, in what ways? How did we go about analyzing structures of power and act towards individually and collectively changing the conditions of our lives? By answering these questions, I foreground the intersections between critical, embodied pedagogies and language reclamation, specifically, how a critical embodied pedagogy can foster language reclamation by empowering students to question hegemonic ideologies that work to marginalize and displace Indigenous languages and knowledge systems.

I came into the research with a clear set of values, ideas and goals that were threaded into a guide that became the syllabus of ‘Lengua, Poder y Arte.’ Yet, and so as not to reproduce hegemonic relations of power, simply replacing one set of truths with another, critical pedagogy needs to be situated locally. Questioning power relations, deconstructing the “authoritative expert” in the classroom and in research also entails an open-endedness, ever attentiveness to the complexities of our multiple identities and complicities (Lather, 1991). I understand that no two journeys are alike and, as Richa Nagar (2019) observes, it is in moments of spontaneity and serendipity that the real praxis lies and the real moments of unlearning and relearning happen.

### **Conceptual Groundings**

While the term “language revitalization” has become ubiquitous in practice and in scholarship, having come to describe a new academic field (McIvor, 2020), this paper favors the term “language reclamation,” defined by Leonard (2012) as a broader effort “by a community to claim its right to speak a language and to set associated goals in response to community needs and perspectives” (p. 359). Language reclamation encompasses common language revitalization strategies, such as language documentation

and language teaching and learning; however, in approaching these strategies, it takes into account the embodied and dynamic nature of language and its inextricable and reciprocal links to human and non-human interaction, Indigenous ways of knowing and being in the world (Leonard, 2021).

Language reclamation goes hand in hand with Indigenous, holistic approaches to the world, of which relationality, the notion that everything is interrelated with each other and one another, is a guiding principle. In that sense, language reclamation is a personal process of rebuilding relationships with language, which in turn is tied to identity, peoplehood, spirituality, land and wellbeing (Leonard, 2021; Simpson, 2018). Language, culture and knowledge-making are intertwined processes that encompass land, relationality, and a collective responsibility that emerges from the roots up.

### **Weaving an Embodied Praxis**

As I developed a praxis that would lead to this dissertation, I found that the many experiences, pedagogical influences and the multiple locations that shaped it could not be easily “fitted” into a single discipline and theoretical framework. The exercise felt like pushing this work into a straitjacket. It had to be substantially reshaped in trying to be something else.

A theoretical framework is meant to help readers make sense of the questions asked, the research approaches used and trace the conversation within an academic discipline. Yet often the disciplinary boundaries that mark many of these frameworks can be limiting, stifle conversations between different lines of inquiry, re-impose the colonial perspectives of many Western theoretical traditions and foreclose oral, multimodal and other situated knowledges deemed outside the boundaries of academia.

Many scholars, speaking from Indigenous, feminist and/or other critical perspectives have challenged disciplinary boundaries. Maori scholar Linda Tuhiwai Smith (2012), for example, draws a connection between the concepts of discipline as a way of organizing people and academic disciplines as a way of organizing systems of knowledge. Both have been used as forms of domination, in the latter case, determining what counts as knowledge. In the former case, colonial education (and neoliberal, imperialist education) has similarly been used “to destroy every last remnant of alternative ways of knowing and living, to obliterate collective identities and memories and to impose a new order” (p. 72). She writes that “The effect of such discipline was to silence (for ever in some cases) or to suppress the ways of knowing, and the languages for knowing, of many different Indigenous peoples.” Therefore, “reclaiming a voice in this context,” “reconnecting and reordering those ways of knowing” entails a refusal of disciplining, including categorization through academic disciplines (p. 72). This work refuses disciplinary boundaries, choosing instead to cross borders and engage in conversations with scholars speaking from multiple journeys but with shared political goals (Nagar, 2019; Smith, 2012).

Several metaphors have been employed to visualize this transdisciplinary engagement. Dolores Delgado Bernal and Enrique Alemán (2017) employ the image of a *trenza* or braid as an analytical tool that brings or braids together critical race theories, Anzalduan Chicana feminist theories and the Indigenous/Chican@Latin@ knowledges and pedagogies of the communities with whom they work. Joe Kincheloe (2008, 2011) employs the image of the bricolage to propose an interdisciplinary theoretical approach that, grounded on what he terms a “multilogicality,” considers multiple, complex

realities, and aims to understand different structures and inscriptions of power through critical inquiry and researcher reflexivity. The bricolage represents a zone of intersection between critical theories, combined with Indigenous and other situated forms of knowledge.

The metaphors invoked by the *trenza* and the bricolage are powerful not only in their refusal to be constricted to disciplinary boundaries, but in their foregrounding of researcher reflexivity and situated knowledges, as well as their explicit engagement with Indigenous ways of knowing. In a similar vein and inspired by these metaphors, I employ a web as an analytical tool. A web foregrounds the transdisciplinarity conveyed by the *trenza* and the bricolage as a weaving or entanglements between different theories, praxis, and conversations, a theoretical promiscuity with multiple threads that are influenced by each other and acquire their strength only as a fabric and assemblage of intersections. Unlike a frame, a web moves with the winds and the weight of the context. Like a building, a pedagogy or theoretical praxis is stronger when it is allowed to move with the waves of earthquakes.

While I foreground the intersections of the web, this doesn't mean losing sight of differences and incommensurabilities. Decoloniality/transformation is necessarily a messy process that cannot have a predetermined destination (e.g., Mignolo & Walsh, 2018; Nagar, 2019). It entails different "truths," different versions of justice coming together in time and space, which means that solidarities can only be liminal (Tuck & Yang, 2012). We need to work through the gaps, mindful of the equivocations or ever-present communicative disjunctions (Viveiros de Castro, 2004). Equivocations cannot be avoided but they need to be acknowledged to maintain divergences among perspectives

and avoid erasing dissimilar knowledges by making them the same. The contradictions that entangle us, our knowledges and multiple journeys create the tensions that give the web the strength to move and respond to the weight of the context.

The web that supports this project weaves and creates a dialogue between already entangled genealogies, including feminist and critical pedagogies (e.g., Anzaldúa, 1987; 2002; Freire, 2005; hooks, 2014; Nagar, 2014; 2019) decolonial approaches (e.g., Mignolo & Walsh, 2018) and Indigenous theories and praxis (e.g., Díaz, 2007; Simpson, 2018; Martínez Luna, 2010). The intersections among these approaches together with the threads of experiences and situated knowledges that I as researcher/facilitator and students brought to the space, created the unique fabric that grounded and became ‘Lengua, Poder y Arte.’

The first intersection is the foregrounding of doing, for only through action is transformation possible. Many scholars, activists and educators have challenged the modern division between theory and practice, embracing instead the concept of praxis, a continuous flow of movement of “thought-reflection-action” (Mignolo & Walsh, 2018, p.7). For bell hooks (2014) theory is inseparable from experience and the concrete, emerging from her efforts “to make sense of everyday life experiences,” and “to intervene critically in [her] life and the lives of others” (p. 71). Simpson and Smith (2014) similarly promote theory as praxis, stating that Native communities are actively engaging in critically theorizing and creating new knowledge as they engage in activism. Within Indigenous approaches, the practice of living and the construction of knowledge are inseparable and intertwined, knowledge and theory being generated through relations with the Land as mother and territory (Simpson, 2018; Díaz, 2007). As Simpson (2018)

writes, “doing produces more knowledge.” It is the act of doing that “animates theory within Indigenous contexts, and it is the crucial intellectual mode for generating knowledge. Theory and praxis, story and practice are interdependent, cogenerators of knowledge” (p. 20). These conceptions of theory and praxis directly challenge hegemonic politics of knowledge production that determine what counts as knowledge, leaving Indigenous knowledges and languages out of school curricula. Language and culture reclamation as praxis generates knowledge. It is through doing, through speaking, listening, through storytelling, observing and being in relations and pitching in (Bang et al., 2015), that we are engaging in transformation.

A second and related intersection between feminist, critical, decolonial and Indigenous thoughts and approaches is the consideration of teaching and learning as a holistic process involving mind-body and spirit. A holistic focus on education is based on a belief that “whole” human beings strive “not just for knowledge in books, but knowledge about how to live in the world” (hooks, 2014, pp. 14-15). It challenges Euro-American centric mind/body binaries enforced in education, drawing attention to the body as an agent of knowledge production.

Within Indigenous approaches, language, culture and knowledge-making are intertwined processes that encompass land, spirituality and relationality. As Simpson (2018) explains, knowledge, “ultimately originates in the spirit world, and it is controlled in very specific and intricate ways in Aboriginal lifeways. The process of learning, or of gaining new knowledge is focused around learning more about oneself in relation to the land, the spirits and all of our relations” (p. 142).

‘Lengua, Poder y Arte’ was grounded around the concept of praxis and a holistic conception of learning, inviting class participants to access their embodied knowledge through storytelling, performance, art-making and all their linguistic resources, listening carefully to all our relations and relationships to the land.

I understand “critical embodied pedagogies” as this invitation to listen to and know through body, mind and spirit, a translingual praxis that seeks expression through any language, art form and movement. Rather than a practice that is bound to a classroom (virtual or physical), pedagogy is viewed as relational encounters which make opportunities for growth possible (Zembylas, 2007). It is temporal and uncertain, marked with possibilities and impossibilities, an emergence of constant connections and relations in which we are entangled (Louis, 2005).

### **Background**

Oaxaca is a southern state in Mexico where the Sierra Madre Oriental meets the Sierra Madre Occidental. This rugged landscape is home to some of the country’s most diverse natural ecosystems, as well as the highest number of self-governed municipalities, communal land ownership and people with distinct languages and cultures (Martínez Luna, 2010). The state recognizes 16 official, national languages, though this number is contested because some of these languages have multiple, sometimes mutually unintelligible variants, and according to census data, 31.2% of the population identifies as a speaker of an Indigenous language (INEGI, 2020).



Figure 2: “Nations of Oaxaca” (Credit: Colectivo Mixe)

Perhaps because of this cultural, linguistic and natural diversity, Oaxaca is also characterized by a long history of political resistance against a neoliberal economic model and assimilationist policies— from capitalist mega-projects in Indigenous communities (e.g., García, 2021) to standardized assessments for teachers (Bautista, 2020)— that have seized land and natural resources, and aimed to unify and Spanishize a nation-state in the name of ‘progress’. These policies have profoundly affected Indigenous communities, resulting in societal changes that have disrupted cultural and linguistic intergenerational transmission (de León, 2017). While many communities continue to transmit their language to the younger generations, there is a growing shift to Spanish as the hegemonic language.

As a response, many scholars, activists and teachers have engaged in local processes and efforts to create spaces of resistance in everyday life, as well as in schools where many local, alternative educational models and pedagogies are being developed from the ground-up, following Indigenous forms of knowledge (Schwedhelm, 2019). It is

against this backdrop of hegemonic policies and local resistance that the class that is the basis for this dissertation took place.

The University of Oaxaca is a public institution located in the City of Oaxaca which attracts students from multiple communities throughout the state. Within the Facultad de Idiomas, students are required to take English language classes and choose a “third” language. While most students take Indo-European languages like French, Italian or Portuguese, spaces for Indigenous languages have been growing gradually over the years, with the recent offering of Isthmus Zapotec and Mixe language classes.

Zapotec is the most widely spoken language in the state, with more than 420,000 speakers (INEGI, 2020). It is generally divided geographically into four macro variants: Sierra Norte, Sierra Sur, Central Valleys and the Isthmus, and over 60 variants, many of them mutually unintelligible (INALI, 2020). The sociolinguistic context varies greatly by district and community. While the Central Valley varieties within and nearby the urban areas are being more rapidly displaced (Brügmann & Acevedo, 2013), Isthmus Zapotec or Diidxazá has the largest numbers of speakers and enjoys a long tradition of activism due to economic, political and academic support that has resulted in the development of a growing body of literature and other arts-based initiatives (DeKorne, 2021).

Mixe or Ayuuk is spoken by 118,000 people (INEGI, 2020) in a small mountainous area in the northeast of Oaxaca that borders and intertwines with Zapotec languages in some communities. It is characterized as one of the most vibrant languages of the state due to a geopolitical delimitation and collective identification that has generated multiple strategies of resistance through the daily practice of comunalidad, an ideology, theory and way of living (Díaz, 2007) briefly described as “the principle and

practices of communal life and the source of indigenous identity and resistance” (Meyer, 2010, p. 30-31). This has been used as a guiding principle in the development of education programs, from early to high education, that are born from and are integrated into the community (Meyer & Maldonado, 2004; Morán, 2013).

The growing recognition of the linguistic and cultural diversity within the University, and the role and responsibility of the Facultad de Idiomas to make spaces for Indigenous languages has also fostered the development of new events like multilingual song competitions, projects and workshops through partnerships with other institutions (for example, a workshop on linguistic auto-documentation) and a Master’s degree program in translation and interpretation of Indigenous languages.

Some students are speakers or learners of an Indigenous language; thus, they are already bilingual or multilingual when they enter the program. Many more have parents, grandparents or close friends who are speakers or have been exposed to the linguistic diversity of the state in their communities and in Oaxaca City, where it is common to hear multiple languages in markets and other public places.

### **Language, Power and Art**

The class was and was not about language reclamation. You could find references to language reclamation in my research proposal, in my research question, examining the possibilities of embodied pedagogies for language reclamation, and in the syllabus, stating, among other objectives, that “students will imagine new ways of becoming linguistic and cultural revitalization agents” (See Appendix A).

But the class was also, as the name suggested, about language, power and art.

The class description spoke of a collective labor of learning through storytelling and through the exploration of language ideologies and regimes that influence education and our lives, and it talked about (re)imagining more equitable policies and pedagogies. Yet there is no exploration of language and power in Oaxaca that does not involve Indigenous languages and no (re)imagining of equitable policies, practices and pedagogies that does not involve language reclamation.

After the pilot I facilitated in the fall of 2019 (also called ‘Lengua, Poder y Arte’) had attracted only three students, faculty members at the University suggested changing the name of the class, which I initially did, to “Language Policy and Linguistic Ideologies.” But while this conveyed the topic in some form, it did not convey the form. I was not giving an overview of research and definitions, but asking students to learn collectively through our stories about the relationships between language and power. Naming it “language reclamation” or “language revitalization” would also create expectations that would not encompass critical conversations about language, storytelling and performance. But beyond conveying misleading expectations, I was wary that the name would suggest the class was meant for speakers of Indigenous languages and discourage “ghost speakers” who have insecurity in the language (Covarrubias Acosta, 2021), those who no longer speak the language of their parents or grandparents or those, like me, who have interrupted ties to Indigeneity but are interested in exploring the questions posed by the class and find ways to create change from their particular locations. Turning to the arts to explore the many relationships between language and power invites everyone into the conversation/praxis, for we all have language stories and linguistic histories that reflect the power dynamics that we are immersed in and

participate in. Drawing inspiration from Richa Nagar's (2019) "Stories, Bodies, Movements," which I had been a part of and which has been an important influence in my journey leading to the class and this dissertation, I decided to name it simply, 'Lengua, Poder y Arte,' leaving expectations open and curiosity wide.

I came to language reclamation from an interest in languages and the multiple worlds and ways of knowing they reveal. The path I forged took me from language learning and teaching to linguistics, to deeper conversations about pedagogy, uneven power dynamics and longstanding discriminatory practices that manifest in our everyday languaging, schooling and academic practices. I was introduced to language reclamation work by my advisor, Mary Hermes, from whom I started learning Ojibwe; yet it was important to me to return to Mexico and make sense of the social discourses and ideologies inscribed in my body, ideologies connected to forced assimilation, land grabs, discrimination and language loss.

I took the invitation to do my research at the University of Oaxaca from Mario López-Gopar, whom I had met through mutual contacts. Already heavily invested in advancing critical perspectives and making spaces for Indigenous languages, the University, home also to a very diverse group of students, was an ideal setting for my work. I felt at home in academia, having spent much of my life as a student, and so it is from that space, so implicated in epistemological and linguistic erasure, that I, as a language teacher educator, felt I could make a contribution towards decolonizing language teaching and promoting the teaching and learning of Indigenous languages.

As the researcher and the facilitator, I am embedded in my research, my own decolonization process entangled with the processes that generate the classroom space. I

am engaging in this work as a way to respond to the many ways my own histories carry colonial burdens, to combat colonial unknowings, interrupt genealogies of violence, and forge situated solidarities (Nagar, 2014), moving towards reclaiming Indigenous ways of knowing, being and living in relation and closer to the land.

This is my dance with the stories (re)told and experiences lived in ‘Lengua, Poder y Arte,’ one enunciation among many, from a particular place and time. I do not speak for, nor represent any pedagogy, community or people(s). I speak however with the confidence that there are other educators, activists and scholars thinking through and engaging in similar, parallel struggles. It is only through the act of sharing and our multiple enunciations that we can enrich our praxis and scholarship of language reclamation, applied linguistics and language teacher education.

### **A Three Paper Dissertation**

Presenting data completely, “in all their ambiguity and inelegance” has always been a challenge for qualitative researchers, not excluding dissertation writers. Seeing that data does not always support predetermined conceptual frameworks, Leung, Harris and Rampton (2004) suggest that, in order to advance theory-building, rather than “smoothing” the data (for me a more violent process of forcibly pushing it into a straightjacket), researchers should pay attention to the messiness and the ways that participants’ experiences do not fit their preconceived frameworks (and, I would add, structures).

Like opting for a theoretical promiscuity, making sense of the data through separate, stand-alone but interrelated papers enables approaching and exploring the same question from multiple angles and perspectives. It also helps unravel the messiness of the

data, the multiple stories, possibilities and threads to tell one (or multiple) research stories.

This is a dissertation in three papers. Each paper takes up different theoretical threads into the conversation, while all remain connected and supported by the conceptual web that gave rise to the embodied praxis. The three papers or chapters are also organized in three sections: Language, Power and Art.

The three chapters are:

- Language - The language sprouts: Remembering, reading, storytelling and revitalizing in language teacher education
- Power - Mountains, seas and peoples: (Re)constructing and mobilizing identities for language reclamation
- Art - Enacting language reclamation through performance as embodied praxis

The first chapter, under “Language,” takes up threads of Indigenous (Kovach, 2009; Smith, 2012) and decolonial approaches (Mignolo & Walsh, 2018) to examine the possibilities of language reclamation through the interrelated processes of remembering, reading, storytelling and revitalizing. By approaching language reclamation from a language teacher education program where students from multiple heritage reclaimed their languages, cultures and stories of place, it makes a case for broadening our conception of language reclamation beyond language teaching and learning to a process of knowledge production that contests hegemonic policies and linguistic ideologies.

The second chapter, under “Power,” employs found poetry (Furman et al., 2007) and draws on work on indigeneity and identity politics (Aguilar Gil, 2017; Medina, 2009; Mendoza Zuany, 2014; Urrieta, 2017) and comunalidad as praxis (Díaz, 2007; Martínez

Luna, 2013) to explore questions of identity as it relates to language reclamation, specifically, how to approach the process within a teacher education program in a meeting grounds city, with students from multiple places, heritage, histories and experiences. The chapter calls for scholars and educators involved in language revitalization/reclamation efforts to attend to the nuanced ways that people inhabit and negotiate identities in different settings and in interaction (Urrieta, 2017), and to think actively into how pedagogical practices can constrain or enable identity positions that encourage the (re)appropriation, (re)creation and (re)invention of indigeneity.

The third chapter, under “Art,” employs performance pedagogy (Boal, 2000; Louis, 2005; Madison, 2014) and ethnodrama (Saldaña, 2005) to look at how performance operates as a mode of embodied analysis and critique, exploring the ways it can foster language reclamation by empowering students to question hegemonic ideologies that work to marginalize and displace Indigenous languages and knowledge systems. It argues that performance provides a space to critically question, feel and analyze the meanings ascribed to languages and bodies and a platform for struggle and rehearsal where empathetic reflection (Nagar, 2019), hartazgo and joy can generate ideological, implementational and actual spaces for Indigenous languages.

Together these chapters offer insight into the possibilities of critical embodied pedagogies for language reclamation, illustrating a praxis grounded on conceptions of language reclamation as inseparable from culture, identity and epistemology. They also make a case for expanding the practice of language reclamation to language teacher education programs as efforts towards decolonizing language teacher education while opening up new spaces for Indigenous languages, cultures and knowledges to sprout.

## Language

### *The Language Sprouts: Remembering, Reading, Storytelling and Revitalizing in Language Teacher Education*

Brota la lengua, or “the language sprouts,” is the title of a poem by P’urepecha poet Rubí Huerta (Culturas Populares Durango, 2019) that captures the image of a language reawakening (originally written in P’urepecha, the translation from Spanish is mine). “Language is not only word,” she writes, “it got stuck between the paths along the sierra, in the perfume and color of the flowers, between the herbs of the field, and it was made medicine.” Language, she tells us, remains in the depth of the lake, within the ashes of our grandmothers’ stove. “Sound that flies with the intensity of the wind,” language falls like seeds, names our surroundings and sprouts once more.

This chapter follows Rubi Huerta’s beautifully rendered view of language as living, inseparable from its people and its surroundings, and of language revitalization as reawakening, a process of reclamation that is both local and global, intimate and political (Hermes, Bang & Marin, 2012). The context, a language teacher education program at an urban university in Oaxaca, Mexico, might seem far removed from the sierra, the lake and the grandmother’s stove described in the poem. Language reclamation, usually connected to the efforts of a linguistic community to bring back their language, is also seldom associated with language teacher education programs. Indeed, schools and universities, including teacher education, have a longstanding history as central sites of linguicide and epistemicide, the violent erasure and replacement of languages and systems of thought with those associated with the dominant group (Ngũgĩ wa Thiong’o,

2009; Skutnabb-Kangas & Phillipson, 1996). In Mexico, this was done through campaigns of castellanización or “Spanishization,” an assimilationist project implemented after the Mexican Revolution and throughout the 20th century (López, 2013) that presupposed that national unity rested in the cultural unity of the Mexican population, with Spanish as the only national language (Schmelkes, 2006). Today, the process and practice of castellanización continues, supported by Euro-Western centric hegemonic systems of education that have profoundly affected communities in Mexico, resulting in societal changes that have disrupted cultural and linguistic intergenerational transmission (Aquino Moreschi, 2013; de León, 2017).

Yet this very history underscores the need to foreground Indigenous languages, cultures and ways of knowing as a path towards language reclamation and decolonization of language teacher education. It is through students’ stories of and about language, land and community, that we can call the seeds of language into the classroom.

The chapter draws from the experience of a class I facilitated at the Language Department of the University of Oaxaca in the Spring of 2020. The class, titled ‘Lengua, Poder y Arte,’ aimed to nurture and create spaces for language reclamation through critical embodied pedagogies, a holistic praxis that questions power and creates alternatives through any language, art form and movement. Students, many of whom are speakers or have heritage in an Indigenous language and who are learners of English and other “world” and local languages, engaged in the co-exploration of linguistic ideologies and language regimes through storytelling and art-making, reflecting on how these ideologies and power structures influence our lives, education and society.

Foregrounding the intersections between critical, embodied pedagogies, language reclamation and decolonizing methodologies (Smith, 2012), I ask how a critical embodied pedagogy can foster language reclamation by empowering students and future language teachers to question hegemonic ideologies and actively (re)create spaces for Indigenous languages and cultures within and beyond the university. Through video, poetry, photography, narrative and critical conversations, participants in ‘Lengua, Poder y Arte’ questioned dominant epistemologies and cultivated new and existing projects to relearn their Indigenous languages, raise awareness and reclaim erased local histories and knowledges. The virtual landscape in which we were forced to work due to the COVID-19 pandemic foreclosed the ability to interact, relate and move together in person, but it enabled different types of relationships and collaborations, underscoring the rich possibilities of critical embodied pedagogies to foster critical ideological awareness, intergenerational learning, advocacy and activism within and beyond a virtual realm and our individual locations.

In the preceding discussion, I have introduced language reclamation and illustrated the context within which ‘Lengua, Poder y Arte’ took place. After locating this study within the context of the University of Oaxaca and wider efforts at decolonizing language teacher education, I introduce the Indigenous and decolonial theoretical threads that guide the weaving of this chapter. The next section describes and analyzes the individual and collective work of students in the class, organized around four Indigenous projects: *reading*, *remembering*, *storytelling* and *revitalizing and regenerating* (Smith, 2012). I conclude with a reflection on the possibilities of this work for language reclamation and the decolonization of language teacher education.

## **Oaxaca and the Department of Languages: A Portrait**

The University of Oaxaca sits in the heart of Oaxaca State's Central Valleys. It is a big public institution that extends along Avenida Universidad, one of the main arteries of Oaxaca city. The Department of Languages or Facultad de Idiomas lives in a set of two-story buildings by an open-air cafeteria and basketball court. Classrooms and offices open to open-air hallways that face a patio in the middle so that at the end of class periods, students converge in the outdoor spaces in between the wings, the cafeteria and the basketball court. The hustle and bustle denotes a tight community among students, staff and faculty that is particularly evident during events like singing and dancing competitions and fairs. The common language is Spanish, but learned languages like English, French, Japanese, Zapotec or newly added Mixe are showcased periodically during these events, and if one listens carefully, one might hear sounds of Oaxaca's languages flying through the cafeteria, in and out of the classrooms into the hallways and open spaces. Three students in the cafeteria sit and discuss versions of the national anthem in Indigenous languages. One of them speaks Mixtec and sings along for her friends.

I head to the Isthmus Zapotec class I am auditing. It is a third semester class and students read along a story they wrote in both Zapotec and Spanish. Kiara Ríos Ríos, the teacher, is a speaker of Isthmus Zapotec and a former student at the department where she now teaches. Two other students, David and Sica Bii also grew up in the Isthmus region and speak a similar version of Zapotec that Kiara regularly invites them to share. Both Sica Bii and David dream of returning to the Isthmus and teaching their language. David is in the class to (re)learn the language he says he did not want to learn as a child from his

father, and both of them are learning writing and teaching strategies of a language that they were never taught in school and had never written before entering the Zapotec class at the University. While the Zapotec Isthmus community has a long history of activism and promotion of their language, also known as Diidxazá, Spanish remains the medium of instruction in most schools and other public settings, with Diidxazá being largely relegated to private spaces (López-Gopar et al., 2021).

Two other students, Sylvia (pseudonym) and Abraham are speakers of two different varieties of Zapoteco de la Sierra. Zapotec has over 80 different dialectal varieties (INALI, 2020) and the languages of Sylvia and Abraham, spoken in towns located along the northern mountain range that transverses the state, are largely unintelligible with Isthmus Zapotec. Abraham shares that he spoke the language as a child but stopped when he moved to Oaxaca City and has since forgotten it. Only when he is there, do the meanings come back to him.

Another highly engaged participant in the class is Emma. Emma comes from Yuvila, a community in the Sierra only an hour drive north of the city that has a few elder Zapotec speakers left. Among the last speakers was Emma's late grandmother, who inspires her desire to reclaim and revitalize the language in her community. And then there is Aremi, whose father speaks Zapotec and did not transfer it to his children out of concern that her mother, who is a Spanish speaker, would not understand.

Other students too have a parent or grandparent who speaks a local language, either Zapotec or one of the other 15 languages and over 100 Indigenous language varieties recognized in the state (INALI, 2020). Some have friends or have simply developed an interest in learning Zapotec born out of the activism of the Department of

Languages to include and promote Indigenous languages as an effort to decolonize language teacher education (López-Gopar et al., 2021).

### **Decolonizing Language Teacher Education**

The same colonial processes of oppression and exploitation that have suppressed, invisibilized and eradicated Indigenous languages (linguicide) have also worked to displace and eradicate Indigenous knowledge systems (epistemicide) (de Sousa, 2009). This happens in schools and universities through the imposition of curricula that privilege Euro-Western epistemologies as the only legitimate knowledge to be taught as content; and through education policies that privilege English, and in Mexico, Spanish, the hegemonic language, as the only legitimate medium of education.

Language reclamation is also political in that it identifies the historical and contemporary causes that have displaced linguistic and cultural practices, and goes beyond to actively resist the beliefs and practices that impede language recovery (Henne-Ochoa et al., 2020; Leonard, 2021). As a decolonization effort and in order to counter both linguicide and epistemicide, language reclamation must be grounded on Indigenous knowledges and approaches, engaged through local practices, uncovering and re-creating local knowledges. As a person of mixed German, Spanish and Mexican heritage with broken ties to indigeneity working with young people tracing roots to multiple places and peoples, I took on this responsibility by encouraging us to engage with our inherited ancestral knowledges, learning from our embodied experiences and with our parents, grandparents and our communities.

Working towards language and culture reclamation within language teacher education requires adapting to nontraditional teaching methods and practices (McCarty & Lee, 2014, p. 110) and calls for cross disciplinary thinking with Indigenous and critical approaches (Phyak & De Costa, 2021). Indigenous scholars have long been advocating for and actively constructing paradigms rooted on Indigenous epistemologies and social justice (Breidlid & Botha, 2015; Díaz, 2007; Kawagley, 1995; Wane, 2008), calling for the integration of language and culture (e.g., Hermes, 2007), Indigenous intellectual traditions and language and literacy development (e.g., Romero-Little, 2006), and Indigenous ways of teaching and learning in education (e.g., Barnhardt & Kawagley, 2005; Simpson, 2018).

Several Indigenous and intercultural higher education models and programs have sprung up around the world, particularly during the last three decades (e.g., Mato, 2008; Schmelkes, 2009). Not unlike challenges faced by elementary and secondary schools, Indigenous higher education has to navigate neoliberal systems of education and colonizing institutions, and some efforts have been criticized for falling into (or originating from) that model (Maldonado-Alvarado, 2016; Walsh, 2010). Yet despite these challenges, many activists, scholars and educators have successfully opened up new spaces for Indigenous knowledges and languages through higher education. A notable example in Oaxaca is the ENBIO (Escuela Normal Bilingüe Intercultural de Oaxaca), a teacher training institution rooted in comunalidad and intercultural education for speakers of Indigenous languages wishing to work in their own communities (Reyes & Vázquez, 2008).

Until recently, the Department of Languages at the University was known as the Department of Foreign Languages, which offered an undergraduate degree in the teaching of foreign languages with a strong focus on English, by far the most widely taught language in Mexico. It was not until 2013 that, as part of the activism of faculty, Kiara Ríos Ríos, then a student in the program, was invited to teach her language and stay on as a lecturer and staff member at the University, and the Department changed its name from *Facultad de Lenguas Extranjeras* (Department of Foreign Languages) to a broader and inclusive *Facultad de Idiomas* (Department of Languages) (López-Gopar et al., 2021).

The focus on European languages, and especially English in schools and universities and subsequent overshadowing of Indigenous languages in Mexico is not uncommon. In 2015, the newly appointed minister of education, Aurelio Nuño Mayer presented the new national English language program, declaring that “in 10 to 20 years... [Mexico] can be a bilingual country” (Muedano, 2015, my translation). This blatant exclusion of Indigenous languages is part of a discourse that positions English as the language of modernity and development while regarding the (often counted) 68 Indigenous languages as-objects, relics of a romanticized past, but not the present or future, to be taught and learned.

Colonizers repressed the epistemologies of the colonized, their knowledge production, symbolic universe and forms of expression, engendering an epistemic hegemony that extends beyond geographical regions and is manifest today through a rhetoric of modernity that maintains a logic of coloniality (Quijano, 2007). The colonial discourses like those that link English to progress and development, and Indigenous

languages with backwardness and “underdevelopment” are inseparable from neoliberal practices that maintain Spanish, the hegemonic national language, as the medium of instruction in schools and promote English as the language of modernity while subtly erasing Indigenous languages (López-Gopar et al., 2021; Sayer, 2015).

Mignolo and Walsh (2018) make note of the complicities that bring us to participate in what they call the modernity/coloniality matrix of power by negating, distorting and denying “knowledges, subjectivities, world senses, and life visions” outside hegemonic epistemologies and ontologies (p. 4). While modernity/coloniality is a constant process of rearrangement and production of relations and structures of power and domination, decoloniality seeks to displace these colonial habits through an ongoing process of re-imagining and enacting an otherwise or a “re-existence,” “the redefining and re-signifying of life in conditions of dignity” (p. 3).

The syllabus of ‘Lengua, Poder y Arte’ aims to displace colonial habits by reflecting on our complicities and making the ideologies that help perpetuate these uneven power relations visible. But rather than staying at reflection, the syllabus seeks to turn this reflection into a praxis of language reclamation that resists domination and imagines equitable multilingual and multicultural practices.

Within the University of Oaxaca, decolonizing language teaching is conceived as “Latin American peoples’ awareness of the rhetoric of modernity/coloniality present in neoliberal discourses in language teaching and learning and peoples’ attempts to challenge them” (López-Gopar et al., 2021, p. 315). This includes the recognition that “knowledge is not only produced in European centers through European languages” (p. 315). This awareness is part of a long process of unlearning, questioning the ideologies

that are deeply embedded within us/students/scholars/educators. It is also an important and necessary step towards creating spaces for Indigenous languages and knowledges.

Members of the University community have worked towards this vision by making spaces for Indigenous languages through the inclusion and promotion of Zapotec and Mixe, but also through partnerships with communities and organizations, and the conception and implementation of projects like auto-documentation workshops, peer-to-peer language tutoring with students/speakers of Indigenous languages and a new Masters program in translation and interpretation of Indigenous languages. It is within this context that the syllabus and the different iterations of ‘Lengua, Poder y Arte’ take form and are realized, small, but important enunciations towards decolonizing language teaching within the broader efforts at the University and beyond.

### **Theory Threads**

This chapter takes up threads of Indigenous, transformative paradigms and decolonial options. While there are important differences between the different approaches, rooted in different genealogies and conversations, there are also many alignments and cross influences (Kovach, 2009). Transformative paradigms and approaches offer a critical perspective that considers the influence of colonial relationships and point to the need and responsibility of researchers to draw on knowledges that resist hegemonic epistemologies and ontologies and point to alternative futures (Kincheloe, 2008). One way to do this is by challenging the division of theory and practice, advocating for a praxis that ties action to reflection and back to action (Mignolo & Walsh, 2018; Freire, 2005; hooks, 2014). Indeed, the possibilities for transformation or “re-existence” cannot just be thought or imagined, they have to be lived and continuously

practiced, a continuous movement of knowledge production and action towards a decolonized future. Within indigenous paradigms, the practice of living is similarly perceived as inseparable from the construction of knowledge, generated through relations among humans and between humans and the land (e.g., Martínez Luna, 2010; Simpson, 2018).

In her book, *Indigenous Methodologies*, Smith (2012) describes twelve Indigenous projects which, rooted in praxis and situated within decolonization politics of Indigenous people's struggles, move towards cultural survival, self-determination, healing, restoration and social justice. Four of these intersecting projects: a) remembering, b) reading, c) storytelling, and d) revitalizing and regenerating were especially present in the creation of the syllabus and research design.

*Remembering* means both remembering the past, attending to the history and present dynamics of colonialism to then re-member, “connecting bodies with place and experiences” and people's responses to painful colonial histories (p. 147).

*Reading* refers to a critical re-reading of history, deconstructing Western versions of history and science to provide critical re-tellings from Indigenous perspectives (p. 150).

*Storytelling* has long formed part of Indigenous oral traditions. According to Archibald (2008), “stories engage listeners and the story teller in a respectful relationship of reciprocity that creates and sustains oral cultures” (as cited in Smith, 2012, p. 146). Storytelling can be a form of intergenerational knowledge transfer, connecting the past with the future (Kovach, 2009).

*Revitalizing and regenerating* respond to linguisticism and linguisticide and involve creating initiatives around education, broadcasting and publishing among other efforts to promote the (re)learning and use of Indigenous languages. Students can engage in revitalization through arts-based (e.g., film, theater, fanzines, etc.), education (by creating materials or language learning strategies, tutoring, re-learning and re-claiming heritage languages) or other communication projects (participation in university or other community events).

Story and epistemology cannot be separated, as Brayboy (2005) notes, “our stories are our theories” (p. 427). In this study the class worked to recover and reclaim stories and epistemologies and make sense of them in the context we inhabit (language education, high education, urban spaces). The narratives that emerged in the class and my retellings in this chapter aim to honor “the primacy of direct experience, interconnectedness, relationship, holism, quality, and value” (Cajete, 2004, p. 66), recognizing however the imperfect translations of the stories and experiences of class participants (Nagar, 2019). As Abraham, a class participant, mentioned after he read one of my (re)tellings: “it feels like being backstage,” looking at the experience of our performance and the (re)telling of his story through my gaze and from my position on the stage.

### **Research Strategies**

Methodology and pedagogy are intricately linked, both referring to the praxis of seeking and gaining knowledge (Wilson, 2008). Hence the processes of knowledge-making that took place in the class are inseparable from subsequent processes of knowledge-making through analysis of those experiences. In this section, I describe the

online context in which the class took place followed by the strategies used in preserving (data collection) and analyzing the experiences within ‘Lengua, Poder y Arte.’

The class took place in the spring of 2020. Meant to be a face-to-face experience, we quickly had to adapt to a virtual environment due to the COVID pandemic. This greatly influenced not only the experience of the class, but the nature of data collection. While it foreclosed some possibilities and exercises that can only be done in person, it enabled others, as many students were able to travel back to their communities and (re)connect with family members and we were able to take advantage of the many technological tools available to us.

The class met synchronously through Zoom for 1.5 hours twice a week during one semester (15 weeks). Due to difficulties with scheduling and access to high-speed Internet, not everyone was able to connect to the Zoom sessions and many of these were recorded on my phone and transmitted on Facebook, where we also had a private group to share our work. In addition, we used Google Classroom to keep track of assignments and we had a WhatsApp group to communicate, ask questions and organize group work.

The class was an elective class offered to students in the 4<sup>th</sup> to 8<sup>th</sup> semester of the Language Teaching Licenciatura (equivalent to BA program). Students were informed about my research project during the first day of class, but informed consent was only pursued at the end of the semester and after grades had been submitted. Taking place within the university system, grading was a requirement, yet I was given flexibility in how to approach this requirement. Because art can never be “right” or “wrong,” grading was calculated based on participation (taking into account the technological and other practical limitations) and a self-evaluation where students were asked to consider the

degree to which they challenged themselves in their work. In the end, 23 out of the 26 students in the class decided to participate in the research project. Six of them identified as speakers/learners of an Indigenous language (three of Zapotec, one of Mixtec, one of Chontal and one of Huave), three others had a parent or grandparent who is or was a speaker of Zapotec.

The experiences or data that were recorded and analyzed later include recordings of synchronous class sessions, student work shared through Facebook and Google Classroom, including photos, narratives, poetry, written and oral reflections, drawings and videos. The data set also included my reflections, which I wrote or recorded orally after each class session, and recorded conversations with each participating student about two months after the end of the semester.

Analogous to interviews, the conversations (Wilson, 2008) were unstructured dialogues about students' experiences in the program, the class and their plans and dreams for the future. The language of the class as well as all my interactions with students was Spanish. Except for the projects where students used their Indigenous languages, all the work was done in Spanish. The translations from Spanish into English are mine.

While I was the teacher of the class and was addressed in Spanish as “profa,” short for “professor,” marking the hierarchies that we occupied within the university, we developed and contested relationships throughout the semester (some participants were also fellow students in the Zapotec class I was auditing), so that by the time of our retrospective conversations about the class and their experiences, our relationships were

based on a personal connection beyond that of researcher-participant and, I believe, allowed us to have more open and honest discussions.

### **Data Analysis**

I organize my analysis around the four projects of *remembering*, *reading*, *storytelling* and *revitalizing* (Smith, 2012). Given the focus of the chapter on language reawakening, I foreground the stories of three students, Jacky, Joselint and Alexis, who saw their mother languages sprout, alongside work of students' who reclaimed ancestral and community knowledges and practices.

Analysis was first a process of deductive meaning-making and subsequently inductive coding (Saldaña, 2013) using Smith's (2012) Indigenous projects to organize and make sense of the experience and work done in class. These projects intersect in several ways and more than one can be present in any given narrative. A performance can involve *storytelling* as the group shares stories and/or collectively authors a story, *remembering* as they/we draw from the past to heal colonial pain and bring together mind/body and spirit, *reading* as they/we (re)tell dominant histories and foreground alternative histories, and *revitalizing* by creating spaces for Indigenous languages and ancestral knowledges. The aim around organizing the analysis by project is not to disentangle them, but to shed light on each one as an important methodology and pedagogy towards language reclamation.

### **Reading, Remembering, Storytelling and Revitalizing**

In this section I illustrate some of the work that was generated through 'Lengua, Poder y Arte' in relation to the Indigenous projects of *reading*, *remembering*, *storytelling* and *revitalizing and regenerating* (Smith, 2012). An ongoing concern in the (re)telling of

this research story is the impossibility of doing justice to the rich, multimodal and multilingual work of students. Given the limitations of the (written, academic) form and my own linguistic limitations, I can only offer brief snapshots in English and Spanish. I invite readers to make this a multimodal experience and explore the full work of students in the Appendices and/or the accompanying links (<https://lenguapoderarte.wordpress.com/>).

### **Reading and Remembering: Connecting Body, Place and Experience**

*Remembering* is similar to *reading* in that it involves a critical re-reading and re-telling of history, but paying closer attention to the politics of memory and the praxis of re-membering as (re)drawing connections between body, place and experience (Smith, 2012). Remembering or re-membering is a response to the dismemberment of Indigenous memory through the replacement of names, languages and Identities with European ones (Ngũgĩ wa Thiong’o, 2009). As Nguyen (2016) writes, memory is not separate from power. What we remember and what we forget are bound to the discourses and the power networks within which we are located. The narratives below illustrate a remembering of language stories dismembered or fragmented by colonialism and globalization.

#### ***On Why Chontal Ceased to Be Spoken***

The first story was told by Jacky, a fourth semester student from Chonte who connected to class from her community. She wrote this in response to a video called “No hay lengua sin pueblo” (Canal 22, 2019) which students watched at the beginning of the class. In it, three Indigenous poets, Mikea Sánchez, Enriqueta Lunez and Irma Pineda, tell us their stories of language through poetry and images, inviting us to see all the connections between language, art, spirituality, rites, organizations, stories, and of course,

people. I asked students to post a response to the video, thinking about what they felt, what struck them, and offering a story in return. This is an abstract of Jacky's story and my translation into English.

Sobre por qué se dejó de hablar el chontal  
By Jacky Fuentes

Yo le pregunté a mis abuelos  
que cómo fue que las personas dejaron de  
utilizar el chontal.  
me contaron que cuando eran niños,  
en las escuelas les prohibían hablar el  
chontal,  
que los castigaban o les pegaban  
con el fin de que ya  
no utilizaran el idioma.  
Cuando salían a estudiar fuera,  
se burlaban de ellos  
cuando los escuchaban hablar en chontal,  
o los miraban feo, así como con desprecio  
o como sino valieran nada.  
Cuando ellos se convirtieron en padres  
obviamente  
ellos no querían que sus hijos pasaran por lo  
mismo,  
entonces ya les enseñaron mejor el español  
y el chontal solo lo ocupaban en casa.  
  
al ver que el chontal ya no era tan  
indispensable  
pues ya muchos padres solo le hablaban en  
español a sus hijos,  
así con el tiempo ya solo el español es el que  
se utiliza aquí en Chonte,  
mi comunidad.

*On why Chontal ceased to be spoken*  
*By Jacky Fuentes*

*I asked my grandparents  
how it was that people stopped  
using Chontal.  
They told me that when they were  
children,  
In schools they were forbidden to speak  
Chontal,  
that they punished them or they hit them  
so that they will not speak the language.  
When they left to study,  
they were made fun of  
when people heard them speak in  
Chontal,  
or they looked at them ugly, with  
contempt  
or as if they were worth nothing.  
When they became parents  
obviously  
they didn't want their children to go  
through the same,  
so they taught them Spanish  
and only used Chontal at home.  
  
Seeing that Chontal was no longer  
indispensable,  
well many parents only spoke to their  
children in Spanish,  
so that with time it is only Spanish that  
is used here in Chonte,  
my community.*



Figure 3: The mountains of Chonte by Jacky Fuentes

Yásnaya Aguilar Gil (Canal 22, 2017) states that there are many reasons to learn a language and only one to stop speaking it: discrimination. This story embodies this statement through the lived experience of Jacky’s grandparents. Jacky’s question, on why Chontal is no longer spoken in her community, challenges academic and institutional reports that provide quantified indexes of “endangerment,” while ignoring the causes that are driving that change. Even when the causes of language shift or language loss are laid down, they are sanitized in the process of trying to translate experience through disembodied (re)tellings that obscure the painful experiences of those subjected to that violence.

Jacky’s story connects experience, body and place in a deeply felt narrative of language dismemberment. As her grandparents remembered painful colonial histories of being punished, beaten, their humanity taken from them for speaking an Indigenous language, Jacky re-membered the embodied stories and experiences of her grandparents and others in her community. Through intergenerational storytelling, she connects bodies, experiences and place to weave together a re-telling of language loss that is embodied, inseparable from her community and her own story.

Offering stories in response to “No hay lengua sin pueblo” (Canal 22, 2019), class participants continued learning from each other, remembering that language loss is

a violent process, and that it affects all of us, though differently, from our different locations.

### *Lo Desconocido*

Later in the semester, I asked students to share stories of language. These could be any experience or emotional response related to an interaction that brought to light how they or others engage in languaging or communicate, or a story related to language, like Jacky's, that they had inherited from parents or grandparents. Students then got together in small groups and either chose one of those stories or created a new one, writing a script that they would perform in the synchronous class sessions and later record on video and post to our Facebook group.

Jacky, Victoria, Sandra and Marili decided to write a script that told a story from the perspective of three languages: Chontal, Chocholteco and Ixcateco (Readers can see the video of the performance here: <https://youtu.be/OJ6ZUiINjSk>). Their criteria for choosing these languages (out of the 16 officially recognized in Oaxaca), apart from Chontal being Jacky's language, was the reduced number of speakers. Ixcateco is often mentioned in reports and news articles about language endangerment in Mexico and in Oaxaca. Characterized as a language on the brink of extinction (e.g., de Jesús Cortés, 2020), this attention has brought many linguists to Santa María Ixcatlán, a small town in the north of the state, seeking to record the "last native speakers." In contrast, Chocholteco or Ngigua, a language spoken on a mountainous region not far from Santa María Ixcatlán, is not so widely known. Victoria, whose family comes from the Isthmus and who has Zapotec heritage, had never heard of Ngigua and engaged in research to learn more about the language and its speakers. Sandra, who played Ixcateco and who

comes from the City of Oaxaca, also engaged in research to learn more about the context of the language, while Jackie drew from her own knowledge and the knowledge of her family and her community to write and play the role of Chontal.

Communicating and working together through WhatsApp, the group created a short script for a play called *Lo Desconocido* or “the unknown,” in which three languages, Chontal, Chocholteco and Ixcateco, personified by Jacky, Victoria and Sandra respectively, are interrogated by Marili, “the interrogator.” The script (and video) begins with a description of the scene:

Un interrogatorio se lleva a cabo. Los interrogados saben porqué están allí. Hay melancolía, frustración, desconcierto. El interrogador con cierta perspicacia comienza su labor, su intención es indagar más allá que cualquiera haya intentado. Comienza con las preguntas...

*An interrogation takes place. Those questioned know why they are there. There is melancholy, frustration, bewilderment. The interrogator with some insight begins his work, his intention is to investigate further than anyone has tried. He starts with the questions...*

From this introduction, it is unclear why this interrogation is taking place or what the interrogation room is, but in conversation during the synchronous performance, the group explained it represents our minds. It is “ourselves and the minds of speakers,” Sandra said.

The first question asks the three languages to introduce themselves, to which they reply:

Ixcateco:

Soy el crecer de las orquídeas en cuaresma, el canto del jilguero por las mañanas, la grava, la puesta de sol en el murillo, el canto de 10 voces, el reptar de la serpiente coralillo, soy el Ixcateco y vengo de Santa María Ixcatlán

*I am the growth of orchids in Lent, the song of the goldfinch in the morning, the gravel, the sunset on the murillo, the song of 10 voices, the slithering of the coral snake, I am the Ixcateco and I come from Santa María Ixcatlán.*

Chontal:

Soy las altas montañas repletas de encinos y pinos, con terrenos que la gente trabaja, soy el viento feroz e indomable en febrero, soy la ausencia de las nubes en marzo y abril y días nublados en los demás meses.

*I am the high mountains full of oaks and pines, with land that people work. I am the fierce and indomitable wind in February, I am the absence of clouds in March and April and cloudy days in the other months.*

Chocholteco:

Soy el adobe de los refugios, el techo de palma y las manos que tejen sombreros. La soledad y la aridez de la tierra.

*I am the adobe of the shelters, the palm roof and the hands that weave hats. The loneliness and aridity of the earth.*

The languages are portrayed as living, not only characters speaking for themselves and expressing emotion, but as evident in their introductions, inseparable from place and land. By coming together in the interrogation room, the languages engage in the act of remembering, connecting experience to land and bringing together their stories from fragmented pieces, re-telling history from their own perspectives. Only Jacky speaks Chontal and there are few speakers of Ixcateco and Chocholteco/Ngigua that Victoria and Sandra don't have access to, so the three languages are given voice in Spanish. Perhaps this is a reflection of the sociolinguistic regimes that we live in, with Spanish as the lingua franca (and hegemonic language), and thus wasn't questioned by anyone during the performance.

After asking languages how they feel about the end, the interrogator asks the languages what brought them to the interrogation room. The meaning of the question is not immediately clear. Earlier the narrator describes the interrogation room as "no more than the first place where everything that is dying goes," but continues, "not before

coming together in the same room, turning it into a heavy table of oblivion, resistance, uncertainty and nostalgia.” From the first line, it seems like the languages are on their last stop before vanishing, a steady and inevitable path to oblivion, yet then we learn about resistance and uncertainty, making this room perhaps not a last stop, but a place to come together, remember, gather strength and new hope. This becomes more evident after we hear the answers of the languages to the question: “Who brought you here?”

For Chocholteco, it was el señor Alfonso, “a man with much hatred and little understanding. He despised me because he didn’t understand me.” We don’t know much about Don Alfonso from the play. Was he or his parents punished and beaten for speaking the language like Jacky’s grandparents? Was he afraid that his children would be? But, Chocholteco says, “young Silver strengthens me every day.” Victoria shares that Silver is a friend of hers from the Department of Language who is a speaker and activist, fighting to reclaim his language.

Ixcateco was brought to the interrogation room by Doña María, who behind a loom “tries to teach her granddaughters how to weave a huipil; who does not know if she should or shouldn’t introduce [Ixcateco] to the new generations because she is afraid to see her family suffer discrimination,” but who “despite all, continues with a smile full of hope that pushes me to be here.” Finally, Chontal says it was brought to the interrogation room “thanks to the hope that many people give me” and names Luis Angel especially, a young man who has fought greatly and created many initiatives so that other people might “know me.” And, while Chontal mentions that it continues to face many challenges, “it is better to take risks,” it says, “than to sit idly by and see how life drains out of me.”

According to the answers the languages give us, it is not only those who don't understand them, the hatred and discrimination, but also the hope and the continuity of cultural practices traditionally tied to language (e.g., weaving of the huipil) and the unwavering effort of those committed to revitalizing the languages that brought them to the interrogation room. Languages, we realize, are refusing "the last stop," turning it into a place of remembrance, continuity and hope, an ever present potencialidad, the possibilities of worlds otherwise. The video of the performance ends with a clip of a Nguigua elder at her home speaking her language and the tune of the Oaxacan song of "La Martiniana": *Niña, cuando you muera*, 'when I die,' say the lyrics, *no llores sobre mi tumba*, 'don't cry over my tumb.' 'Sing me a song,' for 'when you sing, I will never die.'

### ***Stories of Place***

Many moments of *reading* and *remembering* grew from interactions and conversations with Yásnaya Aguilar Gil, a Mixe linguist and activist. The group engaged with various articles by Yásnaya (Aguilar Gil, 2017; 2018) and watched an interview of her by Mardonio Carballo, another prominent Indigenous (Nahua) activist in Mexico (Canal 22, 2017) to which students responded through various reflections. Later in the semester, Yásnaya was able to visit one of our synchronous classes on Zoom where students asked her questions related to the readings and the work she does in her community. One of the questions that Yásnaya raised during our conversation is why in schools we learn the names of rivers in Europe, but we don't learn the names of the rivers in our communities or the languages that are spoken in our state (see <https://lenguapoderarte.wordpress.com/2022/06/22/reminiscencia/>) . This statement struck many students. Why had we never questioned such an obvious omission? During

class, Victoria noted it reflected an outlook and preference for the foreign and the European that she had never considered before. Yutzin drew connections between the content taught in schools and the languages that are more “popular” and have a higher “prestige.” In a post, Joselint also reflected about “the influence that the education system has in our ideological formation.” “Somehow,” she writes, “these prejudices were planted in us from the contents that the school tends to teach us. Giving more importance to that which is outside the country and the state instilled in us the idea that the international is much ‘better’ than what we have around us.”

These reflections made connections between language and school content, for it is both, local languages and knowledge(s) of place that are displaced from the school curriculum and violently erased from our memories. Local knowledge is absent twice, first as content in the curriculum, and second, as knowledge embedded in Indigenous languages, omitted in “preference” of foreign languages. As Joselint writes, these omissions shape our “ideological formations,” making us complicit in the process of erasure. Students’ critical reflections prompted inward views towards our own values and actions, in turn prompting some students to learn more about their communities from family and community members and to transmit that knowledge to others in their generation and future generations through videos.

As their final projects, five students, Cesar, Rocío, Karla, Wendy and Emma, made videos where they told “stories of place.” Karla and Wendy tell foundation stories of their communities which they learn from parents, aunts, uncles and grandparents. César interviewed his mother, the great granddaughter of the founders of his community, Pueblo Nuevo, a town now incorporated into Oaxaca City, as well as two other longtime

residents about the history, politics and ideologies of his community (See [https://www.youtube.com/watch?time\\_continue=1&v=Vse0rwPfHhA&feature=emb\\_log](https://www.youtube.com/watch?time_continue=1&v=Vse0rwPfHhA&feature=emb_log) ). The interviewees reflect about political changes, for example a shift from Indigenous organizing processes to a system of elections that incorporated the new residents that settled there. As part of the older organization system, we learn from Florinda, an older resident, about the tequios, a system for organizing volunteer work for the community. “We used to go up to plant trees on the hill, clean the river, improve the schools,” she says. “Now sadly, many things have changed... people don’t listen.” But, she turns towards the future in hope, “they should come together in agreement. There are many young people in town that we have to call.”

In her video, Rocío narrates the story of the mine of black clay in her community. Previously known as Zaapeche, place of many jaguars, San Bartolo Coyotepec is a Zapotec town 12km away from Oaxaca City famous for the black clay. She talks about the old techniques to work the clay and the story of how the mine came to be. According to the story, a young woman, betrayed by her husband, sits by a rock to cry, creating a spring. El Dios Venado, the spirit of the mountain, thanks her for giving water to so many people and gives her the virtue of becoming a mine of clay that would become an object of desire (See <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XsnP2mlXmkY&t=3s>) .

Finally, Emma wrote a poem about and for her community, Yuvila, a town on the mountain an hour drive from Oaxaca City. Written with Yuvila as the narrator and with photos to go along with her words, Emma crafts a video that is an ode to her community. “My history is written on the face lines of my people and the curves of my path,” says Yuvila, “I have a Zapotec heart... a small place with people of big hearts, a place dressed

in green, where the mushrooms and the smallest fruit grow... I am life between the mountains... I am an eye of water that has seen many die and others grow... I am part of the heart of those who visit” (my translation). Emma transmits the nostalgia and love for her hometown at a time when she was not allowed to visit her community or her family because of COVID restrictions. Ideally, she had mentioned, she would have worked on a revitalization project in Yuvila, starting to document the language of her grandmother, but seeing that she would not be able to go, she decided to write a poem instead to instill the love she has for her community in the younger generations (See <https://lenguapoderarte.wordpress.com/2022/07/06/emma/> ).

These stories of place not only validate local knowledge, but facilitate intergenerational learning as students turned to parents, aunts, uncles and grandparents for knowledge and to younger generations to transmit that knowledge through videos that they shared on Facebook. Through this process, they were not only re-reading history, re-telling the history of their community from their own perspectives. They did so within the larger context of an academic class at a teacher education program, a step towards contesting epistemic erasure, undoing the “ideological formation” imposed upon us, and re-thinking/doing politics of knowledge production within the university. These re-readings were also acts of re-membering, connecting knowledge with experience and emotion, putting back the pieces fragmented by colonial histories.

### **Storytelling: Multilingual Encounters**

There is much overlap between storytelling and remembering. When engaging in intergenerational knowledge transfer and a relationship of reciprocity that as Archibald (2008) notes, creates and sustains oral cultures, storytelling itself is also an act of

remembering. The examples related above, the stories of place, Jacky's story about the experiences of her grandparents and the script and performance of *Lo Desconocido* are examples of storytelling through which students engaged in critical re-readings and re-tellings of history. In this section, I share and retell three stories told from the perspective of students as children. They were first shared in writing in our Facebook group as "stories about language," and one of them, Joselint's story, was also scripted and performed by her, Emma and Doreli (See <https://youtu.be/su4qng6Uc7s>). Unlike the stories above, these stories are not critical re-tellings, nor were they written as responses to colonial histories, but they provide views into an otherwise.

In Joselint's story and the subsequent collective script and performance, Joselint recalls going to the market with her grandmother in her town of San Dionisio del Mar:

On the way to the market...

Comadre: Dios, comadre.

Abuela: Dios!

Narrator: Joselint stops to think... and asks herself ¿Dios?

Abuela: Vamos hija, we need to hurry.

Narrator: Joselint can't stop asking questions. She whispers "I have to ask my abuela what she means by 'Dios'" meanwhile she imagines a story where Dios is a big and powerful man, capable of appearing each time people say his name.

Abuela: ¿What are you thinking about?

Joselint: I was imagining a story, abue, ¿Why do people from here invoke God all the time?

Abuela: (laughs) no hija, we were not invoking God. In our language,

there is no good morning, afternoon or evening, I don't know how we began to greet each other only with "Dios" but it's like saying "God be with you".

Joselint recalls the moment when she learned that the same word uttered in different languages can carry different meanings, which opens a world of wonder and curiosity to learn more about her maternal language. She learns that speaking more than one language is much more than translating between codes. Because language is deeply entangled with place, history, and the ways of knowing and being in the world of its speakers, translation is never a straightforward process. There are ideas that can never be fully translated (Nagar, 2019), which only increases the wonder, the curiosity and a yearning to reach across "incommensurable landscapes of struggles and meanings" (Nagar, 2019, p. 213).

Like the initial story by Joselint, Alexis' and Jacky's stories were told as responses to the prompt asking students to tell stories about language, these could be a time when they felt different based on how they communicated, when they noticed someone making a comment about someone's language use; a moment when something was lost in translation or a story they inherited from parents or grandparents.

*I remember that a while ago when I went to the plazas with my mother in other municipalities, she always spent her time talking to other women in Mixteco. And it was kind of funny because the languages of the Mixteca always vary a lot. So it was a bit confusing for me because some words that other people used in their lexicon also exist in mine but they don't mean the same thing, which made me quite doubtful.*

*So what they said didn't make sense to me, but later I clarified all those doubts with my mother. She explained to me the meaning of the words that sounded the same but had different meanings in Mixteco, and since then I understand the conversations of different people from different municipalities better. A very nice experience.*

*(Alexis)*

*More than 11 years ago, at a patron saint's fiesta in my community, I remember that I went to buy tlacolulita bread on the field with my mother. It was there that I heard a*

*group of women talking to their little children. They were talking a different language, but it was neither Spanish nor Chontal. On the way home, I asked my mother where they came from, and what they were saying. She told me \*gueygone leyne, eigeishina dipaleigui antsajueine\* (that she did not know what they were saying, they were speaking Zapotec, therefore they came from neighboring Zapotec communities). I mention this experience because, at that moment, I was curious but I was also somewhat confused by how they spoke. For a moment I thought that it was another type of Chontal and that is why I did not understand it. It was nice to see how the little ones learned to speak in their mother tongue.*

*(Jaqueline)*

Alexis' and Jaqueline's stories illustrate the linguistic diversity in Oaxaca through their own experiences as children attending community events and tell of the curiosity, joy and learning that comes from these encounters. Their stories, as well as Joselint's, take place during events that in Oaxaca have for centuries facilitated encounters between people from different communities, plazas de mercado and fiestas. Plazas de mercado are specific days when a market is set up, usually every week, and people from around the region visit to buy, sell and/or exchange food and other items. The second event, where Jacky's story takes place, is a fiesta or party. A community celebrates many fiestas each year, some of which last for several days, and receive visitors from the region and around the state. Markets and fiestas often coincide. Fiestas have multiple exchanges through markets, and important market days also become fiestas. These are part of a way of living, also described as an ideology, theory and praxis, called *comunalidad*, through which Indigenous peoples have long resisted colonial violence and globalizing processes (Maldonado, 2010).

*Comunalidad* as an organizational structure comes particularly to light during times of fiesta. La fiesta is "where relationships between relatives and neighbors are best created, consolidated, repaired or broken" (Guerrero Osorio, 2013, p. 47). New familiar

relationships like *compadrazgos* are solidified, people fulfill work for the community, share *guelaguetzas* (mutual help between family, *compadres*, and friends during important events) and take part in collective expressions of identity.

Language is central to *comunalidad* and “one its main creations” (Aguilar Gil, 2013, p.81), for it is through language that interaction within *comunalidad* is mediated while *comunalidad* impacts, changes and creates language. Linguistic encounters between different languages and different varieties of languages take place within a context of sharing and relationship building.

The three stories reflect the long history and praxis of multilingualism in Oaxaca through joyful encounters between dialectal varieties of Mixtec in Alexis’ story, and language groups (Chontal and Zapotec in Jaqueline’s story and Huave and Spanish in Joselint’s story). These multilingual encounters open up views into different worlds where words mean different things and people come together to share meanings. These are stories that do not let the violence of colonial histories dominate, shedding light instead into the many voices and landscapes of multilingual Oaxaca and a process and possibility of equitable multilingualism through sharing, relationality and the organizational structures of *comunalidad*.

### **Revitalizing and Regenerating: The Language Sprouts**

Revitalizing and regenerating involves creating initiatives around education, broadcasting and publishing among others that bring the language back (Smith, 2012). This section describes projects of language reclamation that saw the languages of students sprout. For their final projects, I asked students to think about creating something related to the work done in class around language and power that would have

meaning and life of its own beyond an assignment for the class. It could be in any modality or art form and in any language(s) they chose to express themselves in. It could also be individual or collaborative. The stories of place, described above, were some of the responses to this prompt. Three students, Joselint, Jacky and Alexis conceived of initiatives to relearn their language and reclaim ancestral knowledge from their parents and other community members while publishing this work to share with others in the form of video.

***Joselint: A Story in Huave***

Joselint narrates how, when she was thinking about her project, she heard her mother tell a story to her brother. It was one of those stories that her mother heard from her grandparents and used to tell her and her siblings in Spanish. Joselint asked her mother to tell her a story she hadn't heard yet, but in Huave, not in Spanish. "At the beginning," she said, "she was nervous that she would forget... She doesn't have contact with her language. Sometimes she says something in Huave and continues in Spanish. I told her, 'it's OK, speak slowly so that I can understand'" (Joselint, September, 8<sup>th</sup>, 2020).

Joselint recorded her mother telling the story and with her help and the help of a dictionary, she set up to translate it and added subtitles to the video. "It took a while but in the end I did it. I retold the story to my mom in Spanish and she said it was OK, she was only going to change a few words. I was able to translate about 70-80% and I feel proud [...]. It was a new experience. I learned a lot from it... that translation takes more... it has a depth that has to do with the culture, with the context" (Joselint, September 8<sup>th</sup>, 2020).

Joselint notes that her mother was surprised at how well she was able to translate the story, though she knows Joselint understands when she talks Huave to someone else. “There are a few things missing, but it’s not very much... it was like, wow, if I put down the effort, I can learn more even though I’m older.” On asking if she has thought about it, she said, “I really want to learn because my mom needs someone to talk to, because it’s being lost... I think it’s a very interesting language, I’m curious about the things that they mention. They always give it a strange meaning. There’s something very curious, even the flowers that are under the water have their name. There is one flower that is under the water, bhnes, a flower that smells very good when it comes out of the water. This plant here or there, the fact that my mom knows it, I think it’s really interesting” (Joselint, September 8<sup>th</sup>, 2020) (See <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4-6kvOtMKCU&t=2s> ).

### ***Jaqueline: The Signs of Rain***

At the beginning of the semester, Jacky made a video about her community with images, a Chontal voiceover and Spanish subtitles. Later, for her final project, she made a video, also in Chontal with Spanish subtitles, where family members talk about the signals that predict when the rains are coming. Being back in her community and close to family gave her the idea of making the videos in Chontal and facilitated the process. “When you said it could be in any language,” she reflected, “and taking advantage of being in my community, I had my mom, my dad and my grandparents, I said, ‘there.’” Jacky says that she knows many words and the projects helped her reinforce her Chontal. “First I wrote it in Spanish and I asked my mom for help first. Because she couldn’t remember some words, I asked my grandmother for help. Translating it was complicated. The phrases are not always the same in Chontal. My grandmother told me, ““that phrase

like you say it we don't have it in Chontal.' 'But how would you say it?' I asked, and then she told me the phrase in Chontal and so I made progress... From there other conversations flowed. It was beautiful, learning more" (Jaqueline, August 23<sup>rd</sup>, 2020).

For the second video, Jaqueline was thinking about telling a story from her community, because her grandfather used to tell her many stories, but it was the rainy season in Chonte and when it was thundering, Jaqueline heard people talk about the natural changes that signal rain and she decided to document that knowledge instead. In the video we learn for example that when a tempest is coming, the crabs come out of the streams because the water is going to rise. When they come back, it means the tempest is over. Similarly, the black ants come out of their holes and the black swallows cross the sky (See <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GOpUUIy7MXI&t=6s> ).

### ***Alexis and Cristian: An Interview***

"The idea of our project," writes Alexis in the Facebook post where he shared the collective work he did with Cristian, "is to project our ideas and knowledges in a video, with the end of showing the importance of preserving our roots, emphasizing the risks that our ways of being and our languages run. In this video, my mother tells us what she thinks about her own language, what she likes to do, among other things. All in her native language, Mixteco. All of this helps us understand how a native speaker of the language expresses herself, speaks it, and gives us a different perspective than the one that we might have or that we didn't know."

In the video, Alexis records his mother introducing herself and where she lives. She says that she likes to work in her milpa and that when she has people helping her with harvest, she cooks for them, so that it will be a good harvest. Then she talks about

her language, having learned it from her parents and grandparents. She mentions that children these days do not want to learn it and then addresses students of English directly, saying that like English, Mixteco helps them communicate (See <https://youtu.be/VTLJXQ7D64g>).

Alexis mentioned that when asking to record her, his mother felt a little shy, yet upon saying that he was going to publish it in a group of colleagues, many of whom speak Indigenous languages, she felt better, and became excited when he told her he wanted other people to see and hear how Mixteco is pronounced, how it sounds.

Cristian, a friend of Alexis, helped with the editing process and in entering the subtitles. Alexis recalls meeting with him to talk about the final project: “We didn’t know what to do. He was also blanking, until I said, we are in the Language Department, why don’t we represent my native language? Through this work, Cristian, who comes from Oaxaca City and is a speaker of Spanish, was able to learn more from Alexis. “It was interesting,” he said, “because I asked questions, for example, if there were similarities with what I did because I am from the city and he is from a community, like that intercultural interaction... I learned what he does on a day to day, that his schedule is very different from mine, and the activities that he does every day. We first talked about what he did in his community and then I shared what I did in the city. We decided to interview someone with more experience to tell us how life was in his community and what differences she saw in the time that she lived and the time that my friend is living” (Cristian, September 16<sup>th</sup>, 2020).

For Alexis, speaking Mixteco and being able to communicate in two languages is a blessing. Alexis says, “I have cousins who live in the city and don’t understand,” he says.

“They live in one language and don’t understand when my grandmother is speaking. They ask me, ‘what is she saying?’ (Alexis, August 7<sup>th</sup>, 2020)

### ***Intergenerational Learning***

The multimodal and multilingual projects created opportunities for Jacky, Joselint and Alexis to engage in intergenerational learning through storytelling and knowledge sharing. By learning from these stories and knowledge about the land in their native language, they were also creating opportunities to speak and (re)learn their language. Joselint and Jacky, who identify themselves as learners, approached the task through translation. Joselint translated a Huave story into Spanish with the help of her mother, and, in her first video, Jacky translated a text she wrote in Spanish into Chontal with the help of her grandmother. These interactions in turn lead to conversations about the culture and cultural knowledge embedded in the language. It reinforced the realization that Joselint made as a child, walking through the market with her grandmother, that language is inseparable from culture, history and place, and that learning the language of your mother or your grandmother means retracing those connections and forging new intergenerational ties.

Chontal, Huave and Mixtec are traditionally oral languages, with knowledge transmitted intergenerationally through storytelling. The integration of image and sound makes video a useful medium to record and transmit orality practices. This medium also afforded students the possibility to work in their native languages. While some work has been done to introduce alphabetic writing and new orthographic norms (e.g., Mixtec language academy), neither Alexis, a fluent speaker of Mixteco, nor Jacky, Joselint or their families has experience writing their language. Despite the *Ley General de*

*Derechos Lingüísticos de los Pueblos Indígenas* (2003), a federal law passed in 2003 that declares children's right to learn to read and write in their native language, this seldom happens in practice. Just like schooling continues to foreclose the possibility for students to learn to read and write in their (Indigenous) native languages, a written medium would have foreclosed the creativity and the possibility of the language sprouting through these reclamation projects.

Some of the videos were made public beyond the group with the goal of, as Alexis put it, projecting "our ideas and knowledges in a video" and "showing the importance of preserving our roots." The work of Jacky was also shared in a website managed by her sister that promotes Chontal in her community. The collaborative work between Alexis and Cristian led Cristian to learn more about Alexis' language and daily practices in his community. While they were friends at the University, the exchanges fostered by their project together, framed by Cristian as intercultural, led to a deeper connection and taught Cristian more about Oaxaca's Indigenous communities, specifically the Mixteca, and inspired him to pursue work in language revitalization for his thesis project.

These videos are enunciations of the intergenerational learning and language reclamation processes of Jacky, Joselint and Alexis, but they are also educational materials that can be used for others to learn, (re)learn and inspire new projects. In the section below I weave my reflections on the projects undertaken in 'Lengua, Poder y Arte' into one fabric and discuss the implications of this work for language reclamation and the decolonization of language teacher education.

## Language Reclamation as an Embodied Decolonization Praxis

Considering language as living means that it is dynamic, never static. And just like it can be violently lifted from homes and communities, it can re-settle, reawaken, resprout and give fruit to new forms of communication, new forms of knowledge and knowledge systems, rooted, but in constant movement. Language reclamation is much more than the revitalization or re-learning of Indigenous languages. It is also a reclamation of culture, knowledges and identity, a process of decolonization that counters linguisticism and epistemic erasure. Processes of *reading*, *remembering* and *storytelling* are critical to language reclamation work, for they help us question power, connect bodies with place and past with future. Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o notes that how we use language(s) (and how we forget them) is tied to structural inequalities (Canagarajah, 2020).

Remembering language(s) entails understanding the sociohistorical context and the intertwining oppressions that lead to forgetting, and the struggles that give them life. It is through storytelling and (re)reading that we can start to (re)member the histories and cultures fragmented by colonialism and modernity and, as Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o (2009) observes, we need to remember language in order to revitalize it.

Jacky turns to her grandparents, asking why Chontal ceased to be spoken in her community and offers an embodied (re)reading and (re)telling of history from an Indigenous perspective. In the play *Lo Desconocido*, the languages come together with fragmented stories, gathering hope and strength in the process of (re)membering their identities, tied to land and their experiences in light of those who work to sustain them.

The stories of place also offer (re)readings and (re)tellings of history by responding to the absences in school curricula. Emma, César and Rocío took different

approaches to tell stories of their communities, validating the knowledges held by their families and communities and contesting the epistemic erasure that these have been subjected to by reclaiming them within the space of the university.

Thinking of story as theory challenges Euro-Western politics of knowledge production. Storytelling involves looking holistically at experiential narratives that, as Archibald (2008) points out, “constitute epistemic, theoretical, pedagogical and empirical lenses through which relationships with and between people and the natural world can be understood” (As cited in Tom, Sumida Huaman & McCarty, 2019). Through these stories, we are able to understand a different type of relationality between people, language and the natural world. Alexis’, Jacky’s and Joselint’s childhood stories let us imagine alternative futures. They foreground the joy and awe of linguistic and cultural encounters, offering views into other worlds and other possibilities of convivial multilingualism through a praxis of *comunalidad*.

While these (re)tellings, performances and other interactions took place mostly in Spanish, the hegemonic language and our common language, they are still acts of reclamation, for they remember and reclaim *comunalidad*. The stories of linguistic encounters in markets and *fiesta*, and the stories of place that describe community interactions through *tequio* in César’s story (re)constitute relational processes of *comunalidad*. Martínez Luna (2013), a Zapotec scholar from Guelatao, a community that has largely shifted to Spanish, argues that *comunalidad* takes place also in Spanish. When *comunalidad* but not language has been able to survive centuries of ethnocide, the communal social structure provides the foundation from which language can be brought back. It is through *comunalidad* and the ways through which people relate to each other,

that the language can be reclaimed. Just like knowledge and culture live within the language, the cultural practice and theory of *comunalidad* hold the language along the sierra, in the fiesta, the *tequio* and the work on the land. Students tend the ground for the language through their stories, relationships and remembering *comunalidad*.

Finally, Jacky, Joselint and Alexis, speakers and learners of Chontal, Huave and Mixteco respectively, engaged in (re)learning and sharing their languages through storytelling and video-making. These are instances of language reclamation and the language sprouting, as students interacted with family members as mentors in their (re)learning processes and as they published their videos as educational materials for themselves, our group of ‘Lengua, Poder y Arte’ and for others in their communities.

The reality of the COVID-19 pandemic shaped the course of the class in unexpected ways. The original syllabus, the embodied activities that included performance and storytelling had to be reinvented as we adapted to new and different forms of interaction and to our differing circumstances. Individual and collaborative multimodal projects, especially through video, emerged as an important form of expression that could be shared in a common platform when meeting synchronously was not (always) possible for many. The locations of students also shaped the interactions and the work that emerged. Emma, for example, had to stay in Oaxaca City, unable to return to her community, shaping the form of her project as an ode to Yuvila, her community and her people, and perhaps contributing to the strong support for her video online (in a message, she shared she had received over 300 “likes”). For Jacky and Alexis, it meant that they were working and connecting with us from their communities, and while they, like others, were navigating work and school, they were able to live in or be close to the

language and do projects that they would not have been able to do otherwise, working closely with their families and their communities.

Underscoring the entanglements between language, culture, land and individual and communal identity, a critical embodied pedagogy not only recognizes emotion as an inevitable part of language reclamation but understands learning as a holistic process that questions oppressive power dynamics through (re)readings and (re)memberings, stories, our experiences and our bodies. Foregrounding mind, body and spirit through performance and storytelling opened up spaces for reclamation processes that are personal and deeply affective, for they contend with personal and inherited stories of violence, yet also stories of joy. Inviting learning with and through emotion in (virtual) classroom spaces by reclaiming our stories can counter the painful emotions associated with the trauma of losing a language and intergenerational connections (McKenzie, 2022).

Inspired by Indigenous approaches, a critical embodied pedagogy aims to move towards relational learning through experience and participating in the world (Simpson, 2018). As a facilitator, I struggled with making connections to the land and to foster collaboration and relationship building through virtual interactions. But just as the physical space of the university and the classroom can foster relationships among us, it can be limiting by drawing borders between us and our other communities, beyond the university. Being physically apart from each other might have posed limitations to the interactions within the members of the class, yet it opened up many other possibilities of interaction beyond our small community. Our virtual parcel might have been all the space that we needed to bring together our stories and our experiences from the physical world

to share with each other, grow new learning and then take that learning back to our many (in-person and virtual) communities. Like/as decolonization, language reclamation is a continuous process, always necessarily unfinished. The multiple projects engendered individually and collectively by students are enunciations or seeds that will continue their growth and separate journeys.

### **Conclusion**

A critical embodied pedagogy that invites processes of (re)reading, (re)membering, storytelling and revitalization and regeneration into a diverse language teacher education program, helps us reconceptualize language reclamation beyond language and language learning. Not only does (re)reading, (re)membering and storytelling tend the ground to reclaim the language (Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o, 2009), but they (re)constitute and reclaim *comunalidad*, itself inseparable from language/culture.

While this chapter focuses on the work of a few students, especially Jacky, Alexis and Joselint, who saw their mother language sprout, language reclamation, as tied to culture, identity, land and politics of knowledge production is both relevant and necessary for those who identify as Indigenous and for those, like me and many others, whose indigeneity has been erased by centuries of oppression. As illustrated by the stories of place, we can reclaim language/culture by reclaiming *comunalidad*; by contesting politics of knowledge production that keep Indigenous histories and epistemologies outside the school curricula and what counts as 'knowledge'; and by enunciating alternatives. The act of engaging in language and culture reclamation generates knowledge. Broadening our understanding of language reclamation as an individual and collective process of knowledge production contests hegemonic policies and linguistic ideologies that have led

to the need to reawaken Indigenous languages and epistemologies. Broadening our praxis to diverse communities in higher education opens up new spaces and possibilities for the language to sprout in unlikely places.

Language teacher educators and education programs have a responsibility to dismantle the epistemological and linguistic erasure that often starts in the classroom (King, 2017). A language reclamation praxis through critical embodied pedagogies helps students gain the recognition that “knowledge is not only produced in European centers through European languages” (López-Gopar et al., 2021, p. 315), and it also goes beyond, tending the ground to create spaces for an otherwise where our Indigenous languages, cultures and ancestral knowledges can sprout.

## Power

### *Mountains, Seas and Peoples:*

#### *(Re)constructing and Mobilizing Identities for Language Reclamation*

Soy de Santo Domingo Chontecomatlán, vengo de donde las nubes juegan y chocan con las montañas. Aun no encuentro algo que me identifique bien... yo solo podría decir que me identifico con ser chontal. Chontal significa identidad. Es como que algo, no se. mucho. significa mucho. de donde vengo, costumbres, raíces, tierra fértil se me viene. Vida. (Jaqueline)

*I am from Santo Domingo Chontecomatlan, where the clouds play and collide with the mountains. I still haven't found something that identifies me well... I can only say that I identify with being Chontal. Chontal means identity. It's like, I don't know. A lot. It means a lot. Where I come from, tradition, roots, fertile land comes to mind. Life. (Jaqueline)*

Soy la mezcla de varios lados. Aunque nací en lo que comúnmente se le conoce como Valles Centrales, tengo afluencia serrana ya que mis padres pertenecen a diferentes distritos de la Sierra Norte. Soy una mezcla de muchas raíces y colores, eso me encanta, porque fortalece mi identidad. (Doreli)

*I am the mix of various places. Even though I was born here in what we know as the Central Valleys, I have heritage from the Sierra given that my parents belong to different districts in the Sierra Norte. I am a mix of many roots and colors, that I love because it strengthens my identity. (Doreli)*

A lo largo de mi vida he tenido que vivir en diferentes lugares, para ser honestos no tengo muy claro cuales son mis raíces. Por una parte me siento costeña por haber nacido en Puerto escondido, mi familia de lado paterno vive allá, después está el pueblo donde he vivido la mayor parte de mi vida, Santa María Vigallo, en este pueblito crecí y está la familia de mi mamá pero tampoco me siento parte de él, las circunstancias de la vida me hicieron mudarme y ahora estoy sola en otro lugar del que tampoco me siento parte. (Wendy)

*Throughout my life I have had to live in different places, to be honest I am not very clear about my roots. On the one hand, I feel from the coast because I was*

*born in Puerto Escondido, my family on my father's side lives there, then there is the town where I have lived most of my life, Santa María Vigallo. I grew up in this little town and my mother's family is there but I don't feel part of it either, the circumstances of life made me move and now I'm alone in another place that I don't feel part of either. (Wendy)*

The narratives above come from student teachers in a language teacher preparation program in Oaxaca City, Mexico. They are responses to my question about self-identification during a post-class interview, and to the prompt: “Where do I come from? What are my mountains? What are my seas? Who are my people?” which they shared with members of the class in a private Facebook group early in the semester. The class I was facilitating, called ‘Lengua, Poder y Arte,’ aimed to raise critical awareness of the neocolonial power structures and power dynamics that affect language use and lead to language loss, and to go beyond to (re)create and (re)claim Indigenous language practices, cultures and knowledges.

Language reclamation is a holistic concept that tends to the ways that language exists in complex social contexts that are intimately tied to land, peoplehood, identity and belonging (Leonard, 2021). As Hermes, Bang and Marin (2012) write, the process and movement to reclaim Indigenous languages is “passionate, political, and deeply personal” (p. 26). Much of the scholarship engaged with language reclamation is concerned with the language recovery efforts of an individual or, more often, a single language community (e.g., Goodyear-Ka'opua, 2013; Hermes et al., 2012; Meek, 2010). But how do we approach this process when, as within a teacher education program in a very diverse state, students come from multiple places, have different heritage, linguistic histories and experiences? While Jaqueline, Doreli, Wendy and all other participants in the class, including myself—a facilitator with Mexican and European roots and

interrupted ties to indigeneity— shared the same space of critical inquiry and creativity, our different identities and stories moved us in different directions.

This chapter, embedded in a language teacher education program in a meeting ground city, explores questions of identity as it relates to language reclamation. Drawing from recorded (virtual) classroom interactions, student work and my own and students' class notes and reflections, I turn to arts-based research, and specifically found poetry (Furman et al., 2007; Jasenick, 2016) to ask: What does Indigenous reclamation mean in contexts of diversity? How do we inhabit, negotiate and challenge identities within reclamation process(es)? And, what are the implications for pedagogical practices and language teacher education?

I approach these complex questions from discussions on indigeneity and identity politics (Aguilar Gil, 2017; Medina, 2009; Mendoza Zuany, 2014; Spears-Rico, 2015; Urrieta, 2017) and comunalidad as praxis (Díaz, 2007; Martínez Luna, 2013). Art-as-inquiry was also employed as a pedagogy and tool for language reclamation as well as a space to negotiate, (re)create and (re)imagine fluid identities and decolonial practices around language. The arts afford multiple possibilities for reflecting, theorizing and engaging in different ways of knowing and being in the world beyond the teacher and text-centered approaches characteristic of schooling and academia (Liamputtong & Rumbold, 2008), and allow for the consolidation and renewal of traditions, strengthening cultural manifestations across new generations.

I thread a conversation that explores the intersections/entanglements between identity and language reclamation, arguing that a deep engagement and understanding of these intersections is necessary to foster processes of language, culture and knowledge

reclamation within diverse communities. Specifically, research and practice in language reclamation needs to consider the “nuances and complexities of what” being Indigenous means for different people “in particular communities, in multiple contexts” (Urrieta, 2017).

This chapter is framed with a discussion on definitions and understandings of indigeneity, *comunalidad* and *mestizaje* within the context of identity politics in Mexico. Turning to found poetry as a form of inquiry and representation of students’ narratives, I analyze the ways that participants (re)constructed and negotiated their identities in relationship and interaction, and the connections and implications for language reclamation processes. I close by discussing the importance of fostering a positive emotional ecology of language (Smith-Christmas, 2022) for the reclamation and (re)appropriation of powerful Indigenous, situated and otherwise community-rooted identities that move towards a reclamation of language, culture and knowledge as a decolonial option within language teacher education and beyond.

### **Different Meanings of Indigeneity**

The term ‘Indigenous’ is at the center of the concept of Indigenous language revitalization and language reclamation, yet scholars in the field, concerned more with strategies for sustaining and reawakening language and culture, often skip over complex discussions about the many meanings of the term. Some scholars (e.g., Fishman 1990; Romero-Little 2006; Leonard 2017) have emphasized the importance of what Fishman (1990) termed “ideological clarification” in order to understand and resolve potentially differing conceptions of language, strategies, and goals of language revitalization efforts between those who engage in language work, and avoid tensions that, instead of

strengthening, might weaken Indigenous identities and languages (Schwedhelm, Stemper & King, 2019). These concerns, alongside a growing awareness on the importance of grounding language reclamation work on Indigenous epistemologies has given rise to new frameworks that invite those involved in language work to move away from abstract conceptions of language towards more relational and holistic understandings (Leonard, 2017; Henne-Ochoa et al., 2020). The calls to situate language reclamation on local/Indigenous conceptions of language represent a welcome and much-needed shift in scholarship, yet they make the absence of similar discussions about the term ‘Indigenous,’ which lies at the very heart of ‘Indigenous language revitalization/reclamation,’ more notable.

One exception comes from Guerrettaz, Chan Dzul and Pomol Cahum (2020). Working from the context of the Yucatan Peninsula in Mexico and within Yucatec-Maya revitalization efforts, the authors note that speakers there self-identify more widely as ‘Maya,’ as opposed to ‘Indigenous,’ which carries derogatory connotations. They invite readers to problematize the notion of ‘Indigenous’ identity and question how social identities are constructed locally, since, as they note, “social identity considerations have profound political and practical implications” (p. 516), and ultimately shape language reclamation processes.

The categories we employ limit our understanding and imagination, erase other understandings and might reproduce violent relationships. Such is the case with the term ‘Indigenous,’ which, as Aquino Moreschi (2013) notes, limits us from seeing the cultural diversity that hides within it. On the other side, it can be used as a global term that forges alliances and political solidarity among people who have experienced similar forms of

oppression under colonial powers and serves to name that very history of domination. Indeed, scholars have defined indigeneity based on a shared experience of colonization and domination “perpetuated by [contact] with a western hegemonic epistemology” (Breidlid, 2013, p. 31). This conception of indigeneity is framed from a political stance of active resistance against dominant powers.

Alternatively, many Indigenous scholars define being Indigenous as living “in relationship with the place where one is born,” (Guerrero, 2003, as cited in Henne-Ochoa, 2020) or as a person who is “strongly rooted to the land” (Henne-Ochoa, 2020, p.484). These definitions refuse racial categories and an identification that is only articulated in terms of resistance, foregrounding instead Indigenous ways of being and living in relation to the land.

Both of these conceptions of indigeneity, those that frame it from an anti-colonialist perspective and those that root it in place and relationality, avoid essentializations and refuse stereotypes of Indigenous authenticity that determine who is recognized or characterized as such. However, authenticity myths continue to circulate within the many colonial powers that we are embedded in, and play an important role in shaping ideologies around indigeneity that in turn shape how individuals and communities negotiate, challenge and (re)appropriate Indigenous and other place-based identities.

Unlike the U.S. context, where Native people are formally enrolled in tribes, indigeneity in Mexico is claimed by knowledge and use of an Indigenous language and self-identification. The census in Mexico calculates the Indigenous population by adding the population above three years of age who are speakers of an Indigenous language,

those who live in a home where one member of the family is a speaker of an Indigenous language and those who self-identify as Indigenous (Rubio Badán, 2014, p. 38).

Colonialism still exerts relations of power that designate Indigenous peoples as ‘gente de costumbre’ associated with tradition, a romantic and sometimes obsolete past (Bartolomé, 1997). In Oaxaca, as in the Yucatan Peninsula (Guerrettaz et al., 2020), the term “indígena” can carry derogatory meanings. As scholars have pointed out, there exists a contradiction where a pride in the Aztec, Maya and Zapotec past, their art, technologies and ancient cities versus a shame in the present lived experience of an Indigenous population characterized as poor and ignorant (Jiménez, 2011). In research, in governmental institutions and non-governmental organizations, the term “indígena” is largely a marker of marginalization. Education research for example often refers to ‘Indigenous’ as the marginalized, foregrounding deficits in education in relation to the ‘general’ population (e.g., Schmelkes, 2006). Governmental institutions operating in Oaxaca, like the CDI (*Comisión Nacional para el Desarrollo de los Pueblos Indígenas*), created in 2003 to support the rights of Indigenous peoples and allocate resources, similarly uses poverty (using a marginality index), as one of the main indicators of indigeneity (Mendoza Zuany, 2014).

While the stated goals and aims of most research and these institutions are framed around “equity” and “development,” as exemplified in the CDI mission to “orient public policy for the sustainable and integral development of Indigenous communities” (CDI, 2018), they simultaneously and paradoxically construct a social identity that is neither positive, nor desirable.

Mixe scholar and activist, Yásnaya Aguilar Gil (2017) writes that the Indigenous category was formed in relation and in contrast to the existence of the nation state. It is an identity that is marked as different and frequently investigated because it deviates from the identities created as the norm by the ideological systems of the state. Mexican nationalist constructions of indigeneity, along with marginalization, have worked to authenticate indigeneity through traditions, especially dress and language, fossilizing romantic notions of cultural purity and using these markers to authenticate who is Indigenous (Boj Lopez, 2017). The consequence of these restrictive yet widespread ideologies is that for many, the loss of the native language has also come with a loss of self-identification as Indigenous.

This is something that Mendoza Zuany (2014) and Maldonado (2002) observe in towns like Guelatao in the Sierra Norte, where Spanish is now the predominant language and where youth no longer self-identify as Indigenous or as Zapotecs because their own definition corresponds with the official characterization of Mexican Indigenismo.

As we have seen, this history and use has come to create meanings of “indígena,” that, as Maldonado (2010b) finds, “refers to a condition of exploitation, domination and exclusion” (Maldonado, 2010b). As an alternative, the term *originario/originaria*, or ‘originary’ has grown in popularity, especially in the Oaxacan context, to describe the ‘pueblos’ or ‘peoples’ that lived in Mesoamerica prior to the Spanish conquest and the nation-state formation. The word “pueblos” as in ‘pueblos indígenas’ or ‘pueblos originarios’ is an important term in Mexico and represents a legal entity in the political debate, carrying a history of resistance and struggles for self-determination that is not communicated through the English “peoples” (Meyer, 2010). “Originario/originaria” is

mostly used as an adjective attached to pueblos and languages (lengua(s) originarias), but when it comes to individual and social identities, it is mostly used as a verb attached to place (e.g., originario de Oaxaca). Given the different syntactic use of “originario” and the ubiquitousness of “Indigenous” both in Mexico as around the world and in research, I here use the latter term despite and conscious of its many problematic meanings.

### **Comunalidad and Belonging**

Like the many scholars and activists in the US and around the world who have appropriated the word “Indigenous” from an anti-colonial stance (e.g., Breidlid, 2013; Smith, 2012), some communities and individuals in Oaxaca have also appropriated the term “indígena” for political action and are working towards creating new meanings of indigeneity that reject static notions of cultural purity and are not tied to speakerhood.

Oaxacan scholars from the Sierra Norte, Floriberto Díaz (2007) and Martínez Luna (2013) have advanced new ways of defining indigeneity through comunalidad as a praxis and a way of life of Indigenous communities. Comunalidad emerges as an ideology of conscientization that seeks to “orient the life of pueblos as pueblos,” to uncover the effects of colonialism and the dominant culture so they could be reverted (Maldonado, 2010a, p. 46). This has been particularly relevant in communities where the language, a traditional marker of Indigeneity, is no longer spoken.

In his writings, Floriberto Díaz translated living energy of Ayuujk thinking into Spanish and Euro-Western epistemologies. The word “community,” or in Spanish, “comunidad,” he notes, is not an Indigenous word, but it is the one that “comes closer to what we want to say” (2007, p. 38). In his Ayuujk language, the idea of comunalidad is described through two words, *näjx*, (earth/land) and *käjp*, (pueblo), making the

interrelationship and interdependence of earth/land and pueblo evident. As he tells us, *näjx* makes the existence of *käjp* possible, while *käjp* gives meaning to *näjx* (2007).

Beyond the idea of “community” as an aggregate of individuals coming together in a specific geographic location, the community that Floriberto Díaz and Jaime Martínez Luna show us is characterized by a web of relationships primarily between people and the environment and then among people themselves. Martínez Luna (2010) writes that “comunalidad is a way of understanding life as being permeated with spirituality, symbolism, and a greater integration with nature. It is one way of understanding that human beings are not the center, but simply a part of this great natural world” (p.94). This being in relation with the natural world is fundamental to many Indigenous cultures around the world (e.g., Bang et al., 2015; Simpson, 2014; Wilson, 2001) and integral to Indigenous methodologies (Kovach, 2015; Smith, 2012). In his community of Santa María Tlahuitoltepec, Floriberto Díaz describes these relationships as manifesting through an underlying force or energy that mediates between people and people with each element of nature (Nava Morales, 2013, p. 60). Human beings, he says, “entramos en relación con la Tierra de dos formas,” enter in relationship with the Earth/Land in two ways, “a través del trabajo en cuanto territorio, y a través de los ritos y ceremonias, en tanto a madre,” through work as land/territory and through rites and ceremonies as mother (Díaz, 2007, p. 41).

While comunalidad can be described as an ideology of identity, of what it means to be Indigenous, the comunalistas highlight not an origin or essence, but the organizational structures and processes that constantly create and re-create comunalidad and the sense of belonging to the community. Martínez Luna notes that anyone who is

committed to communal life and contributes to the *asamblea* (assembly), *tequio* and *cargo* system (unpaid work for the benefit of the community) can live and experience *comunalidad* (Aquino Moreschi, 2013). At the same time, he points out that *comunalidad* doesn't have to be exclusive to rural areas. Many migrants to the big cities in Mexico and the United States have continued a deep engagement to and with their communities, sometimes traveling back for a year or two or arranging for representatives to fulfill *cargos* and responsibilities. The Mixtec community, for example, with a large population in Oaxaca and in California, have promoted a new and positive identity as "Indigenous people" and established transnational ties through participation in community activities (Mendoza Zuany, 2014).

Yet community participation through *comunalidad* does not necessarily translate to a self-identification as "Indigenous." Rosa Guadalupe Mendoza Zuany (2014) found that in the communities of Ixtlán and Guelatao de Juárez in the Sierra Norte of Oaxaca, participation in the community through *comunalidad* gave instead rise to a strong place-based identity. She writes that "the sense of belonging to the community is stronger than that of belonging to an Indigenous group (the Zapotec people) or to the Zapotec people as an ethnic group" (p. 45). Local identities, she notes, are strengthened by "internal processes of categorising inhabitants based on their origin and integration into the socio-political organisation of the community" (p. 45). This preponderance of place-based identities over a self-identification as Indigenous or Zapotec was more prevalent in diverse communities where the language was no longer in active use and a large number of outsiders had moved in, and integrated into the community. *Comunalidad* thus opens many possibilities for belonging both for those born within and for those who moved into

the community. While the latter group were not identified as “comuneros,” a term reserved for those born into the community, they carried the same privileges and responsibilities as “avecindados” or “those who became neighbors.”

Yásnaya Aguilar Gil (2017) too foregrounds her identity as a member of el pueblo Mixe above an identity as “Indigenous.” She notes that her Ayuujk/Mixe identity, which predate her and is embedded in narratives, stories and rituals of her childhood is stronger than her identity as Indigenous, acquired later in life when she left her community to study in Mexico City. In Ayuujk, her native language, she notes, there is no word for “Indigenous,” but two terms to describe those who are Mixe, *ayuujk jä'äy*, and those who are not, *akäts*, which includes Zapotec and Chinantec neighbors to the Mixe region. She powerfully states that she has never wished to stop being Mixe, an identity which contrasts with other peoples of the world, but she has often wished to stop being Indigenous. “Ceasing to be Indigenous without ceasing to be Mixe,” she explains, “would mean that the discourse and state practices that combat identity markers different from the official ones have ceased to operate, it would mean that I can take classes in any subject in my native language or know the history of my community/pueblo in the classroom or, even more so, that my community/pueblo can have self-determination over the natural goods present in our territory” (Aguilar Gil, 2017, p. 23, my translation). She then takes up an Indigenous identity as a political action towards decolonization, an identity which would no longer be relevant once the many power structures of the state used to oppress and try to erase the identity markers of being Mixe would cease to operate.

## **Mestizaje, a Political Project**

An important tool of the Mexican state to erase indigeneity was and continues to be the ideological and political project of mestizaje. The term “mestizo” dates back to the early years after the Spanish conquest to refer to the offspring of Indigenous women raped by the Spanish colonizers. The new colonial subject was neither a member of the Spanish nor Indian group and was subject to different forms of marginalization and discrimination (Medina, 2009, p. 129).

The meaning and positioning of this new colonial subject changed gradually as the population grew and as the new Criollo elite (descendants of Spanish colonizers) turned to a mythic Aztec past to assert their difference and independence from Spain through a discourse that eliminates the Indigenous from the mix and placed the Criollo minority in a position where they could lay claim to their Mexican roots and control their Mexican interests against the Spanish (Calderón & Urrieta, 2019, p. 4; Medina, 2009, p. 104).

This mestizo identity was again reconstructed in the post-revolutionary Mexico of the early XX century to unify a fragmented territory around an imaginary national subject. José Vasconcelos, through his position as the first Secretary of Education, would come to play an important role in building this post-revolutionary nationalism. In his essay “la raza cósmica,” published in 1925, he takes up the discussion about race and mestizaje from an anti-US-imperialist stance, arguing that unlike the division between Black and White and the racism in the United States, Latin America has seen a racial mix between Europeans, Africans, Asians and Indians. This imaginary supposed that in Mexico there is no racism because of the mixing of the races and the sympathy for the

other (Medina, 2009). However, in the words of Medina, mestizaje “as an intellectual discourse proposes the ideal synthesis of the diverse as an urgent argument to resolve the anxiety in the face of the existence of the other. Therefore, mestizaje is a unique form of control of plurality in Mexico, an alternative to the policy of extermination of the Indigenous peoples” (Medina, 2009, p. 110, my translation). Juan Carlos Grijalva (2004) too explains that Vasconcelos saw mestizaje as a form of esthetic redemption, of moving towards whiteness and avoiding the ‘ugliness’ of others from propagating. His utopian discourse of mestizaje was “a way to erase and de-indianize, of forcibly assimilating of ethnic sectors [deemed] antiesthetic, into the hegemony of the emergent national culture” (as cited in Medina, 2009, p. 110).

This ideological and political framework is still at work today. As Figueroa (2011) notes, “mestiza is seen as term both relatively ‘neutral’ (i.e. all Mexicans are Mestizas/os) but also as highly ‘loaded’ (implies possibilities of inclusion and exclusion to the national myth)” (p. 1). The political project of mestizaje as an umbrella identity effectively serves to erase indigeneity while concealing racism and linguisticism through the claims that we are all ‘mixed’ (Calderón & Urrieta, 2019; Figueroa, 2011). It leads Mexicans to view them/ourselves not as racial subjects, but as citizens, successfully assimilating into a national/official identity.

Mestizaje can work towards erasing indigenous identities by absorbing and assimilating them into hybridity, while paradoxically creating a mestiza/Indigenous dichotomy that essentializes indigeneity, creating a stereotype that fails “to reflect the complexity of multiple Indigenous existences and experiences” (Urrieta, 2017).

P’urepecha scholar Luis Urrieta (2017) for example, narrates his struggles in legitimizing

his indigeneity among Mexican mestizos and in his own ancestral pueblo in Michoacán, because, as an English-speaking scholar living and working in the US he does not fit the “standards operating in the Mexican mestizo/indigena dichotomy” (Urrieta, 2017) that characterize the “authentic Indian” based on rurality, language and dress. The term “authentic,” used as a criterion to determine who is “worth saving” and “free from Western contamination” (Smith, 2012) is a form of dehumanization by rendering Indigenous cultures (and languages) static, unable to recreate themselves, be internally diverse or contradictory (Smith, 2012, p. 77).

The policing and regulation of indigeneity through discourses of authenticity is especially evident in Oaxaca at the Guelaguetza, a yearly folklore festival organized by the state government which invites communities from around the state to participate and showcase their traditional dances through a “Committee of Authenticity.” It does not take long, as Aguilar Gil (2017) notes, to criticize the festivities as a state appropriation and exploitation of indigeneity for purposes of consumption.

### **Mestizaje as Decolonization**

The concept of “mestizaje” has taken different turns and meanings and has also been appropriated as a positive identity, most notably by the Chican@ movement in the US. Tracing their roots to an Azteca identity and to Aztlán as their place of origin in what is now California, Chican@s reclaimed an Indigenous identity through mestizaje, downplaying their Spanish roots and positioning themselves as the original North Americans in relation to Euro-Americans (Keating, 2014). Writing on Mesoamerican mythmaking, Keating (2014) notes that “while this renaming was an important decolonizing strategy, it did not adequately distinguish between Chicanos/Latinos and

contemporary indigenous southwestern peoples, thus dismissing issues of sovereignty and inadvertently negating the people themselves” (p. 534).

The discussions about mestizaje have continued at a theoretical level about hybrid identities. In *Borderlands/La Frontera*, Gloria Anzaldúa (1987) appropriates the concept and revises it to exceed biological classifications, proposing the “new mestiza,” “a fluid transformational thinking process that breaks down rigid boundaries between apparently separate categories of meaning” (Keating, 2014, p. 535). Anzaldúa recognizes the hegemonic structures on which mestizaje operates and in contrast to Vasconcelos, does not suggest that it represents equality nor that it works as a synthesis of overcoming differences. Instead, she understands mestizaje as a historical and cultural process through which the imposition of the hegemonic coexist with resistance, and as a space where the subaltern can claim their differences (Medina, 2009). For this reason, the mestiza, as revised by Anzaldúa has been taken up by other Chicana@ scholars as a “figure of hope” for political change (Feghali, 2011), yet for others, it continues to be problematic. In her later work, Cherrie Moraga (2011) points out that “mestizaje” as a theoretical tool could be used as another attempt at enforcing hegemony and proposes reaching back to an Indigenous identity, replacing mestiza with “Xicana Indígena.” With this move, she leaves behind hybridity to align herself with her Indigenous heritage (Keating, 2014).

The ways that mestizaje is still relevant and mobilized in Mexico as a political project that absorbs diversity and promotes discourses of authenticity lead me, with Moraga (2011), to look critically at mestizaje while being attentive to the dangers of new

identities that can similarly enforce hegemony in their moves to stress hybridity and commonalities.

### **On Poststructuralism, Identity and Decolonial Dangers**

Countering the Mexican national imaginary of a static Indigenous identity, this chapter adopts a poststructural definition of identity as "...a socially constructed, variable definition of self or other, whose existence and meaning is continuously negotiated, revised and revitalized" (Nagel 1994, p. 2). Like Foucault (1980), Nagel argued that identity is fluid and dynamic, discursively constructed and socially and historically situated.

Identity has to be understood in respect to the relationships, interactions and the broader social and historical world in which each individual is embedded. Yásnaya Aguilar Gil (2017) for example, speaks about the identities (Indigenous and Mixe) she wears in different locations and for different purposes. Similarly, scholars working on language revitalization in Mexico and in Peru (Guerrettaz et al., 2020; Hornberger, 2014) have noted how individuals in the region may use the social category of "Indigenous" depending on their current context and how they want to position themselves.

From this perspective, Perley (2014) sees indigeneity as performative, and neither definitive nor fixed. He offers the concept of critical indigeneity as a commitment to living in mutually affirming relationships with the Maliseet community and with Maliseet worlds. He conceptualizes Indigenous identity as a continuous and contingent practice, similar to *comunalidad*. Critical indigeneity constantly re-creates Maliseet worlds (p. 47). Like *comunalidad*, it is not an Indigenous-only experience in that it allows and invites

“Indigenous” and “non-Indigenous” people alike to experience Maliseet worlds through art and other relational expressions.

Poststructuralism, decolonial approaches and scholars of Indigenous identity generally oppose essentialism, the notion that there is a “real” essence in any racial or ethnic category (Mignolo & Walsh, 2018; Weaver, 2005), commenting on the impossibility to contain the multiple experiences and diversity among those who claim the identity, “from those who were born to and are historically rooted (socially and culturally) in the practice of their identity, those who come to a knowledge of this identity status later in their lives, and those who may have been cut off from cultural or social institutions that offer opportunities and constraints that define and outline the parameters of how to ‘be’ indigenous” (Harris, 2013, p. 11). However, Indigenous scholars, among them Cook-Lynn (1997), have also pointed out that essentialism is “a defensible notion” that has been used by Indigenous groups to fight off domination and make themselves heard. Spivak (1993) notably takes up this tension and critique of deconstruction within poststructuralism, calling for a “strategic essentialism,” mobilized from the ground up in service of political goals.

Strategic essentialism might serve to counter all-absorbing hybrid social identities, like *mestizaje* in Mexico, serving to give voice and presence to an Indigenous population that refuses to be assimilated. But while strategic essentialism stands in stark contrast with the essentialist constructions of indigeneity circulated by the state, in the source and purpose of the enunciation, essentialism remains a risky politics. Mignolo and Walsh (2018) warn about the decolonial danger of “the simplification and oversimplification of indigeneity and indigeneities along with the notion of a decolonial

geography of ruralization” (p. 82). Perhaps the relative ease with which scholars can slide into a romanticization of indigeneity as a framework of decolonization against a Euro-Western hegemony, leads many, especially those cut off from Indigenous worlds, to balance this pull by leaning towards hybridity and deconstruction.

Another decolonial danger that goes along with romanticizing and essentializing is the appropriation of Indigenous cultural practices and identities (Aguilar Gil, 2018). Vine Deloria (1980) talks about a quest for indigeneity as a longing by the white man “to achieve an authenticity which can never be his” (p. xvi). In the context of Mexico, Yásnaya Aguilar Gil (2018) uses the Guelaguetza as an example of appropriation, not only by the state, but by those categorized as mestizo/a in taking cultural elements of oppressed groups while reinforcing stereotypes and turning diversity into a homogeneous category. She illustrates this through “Flor de Piña,” a dance performed every year at the Guelaguetza that features women wearing huipiles from Chinantec and Mazatec communities which are themselves not invited to participate. This undue appropriation or “apropiación indebida” is made possible by the narrative of mestizaje that obscures these types of phenomena as racism and exploitation (Aguilar Gil, 2018). In a similar critique, Calderón and Urrieta (2019) liken mestizaje to settler moves to innocence, a term coined by Tuck and Yang (2012) to refer to “...those strategies or positionings that attempt to relieve the settler feelings of guilt or responsibility without giving up land or power or privilege, without having to change much at all” (p. 10).

They (Calderón & Urrieta, 2019) cite P’urepecha scholar Spears-Rico (2015), who offers the concept of “mestizo melancholia” to describe a mestiza/o nostalgia for a romanticized Indigenous past that is not generative. Her work looks at Mexican tourists

visiting the state of Michoacán to witness P'urepecha day of the dead activities. Such tourism, Spears-Rico argues, allows mestizos to romanticize Indigenous communities and appropriate Indigenous culture while remaining innocent spectators in the process (p. 9). She calls for a distinction between symbolic and lived indigeneity.

As Saldaña-Portillo (2016) argues from the context of the U.S., “to reclaim Indian heritage without recognition of the differences 150 years of U.S. racialization have wrought among southwestern indigenous peoples confined to reservations, African Americans, and southwestern mestizos is to reclaim an innocent history that is not so innocent after all” (as cited in Calderón & Urrieta, p. 152). It is necessary, as Saldaña-Portillo (2016) demands, that we understand racialization and how we are implicated in the many layers of colonial power structures that have and continue to dispossess Indigenous peoples from their languages, knowledges and territory.

### **Poetry and Narrative as Arts-based Methodologies**

This chapter employs the arts as a strategy to explore how class participants construct and reconstruct identities and the connections between identity, emotion and language reclamation processes. Art-as-inquiry and pedagogy challenge dominant epistemologies by providing multiple ways of expressing and interpreting data. As ways of knowing in themselves, art and narrative can be used to explore new individual and collective identities and to transform the idea of reality.

The arts-as-inquiry or arts-based research is an umbrella term that encompasses visual, music, digital and kinetic arts. Within each of these approaches, the arts can be used as data-collection, analytical process, representation or a combination thereof (Leavy, 2015). In ‘Lengua, Poder y Arte,’ I use the arts as pedagogy and subsequently as

data, analysis and representation. Students were invited to respond to the prompts through any form, medium and language and creativity was encouraged. Conducting the class remotely also enabled different ways of sharing our work, with many students turning to video or a combination of image and text.

To analyze and represent the data I turn to narrative and poetry. Narrative inquiry (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000) has become an increasingly important method in identity research because it allows researchers to consider the situatedness of experience and it can illuminate the subtle ways that identities are negotiated, constructed and reproduced (Early & Norton, 2012; Norton & Toohey, 2011). Experiences are conceptualized not in isolation, but in relation to their environment and their social and historical context (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000).

Narrative inquiry can encompass different forms, including poetry. In the literary world, found poetry is defined as the equivalent of a collage. Found poetry takes “existing texts, refashion them, reorder them and present them as poems” (Poets.org, n.d.). Crafting a found poem entails several analytical processes, from (re)reading and transcribing the existing texts, in this case, students’ poems, narratives and videos, to entextualization, the process of selecting and lifting content from the original “texts” and re-contextualizing it, creating new meanings (Blommaert, 2005; Leppänen et al., 2014). Finally, the translation into English created another layer of interpretation as I engaged in decisions about translation and what to leave untranslated. The format of the poem is used in arts-based research with the goal of preserving the “*livedness*” of the data (Furman et al., 2007), creating “an entertainingly informative experience for the

audience, one that is aesthetically sound, intellectually rich, and emotionally evocative” (Saldaña, 2003, p. 220).

The next section analyzes the art-work responses of students to the “Where do I come from?” prompt through a found poem. I also turn to students’ reflections on engaging with each other’s work and on reading the found poem, which was crafted during the class and shared with students.

### **Mountains, Seas, Peoples**

The second week into the semester, I asked students to introduce themselves by talking about their place of belonging. The prompt, “Where do I come from? Where are my seas and my mountains? Who are my people?” is inspired by *pepeha*, a Māori practice of linking people and identity to land (Murton, 2012).

As we were working remotely and still figuring out synchronous ways of interacting, I invited the group to post on our shared Facebook group and respond in any language(s) and through any medium they wished to express themselves in, from audio, essay, poetry, image, video or movement. The goal of this exercise was for us to get to know each other better across the physical distance that separated us. I wanted to give students time to think and create something meaningful and beautiful that could take them/us to a different place at the time of uncertainty, anxiety and isolation that were the first months of the pandemic. This exercise would not only help us establish a community remotely, but also start weaving for us the relationships between place, language, culture and identity and ground ourselves with our stories in the middle of those intersections. Finally, I wanted to provide an opportunity for all of us to think deeply about our own

identity and belonging and construct them on our own terms, with our own words, images, sounds or movements.

The responses were beautiful, daring and creative. There were videos and images accompanied by poetry, there was dance and drawings, a celebration of place, family, community, and also questions about identity and belonging. The responses also signaled the diversity within the class. The geographical landscape that we brought to that space extended wide through the state of Oaxaca, from the coast to the Sierra Norte, the Mixteca to the Isthmus and to neighboring states. As I read along the songs of celebration, the questions and dreams, trying to abstract meanings and findings, I felt the only way to do justice to these stories was through crafting a collective poem that preserved the “livedness” in our voices. I turned to found poetry.

Beyond being both informative and entertaining and emotionally evocative, the found poem wove our voices together into a new fabric, changing the context of each individual’s words to be now in conversation with other voices and creating new meanings. In making decisions about choosing lines and re-ordering, I grappled with the ethics of which stories to tell, and how to tell and not tell the stories that I felt need to be told (Nagar, 2014, p. 172). This entextualization, the collage of words decontextualized and recontextualized, was mine. While the poem includes lines written or spoken by most members in the class (except for Cesar, who danced, and myself and two other students who posted their reflections after I had created and shared the poem), the crafting of the found poem was my process of inquiry. Yet by inviting students to share their reflections and to add or change the poem, and pushing them to make it theirs, my goal was to move towards a praxis of co-authorship as an ever-evolving commitment and practice of

sharing authority (Nagar, 2019, p. 213). I asked students what we gain and what we lose in creating such a collective text, and to grapple with me with questions of ethical storytelling. This is an ever-evolving praxis. I/we struggled to disrupt hierarchies that we occupied in the class and my role as both “profa”/facilitator and researcher. That meant in part that while some students took the call to change the poem, they did so in separate documents, unwilling to change the version I had created and which is at the center of this dissertation.

There is no way to capture all the richness of the stories, especially when curated through the page and through words alone. Images, for example, were left out as I went through stories and copied phrases and sentences that seemed to capture the unique perspective of the author. I was especially drawn to metaphors because of their aesthetic and power to capture and transmit images. I (re)watched videos, taking phrases that I transcribed, yet I was only able to copy phrases in Spanish. Some students included some phrases in Zapotec. One student, Jaqueline, did her whole video in her language, Chontal, using only Spanish subtitles. It pained me that while she had taken the call to use her language, I used the Spanish translations. Similarly, Cesar J. recorded himself dancing to a piece, using the language of the body. I was unable to translate it into the page.

The phrases I borrowed were transferred to another document, where I arranged them and rearranged them. First, I included place-names, a collage of places to convey the diversity of the group, then references and descriptions of place followed by references of family, community and values together with questions about belonging. Finally, I included phrases about language, struggle, resistance and identity reclamation. This is the poem that emerged.

## ¿ De Dónde Vengo? A Found Poem

Vengo de Yuvila  
De San Pablo Huixtepec,  
Santo Domingo Chontecomatlán, donde las  
nubes juegan y chocan con las montañas  
De la hermosa región del Istmo  
De la costa, un lugar llamado San Pedro  
Pochutla  
San Bartolo Coyotepec un lugar maravilloso  
lleno de tradiciones y costumbres

*I come from Yuvila  
From San Pablo Huixtepec,  
Santo Domingo Chontecomatlán, where the  
clouds play and collide with the mountains  
From the beautiful Isthmus region  
The coast, a place called San Pedro  
Pochutla  
San Bartolo Coyotepec, a beautiful place  
full of tradition and customs*

Vengo de un pueblito llamado Ocotlán de  
Morelos  
Rodeado de montañas  
De una comunidad indígena llamada San Juan  
Juquila Vijanos  
Del más áspero de los senderos, Xoxocotlán,  
junto a los frutos muy ácidos o agridulces

*I come from a town called Ocotlán de  
Morelos  
Surrounded by mountains  
From an indigenous community called San  
Juan Juquila Vijanos  
From the roughest of trails, Xoxocotlán,  
next to the acidic or bittersweet fruit*

Soy de San Dionisio Ocotepec, lugar de los  
mandiles bordados, del buen mezcal, de las  
tortillas hechas a mano, del atole de granillo, de  
cada historia de su gente, de sus calles que me  
han visto crecer

*I am from San Dionisio Ocotepec, place of  
the embroidered mandiles, good mezcal,  
hand-made tortillas, granillo atole, the  
stories from its people and the streets that  
have seen me grow*

Vengo de un legado cultural inmenso de  
costumbres y tradiciones que luchan por  
permanecer generación tras generación  
de gente humilde y trabajadora, que  
todos los días se preocupan por llevar el  
sustento a sus casas, donde las mujeres  
desfilan por las calles desde muy  
temprano, llevando sus cubetas de  
nixtamal a los molinos y los hombres  
alistan sus herramientas o a sus  
animales que los acompañarán a una  
jornada más de trabajo.

*I come from an immense legacy of tradition  
that struggles to remain generation after  
generation  
From humble and hard-working people,  
who each day work to bring sustenance to  
their homes, where women parade the  
streets from the early hours, taking their  
buckets of nixtamal to the mills and the men  
ready their tools or animals who will  
accompany them in another day of work.*

Vengo del esfuerzo de mi padre y los golpes de  
mi madre, del bullicio en la calle México #8

de las risas de mis hermanos y el cariño de mis abuelos.

Vengo de la tierra de emigrantes

de la comunidad que se esfuerza por hacer crecer la tierra

de los ojos del hombre cautivado al ver sus frutos, sueños, esperanzas y deseos.

Mi pueblo originario me trae grandes recuerdos: como ir caminando a través de los vastos bosques de pino junto con mis padres, hermanos y abuelos, ya sea para ir a la recolección de café o para visitar los campos de cultivo.

Vengo de los valores que me han inculcado, vengo de la educación que me han dado y que yo he recibido, vengo de los logros y porqué no, de los fracasos.

Por algunas razones que aún no logro definir, no me siento ni de aquí ni de allá.

Mis papás nacieron en diferentes pueblos, y como es de imaginarse cada uno tiene un aire diferente, cada uno me ha mostrado sus mejores riquezas y me han sembrado sus esencias.

Yo le pertenezco a mi familia

Nací en la ciudad de Oaxaca de Juárez lugar donde “dios nunca muere”

cuna de grandes artistas y figuras políticas algunas buenas y otras no tanto

No conozco el mundo entero pero en el entero mundo que conozco, no estaré jamás en una ciudad en la que quepan tantos colores, tantas

*I come from the effort of my father and my mother's blows, from the bustle on Mexico Str. #8*

*From the laughter of my siblings and the love of my grandparents.*

*I come from the land of emigrants*

*From the community that strives to grow the earth*

*From the eyes of men captivated by their fruit, dreams, hopes and desires.*

*My homegrown community brings me big memories: like walking through the vast pine tree forests next to my parents, siblings and grandparents to harvest coffee or visit the crop fields.*

*I come from the values that have been instilled in me, the education I have been given and I have received, I come from the achievements and why not, from the defeats.*

*For some reasons I cannot define, I don't feel from here or from there.*

*My parents were born in different communities, and like one will imagine each has a different air, each has shown me their richness and have sowed their essences.*

*I belong to my family*

*I was born in Oaxaca City, where “God never dies”*

*Cradle of great artists and political figures, some good, some not so good*

*I don't know the whole world but in the whole world that I know, I will never be in a*

formas, tantos olores y sabores, tantos y tan  
libres modos de ser como en Oaxaca.

*city where so many colors, forms and  
flavors fit, so many and so free ways of  
being, like in Oaxaca.*

la comunidad de mi madre perteneciente a la  
mixteca  
su gente y sus hermosos lugares que me hacen  
sentir tan plena y libre.

*The community of my mother native of the  
mixteca  
Its people and beautiful places that make me  
feel so full and free.*

Vengo de la tierra que enamora se dice llamar  
el cielo, pero yo la conozco  
como Guadalupe Nuevo Centro.

*I come from the land that makes you fall in  
love, it calls itself heaven but I know it as  
Guadalupe Nuevo Centro.*

Vengo de dos estados cercanos, pero totalmente  
diferentes

*I come from two neighboring, but  
completely different states*

Soy la mezcla de varios lados  
Una mezcla de muchas raíces y colores

*I am the mix of many places  
A mix of roots and colors*

Realmente no recuerdo mucho, pero, a veces,  
viene a mi mente un enorme árbol con una  
hamaca

*I really don't remember much but  
sometimes I see a huge tree with a hammock*

ahora estoy sola en otro lugar del que  
tampoco me siento parte

*Now I am alone in another place where  
I also don't feel I belong*

El lugar donde nací no me define  
Sé lo que no soy y con eso me basta

*The place I was born in doesn't  
Define me*

Vengo de una familia de mujeres cercana a las  
costumbres, diversa en cuanto a opiniones y  
criterios de vida que comienzan, se consolidan  
y se resisten a desaparecer a pesar del tiempo

*I know what I am not and that is enough*

me han inculcado el amor a mis raíces  
que todo lo que haga lo tengo que hacer en  
beneficio de mi comunidad y de mi gente

*I come from a family of women close to  
traditions, diverse in terms of opinion and  
lifestyles that begin, consolidate and refuse  
to disappear despite of time*

respeto, humildad, la importancia del trabajo y  
del esfuerzo duro

*They have instilled in me a love of my roots  
That all I do I shall do in benefit of my  
community and my people*

Aunque mi lengua materna es el Zapoteco,  
desde temprana edad tuve que adaptarme más

*Respect, humility, the importance of hard  
work and effort*

al español, ya que a los tres años de edad, mi familia se mudó a los Valles Centrales

mi padre de pequeño me quería enseñar,  
el DIIDXAZÁ  
me decía  
aprende

fue más conveniente enseñarnos español para desenvolvernos mejor en esta sociedad. Y así fue como paulatinamente fui olvidando hablar Zapoteco.

A pesar de mis años sigo aprendiendo, porque adoro hablar en Zapoteco.  
Adoro hablar con mi abuelita y escucharla contar sus historias.

Vengo de una región conquistada por los españoles  
De una región que jamás se rinde y lucha por salir adelante y salvar su cultura

No voy a dejar que se pierdan los valores y el idioma  
de poco en poco se harán varios hablantes en otros lugares

Un día, mi tío me enseñó a hacer tepache y mientras me explicaba el proceso de conservación me dijo que estuviera atenta a la “madre”- una especie de nata pesada- que saldría con el tiempo y, con este, el brote de un gusano. Y así fue, con paciencia el gusano nació de entre la fermentación, la panela, el agua, la piña. Me pareció increíble que de entre la nada pueda existir vida, así es como pienso que todo existe y no tengo certezas de lo que hay después.

*While Zapotec is my native language, I had to adapt to Spanish when, at three years old, my family moved to the Central Valleys*

*When I was young, my father wanted to teach me DIIDXAZA  
He told me  
Learn*

*It was easier to teach us Spanish to better navigate this society. And so it was that I slowly forgot to speak Zapotec.*

*Despite my years I keep learning, because I love speaking in Zapotec.  
I love speaking to my grandmother and listen to her stories.*

*I come from a region conquered by the Spanish  
From a region that never gives up and fights to keep going and save its culture*

*I won't let the values and language get lost  
Slowly, there will be new speakers in other places*

*One day, my uncle showed me how to make tepache and while he explained to me the conservation process he told me to be attentive to the “mother”-- a kind of thick cream-- that would come out with time, and with it, the emergence of a worm. And so it was, with patience the worm was born between the fermentation, the piloncillo, the pineapple. It seemed incredible that life can come out of nothing. That is how I think everything exists and I have no certainty of what is beyond.*

*I enjoy the simple things*

Disfruto de cosas simples  
el ir por la ciudad, escucharla, sentirla y robarle  
un instante  
Veo que todo el mundo quiere ir de prisa, yo  
quiero ir lento  
No me dirijo a un lugar específico pero estoy en  
una búsqueda constante de mi montaña o mi  
mar

Pertenezco a los lugares en donde siento  
felicidad plena  
Siempre he creído que las personas se  
encuentran por alguna razón

Mi gente es sencillamente toda persona que ha  
llegado hasta mí y yo a ellos para estar donde  
estoy ahora

Tengo mucho camino por recorrer  
Me restará conocer más montañas y mares de  
las que imagino.

Donde habite el recuerdo, allí estará mi tumba  
Mi corazón siempre estará ahí  
Ne..." Pa' nananu'laa, zandalanu'

*Walk through the city, listen to it, feel it and  
Steal an instant  
I see the whole world wanting to go fast, I  
want to go slow  
I'm not going to any specific place, but I'm  
constantly searching for my mountain or my  
sea*

*I come from the places where I feel full  
happiness  
I have always believed that people meet for  
a reason*

*My people is simply all of those who have  
arrived to where I am and me to where they  
are to be where I am now*

*I have a long way ahead  
I will know more mountains and seas than I  
can imagine*

*Where the memory lies, there will be my  
grave  
My heart will always be there  
Ne..." Pa' nananu'laa, zandalanu'*

Art-as-inquiry has a unique power to spark creativity and imagination, making the experience of engaging with the (oral and written) texts of the group an embodied, affective experience. “It was very special being able to learn a little about each of our stories,” Ruth wrote in her reflection on reading the found poem and engaging with the work of her fellow students: “As I read some texts, where they described their places of origin, I imagined being there, on those streets, in that forest, those towns...”

As Janesick (2016) notes, “poetry engages us and draws us into someone’s life experience” (p. 33). The multiple voices in this collage, twenty-three voices woven

together, communicate multiple truths about human experience, helping us to see the deep diversity within a community that might superficially seem homogeneous (Oaxacan university students). Foregrounding the dialogical specificity of each voice, and juxtaposing them into a new narrative can generate something beyond each individual voice, a thread of “non-coercive knowledges which are located, partial and embodied” (Lather, 1991, p. 134-135). The collective poem maintains the embodied experience and affect from the individual pieces, but this emotion, in conversation, also created new meanings.

Marili reflected on the emotion she felt in reading the found poem: “I was moved by every word, phrase and paragraph. The appreciation each has for their roots, origins, you can see clearly. It was impossible to avoid being astonished by the texts of classmates. Seeing through other minds what we sometimes forget. To see the beauty of the languages, their culture, even if we live in the same country, the customs and traditions vary in each state and each community” (Marili).

Poetry allows for building relationships and community (Janesick, 2016, p. 39). Not being able to build relationships in person, the arts, including images, poetry, voice and the moving image, created a space where we could start to think of ourselves, the group of ‘Lengua, Poder y Arte,’ as a community, getting to know each other in many ways more deeply by making ourselves vulnerable through our creative work and personal stories. Seeking, finding and constructing a sense of belonging is always an affective process. In their oral and written poems and narratives, students conveyed the love and pride in their place of origin, their families and communities.

Led perhaps by the prompt, many students expressed belonging to a specific place. This place was usually a pueblo (the Spanish word *pueblo*, conveys both the meaning of town and community), like Yuvila, Ocotlán de Morelos, San Juan Juquila Vijanos. These pueblos are inseparable and synonymous to the geographical landscapes in which they are located, as students narrate in their poems: “*Santo Domingo Chontecomatlán, where the clouds play and collide with the mountains,*” or “*The coast, a place called San Pedro Pochutla.*” They are also inseparable from cultural practices, like “*San Dionisio Ocotepec, place of the embroidered mandiles, good mezcal, hand-made tortillas, granillo atole, the stories from its people and the streets that have seen me grow.*” Along with place, we see belonging rooted in families, and in generational continuity: “*I come from a family of women close to traditions, diverse in terms of opinion and life views that begin, consolidate and refuse to disappear despite of time.*” The line between place and people starts to fade when considering both place/pueblo and family as converging in community. Values of *comunalidad*, like reciprocity and hard work (Martínez Luna, 2013), which organize life in many communities in Oaxaca, are often the same values transmitted in families through life experiences and storytelling:

*They have instilled in me a love of my roots  
That all I do I shall do in benefit of my  
community and my people  
Respect, humility, the importance of hard work and effort*

Even when there is no connection to a specific pueblo, *comunalidad* remains as a set of values, and sense of identity and belonging. By rooting ourselves in place and community, we gain a sense of being part, and belonging, to something bigger, knowledge passed down from generation to generation and struggles that go beyond the

individual, as Ruth narrated in her video, *“I come from an immense legacy of tradition that struggles to remain generation after generation.”*

Reordering the statements of belonging one after the other gave the poem a special affective power, an act, perhaps, of mobilizing emotion through language/languageing. The voices, woven together, created a collective, multi-voiced text, an imperfect portrait where we could see ourselves within/as the group. But the found poem also created the sense of community in recognizing the common love each one has for their mountains, seas and people and in recognizing those seas, mountains and people as their pluricultural state. As Lucero wrote: *“I identified with many of my classmates’ descriptions. It made me feel pride and to value what we have, our cultural wealth and beautiful people.”* By not attributing the lines in the found poem to the individual authors and not attributing it to myself, but rather sharing it as a collective poem and inviting anyone to edit and change it; moving towards a praxis of co-authorship, “creating and learning by sharing authority with one another” (Nagar, 2019, p. 213), the ownership changed from the individual to the collective.

Lucero notes how she identified with many lines of text. She locates herself within the poem and the class community, but also, by using the pronoun “we,” she turns the collage of places and peoples into a whole where she too is located. The found poem contains the diversity of our many voices. It becomes “ours,” even though only one or a few lines might have come from any one person’s authorship. By embodying the diversity of Oaxaca, the found poem served as an affective space to re(construct) belonging to the state.

The poem and the experience of engaging with all the texts also served as an affective space for negotiating identity and belonging through identification and (de)identification. For many, being able to identify with and claim belonging to a pueblo represented a privilege. This was expressed by students like Wendy (quoted above), who trace their roots to more than one place but struggles to find belonging, or by students like Arleth, who grew up in Oaxaca City and don't have a strong connection to other communities:

Soy de Oaxaca como la mayoría de ustedes y, desgraciadamente para mi, no de un lugar interesante como un pueblo en la sierra, la costa o un lugar donde haya un bailable que los identifique, sin embargo me siento parte de toda Oaxaca, de toda su cultura, de sus lugares, de todos sus bailes, de toda su comida.  
(Arleth)

Arleth's post, accompanied by images of buildings, festivities and landscapes in and near Oaxaca City, is in part a response to posts of her classmates who have identified a specific pueblo as their place of origin. By not being able to claim belonging to "an interesting place," Arleth, like Lucero, constructs her sense of belonging to a whole ("*I feel part of all of Oaxaca*"), the state as a legal entity that contains all the pueblos and cultural practices.

Some students, like Doreli (quoted above), identified as a *mezcla*, *a mix of many roots and colors*. Doreli's parents come from different communities in the Sierra. Her father speaks Zapotec, while her mother grew up speaking Spanish, which is also the lingua franca of her home. While Doreli grew up in Oaxaca, she expresses attachment to both her father's and her mother's communities.

Like Doreli, Wendy's parents come from different communities in Oaxaca and she has lived in different places, including Oaxaca City, but unlike Doreli, Wendy

struggled to find a sense of belonging. She shared that she didn't know she came from any particular place, her languaging, a hybrid of (Spanish) accents and words acquired in each of the places she had lived, as evidence of her sense of placelessness. During a conversation at the end of the class, Wendy told me about her experience reading the found poem and how she found comfort in phrases like Doreli's that found pride in being a *mezcla*. She noted that she particularly liked the phrase "*I belong to my family*" in the found poem. This opened up new possibilities of imagining a place of belonging as dynamic and as a community that is not necessarily tied to a geographical location. "I feel like my identity, at least right now," Wendy shared at the end of the class, "I feel like I belong to a community, I feel like I belong to the Department of Languages."

Wendy's journey resonates with my own. My own response to the prompt asking to locate ourselves was a video following a bee flying over jacaranda petals that had fallen on the ground with a voiceover where I express coming from the earth but growing up on the cement of Mexico City. "I come from stories of wondering ancestors," I said, "a la vez de muchos y de ningún lugar," "from many places and at the same time, from nowhere." "I am a seed still in flight, looking for fertile earth, wishing to one day, spread root, bury histories, memories and return fruit."

With Wendy, I found that recognizing myself in others' stories of *mezcla* allowed me to see myself identified in/with the group. Reading about the multiple articulations of belonging to family, to community, to multiple places, to memories and teachings was healing. I learned that we can find and grow roots in many places and stories and we are not alone in our struggles for belonging. The found poem constructed a space where it was OK to be a *mezcla* and it showed that there are many ways of being hybrid.

While the found poem constructed spaces of identification and a common identity as members of the class, and (for everyone but myself), as Oaxacan, it also foregrounded differences, or as Jaqueline observed “the little details that make us unique.” The unique details, differences juxtaposed, created a fabric of apparent disjunctures and contradictions, a first-person singular describing coming from one place, then another, stating simultaneously belonging and the struggle to belong. In her reflection about the process of crafting her own found poem, Emma wrote:

Just like there are those who have similar ideas, there are others who have different ones and putting everything together seemed contradictory. Putting the lines together, I gained a more profound and complete text but at the same time the main idea each author tried to convey was lost.

The contradictions, as Emma noted, only made the text deeper and “more complete,” for there is no individual, and certainly no collective without contradictions. In many ways, it was the contradictions that provided the color and shape of the new collective story, each line, each author a different color threaded together. Collectivity is not neat. It is complex and at times contradictory. Building a community, including a classroom community entails many people coming together with their similarities and differences, creating a new space of belonging despite the contradictions. For it is within contradictions that creative tensions, and new learning and unlearning can emerge. Indeed Jacqui Alexander (2006) calls us to see contradiction and paradox “as the motor of things” for “living contradiction is necessary if we are to create the asylums of identification and solidarity with and for one another, without which our lives will surely wither” (p. 266). Contradiction as generative and necessary is part of the praxis of co-authorship and learning to create, (un)learn and move together developed in *Hungry Translations* (Nagar, 2019) and central to my/our work in/with ‘Stories, Bodies,

Movements' (Nagar, 2019; Stories, Bodies, Movements' Class, Spring 2017. 2021) A praxis of co-authorship can only emerge in what Nagar (2019) calls 'situated solidarities' that recognize the "blended but fractured we" and the impossibilities of translating between struggles (p. 42).

As Emma also noted, many stories were lost in this retelling, each line decontextualized from its source and entextualized in the found poem, creating new meanings. The story of tepache, for example ("*One day, my uncle showed me how to make tepache...*") was written by Victoria. In it she describes the awe she felt, watching the worm be born from the fermentation process. Part of the richness of this story is in how it invites the reader to create their own analysis and interpretations. Originally followed by a paragraph stating her own contradictions-- "I don't know where I am going but it's clear to me where I don't want to go. I have many goals but I am not worried about not meeting them. I prefer many things but I prefer what I have"—, it could be read as both uncertainty and wonder towards the future. Within then poem, I placed the story after references to the love and regret of languages not learned and the commitment to give further life to them, so the wonder of seeing life be born out of nothing but a cocktail of sweetness left to ferment, signaled, for me, an everlasting hope and certainty in the continuity of languages and knowledges. Reclamation is made of small steps and moments of awareness, as the poem continues:

*I enjoy the simple things  
Walk through the city, listen to it, feel  
it and  
Steal an instant*

In what can seem like a paradox, we also read about students looking back to the past, their place of birth and previous generations while simultaneously looking forward in search of their mountains and seas.

*I have a long way ahead  
I will know more mountains and seas than I  
can imagine*

*Where the memory  
lies, there will be my grave*

The apparent paradox of looking simultaneously back and forward for identity is not a reading unique to the found poem. It is also present in some students' responses, like in that of Alexis. In his post, Alexis, who comes from the Mixteca, wrote about his native land, the "bellas tierras tlaxiaquenses" (beautiful land of Tlaxiaco), "where people work from sunrise to sunset, characterized by its wonderful traditions, customs and delicious gastronomy." He goes on to state:

I have yet to discover what my seas and my mountains are, I know that with every step I take I am closer to discovering it. Although the horizon recedes, I go after it until one day I achieve the dream that was forged in me, and when I am above my mountains and can walk on my sea, it will be then when I will know where I came from and what I was doing to get there.

Then, he goes back to his community, "my beautiful land," he writes, "of kind and solidary people who give you a hand without thinking about it, a place of men who fight for their land." Later, during our interview at the end of the semester, Alexis expressed the joy he feels being able to communicate in Mixtec.

It's too beautiful. Speaking two languages at once. I have seen many people who only speak one language and others who speak other languages like Spanish or Zapotec. I have cousins who live in the city and they don't understand. They live stuck in a language and don't understand when my grandmother speaks. They ask, what is she saying? It's a blessing being able to speak my native language.

(Alexis, August, 7<sup>th</sup>, 2020)

In the future, Alexis wants to travel as a photographer and make portraits of people, especially elders. He talks about the importance of language to communicate with elders, to listen to their stories and build relationships. He also talks about photography as a language in itself “an image transmits a thousand stories... sadness, joy, loneliness... they make us imagine.” Looking into the past, into the elders’ stories, he imagines.

Stories like Alexis’ show that reclamation does not only mean looking back. It doesn’t mean not looking elsewhere, not leaving. His statements on looking for other, far away mountains and seas could be interpreted as a desire to leave his community, to “progress,” a narrative in complicity with neoliberal conceptions of “success,” analogous to leaving your (backward, traditional) community for the (developed, modern) city. Yet the grounding he feels in his community, his family and his language point to more complex meanings. It can be a refusal to be categorized/identified only in terms of place, a refusal to stereotypes attributed to a rural community and/or it can express a very human desire to discover, learn and find their own path. Migration, voluntary or forced, is part of many peoples’ stories. It will be when Alexis is standing in his far away mountains and seas that he will know his roots. It is abroad, in the US, that many Mixtec people have reclaimed and appropriated an Indigenous identity (Mendoza Zuany, 2014). Leaving can also mean a return. Similarly, language reclamation involves looking back and forward, (re)membering in order to imagine and transform.

Despite migration, despite leaving the native community for the city, as in Abraham’s story— *I had to adapt to Spanish when, at three years old, my family moved to the Central Valley,*— despite being physically and/or cognitively disconnected from

their/our roots, languages and ways of knowing, students find ways to (re)construct their identities in ways that often resist and refuse identity politics: *“the place where I was born doesn’t define me.”*

After the end of the semester, during my interview conversations with students, I asked them how they identified themselves. Most, like Jaqueline (quoted above), reinstated their identification to/with their place/community of origin. Others, like Wendy (also quoted above), (re)constructed their identities as part of a community, like the Department of Languages. Only Emma, identified herself as Indigenous:

*“Soy indígena” she said. “I am Indigenous because I love the place where I come from. It is not wearing a white skirt... it is wearing it everywhere in your heart and in your blood. I am proud. Clothing doesn’t define me.”* (Emma, August 18<sup>th</sup>, 2020)

Emma comes from Yuvila, “a small place with big hearted people” in the Sierra Norte. Her grandmother spoke Zapotec, which is now only spoken by a few elders in her community. Now learning Isthmus Zapotec in the Department of Languages, her dream is to go back to Yuvila (re)learn the Zapotec of her community, and help revitalize her language among youth.

Emma is (re)claiming and appropriating an Indigenous identity, while refusing the national neocolonialist imaginary that defines Indigenous people by language and traditional dress. Using that as metaphor, she defines Indigeneity as a pride that you take with you, wearing it “in your heart and in your blood.”

## **(Re)claiming our Seas, Mountains and Peoples**

As is stated throughout this chapter, language reclamation is also necessarily a reclamation of identity, a re-remembering, putting back together the fragments of ourselves that were forcibly taken apart; a deeply personal process of seeking and growing new roots and generating new seeds. Identities, constantly produced and (re)produced through interaction, are also embedded within the same layers of colonial power structures that have erased Indigenous languages, ways of knowing and being in the world.

In Mexico as in many places around the world, indigeneity is often at the center of identity politics. Top-down policies have constructed ethnicity and national identity from outside Indigenous peoples' experiences, but these constructions are also continually subverted in interaction (Taylor, 2009). How identities are (re)constructed locally, in classrooms and community, has profound political and practical implications (Guerrettaz et al., 2020) and can ultimately shape language reclamation processes. For this reason, examining the nuanced ways that identities are negotiated, inhabited and (re)constructed should be at the forefront of every language revitalization/reclamation effort. This is especially important in language teacher preparation programs and other diverse settings where individuals might not share a social identity linked to a single linguistic community.

The purpose of asking students to look for their mountains, seas and people was to provide a space to (re)construct their/our own identities, to locate ourselves in the nature, land, the world, and in relation to their group. It allowed them to build relationships and create a class community within the community of the Department of Languages. Students came from different places, identified in multiple ways, disagreed in

many others. Some knew each other and met in the synchronous sessions and worked together remotely. Others, unable to connect, knew the group only based on the work they posted on Facebook and the found poem that brought us/them together. This was a fractured and evolving community. I was careful not to assign identities to students, to somehow, through activities or calling out some people over others based on their experiences, position students in ways that they would not position themselves. Knowing the many meanings and problematic nuances of the term “Indigenous” as a marker of marginalization, I also avoided using the term in the class description (See Appendix A), though I was explicit about naming my research question –as exploring the possibilities of Indigenous language reclamation through embodied pedagogies–, during our first day of class. Although I wished the class would attract students with many different cultural and linguistic heritage, including speakers of Indigenous languages, I did not want the class description to suggest it targeted “Indigenous” students and thereby perpetuate the simplification of indigeneity, excluding for example those who identify by place/community, as *mezcla* or those who have had their ties interrupted. These choices were not always conscious, but rather an intuition, based on an embodied knowledge of identity politics in Mexico. I was also influenced by my experience as a participant in Richa Nagar’s *Stories, Bodies, Movements*, where students from multiple geographies, disciplines and experiences came together in radical vulnerability to learn together from each others’ stories and in solidarity with struggles near and far (Nagar, 2019). Ultimately, opening the class to all meant a refusal of identity politics and a recognition that we are all implicated in coloniality from our different locations and therefore have a role in the reclamation of Indigenous languages and cultures as a decolonization process.

As the found poem shows, there are multiple ways of rooting oneself with one's ancestral languages, ways of being and knowing through place, through communities or stories. Aguilar Gil (2017), a linguist by training, uses an analogy with phonemes to state that there are many characteristics to any individual, but when it comes to the (re)production of identities, it is only those characteristics that are contrasting that matter. It is therefore that in Mixe there is no concept of being "Indigenous," but rather "Mixe" and "non Mixe." Within the classroom, it is important to pay attention to how students define themselves in interaction in relation to others in the class. What are the contrasting characteristics within the class? How are students positioning themselves within our shared space and one another? With most students living in Oaxaca City but coming from multiple places/communities throughout the state, their place of origin was a marker of difference and identity. Critical pedagogies in the class (as within other spaces in the University) fostered placing value in linguistic and cultural diversity. Accordingly, students celebrated the cultural manifestations of their pueblos/communities, and those with close ties to Indigenous languages confidently shared their languages (see "Language" chapter) and their intention to (re)learn, teach and promote them. But students also emphasized their identity as Oaxacan. This identity contrasted only with me, coming from Mexico City, and might have been emphasized if I, as the "profa," was perceived as the main audience of their posts, yet a common Oaxacan identity can also be (re)constructed as a symbol of belonging to a larger community represented by Oaxaca State, the University, the Department of Languages and our class. Many members of the class, including myself, struggled to reconnect with roots that are linked to more than one place. Learning about each other's struggles for belonging and constructing a common

identity as a member of the class, the Department of Languages, the University of Oaxaca provided a healing space to come together in relationship through commonalities.

But foregrounding commonalities with no attention to the differences and contradictions can be problematic. A positioning as Oaxacan was especially emphasized by those who came from Oaxaca City and had broken ties to indigeneity. In a class which championed the maintenance and continuity of Indigenous languages, cultures and ways of knowing, Arleth expressed regret that unlike some of her classmates, she did not come from “an interesting pueblo in the sierra, the coast or a place with a dance that identifies them.” A diverse urban center where the Guelaguetza is celebrated every summer, Oaxaca City is seen to represent and contain all the cultural and gastronomic manifestations from around the state. Discourses of appropriation of diversity by the state, symbolized by the Guelaguetza, are prevalent, and the role of the found poem in (re)constructing a common Oaxacan identity by encompassing its diversity could feed into this discourse. There is always a danger of non-generative essentialization, of romanticizing and appropriating indigeneity out of a mestizo melancholia (Spears-Rico, 2015), a move to innocence that perpetuates the neocolonial ideologies and linguistic regimes that we are trying to contest and transform.

Pedagogical practices fostering language reclamation need to be conscious of these decolonial dangers (Mignolo & Walsh, 2018) and integrate critical reflections on the different ways we are implicated in colonial structures of power, linguicide and its intersections with racialization processes (Skutnabb-Kangas & Phillipson, 1996). At ‘Lengua, Poder y Arte’ we explored our complicities by examining our linguistic ideologies, through telling stories of language (see *The language sprouts*), retelling them

through performance (see performance chapter) and by being in conversation with critical thinkers through text and video (e.g., Aguilar Gil, 2017, 2019; Canal 22, 2017, 2019; NotimexTV, 2017). The real possibilities of language reclamation as decolonization, and avoiding this work becoming another manifestation of mestizo melancholia, lies in its praxis, a constant engagement that continuously generates knowledge towards an Indigenous resurgence (Simpson, 2018). Refusing politics of recognition, Simpson refers to Indigenous resurgence as “a set of practices,” “a reengagement with the things that we have left behind, a reemergence,” and “an individual and collective process of decolonization” (pp.16-17). Simpson follows Sarah Hunt and Cindy Holmes who make a call for taking up decolonization in intimate spaces, re-creating “Indigenous political practices inside our homes” (pp.191-192), and, I would add, in classroom spaces. This work, of course, does not begin or end in the classroom or within a single semester. It needs to be continuous and to break down boundaries that separate the classroom from the homes and the community.

A reclamation of language and identity is part of a resurgence, a constant praxis of *comunalidad* that is generative and where there is space for all. There can be multiple ways of belonging and a multitude of identities, from Mixe to non-Mixe, *comunero* or *avecindado*. In *Mohawk Interrupts* (2014), Audra Simpson invites us to consider how we belong. How do I reflect, act and embody my belonging? How am I contributing to resurgence, to *comunalidad*? What practices am I carrying along to the next generation? (see L. Simpson, 2018, pp. 176-179). These are the questions that we should continuously ask ourselves as educators and scholars as we too navigate our reclamation journeys, trying to generate new futures while making sense of our own stories.

## **Mobilizing Emotion for Language Reclamation**

Like language is tied to identity, identity is tied to emotion. From a holistic view of the self that emphasizes the union of mind, body and spirit in knowledge making and pedagogy (hooks, 2014), emotion is entangled in the process of knowing. Embedded in unequal power structures and discourse practices, we learn from our embodied experiences and gut feelings, which play a vital role in the production and reproduction of identities. Like identity, emotion is always dynamic, ever-present and in flux (Ahmed, 2004).

Emotion and identity are important constructs that are connected to and shape learners' investment and commitments to learn a language (Norton, 2000; Norton & Toohey, 2011), but they take special meaning and deserve special attention in contexts of language reclamation because of the generational trauma and painful identity politics associated with indigeneity (McKenzie, 2022).

Emotion can play a key role in the (re)production and (re)construction of identities, transforming their meanings and creating other affirming identities, but beyond being a space and medium where identities are (re)constructed, emotion can also transform signs (Lewis & Bigelow, 2019), including identity labels. The word "Indigenous," which can have problematic meanings as a marker of marginalization, rurality and a romanticized past, can also be reframed and appropriated for political purposes.

The arts have a special way of mobilizing emotion. In 'Lengua, Poder y Arte' we listened to Indigenous poets describe their relationships to their language and the meanings of losing it. We listened to the anger and resolve of youth working to reclaim

their Zapotec language through rap music. We also (re)told stories about language and performed them, putting ourselves in the shoes of protagonists and antagonists (see performance chapter). There was also something especially moving about sharing stories of our mountains, seas and people and being the receivers of others' stories. We were moved by the similarities, what we share with each other, but also what makes us distinct and unique, what grounds us and what drives us. The affective space of vulnerability, empathetic reflections, striving to “empathize and connect generously with the viewpoint, experience, or argument of an other” (Nagar, 2019, p. 212) and joy in sharing and producing knowledge in relationship mobilized emotions, reframed meanings and made powerful identities available.

It is important that we listen to the nuances, embrace, find comfort in the commonalities while considering the complexities in the contradictions. Pedagogical practices need not only consider the ways that identities are (re)constructed locally (Guerrettaz et al., 2020), but be actively listening to the complexities and contradictions in the affective spaces where identities are continuously (re)constructed.

Language regimes, language policies and linguistic ideologies affect the emotional ecology of language, the emotional experiences at the group and individual level, mediated across time and space (Smith-Christmas, 2022) and in turn affect identification to the language, culture and community. Considering emotion as a space where identities are (re)produced and signs can be transformed (Lewis & Bigelow, 2019, p. 219), pedagogical practices can mobilize emotion through the arts, entextualization and empathetic conversations, (re)producing affirming identities that move towards a language reclamation and resurgence.

## Conclusion

In this chapter, I turn to the arts-as-inquiry to explore how students in a language teacher education program in Oaxaca, Mexico, inhabit, (re)construct and negotiate their identities in relationship and interaction, and the connections and implications for language reclamation processes. Few studies have considered the connections between identity and language reclamation or questioned the various meanings that the term “Indigenous,” central to the field and work of language revitalization, yet embedded in multiple oppressive histories and neocolonial structures of power, can have in different settings and contexts.

This chapter calls for scholars and educators involved in language revitalization/reclamation efforts to attend to the nuanced ways that people inhabit and negotiate identities in different settings and in interaction, and to afford spaces for self-identification and self-determination. At ‘Lengua, Poder y Arte’ we inhabited and negotiated multiple identities, expressed in part through our responses to the prompt asking us to locate our mountains, seas and people. While constructing a common identity (as a class, members of the Language Department and/or the state) to bring us together in a space of belonging can be healing and joyful, we need to be attentive to the danger of absorption and appropriation and thereby erasure of diversity. The found poem that emerged from our collective voices was a space of paradox and contradiction, underscoring the complexity of identity and contesting oversimplified conceptions of indigeneity. It is in these spaces of identification and de-identification that we need to linger in critical reflection (Mora, 2011).

The experience at 'Lengua, Poder y Arte' also underscores the need to think actively into how pedagogical practices can constrain or enable identity positions that encourage the appropriation, (re)creation and (re)invention of indigeneity. Learning is an affective experience, therefore we need to consider emotion as a space and medium where positive, supportive and powerful Indigenous/place based/rooted identities are (re)constructed and (re)created. Integrating the arts, including poetry to mobilize emotion, asking "how do I belong?" "What does it mean to be Indigenous?" and allowing ourselves to theorize from our bodies and our hearts. The answers are not only about language, but are at the heart of language.

Finally, (Indigenous) language reclamation can be approached from many identities, and not only from a proclaimed Indigenous identity. It can be approached from a mezcla working to reclaim broken ties to Indigeneity without negating its other parts, from place-based community identities, pushing us to think of place also as community and therefore dynamic, rooted in ancestors. We need to think about reclamation in and from urban spaces, and from a multitude of identities moving in relationship towards comunalidad.

## Art

### *Enacting Language Reclamation through Performance as Embodied Praxis*

“Tell me a story about language,” I say to the class of student teachers at the University in Oaxaca, Mexico. Oaxaca is Mexico’s linguistically most diverse state and the students reflect this demographic. They are also language learners and future language teachers, so I know there will be many stories. I would usually be in a classroom on campus, in a circle, facing the twenty six students in the class, but the spring semester of 2020 started with a strike that delayed the start of the semester until March and, just as the University was about to open, the pandemic moved all in-person classes into a virtual environment.

The class I was facilitating, ‘Lengua, Poder y Arte,’ aimed to collectively explore linguistic ideologies and language regimes through our own linguistic histories to (re)imagine and (re)create equitable multilingual policies and pedagogies through performance and the arts. The performances and other embodied activities had to be reinvented as we explored different modes of interaction and collaboration. Yet our constantly changing circumstances allowed me to let go of the pre-determined and embrace an ever-present praxis of exploration, creativity and self-reflexivity.

Many of us have yet to meet in person. And while I long for daily interaction and face-to-face embodiment, I understand pedagogy not as a classroom bound practice but as relational encounters that create opportunities for growth (Zembylas, 2007). Viewed this way, pedagogy is dynamic and adaptable, informed by practice, experience and

stories. So we come together with our stories through our screens, not knowing how this experience will develop.

Today, I am sitting in my bedroom in Oaxaca City, computer on my lap. About half of the students are able to connect to the synchronous Zoom class and I hold my phone in front of my computer to transmit live on Facebook for everyone else. Outside, a voceador advertises warm tamales on the speakerphone. I wonder if they can hear him too.

I continue addressing students, explaining what I mean by “language stories.”

— It can be a time when you felt different based on how you spoke or communicated, or when you noticed someone making a comment about someone’s language use; it can be a moment when something was lost in translation; a story you inherited from parents or grandparents; a moment that stirred joy, anger or pain.

After a moment of reflection, the stories start flowing.

In this chapter I explore the performances and discussions that emerged around one language story during a synchronous online class. Through the exploration and (re)telling of this specific story as an ethnodrama, I examine the possibilities of embodied, arts-based pedagogies for language reclamation, arguing that performance can be an important platform to foster critical ideological awareness and (re)create alternative spaces for Indigenous languages and cultures. The virtual landscape in which we were forced to work hindered some possibilities, but enabled different types of collaborations and modalities.

I begin the chapter by detailing the theories and experiences that ground ‘Lengua, Poder y Arte’ and performance pedagogy in particular. In the second portion of the

chapter, I introduce the story of José within an ethnodrama of a synchronous class session and discuss the implications of this work for language reclamation in diverse settings.

### **Grounding ‘Lengua, Poder y Arte’**

It is through storytelling that we make connections between the personal and the political, the local and the global, for the intimate and the global are continuously invoked and constituted through storytelling (Nagar, 2019). My story, growing up trilingual—in German, English and Spanish—in Mexico City, yet unaware of the living presence of multiple languages indigenous to Mexico, reflects a global history of erasure of linguistic, cultural and epistemological diversity. It was only when I was far from home that I first questioned and became struck with the erasure of Indigenous languages and ways of knowing. I had been studying Mandarin Chinese in China, discovering new ways of seeing and being in the world through a language completely unrelated to my own when I realized I didn’t have to travel that far.

A long history of colonialism and centuries of oppression and discrimination have displaced and invisibilized Indigenous peoples, languages and cultures. My ignorance and my story being both a consequence and driving force of these policies of erasure. There were only rumors that my great grandfather, a book-seller in the Mexican market of La Lagunilla, spoke Hñáñu, a language indigenous to Central Mexico. My grandfather never shared that story. His mother was a woman of Spanish descent and he was raised in the city, his father’s language and stories lost within one generation. In many ways, this research is grounded in my journey to make sense of this generational loss and (re)weave the many loose threads of my own story.

## **Towards an Embodied Praxis for Language Reclamation**

Many different terms and metaphors have been used to refer to the work to reverse language shift. ‘Language revitalization’ is the most widely used among scholars, who’ve also referred to it as a new field (McIvor, 2021). Alternatively, the term “language reclamation” has been put forth and described by Leonard (2012) as encompassing common language revitalization strategies, including language documentation, description and language learning, but with a wider focus on the embodied and dynamic nature of language and its inextricable and reciprocal links to human and non-human interaction. Like Zapotec poet Irma Pineda, Zoque poet Mikea Sánchez and Tsotsil poet Enriqueta Lunez (Canal 22, 2019) remind us, there is no language without people, *no hay lengua sin pueblo*. Language reclamation is therefore never only about the language. It is a decolonization effort, a reclamation of knowledge(s) and a way of being in the world, connected to autonomy, self-determination, land rights, and a sense of identity for communities and individuals (Hinton, 2001; Smith, 2012).

The syllabus for ‘Lengua, Poder y Arte,’ aimed at questioning hegemonic power structures and reimagining equitable worlds, conceived of language as inseparable from its speakers, deeply entangled with questions of race, gender, social class, land and politics of knowledge production. I aimed to connect these questions to action and transformation, using all the senses to feel and do what we cannot express with words alone and found performance as a clear vehicle to achieve these goals.

### *Weaving the Trenza*

As a field, language revitalization (and reclamation) is inherently interdisciplinary (Córdova Hernández, 2019; McIver, 2021), drawing from any body of work that will help advance the aims of countering language shift. Such interdisciplinarity or theoretical promiscuity (Simpson & Smith, 2014) is also common among scholars and educators engaged in critical theories and pedagogies.

Chican@ scholars like Francisca Gonzalez (1998) and Dolores Delgado Bernal and Enrique Alemán (2017) employ the trenza, a metaphor of a braid, an Indigenous hairstyle with important cultural meanings, as an analytical tool. For Delgado Bernal and Aleman, the trenza refers to their critical feminista praxis that braids together critical race theories, Anzaldúan Chicana feminist theories with Chican@Latin@ and Indigenous knowledges and pedagogies. The project described here embraces its own trenza grounded on feminist theories (e.g., Anzaldúa, 1987; 2002; Nagar, 2014; 2019), critical pedagogies (e.g., Boal, 2000; Freire, 2005; hooks, 2014) and Indigenous theories and praxis (e.g., Simpson, 2018; Martínez Luna, 2010).

Scholars engaged within these approaches and pedagogies have challenged the modern division between theory and practice (e.g., Freire, 2005; hooks, 2014; Mignolo & Walsh, 2018; Simpson & Smith, 2014; Smith, 2012). Paulo Freire, for example, embraced the concept of praxis, conceptualized as “reflection and action upon the world in order to transform it” (2005, p. 51). Similarly, the Latin American decolonial school of thought understands praxis as a continuous flow of movement of “thought-reflection-action,” stressing that the possibilities for transformation or “re-existence” cannot just be

thought or imagined, they have to be lived and continuously practiced (Mignolo & Walsh, 2018, p. 7).

But whereas these conceptions of praxis focus on (re)mending a theory-practice divide, feminist and Indigenous scholars have foregrounded the embodied nature of knowledge-making, emphasizing the inseparability between mind, body and spirit (Anzaldúa, 2002; hooks, 2014; Simpson, 2018). Native scholar Leanne Simpson, for example, draws from Nishnaabeg creation stories to assert that theory is storytelling, woven with kinetics, spiritual presence and emotion. It is contextual and relational, intimate and personal (p. 151).

Embracing theory as praxis, as emerging from action, relationships, stories and everyday life experiences not only enables transformation, but disrupts hegemonic ideas of what counts as knowledge, creating spaces for ancestral stories and other forms of knowledge that have not been considered valid within schools and academia. ‘Lengua, Poder y Arte’ was conceived with the aim of disrupting this infrastructure of inequality (King, 2017) by foregrounding our individual and collective stories and knowledges as theory and enacting change through praxis.

### ***Performance as Embodied Praxis***

As Grosz (1994) noted, “it is in and through our bodies that we experience the world and develop consciousness” (p. 106). The arts, like language and as language, are inherently embodied and afford multiple possibilities for reflecting, theorizing and engaging in different ways of knowing and being in the world, opening up spaces for alternative epistemologies. Movement and performance in particular has a special power

to contest divisions between theory and practice through the emphasis on “doing” as meaning-making and activism (Madison, 2014, p. 15).

‘Lengua, Poder y Arte’ turns to performance, and specifically to Augusto Boal’s Forum Theater (2000) as a strategy of collective analysis and action. Within Forum Theater, the community comes together, creating an improvisational forum that explores shared experiences, ideas and concerns. Spectators are encouraged to become active participants, referred to as “spect-actors.” Every participant has the power to interrupt and intervene performances, “forcing the other actors to improvise and realign themselves in relation to the changing action” (Babbage, 2004, p. 45).

Augusto Boal (2013) notes that performance has a quality of abstraction in that it enables people to see themselves from the outside. The performing body becomes a site of analysis that allows us to view markings of class, gender, race, sexuality, language, etc., meanings ascribed to our bodies and the characters we are embodying, both a subject and an object of analysis. These bodies merge and remain distinct, allowing people to see themselves and others, to see themselves in others and others in themselves.

This chapter looks at how performance operates as a mode of embodied analysis and critique, specifically, how a critical embodied pedagogy can foster language reclamation by empowering students to question hegemonic ideologies that work to marginalize and displace Indigenous languages and knowledge systems.

### ***Ethnodrama as Method***

In relation to research, performance can be 1) an object of study, 2) “a pragmatics of inquiry, an optic and operation of research,” and 3) a tactics of intervention (Conquergood, 2002, p. 152). ‘Lengua, Poder y Arte’ and the subsequent research project

encompass all three. Above all, performance was conceived as a space of struggle or tactics of intervention, as I worked with students to create spaces for Indigenous languages and knowledges within a language teacher education program. Performance was also conceived as an object of study, as I analyzed the performances of students' language stories. Yet, and even before this round of analysis, the performance served as a site of analysis or "pragmatics of inquiry." Thus, the intervention *was* performance as a pragmatics of inquiry, theory and practice merged into one.

I also employ performance as a pragmatics of inquiry by writing the narrative of the virtual in-class performance and subsequent discussion as an ethnodrama, an arts-based-research approach. Unlike ethnotheater, ethnodrama is not meant to be a performance event, but more specifically a genre of writing that can serve both as representation of data and analysis (Saldaña, 2005). Ethnodrama recognizes knowledge as socially constructed, drawing attention to the representational nature of data, or what Mignolo calls enunciation, as there is not one world that someone (me) has the authority to represent, but "a world that is constantly invented in the enunciation" (in Gaztambide-Fernández, 2014, p. 198). Ethnodrama draws attention to the many choices that researchers and writers have to make when writing down data to enunciate findings, central to and present in any analysis. For example, while quotes are largely verbatim, I did edit them for clarity, cutting repetitions and hesitations. Space constraints also meant that I had to make choices on what quotes to include and how they would fit together, creating a narrative and telling a specific story.

Another choice involved referring to myself in the third person. I imagined the script as an independent document that can be shared and possibly performed. This

decision also opened different possibilities for analysis, making myself, along with the other cast members/participants, a subject/object of study. It allows, for example, for an analysis of positionalities, in this case, interactions between facilitator and students and how hierarchies are upheld and disrupted (Malhotra & Hotton, 2018). Except for Beatrix, a pseudonym, the names and descriptions of participants in the ethnodrama correspond to the participants in the class.

Ethnodrama as method is consistent with a framework of embodiment by foregrounding the experience of the scripted event and the experience of the reader. My hope is that it will evoke feelings in the reader, just like the event itself evoked feelings in the participants. The purpose of this chapter and ethnodrama, as was the purpose of the performances of the language stories, remains the same, to learn from stories and inspire actions.

In the next section, I present an ethnodrama of a virtual class meeting where students performed and discussed the story of José. Next, I add my reflections as analysis to illuminate the possibilities of performance as an embodied praxis for language reclamation.

## **The Story of José**

### **Prelude**

It is a May afternoon in 2020 and the class is about to start on Zoom. During the previous week students shared their language stories and then got together in groups to write a script based on or inspired by their stories. The original syllabus envisioned the class doing improvised performances based on the language stories. Yet, lack of access to a computer and the Internet, bad connectivity or other issues, means that not everybody

can connect to the synchronous sessions. Co-writing scripts allows those students who cannot connect synchronously to participate in the process in an asynchronous way.

Today is the first day of performances. None of us knows how performance will work on Zoom, this being a new experience for all.

### **List of Participants**

#### **ABRAHAM**

Student and co-author of José's story. Plays 10-year old José. He was born in a Zapotec village and moved to the city when he was young. It was then that he stopped speaking Zapotec. He can understand his language but finds it difficult to speak.

#### **RUTH**

Student and co-author of José's story. Performs as the narrator in the story. Her mother comes from Veracruz, a state neighboring Oaxaca and is a Spanish speaker. Her father comes from a Zapotec village near Oaxaca City where she still lives. She learned Zapotec from her father and in the community.

#### **KARLA**

Student and co-author of José's story. Plays José's mother. She comes from a village by the coast of Oaxaca where Spanish is now the predominant language. She's very attached to her village and finds it difficult to be away in Oaxaca City.

#### **BEATRIX**

Student and co-author of José's story. Plays José's father. She comes from Oaxaca City.

### CESAR

Student. He traces his roots to Oaxaca City where he lives with his mother and grandmother. He is a learner of Mixtec and is collaborating on a revitalization project in a Mixtec village alongside a fellow student from that village.

### AREMI

Student. She grew up in Oaxaca City. Her father comes from a Zapotec village and speaks the language with family and friends. Her mother is a Spanish speaker and the lingua franca at home is Spanish.

### JOSELINT

Student. She grew up in Oaxaca City. Her father is a Spanish speaker and her mother is a Huave speaker from a coastal town. Huave or Ikoots is an independent linguistic group spoken by around 14,000 people on the coast of the Gulf of Tehuantepec, primarily in the towns of San Mateo del Mar and San Dionisio del Mar (Brügmann & Acevedo, 2013). She can understand the language, though she and her mother communicate in Spanish.

### EMMA

Student. She comes from a Zapotec village near Oaxaca City where Spanish is now the predominant language. One of the last few speakers was her late grandmother. She is studying Isthmus Zapotec at the University and wants to start a revitalization project in her home village.

### VICTORIA

Student. She grew up in Oaxaca City. Her mothers' family comes from the Isthmus, where Zapotec is still widely spoken, but neither her mother nor grandmother are speakers.

MARIA

Facilitator. She grew up in Mexico City. She has German and Mexican roots. Spanish is her home language, but she has been living and studying in the US for the past 15 years.

### **Background**

*There are 15 names on rectangles on a screen, some with faces flickering in and out of the virtual room. Three rectangles are black, a melody coming from behind one of them. Nine or ten cameras are on, showing faces against brick or painted walls. Some faces are barely visible, others look deep into the camera, some move about the room, attending simultaneously to the screen and to other people in the house. María holds her phone in front of her, transmitting live on Facebook for students who are not able to join.*

*The session starts with a quick check-in. Students share about their days and developments related to COVID in their hometowns. They express a desire to return to in person classes and note the importance of doing collaborative work and building relationships through the class in a time of uncertainty and isolation. María leads students through stretching exercises to make bodies present and aware. One person models one exercise and the others follow.*

### **Act 1: Activating the Body**

EMMA: *[Stands up. Only half of her body is visible through the screen. She leans to the right and then to the left. Others stand up and follow, letting out deep exhalations.]*

MARIA: Thank you, Emma.

ABRAHAM: I can go next, but my camera isn't working.

MARIA: That's OK. You can narrate what you're doing.

ABRAHAM: OK. So put your arm behind your head and with your other hand pull your elbow to the other side. [*He pauses. Others follow his directions.*] Now do the same with the other arm. [*Four students are standing, others are sitting down. All the elbows are up, bodies swinging left and right.*]

MARIA: Thanks Abraham. Now let's get started. Who is performing today?  
Abraham, you're with Ruth, Karla...

ABRAHAM: Yes, and Beatrix.

MARIA: Perfect. Then you're complete.

**Act 2: José's story**

ABRAHAM: ¿Listos?

NARRATOR/RUTH: OK. [*Clears her throat and looks down, reading from a text*]

Zaku chi' lo ra:tib-tu. Buenas tardes a todos. This is the story of José, a boy who has developed the interest and skill to learn the Zapotec language spoken in his community. The boy arrives home after school. He starts saying some Zapotec words that he has heard in school.

JOSÉ/ABRAHAM: Na:ra va b-dzinya ma'.

MOTHER/KARLA: What did you say?

JOSÉ/ABRAHAM: I'm here mom.

MOTHER/KARLA: Since when do you speak Zapotec?

JOSÉ/ABRAHAM: Everybody speaks it at school, it's a lot of fun. It sounds very nice, but I don't understand them.

MOTHER/KARLA: And would you like to know what they say?

JOSÉ/ABRAHAM: Yes. That way I could have friends. Nobody played with me today.

MOTHER/KARLA: It's great that you want to learn. I am happy that you like it and that you start speaking.

NARRATOR/RUTH: The mother turns to the father, who has just arrived home.

MOTHER/KARLA: [*to the father*] Have you heard your son speak Zapotec?

FATHER/BEATRIX: No [*surprised*].

MOTHER/KARLA: [*to José*] Son, tell me something in Zapotec. What did you learn today?

JOSÉ/ABRAHAM: Today one boy said “xhupa”, which means “father.”

FATHER/BEATRIX: Little by little you will learn and get used to it.

NARRATOR/RUTH: The next part takes place in school. Jose is with a classmate who is teaching him Zapotec.

JOSÉ/ABRAHAM: [*to his classmate*] Hello, will you teach me new words today?

CLASSMATE/RUTH: Of course, we will go little by little, first with the basics. First we have to introduce ourselves. If I say “tu:lalu'?” I am asking what your name is, then you respond “na:ra lá José”.

JOSÉ/ABRAHAM: Na:ra lá José.

CLASSMATE/RUTH: Good, now you will say, I am 10 years old. “Báal iss nú:u?” means how old are you. To answer you say “na:nú tsi'is.”

JOSÉ/ABRAHAM: Na:nú tsi'is.

CLASSMATE/RUTH: Very good. You learn fast.

[There's a short silence, then Ruth looks up from the text, signaling the end of the performance.]

RUTH: That would be all.

JOSÉ/ABRAHAM: That is the first part because the boy learns but then he starts forgetting. He moves to the city and he doesn't want to speak anymore.

MARIA: Oh! So there's one part missing?

JOSÉ/ABRAHAM: A little [*chuckles*]. The boy let's say grows up and moves to the city and stops speaking Zapotec. That's how the story ends.

MARIA: Oh! OK. So for those of us who were observing. What did we see?  
[*silence*]

Let's start descriptively. There was a boy in a scene at home. The boy speaks in Zapotec to his mother, and it seems like the parents don't speak the language, right?

RUTH: In this story, the father speaks Zapotec, but not the mother. It was a little bit like in my story, I think. We're putting them together.  
Doing a fusion of our stories.

MARIA: That's a great idea.

JOSELINT: I think so too. It is very nice that he is a boy and he wants to learn. He talks to his mother in Zapotec even though she doesn't understand. Then... I think there is a loss from the father because he hasn't taught the child, but he is learning from somewhere else. I think that happens often. Many parents don't teach their children

anymore. Languages are lost because parents don't teach their children and in this case the boy became interested somewhere else and the father says, if he's interested, well, I'll teach him.

MARIA: That's a good question. It seems like the parents are glad he is learning, but like you said, Joselint, why hasn't the father taught him? And what about the mother, is she from another community? Did her parents not transmit her the language. What else is there to this story?

AREMI: My case is similar to this story because my father speaks Zapotec very well and he can write it, but not my mom. Then, when he talks to his family and friends my mother doesn't understand. My father said he didn't do it, talk to us in Zapotec, because my mother doesn't know how to speak it. He needs another person who can teach us the language.

MARIA: That's an interesting theme because often we talk about language displacement because of linguistic oppression, the relationship between the dominant language and the minoritized Indigenous languages, but seldom do we mention cases like in your family, where Spanish is the lingua franca. So this could be a theme in this story. Why doesn't the boy speak Zapotec? Why did his father not teach it to him? Why does the mother not speak? What do they feel when the boy is learning the language in school? What did you feel, Beatrix, as the father, and Karla, as the mother?

BEATRIX: He is surprised that he is learning by his own initiative even if he hasn't taught him.

KARLA: It's a different experience. In this case it's a positive influence. The mom could take the joy and learn the language. In this case, Zapotec is the language of the community, so it would be to adapt to a new place.

MARIA: So there's joy and surprise. Abraham, how do you feel as the boy?

ABRAHAM: I would feel excited about being able to learn a new language. Because it is easier to learn it as a boy. You don't have so much pressure and you enjoy it more. I would be very excited.

MARIA: I propose then to do it again, but exploring the feelings of your characters. You can add and improvise. Imagine how you feel, where you come from. Imagine the father. His son is learning his language in school. How would he feel?

CESAR: I have a suggestion. We can use the same context, but instead of everything being positive, explore a negative scenario where the mother or father start reprimanding the son for speaking Zapotec. I don't know if it is the mother, because she doesn't understand and is afraid they might talk about her, or the father, because he is afraid people will think less of him. I don't know. Because now it's a very positive story and there's a great acceptance. It would be interesting to see the contrast. What happens when a boy is

interested in learning an Indigenous language? I would suggest that.

*[students nod, showing interest]*

MARIA: OK, then let's, why not, do this as an exercise. *[To the co-authors of José's story]* Remember these are exercises, not judgements towards your work. You can develop your story in any way that you decide. This can help us explore different scenarios, feelings and ideologies. So, Cesar, why don't you take the role of the father. You can all improvise.

Ready?

ABRAHAM: Yes.

*[the group takes up the performance with the mother addressing the father]*

MOTHER/KARLA: Have you heard your son speak Zapotec?

FATHER/CESAR: What? Why? Zapotec? No, no, no, no, there is no reason to! He is speaking Zapotec? *[agitated, he raises his voice]* What are people going to think? They are going to think... that we're poor or something, it is forbidden that you speak that.

JOSÉ/ABRAHAM: *[Looking down]* But I like it, dad.

FATHER/CESAR: *[Speaking fast and loud, gazing at the camera]* Well, I don't care, or have you seen that we speak that at home? No, no, because we have taught you other things. And you're not going to argue. We send you to school to learn other things, not that.

JOSÉ/ABRAHAM: But I have to talk in school to make friends.

FATHER/CESAR: You can make friends in other ways, with children who teach you other things, better things. Why that? Besides, teachers can discipline you for speaking like that. They can point at you, they can bully you. And besides, what if... you can't even pronounce it correctly.

*[José nods, his voice defeated, his eyes looking down]*

JOSÉ/ABRAHAM: OK dad, if you want it so, I will stop learning.

*[The group responds with silence. Overwhelmed, like José, trying to recollect what happened. After a moment, Joselint speaks.]*

JOSELINT: I think that reaction is more common. There are some places where belonging to a community where a native language is spoken means belonging to a region that can be poor, so many people still hold that view... it could be a more realistic example of what we're still living.

EMMA: *[nods]* I think she's right. I feel it's a more common reaction. At least before, that is why many languages have been lost, for that idea that speaking an Indigenous language makes you a lower socioeconomic status and worth less for society. And that's what parents were guided by.

MARIA: Why did he get so angry?

JOSELINT: Maybe in a way it can be something to try to defend the boy, to avoid him being treated badly.

VICTORIA: I think he also suffered, and he reflects that on his son. He doesn't want that for his son. He was scared, perhaps.

CESAR/FATHER: Yes, I was scared and angry, because I believed José was learning other things in school. The goal was not to go to school to learn a language. As a dad you worry that your son has to learn what he has to learn, like Spanish or math. I also imagined that I was discriminated against and bullied for speaking Zapotec, and not only in school but beyond. I was othered, pointed at: 'he's speaking his language' or 'speaking funny' or 'messing with the words,' or worse, 'it sounds Indian, Chinese.' All of that I am reflecting on this character. These are things that I have heard.

MARIA/NARRATOR: There are so many themes surfacing in this story: the historical load of coloniality that the father carries in his body, language as intersecting with socioeconomic status, the inter-linguistic marriages with Spanish as a lingua franca, puristic ideologies that deem a language not "well spoken" not worthy of speaking at all, and as an epilogue, not yet performed, migration to the cities and subsequent linguistic assimilation. We can choose to explore any of them and how they interlock. Through performance, questioning, improvising, dialoguing. But for now time is running out.

STUDENTS: What is next?

ABRAHAM: Do we change the script?

MARIA/NARRATOR: It is up to you. What do you want these stories and performances to do? Keep playing with them. Let's not leave them static. We might be able to perform them again, this is something dynamic. Even if and when we record them, the work will be dynamic and in progress as long as it keeps growing, provoking reflection and action.

### **Performance as an Embodied Praxis for Language Reclamation**

Performance operates as a mode of embodied analysis and critique through questioning, empathetic reflections (Nagar, 2019) and engaging contradictions, and can become a site of struggle and action towards language reclamation. José's story was one among several told, scripted, performed, improvised, re-scripted, re-improvised and recorded. There was a story of a girl from a Zapotec community bullied and pushed out of an urban school, a story of linguistic estrangement and discrimination within migration from Oaxaca to the United States. There was a story of another girl, discovering, when visiting her grandmother and listening to her speaking in Huave, how language is not just a translatable code, but reflects different ways of being in the world. And there was a story of native languages, embodied and living, narrating their losses, presence and dreams. Some stories, like José's, explored challenges, weighed so large they can seem insurmountable. Others, like the story of the girl visiting her grandmother or the languages sharing their joys, foregrounding hope.

Issues such as structural and curricular barriers and constraints may affect a performance and arts-based pedagogy (e.g., Louis, 2005). In the case of 'Lengua, Poder y Arte,' I was given complete trust and flexibility in terms of course design and evaluation,

determined through participation (broadly defined) and self-assessment. Instead, the most salient issue was the need to adapt an embodied praxis to a virtual context. The reality of remote learning completely re-shaped the process of analysis, engagement and critique. No two journeys are ever alike, and it is impossible to know where this journey would have taken us had we been able to meet and work together in person. But while our bodies were located physically apart, performance still requires us to think in and through our bodies, preserving the embodied processes of knowledge construction even when communicating across screens, being only able to see our faces, or just a black square where our faces would have been. We bring our backgrounds, our voices and silences, faces, gestures, or absences to the spaces within and beyond the screens, like Abraham, his body moving and narrating itself behind the absence of a camera. We ascribe meanings. Virtual interaction is still embodied, still performative.

Performance is also intensely relational. We make meaning in interaction and in community with one another in a form of co-authorship where we take risks in sharing, receiving and engaging with each other's stories (Nagar, 2019). Sitting in my bedroom looking at the screen I am in two spaces at the same time. Never fully in one place. Yet, there is a yearning to do this work, relational and healing, to recognize each other, each other's bodies and stories. Like Ruth mentioned, the collaborative work was indispensable and created a bond of companionship and coexistence, essential in the situation we are facing.

Through sharing and co-writing scripts, students were able to consider and learn with and from each other's' stories, creating a dialogic culture in an evolving co-authorship, "creating and learning by sharing authority with one another" (Nagar, 2019,

p. 212). Ruths's story is one of growing up in a Zapotec community, in a home where her father is a speaker and her mother, coming from the neighboring state of Veracruz, is not. She recalls the joy and pride of showing off her new words to her grandparents in Veracruz. Abraham too grew up in a Zapotec community, but left with his parents to live in the city, where he has gradually forgotten the language. Seeing himself struggle to communicate, he recalls with nostalgia the ease and joy of speaking and learning as a child. Pieces of these stories became the story of José. Others too were able to find pieces that translated into their own experiences. Aremi, whose father also speaks Zapotec but whose mother does not. Emma and Joselint, who recognized the linguistic ideologies held by César's portrayal of the father. César, who embodied the words that he too had many times heard.

Through its quality of abstraction where the body is both subject and object of analysis, performance invites reflection and questioning. It also encourages empathy, as it invites people to think and feel from the perspective of different characters. Karla narrates the process of creating the video for the story of José, using dolls, drawings or socks as puppets: "We had the dialogue but we didn't use it because we wanted to improvise... Putting yourself in the role allowed you to see a different perspective... it tells a story that is sad, but emotional. It was like living the moment and creating a new feeling" (Karla, September 12<sup>th</sup>, 2020).

Especially powerful is the ability of performance to elicit emotion and what Nagar (2019) calls empathetic reflection as we strive to see and feel from the perspectives of an other, "even in situations where we're critical of those others' arguments" (p. 212). In the class narrated here, I asked students to consider how the characters might have felt, and

actors to feel and answer from the perspective of the characters themselves. Within the improvised version, the father became the antagonist, the figure embodying every deficit language ideology, molded into arguments for why his son should not learn Zapotec. Looking deeper, we locate the contexts and structures from which the position of the father is emerging. Perhaps he is fearful, students suggest. He doesn't want his son to experience the discrimination that has marginalized him. Within this fear, he has internalized hegemonic discourses about the purpose of schooling "we send you to school to learn other things," and paradoxically, puristic ideologies about language "you can't even pronounce it correctly," suggesting that Zapotec with a Spanish accent or Spanish influence, sometimes referred to as "Zapochueco" or "crooked Zapotec" (DeKorne, 2017), can be more harmful than not speaking at all. Empathetic reflections (Nagar, 2019) call for empathizing with those deemed as the antagonist, trying to understand the specific contexts from which the character of the father emerges. Inayatullah (2013) refers to this as "generosity to the antagonist." Recognizing every person/character from the context that produces them/us helps us recognize the ways that we too are implicated in reproducing and changing the structures that perpetuate violence, and use that as a catalyst for change.

Through empathetic reflection, we understand the arguments of the father within the sociohistorical context of coloniality. Colonizers repressed the epistemologies of the colonized, their knowledge production, symbolic universe and forms of expression, engendering an epistemic hegemony that is manifest today through a rhetoric of modernity that maintains a logic of coloniality. Mignolo and Walsh (2018) make note of the complicities that bring us to participate in what they call the modernity/coloniality

matrix of power by negating, distorting and denying “knowledges, subjectivities, world senses, and life visions” outside hegemonic epistemologies and ontologies (p. 4). As Leigh Patel (2016) notes, in order to engage in decolonization (and language reclamation as decolonization), one has to first “attend to the ways that we come into relation with coloniality” (p. 8).

Embodying complex characters, feeling the need to protect our own as the father does, fosters empathy, illuminating the ways that we as the father come into relation with coloniality, how we come to internalize and reproduce the social discourses that assign value to certain language varieties, while negating our own language, cultural practices and epistemologies. We are able to step out and recognize the ideologies inscribed on our bodies.

The embodied doing of performance and speaking for the characters enables us, students and teachers, to engage contradictions. Emma and Joselint ascribed ideologies that associate Indigenous languages with poverty to existing in “some places” and “in the past,” yet they both recognized the reactions informed by these ideologies as “more common” than those supportive of learning Zapotec. By characterizing them as geographically and temporarily remote, they distance themselves from these ideologies. They understand the father’s arguments as located and stemming from global pressures and violences, but at the same time recognize these same arguments as contributing to the same global violences, thus seeking distance. In performance, the meanings we ascribe to the actions of the characters, or the performing body, might not be ascribed to us as individuals. Thus, it provides a space of rehearsal where we identify and de-identify.

We bring our ideological bodies, entangled with our multiplicities, for we do not embody a single ideology, but an ideological assemblage (Kroskrity, 2018), feelings we gather from our families, communities, and from our journeys in schooling and academic settings. These ideologies, both indigenous and imposed, “may complement, contest, or otherwise dynamically interact with each other to modify language ideologies and linguistic practices” (p. 134). As teachers and students engage in performance, as we see ourselves from the outside, our ideological assemblages illuminated through the performing bodies, our identities are destabilized, critiqued and reimagined (Louis, 2005, p. 344).

Students display embodied identities, recognizing themselves as the antagonists in the father, scared and angry, fighting for his son to have a good life, and perhaps simultaneously as the marginalized, robbed of the languages and knowledges of ancestors, navigating a world of structural inequalities and injustices. Performance entails vulnerability and risk. We risk discomfort as we co-author a pedagogy where we are the subjects to be disentangled and observed closely, analyzed within the contexts and conditions that engender us. Performance illuminates both limitations and possibilities.

After all the groups had performed their stories and we had watched all the videos that resulted from this project, I asked the group about the purpose of this work, from sharing their stories to co-authoring scripts, performing, and making their videos. We talked about the emotions, the sadness and the anger we felt in some of the stories. So, how do we channelize these emotions so the work does not end in hopelessness? Can it drive us to start actions to change the conditions we have seen in these stories, in our communities?

“Maybe it’s hartazgo,” Victoria said as we embodied a protest on our Zoom screen, “getting to that point where action is inevitable.” Hartazgo is that no longer bearable feeling of satiety, of not being able to bear sadness, anger or pain any longer, feelings about to burst into action that moves towards remediating the social inequities around us. Performance scholar Elyse Pineau noted that her research and teaching “need to be motivated by a gnawing disturbance at the inequities that plague our society” (In Louis, 2005, p. 436). Making ourselves vulnerable, learning with and from each other's stories through performance can fuel the hartazgo to motivate action.

Language reclamation is, like performance, intensely relational, recognizing the complex social contexts in which languages exist (Leonard, 2021). It is also affective, and as Hermes, Bang and Marin (2012) have noted, deeply personal. Generating hartazgo to fuel reclamation work is not a benign process. It requires seeing yourself in these stories, as protagonist and antagonist, engaging contradictions, for we are all implicated in coloniality. Seeing ourselves and others as both protagonists and antagonists, illuminates our shared humanity (Inayatullah, 2013). It requires recognizing violent histories and how they operate at local and personal levels to gain an embodied awareness of structural inequalities and injustices. But alongside hartazgo, there is also joy, the joy of collaboration, of relationality, its significance never more salient than in times of social isolation, the joy of creating something together and the hope of where it might lead.

### **Conclusion**

So where does this work lead? What are the possibilities of embodied, arts-based pedagogies for language reclamation? Performance provides a space to wrestle with

questions of identity and justice, to question ideologies that we hold and the language regimes within which we live. But beyond recognizing the causes and conditions within which language exists and is displaced, performance can be a site of struggle and rehearsal that fuels *hartazgo* and joy towards a reclamation of identity, culture and language.

Nancy Hornberger (2002) posits that “multilingual language policies are essentially about opening up ideological and implementational space in the environment for as many languages as possible [...] to evolve and flourish rather than dwindle and disappear” (p. 30). Many bodies came together during ‘Lengua, Poder y Arte,’ each of us with our own linguistic histories. In a diverse setting where our ancestors’ languages are many, the goal of the performances was to create ideological spaces for Indigenous languages which in turn might open more spaces for Indigenous languages. These spaces could be ideological, by raising critical language awareness in our families and our communities. They could be implementational, by creating policies and pedagogies that encourage students’ Indigenous languages and epistemologies within classrooms and schools, and actual spaces, by engaging in the teaching, learning and promoting of our ancestral languages.

Each one of us might take this journey into different directions. Abraham wrote down his story growing up in a Zapotec community. Joselint recorded a story in Huave from her mother which she then translated into Spanish, using it as a language learning opportunity. Emma made a video of her community, where her grandmother was one of the last speakers of Zapotec and where she is planning to start a revitalization project. César recorded the history of his community (see “Language” chapter). Ruth shared

about the Zapotec bilingual school she attended in her community and Victoria made a video of the class, inciting others to action. The possibilities are dynamic. As Louis (2005) noted, they lie in the process of doing.

Few spaces exist within institutional education settings where young people can critically question, feel and analyze the meanings ascribed to languages and bodies. At the same time, much of the work in language revitalization and reclamation is concerned with a single language or language community, often presumed homogeneous. There are however many communities, especially within institutional settings like the University of Oaxaca, where multiple people come together with their/our diverse linguistic histories and multiple languages, visible or invisibilized. There is thus a great need to expand the work of language reclamation to spaces deemed non-Indigenous, like this University, and among both, Indigenous and non-Indigenous identifying youth. For we also know that identity is changing and dynamic and all of us have a role in language reclamation, that is, engaging in the decolonial actions that resist language and epistemological displacement and erasure. Moreover, embodied, arts-based pedagogies, including performance, invite different ways of knowing into often rigid education settings. Learning through stories and the body, through the senses in a pedagogy that is dynamic, guided through relational encounters also invites alternative epistemologies. We learn from the knowledges that have been handed down from our families and communities. There is much that we can learn from one another and one another's stories and languages. Performance provides a platform for a collective labor of language reclamation where empathetic reflection, *hartazgo* and joy can generate ideological, implementational and actual spaces for Indigenous languages.

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## **Appedix A**

### **A Preliminary Syllabus**

#### **Lenguaje, poder y arte**

Clase optativa

#### **Facilitadora**

Maria Schwedhelm, M.A., estudiante de doctorado en Educación de Segundas Lenguas, Universidad de Minnesota

#### **Hora de clase**

La clase se reunirá martes y jueves de 1:20 - 2:50 pm en la Facultad de Idiomas sede Av. Universidad de la UABJO.

#### **Horas de oficina**

Los invito a ponerse en contacto conmigo después de clase o a través de correo electrónico: [schwe546@umn.edu](mailto:schwe546@umn.edu).

#### **Descripción**

En esta clase llevaremos a cabo una labor colectiva de aprendizaje a través de la narración de nuestras historias lingüísticas y la investigación de ideologías y regímenes de lenguaje. Juntos nos preguntaremos cómo estas ideologías y estructuras de poder influyen en nuestras vidas, en la educación y en la sociedad en general para (re)imaginar y (re)crear por medio del arte, políticas y pedagogías equitativas. Tejeremos historias, recuerdos, lecturas, testimonios para juntos aprender y emprender nuevos caminos por medio del teatro, la escultura, palabra, movimiento y arte multimedia.

#### **Objetivos**

- Los estudiantes (re)conocerán nuevas perspectivas sobre las relaciones de poder y lenguaje, incluyendo las relaciones entre políticas educativas y lingüísticas y la marginalización lingüística y cultural.
- Los estudiantes cultivarán habilidades de pensamiento crítico en torno a los temas de esta clase que resuenen con sus experiencias e intereses
- Los estudiantes cultivarán habilidades artísticas a través de una variedad de actividades y diferentes medios y reflexionarán sobre el potencial de *embodied pedagogies* en espacios académicos.
- Los estudiantes imaginarán nuevas formas de convertirse en agentes de revitalización lingüística y cultural.

#### **Primera parte:**

En esta primera parte del curso nos dedicaremos a contar, escribir y representar historias que giren en torno al lenguaje. Contar historias nos ayuda a construir puentes entre dimensiones abstractas sociológicas y las dimensiones personales en las que opera el

racismo y el lingüicismo. Por medio de nuestras historias y experiencias, nos preguntaremos el significado de “lenguaje” “multilingüismo” y “revitalización”: ¿Cuál es el significado de la revitalización o reclamación lingüística? ¿Cuáles son las metas y objetivos de estos programas y cuál es el rol de las artes? ¿Cómo interactúa el multilingüismo con inequidades materiales, ideológicas y geopolíticas?

### Segunda parte:

La segunda parte del curso va a ir tomando forma durante la primera parte y según los intereses del grupo. Basados en las reflexiones previas, nos preguntaremos cómo podemos participar en crear y apoyar colaboraciones y alianzas a favor de políticas y pedagogías multilingües equitativas. Conversaremos con personas y organizaciones involucradas en la revitalización lingüística e idearemos proyectos artísticos, pedagógicos y/o de investigación en colaboración con nuestras comunidades.

### Horario

Este horario es preliminar y sujeto a cambios según los intereses del grupo.

Fecha	Tema	Lecturas/ Preparación
Sept. 3	Introducción a la clase Lenguaje, storytelling y las artes	
Sept. 5	<b>Part 1:</b> Historias lingüísticas: artifacts, where I’m from, who are my people?	Traer un artefacto que responda a la pregunta ¿de dónde soy?
Sept.10	Image theater Políticas educativas y lingüísticas Story circle	Paulo Freire: Pedagogía del Oprimido y Augusto Boal, Teatro del Oprimido <b>Notas:</b> reflexiones e impresiones
Sept. 12	Riesgos y responsabilidades de storytelling, representación y enunciación Foregrounding y backgrounding ¿Cómo estamos implicados en políticas educativas y lingüísticas marginalizantes?	Lecturas TBD Gaztambide-Fernandez (2014). An interview with Walter Mignolo
Sept. 17	Prácticas multilingües Translenguaje Estandarización ¿Qué prácticas son “correctas” o “incorrectas”? ¿Quién determina lo que es “correcto”?	Gloria Anzaldúa, How to tame a wild tongue? Jamilia Lyiscott TED talk, 3 ways to speak English <b>Notas:</b> reflexiones e impresiones
Sept. 19	Linguistic identities	<b>Poema:</b> Where I’m from
Sept. 24	Clarificación ideológica: ¿Qué significa	Lecturas TBD

	“lenguaje”/”idioma”/”lengua”/”dialecto”?	Preguntar a familiares y amigos. <b>Notas:</b> reflexiones e impresiones
Sept. 26	Linguistic autobiographies	
Oct. 1	Comunalidad y conocimientos ancestrales	Floriberto Diaz Benjamín Maldonado <b>Notas:</b> reflexiones e impresiones
Oct. 3	Lengua y comunalidad	
Oct. 8	Revitalización lingüística y cultural Juego de cartas (Let’s Bog!)	Lecturas TBD <b>Notas:</b> reflexiones e impresiones
Oct. 10	Veronica’s work, documentary, summer camp	Flores Farfán (2007). Desarrollando buenas praxis en la RLS. Hermes et. al. (2012). Designing Indigenous language revitalization.
Oct. 15	Presentar proyectos de revitalización lingüística y cultural	Simpson, L. (2014) Land as Pedagogy Alaska Native Knowledge ANKN website ( <a href="http://www.ankn.uaf.edu">http://www.ankn.uaf.edu</a> ) <b>Notas:</b> reflexiones e impresiones
Oct. 17	Presentar proyectos de revitalización lingüística y cultural	
Oct. 22	Part 2: Marnita’s table, formando proyectos	Lecturas TBD <b>Notas:</b> reflexiones e impresiones
Oct. 24	Investigación de proyectos, creando alianzas y solidaridades	
Oct. 29	Visita a proyecto de revitalización	<b>Creative reflection assignment</b>
Oct. 31	Investigación de proyectos, creando alianzas y solidaridades	
Nov. 5	Visita a proyecto de revitalización	<b>Creative reflection assignment</b>
Nov. 7	Reflexión sobre investigación y formación de proyectos	
Nov. 12	Colaboraciones, metas, objetivos	
Nov. 14	Colaboraciones, elaborar propuesta	
Nov. 19	<b>María en conferencia, trabajo</b>	Establecer metas para esta semana

	<b>independiente</b>	por adelantado
Nov. 21	<b>María en conferencia, trabajo independiente</b>	
Nov. 26	Presentar propuesta, siguientes pasos	
Nov. 28	Colaboraciones, siguientes pasos	
Dic. 3	Elaboración/preparación de proyectos	
Dic. 5	<b>María en Minneapolis, trabajo independiente</b>	
Dic. 10	Elaboración/preparación de proyectos	
Dic. 12	Elaboración/preparación de proyectos	
Enero	Presentaciones de proyectos	

**Requisitos y evaluación:**

La evaluación de la clase será a través de participación (50%) y auto-evaluación (50%). En la autoevaluación los estudiantes tomarán en cuenta el nivel de desafío personal.

Creative reflection assignment:

**Creative reflection assignment based on the visit that involves one PP slide only and the sharing a poem, story, song, or narrative that refers to the following elements: significance of one thing learned and one thing you wish you could explore.**

## Appendix B

### Lengua, Poder y Arte in Broad Strokes

#### This is what it looked like

Where do I come from? Who are my people? What are my mountains? What are my seas?

Discussions around texts and other media

Visits, Veronica Quillien, Yasnaya Aguilar, Eric Benitez / Student responses

Boal performance exercises- Mirroring, power

Self-definitions of terms- art, language, revitalization, power

Stories about language and situated knowledges--- Sharing stories, co-writing scripts, performing, discussing in group.

Final projects

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