THE UNIVERSITY OF CHICAGO

HISTORY (DIS)POSSESSED: HAUNTING, THEFT, AND THE MAKING OF MONUMENTAL HERITAGE IN OAXACA, MEXICO

A DISSERTATION SUBMITTED TO

THE FACULTY OF THE DIVISION OF THE SOCIAL SCIENCES

IN CANDIDACY FOR THE DEGREE OF

DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

DEPARTMENT OF ANTHROPOLOGY

BY

HILARY MORGAN V. LEATHEM

CHICAGO, ILLINOIS

MARCH 2022

Dios Nunca Muere

por Vicente Garrido Calderón

Muere el sol en los montes
Con la luz que agoniza,
Pues la vida en su prisa,
Nos conduce a morir.

Pero que importa saber
Que voy a tener el mismo final,
Porque me queda el consuelo
Que Dios nunca morirá.

Voy a dejar las cosas que amé
La tierra ideal que me vio nacer,
Sé que después habré de alcanzar,
La dicha y la paz, Que en Dios hallaré.

Sé que la vida empieza
En donde se piensa
Que la realidad termina
Sé que Dios nunca muere
Y que se conmueve
Del que busca su beatitud.

Sé que una nueva luz
Habrá de alcanzar nuestra soledad
Y que todo aquel que llega a morir
Empieza a vivir una eternidad.

Muere el sol en los montes
Con la luz que agoniza.
Pues la vida en su prisa,
Nos conduce a morir.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Table of Figures

Acknowledgments

This dissertation – in all of its wild and rotating parts – would be impossible without the generosity, support, friendship, and love of so many people it would be difficult to name everyone. First, I wish to acknowledge the support of multiple funding agencies, notably the Fulbright-Hays Doctoral Dissertation Research Award fellowship, the Tinker Foundation, Leiffer Fund, and the University of Chicago's Leiffer Fund and Center for Latin American Studies Mellon Dissertation Research Award. These grants and fellowships enabled me to pursue both pre-dissertation fieldwork and the full year of ethnographic research in Oaxaca from 2017-2018. Support from a Francois Furet Travel Grant and an EHESS exchange fellowship in Paris gave me the opportunity to conduct archival work at UNESCO's archives and a home in a city I never imagined I'd visit. A Social Science Division Dissertation Completion Fellowship supported my writing, for which I am grateful.

In the Department of Anthropology, the most gracious thanks are owed to my co-chair and advisor, Stephan Palmié, who has always believed in this research project. Not only has he been an unfaltering source of support, but his critical (and creative) vision dared me to take this dissertation in directions I had never thought would be possible or likely. So, too, I have benefitted from his encyclopedic knowledge, unparalleled expertise in the anthropology of history, and sharp sense of humor.

I am indebted to Shannon Dawdy, my second chair, for pushing me to return to Oaxaca and conduct ethnographic fieldwork. Her support, from day one, and appreciation for the ways I was thinking about materiality and temporality stick with me, and her thinking indelibly shapes tremendous parts of this work, as one will see. Her strong presence during a particularly trying and traumatic time in my life was also essential to the completion of this dissertation.

Many thanks as well to Byron Hamann, a force to be reckoned with in the realm of art history; his expertise in Mexican and Oaxacan history has strengthened and refigured this dissertation all throughout. He has also mentored me since John Monaghan introduced us in 2011, so allow me to express again how thrilled I was, as an undergraduate, that a scholar as interesting as Byron signed on to the committee!

Thank you as well to Ryan Cecil Jobson for signing on to my committee last year, after Justin Richland left for UC-Irvine, and the shape of my project shifted. Ryan has inspired me to embrace my poetic and literary sensibilities, and has made this dissertation all the better for it. Justin's influence on my dissertation can be felt in its concerns with Indigenous dispossession – it centers Mitleño voices and takes seriously stories that some people outside of the community have glossed as rumors.

Michael Dietler and Alan Kolata are also owed gracious thanks for their unfaltering support from day one. Both Alan and Michael are the reasons I applied to Chicago in the first place, and even though they ultimately did not serve as members of the committee all the way through, they were both always available for advice and informal chats along the way. Michael's work on the archaeology of colonialism and the politics of the past irrefutably shapes the contours of this dissertation.

Alongside my formal committee, I've benefitted from insightful and provocative conversations with Julie Chu, Francois Richard, Hussein Ali Agrama, and Kathy Morrison. In the History Department, Mark Bradley and James Hevia pushed me to consider the emotive sides of history, while Emilio Kourí and Mauricio Tenorio Trillo guided me to excellent Mexican and Spanish-language sources on Oaxaca – and heritage in Mexico, more broadly.

Deepest gratitude to Anne Chi'ien; it's difficult to articulate precisely how much her presence in Chicago matters to me. My first encounter with her was when she remembered that Waud Kracke had dropped off his letter of recommendation for my admission to Chicago by hand. She is a source of light in the department and absolutely irreplaceable.

At the very beginning of my academic journey, there is the unforgettable and formative mentorship of Gary Feinman, Sloan Williams, Joel Palka, Waud Kracke, James Searing, Richard Levy, and Corey Capers, and the financial support of the Field Museum of Natural History and University of Illinois at Chicago; I would be remiss to not list them all here. Thank you.

My time in Oaxaca stretches back in time to May 2008, when I joined Gary's excavations at El Palmillo. This was also my first introduction to Mitla, and I knew from the very beginning that I wanted to continue working in Oaxaca. Although I began as an archaeologist, I switched to ethnography after listening to the concerns of the Mitleños over how to properly treat their dead. I believe, even now, that archaeology can be done responsibly, but it is best conducted by descendant and stakeholder communities.

I am deeply indebted to the community of Mitla, who assured me that I would always be welcome to return to hear and bear witness to their stories. I recognize that they did not have to grant me permission, but nevertheless, they did. My most gracious thanks to Guillermina, Joel, and Wendy Quero for giving me a home in Mitla, and assisting me in times of need. I could not have done this without them. The warmest and sincerest thanks must be expressed to Armando Méndez, Guadalupe Luis, and Andreas Méndez, who welcomed me into their corner *tienda* and regaled me with stories of the ruins, *los muertos*, and what the Indigenous Zapotec past meant to them. Special thanks to Doña Vicky and Thalia and Daisy Maldonado for their lively conversations and delicious homecooked meals; their hospitality was unparalleled, and I took

comfort in knowing that I could always turn to them, *lo que necesito*. Thank you to Jorge Rios Allier and Marco Méndez for their friendship and deep knowledge of all things heritage-related across Mitla, and to Paulina Pezzat Sanchez, who was not only the perfect roommate, but also a cherished friend. A thank you is also owed to Agustín for permission to observe visitors at Mitla's archaeological zone. And to Richard Orlandini, who did not live to see this dissertation completed, thank you for all the chats, the *chelas*, and the reflections on the state of Oaxacan archaeology.

Over my nearly 13 years of work in Oaxaca, I have cultivated many wonderful friendships and met multiple colleagues who made this dissertation possible. *Mil gracias a* Guillermo Ramón Celis for always being present, for the fascinating conversations, for the introductions, and for giving me a home away from home in Mexico City. Memo is a true friend, even a brother, and I feel like I've acquired another family. Marijke Stoll has also been there for me from the start, the sister I never had and a brilliant archaeologist and conversationalist. Fabiola Sanchez and Daniela Flores García provided me with the necessary break away from archaeologists and heritage practitioners; I love them both for their compassion, for their wit, and for their strength. My love to Danette Cotera Newcomb, who treated me to *mezcalitos* and musical events. Thank you to Nicholas Johnson for his friendship as well as their conversations about philanthropy and the history of heritage in Oaxaca City. Special thanks to Dante García for his humor and for his mezcal deliveries, and tremendous thanks to Rodrigo Carús Azpiri for both the hilarious and insightful talks, dark humor, and introduction to Pame Castillo Cisneros. Oaxaca is a small world at the end of the day.

This may start to read like a laundry list, but I must also express my sincere gratitude to all the institutions and people across Oaxaca who hosted me and supported. Deepest thanks to

Marcus Winter at Centro INAH-Oaxaca, who not only wrote me a letter for the Fulbright-Hays DDRA, but connected me to Salomón Nahmad Sitton at CIESAS Pacífico del Sur. I had not yet heard of Salómon, but he is one of the most intelligent, ethical, and empathetic scholars I've ever met. Admittedly, I was intimidated, but Salómon invited me to his home in San Felipe del Agua, where he told me he would support my project, write me a letter for the Fulbright-Hays, and offer me affiliation at CIESAS if I so chose. A special thank you to Robert Markens, who has over the years met me for coffee and provided thoughts and feedback on my research questions in Oaxaca. So, too, Robert wrote a letter in support of this project, and met with me several times over the course of my fieldwork. Thank you to Miguel Buenrostro Alba, who invited me to the Frissell Museum and opened up innumerable possibilities. Last but certainly not least, I wish to thank María del Carmen "Pame" Castillo Cisneros, who ultimately served as my primary mentor at Centro INAH-Oaxaca. Words cannot fully describe how grateful I am to her for everything; alongside her expertise in ritual and cosmology, Pame met me for lunch and coffee, facilitated many connections, expanded my network in Oaxaca, invited me to exhibition openings, exchanged writing, and granted me the necessary ID and affiliation as a Visiting Researcher at Centro INAH, giving me unrestricted access to the heritage sites this dissertation investigates.

I can't thank enough the friends and family who've been there for me over the years. In my cohort, I'd like to recognize the friendship and most compassionate collegiality of Marshall Kramer, Alice Yeh, Myungji Lee, Damien Bright, Ray Noll, Patrick Lewis, Lauren Ledin, Jamie Countryman, Estefanía Vidal Montero, and Sandy Hunter. You have all been there for me in some way or another, and I'm incredibly grateful. I also give my thanks to Hannah Eisler Burnett, Eilat Maoz, Karma Frierson, Eric Hirsch, Meghan Morris, Sean Dowdy, Christien Tompkins, Jamie Gentry, Austin Kramer, Kate McHarry, Heangjin Park, Christian Rocha, and

Christopher Gatto. Another sincere thank you owed to Juhea Kim, for giving this dissertation a read from another perspective and offering me, likewise, the opportunity to read her historical novel. A special shout out goes to my writing group and cohort-mates, Jamie Countryman and Lauren Ledin, who provided me with excellent feedback and a safe space. A second special shout out to Sonia Grant for exchanging chapters with me and for meeting me for dinner in Oaxaca City on a chilly January evening. My warmest thanks to Mallory James, Ahona Panda, and Maryam Sabbaghi, who were there for me during my last few quarters when we could still physically be present on campus; and thank you, Mallory and Maryam, for always being here for me.

At the EHESS and UNESCO, my thanks to Camilo León Quijano, Nancy Green, and Yael Dansac; and during my time at the Warburg Institute's Geographies of Memory workshop, I wish to thank Carlo Severi, Alonso Zamora Corona, Sanja Savkic, John Tresch, Matthew Vollgraff and others for feedback on how I conceptualized "ghost buildings."

My first chapter, "Manifestations that Matter: A Case of Oaxacan Ruin Possession," began as a response to a call put out by the *Archaeological Review from Cambridge* for papers on posthumanism and archaeology. I am grateful to the editors, David Kay and Mark Haughton, for the opportunity to write and be published in this special issue, and thanks to Oliver Harris for his generative comments (and compliments) which enabled the article to grow into the chapter you see before you.

All my thanks go to my family, but specifically my grandparents who raised me: Richard and Mary Lou Montana. Both have not lived to see this venture completed, but I hope to make them proud. I thank my grandfather, William D. Leathem, who is also no longer with us, but who

has always been a source of inspiration; and I thank my grandmother, Marjorie, for all of the evening chats and for her encouraging emails.

I thank my brother, Cameron; he is the little brother I asked for long ago, and he has never stopped believing in me.

I thank my father for telling me what I needed to hear when things got rough.

And finally, I thank Joey. There are no words that can adequately express my appreciation and gratitude for his unfaltering support, keen sense of humor, and patience, but most of all, the depth of our love.

Introduction

Mitla 3-D: "I am an artist…we can do what we want"

It was 6:45 pm on June 14, 2018, and the usually clement Oaxaca found itself besieged by an oppressive heat wave, causing temperatures to soar up to a sweltering 40 degrees Celsius. Despite heat advisories and a deluge of summer rain, I found myself rushing over to Francisco Toledo's Instituto de Artes Gráficas de Oaxaca (IAGO) last minute on account of a request by my mentor, Pame Castillo Cisneros. Moments before I began my hurried trek toward the Andador Macedonia Alcalá, the main artery for foot traffic in Oaxaca's Centro Historíco, I had received a series of concerned WhatsApp messages from Pame. "Hilary, there is an event I need you to go to for me at Toledo's IAGO. An artist is presenting his research about Mitla, he has made a reconstruction, they say, of the archaeological zone, and I need you to go and find out if he has permission, and if he is making money from this."

Confused by her messages, I'd asked her what she meant by this. In response, Pame sent me a link to the event, entitled, "Mitla 3-D: Reconstrucción arqueologica de la legendaria ciudad zapoteca," and explained that Centro INAH-Oaxaca needed to know about whether the artist was benefitting monetarily from the reconstruction and images because, ultimately, the INAH possessed the rights to the ruins. "I cannot attend tonight as I'm still in Puebla with my father. Can you go and report back to me? You can maybe interview the artist." Intrigued by the emerging tensions between this artist's personal "passion project" and Mexico's National Institute of Anthropology and History, which was hosting me as a Visiting Researcher for my year of doctoral fieldwork, I acquiesced to Pame's request, skipping dinner and nearly jogging over to IAGO.

When I arrived at the entrance of IAGO, Toledo was leaving and the custodian of the building told me there was no space left for me to sit. Apparently, the event was attracting great interest, and he motioned to a crowd of Mitleños – many whom I recognized – standing on the periphery of the small clutter of metal fold-up chairs, which only accommodated about 30 people. "We did not think it would attract so many people," the custodian laughed. "Many people have arrived here by *colectivo* from Mitla, even in this storm. You tell me, what is the artist doing thinking that this presentation about Mitla should premiere here in Oaxaca when this is about Mitla's history?" As he was about to ask me to stand on the periphery, Macario, the curator of the now defunct Frissell Museum, spotted me and waved me over. The custodian laughed again and told me to enter and take a seat: "*Güera*, it looks like you know him. *Ándale*!"

Squeezing my way through the crowd, I entered IAGO courtyard – a beautiful specimen of colonial Spanish architecture, replete with redbrick floors, white pillars, and ivy – and took a seat to the left of Macario. "I figured that you would show up, even without me mentioning this to you. It all happened so suddenly. But once the Mitleños heard about this event, well…you know." Macario gestured to the corner on our left, where I spotted Marco, the founder of Mitla's Pitao Bezelao Cultural Center, and Gildardo, the town's appointed oral historian. Gildardo and Marco nodded over at us, their arms crossed tightly against their chests, and then resumed staring at the two tables facing the audience. A very tall, thin, and dark-haired bespectacled man in his mid-30s paced between the table and the projector, anxiously wringing his hands as he set up his laptop with the help of several IAGO staff. He, too, was clearly a *güero* or *extranjero*, and we would soon hear about how he had abandoned the French countryside several years ago in order to pursue his "Mexican dream." This was the artist, Etienne.

"I'm not really here out of interest, to be honest," Macario remarked. "I'm here because these Mitleños are royally pissed and I want to see this."

"Wait, so you don't know Etienne?" I responded.

"Of course not. I don't know everyone who comes by. Not everyone who does research asks permission or talks to the right people. You have to also ask yourself: if you're going to reconstruct Mitla's ruins, why the hell would you have the inaugural event in Oaxaca City?"

Meanwhile, Etienne was having technical issues and a slight commotion ensued as rain began to fall again and people complained about the event being held outside. I draped my *rebozo* over my head and waited for Etienne and the IAGO staff to fix the issue. After another ten minutes, the energy shifted in the room. A vibrant image of Mitla's palatial ruins illuminated the blank surface of the white wall before us, and Etienne began his presentation.

"He's French!" Macario exclaimed to me. I still don't know whether this was a statement of excitement or disappointment.

Tapping the microphone and clearing his throat, Etienne finished introducing himself and pronounced his love for Mexico, providing us with a somewhat tangential foray into his stint living and working in Mexico City and his eventual 'discovery' of Oaxaca. Over the cascades of luminous and spectral images of the Mitla ruins, he spoke of the aesthetic and architectural harmonies he found between the archaeological site's geometric designs (zig-zag motifs and step-frets) and the ruins of Chachapoyas in Perú. "These are patterns of culture," he explained. "This is what anthropologists would call it. Cultures diffuse." The next image he projected on to the wall were texts by Claude-Levi Strauss and Ruth Benedict. We know, at the very least, that this is not precisely what Benedict meant.

Macario looked at me and snorted into the nook of his arm. He could see me gritting my teeth at this point. I could also feel Gildardo and Marco's eyes on me. Internally, I contended with the skeptical and pessimistic side of myself – surely, despite Etienne lax reading and misunderstanding of contemporary anthropology, he meant well.

As he continued to share the images with us, Etienne cited travel writing about Mitla and Oaxaca by Adolph Francis Bandelier, Constantine Rickards, and Désiré Charnay, alongside Elsie Clews Parsons's magisterial monograph and Marshall Saville's archaeological reports. He also provided us with a technical overview of how he'd arrived at the three-dimensional reconstructions. Essentially, Etienne mined these texts and proceeded to synthesize the "data" from these "experts" of Mitla's biography in order to discern Mitla's actual measurements and thus create an accurate, scientific reproduction of the archaeological zone – from its civic ceremonial center and market to its peripheral housing – at the height of its opulence. "Gathering data from all these sources has allowed me to remake Mitla's image for you all. If the average height of one of the columns is X, for example, then we can presume that this is evidence for standardization," he stammered. This was a peculiar kind of haunting; here, the ruins glimmered across the wall, grossly exaggerated by the 3-D aesthetic. As spectral holograms and copies, they acquired an even more uncanny quality. Etienne appeared before us as a sort of uninvited but well-meaning sorcerer.

The tensions increased as Etienne continued. His reference to the American, British, and French explorers, anthropologists, and archaeologists as "experts" on Mitla, received pointed stares, save for his mention of Parsons, which elicited a number of excited gestures from a dozen audience members, including Marco and Gildardo. His attempts to also connect Zapotec cultural motifs and architectural achievements to other Indigenous groups across Latin America also

generated awkward frictions. In fact, twice during the presentation, groups of Mitleños shook their heads and promptly exited the courtyard, disappointed and disgusted. Who was Etienne to take the liberty of reconstructing Mitla? Moreover, who, if anyone, had he consulted in Mitla amidst his fervid pursuit to not simply conjure up the ghosts of Mitla's past, but resurrect – even preserve – their heritage in the form of a 3-D model that he claimed was "the most complete and accurate representation of the heritage site to date"? Most importantly, though, did he ever ask permission to embark on this project?

I would either have to ask Etienne this question privately or wait to see if another attendee would pose the same query. I already figured that he was not receiving any remuneration for this work since there had been no entry fee for his event, so I could report back to Pame. Luckily, one of the attendee members raised their hands. He stood directly behind the last row of seats – I recognized him from Mitla's Saturday market, but had never interacted directly with him. He seemed to be in his early 40s with a shock of black hair and sharp cheekbones.

"Thank you very much for this presentation. This fascinates me. It is clear you love our *patrimonio*. But I have to ask you: who did you speak to about this [project]? Did you ask anyone if this is what we wanted? Also, why did you not have this event in Mitla? This is our heritage and the inaugural event should have been in Mitla. Most of us can't afford to take taxis into the city. This is of interest to us. It's our pride, and we care for it."

Etienne balked and stared at the man. "I asked several people in the community. They said it's okay, the ruins belong to everyone. And so, yes. I asked. You know Marco?" Etienne gestured over to Marco, whose expression suddenly resembled a deer in headlights. Anxiously, Marco clasped his hands and gave a brief clap. Silence proceeded to reign around us.

"Is that not enough?" Etienne asked. He avoided addressing the pressing question of why this event was not happening first in Mitla.

Sensing an opportunity for intervention, Macario bolted up from his seat. "Hey, hey. Let me ask something," he yelled in English, pushing his long salt-and-pepper hair out of his eyes. "So, look, what this man is asking you is about permission. And you skate around it. Do you have permission? In some ways, this matters more than anything else. Also, I understand it was easier for you to have this event organized in Oaxaca City."

"Ermmm. That's what I am saying. I spoke to a few people, and I consider the permission granted," Etienne responded. Once again, he avoided contending with the tensions surrounding his decision to hold the event in Oaxaca City instead of Mitla. "I don't think the same ethics or politics apply to me as an artist, honestly. I am an artist, and artists have creative freedom: we can do what we want."

Needless to say, this ended the presentation. Macario guffawed in awe at his brazen answer, while the entire crowd succumbed to uncomfortable hoots of laughter. An IAGO employee took the microphone away from Etienne and turned it off; amidst the commotion, I could overhear Etienne announce that his contact information could be found on the final slide he'd projected. I jotted it down and made a beeline for the exit along with the rest of the offended audience.

***

Contours of the Argument

I begin with this little bit of ethnographica because the questions it raises form the cornerstone from which my dissertation is built. We leave IAGO unsettled and, perhaps, we are not exactly certain as to why. As an artist with a passion for Mexican history and archaeology,

Etienne's efforts to reproduce – even resurrect – Mitla's most prized patrimonial site, the palatial ruins, is met with curiosity, ambivalence, suspicion, and outright rage. "Mitla 3-D" is not merely an act of creative expression or intellectual exercise in imagining Mitleño heritage and history; much like the INAH and the rest of the heritage industry across Mexico and beyond, Etienne (and his project) claim to represent the past by taking possession of the site in a concrete way. In this instance, Etienne's possession of Mitla's monumental heritage site is unusual and uncanny – as both an intangible image and representation of, admittedly, a representation, it takes on a keenly spectral quality. Unlike the INAH, he does not benefit monetarily from possessing the heritage site in this way, nor does he view it as an act of dispossession despite the audience's consensus that Mitla 3-D is extractive. Regardless, the ways Mitleños reacted evinces the assertion that this heritage site is theirs, no matter what the INAH says or does. Moreover, their queries and responses to Etienne's project highlight the ways that heritage – at least in Oaxaca – is viewed through the prism of proper and improper relationality. Why did he not simply ask the appropriate authorities for permission? Who are his contacts in the community, and why would he not attempt to share the project first in Mitla, given that these ruins are Mitleño patrimony? Posing these two questions, which hinge on permission and, ultimately, obligation, prompts us to take pause and ask another set of interrelated questions. First, who has the right to possess heritage in Oaxaca, and why does it elicit such strong sentiments? Second, how does it attain meaning? And third, how is heritage deployed by descendant communities, institutional actors, and external forces that exist in-between?

This dissertation attempts to respond to these questions. *History (Dis)Possessed: Haunting, Theft, and the Making of Monumental Heritage in Oaxaca, Mexico*, is an

archaeological ethnography[1] – a rigorous, on-the-ground study of Oaxacan archaeological zones and heritage sites further enriched by attending to the affective economies surrounding these material receptacles of the past. It explores what is at stake in our contemporary figurations of heritage by tracing its conceptual formation and charting its mobilization by both Indigenous stakeholders and institutional actors. I argue that there is no singular, unified understanding of what heritage is, should be, or more crucially, what relationships it should entail. Rather, I contend that heritage, on both a conceptual and ideological level, might be viewed as a set of deeply entangled multiple cosmologies that serve to generate social and affective ties. I posit that we can think of heritage in this manner because its constitution is steeped in battles over meaning; heritage, after all, is notoriously symbolically loaded, overburdened, and continuously open to resignification.

My use of "cosmologies" here draws on the work of Marshall Sahlins (1988), who understood cosmologies to be organized systems of meaning through which we interpret the world and which, in turn, are re-constituted by these acts of interpretation. So, too, I propose the use of heritage cosmologies in order to emphasize the extent to which heritage is a spatio-

---

[1] I understand archaeological ethnography to encompass studies of the ways the materiality of the past bears down on and constantly reshapes the lives of a community (Hamilakis and Anagnostopalos 2009). Instead of viewing archaeological ethnography as "mere *practice*" or methodology, Hamilakis and Anagnostopalos define it as "a transdisciplinary or even post-disciplinary and transcultural *space* for engagement, dialogue, and critique…[with] materiality and temporality as its two main concerns" (2009: 73, emphasis in original). They also contend there is a holistic, sensuous dimension to it. Archaeology – as a formal discipline, as a system of knowledge, as a practice, and as a concept – infuses multiple dimensions of Mitleño and Oaxacan social worlds in even the most indirect ways, and although the final chapter centers on an exploration of street art, I would contend this is still an archaeological ethnography given the ways the street art itself is a form of material culture, a stone wall laden with paint and wheat-paste waiting to be 'excavated'and disrupting conceptions of time and historical narratives. See also Matt Edgeworth's edited volume, *Ethnographies of Archaeological Practice: Cultural Encounters, Material Transformations* (2003), for more on the ways scholars are conceiving of archaeological ethnography. Lisa Breglia's chapter is of particular interest, as it emphasizes archaeological ethnography as an ethnographic account pivoting on community relationships with heritage sites. Perhaps we might say archaeological ethnography is a way of doing and thinking that not only values multi-sited fieldwork and multi-modal methodologies, but mobilizes ethnography to elucidate various configurations of tangible heritage.

temporal project that is dialectical and dialogic, rearranging and reinforcing conceptions of space-time that structure or transform worlds (Munn 1992; Gell 1995). Heritage cosmologies provide scaffolding that simultaneously supports and contests institutional ideologies while also embodying local Indigenous ontologies. This means, in turn, that we can think of some heritage cosmologies as dominant (or dominating), and others could perhaps be glossed as modes of "vernacular heritage," forms of heritage-making that unsettle or intensify relations by collapsing Enlightenment-era boundaries and divides (i.e., the preternatural and natural worlds). As such, heritage cosmologies clash and generate frictions that manifest through robust negotiations or debates over what counts as heritage, why it matters, and to whom it belongs. They are further underpinned by the ritualized acts I gestured to above and upon which each chapter hinges: preservation, destruction or theft, restoration, and reclamation. These rituals make heritage real in the world and reaffirm, through material, discursive, and affective means, its importance on a communal, national, and global level.[2] Heritage cosmologies offer us an alternate avenue into analyzing the rhizomatic making and unmaking of heritage, and offer purchase on the puzzling ways in which heritage can be so overburdened with significance and yet so challenging to define as such.[3]

A second thread woven throughout the dissertation is the suggestion that the local and global epistemic constitution of heritage is paradoxical. Institutionalized and state-sponsored

---

[2] I include and attend to the affective dimensions of heritage in this dissertation, since, as Laurajane Smith and G. Campbell have argued, the strong link between identity and heritage endows it with emotive qualities and responses (2016). So, too, the ritualized practices that uphold heritage cosmologies carry an affective energy (Wetherell 2012); echoes of Emile Durkheim, here, of collective effervescence and the ways these practices – whether they affirm or contest – call forth myriad sentiments.

[3] It is also worth adding that, working backwards from William Mazzarella's deft explanation of ritual as a category co-constituted by both "a live calling forth of 'the collective forces of society' in a manner that aspires to be at once impersonal and exquisitely intimate," and "reproduces form through the repetitive affirmation of categories" (2017: 7), heritage cosmologies are flanked by encounters that activate, agitate, and fascinate.

heritage projects, I posit, expound preservation and restoration, but, in reality, generate destruction in all of its forms – from displacement and erasure to dispossession and the erosion of relations. Put simply, the preservationist and restorationist logics that undergird international and state-led heritage projects tend to produce their direct inverse. Rather than cultivating or re-aligning local attachments to heritage sites, as institutional actors desire and purport to do throughout the narratives detailed in this dissertation, social relations (between humans and between humans and non-humans) are, instead, severed or radically reconfigured amidst institutional efforts to design and dictate *proper relations* with the past. As such, the concept of heritage can be understood as a violent, unwieldy, and morally-inflected form of relationality – even a tool for reinforcing authoritarian regimes and crystallizing asymmetries of socioeconomic and political power. Yet heritage can also be a resource for crafting alternative modes of understanding history and citizenship. Clashes over definition and ownership –or, perhaps better, possession and dispossession – may also be interpreted as cosmological and affective frictions; these are complicated struggles straddling multiple scales and times, encompassing local, Indigenous, national and global idioms of relationality. What unfolds over the course of this dissertation, then, is an ethnographic account of one dominant heritage cosmology, Mexico's *patrimonio*, coming into conflict with a set of alternate, sometimes explicitly anti-state heritage cosmologies in Oaxaca.

Historical and Ethnographic Background

Heritage in Mexico, often referred to as *patrimonio*,[4] is as historically and socially pervasive as it is significant as an economic and political tool. Often utilized as a national symbol through the ideology of indigenismo, Mexican "heritage" celebrates past Indigenous cultural achievements while simultaneously undercutting and devaluing contemporary indigenous lifeways. In separating an idealized past from the present and associating this past with an equally idealized vision of the "Indigenous" Mexican who inherits this past, Mexican state narratives imagine Oaxaca as somehow "set apart" from a modern, industrial Mexico, a symbol of Mexican national heritage that erases the ongoing socio-political and economic struggles of communities caught up in discourses of heritage-making. But the goals of the state are not identical to their realization. In the section that follows, I offer a history of how Oaxaca developed and became central to the project of "heritage" for Mexico, detailing pre-Hispanic cosmologies and orientations to the places conceived as heritage sites today. I also begin to sketch out the conflicts that this process has engendered.

Geographical Overview

My research is based in Oaxaca de Juárez, the capital of Oaxaca, and the town of San Pablo de Villa Mitla. Although Oaxaca de Juárez, often referred to as simply Oaxaca, is made rich by the droves of tourists who descend upon it every year, it broadly remains the poorest state, and notably the most indigenous in Mexico with at least fifteen indigenous languages spoken (Brulotte 2012). Despite Oaxaca's ethnolinguistic diversity, however, the state is predominantly Zapotec and Mixtec. Mixe, Mazatec, Chatinos, and Trique are also present, but

[4] For a precise definition of *patrimonio* as laid out in Mexico's legislation, see Sonia Lombardo de Ruiz and Ruth Solís's *Antecedentes de las leyes sobre monumentos históricos (1536-1910)* (México: INAH, 1988). Otherwise, see Chapter 2 for a discussion of the semantics and connotations of *patrimonio*. Ultimately, it is an idiomatic term that is difficult to translate directly into English without splitting it into "inheritance" and "heritage".

the most powerful actors have historically been Zapotec and Mixtec. Bordered by the states of Guerrero, Puebla, Veracruz, and Chiapas, Oaxaca's rugged, mountainous terrain is often cited as the main reason for its linguistic and cultural diversity, which made travel in this area challenging. Zapotec is the most ubiquitous indigenous language, overheard in the *zócalo*, stores, and *tianguis* (markets). Mixtec is prominent in the Mixteca Alta, and there exist decently sized enclaves of Chatino, Trique, and Chocho speakers throughout the state (Taylor 1979).

Oaxaca's Ritualized Landscapes

The Zapotec ruins of Monte Albán sit in the southwestern corner of Oaxaca, casting their shadow over the city's core every day, while Mitla's crimson palatial ruins lie approximately 45 kilometers east of the city and are a premiere tourist destination. As material reminders to residents and visitors alike of the presence of the pre-Hispanic past, the ruins are inextricably bound to local cosmologies and conceptions of history. They also occupy a stronghold within romanticist imaginaries of Oaxaca's past. Ruins sprinkled throughout the region have drawn scholars to Oaxaca for over a century. Explorers and scholars interested in the Pre-Hispanic past such as Guillermo Dupaix, Eduard Muhlenpfordt, Désirée Charnay, William Henry Holmes, and Eduard Seler paid visits to Monte Albán and Mitla over the course of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, writing speculative work on their origins (Joyce 2013). Often remarked upon was the haunting and ethereal quality of Oaxaca's landscape. Wrote Adolph Francis Bandelier upon his visit to the town of Mitla (1881):

> The appearance which the ruins present, and the impression which they create, are certainly very striking. They stand in the midst of this gloomy and cheerless landscape, like the relics of another world. Their ornamentation also, composed exclusively of geometric forms, without any human or animal shapes whatsoever, the absence of vegetation, the dismal silence that reigns around them, all contribute to give an air of weirdness which overwhelms and bewilders.

The landscape of bewilderment to which Bandelier refers emerged out of a particular set of social and cosmological practices. By reducing those complex histories of practice into an aesthetics of the uncanny, Bandelier prefigures both statist heritage discourses that reduce spaces of ongoing meaning into icons of a "Mexican" past and, equally, the continual sense of haunting that imbues heritage sites in Oaxaca's present. We will return to both of these ideas.

Within pre-Hispanic Zapotec and Mixtec cosmologies, the landscape is marked with sacred sites, whose place names appear in the codices and correspond to deities and the birth of various indigenous groups or folk-heroes (Steele 1997; Hamann 2002; Byland and Pohl 1994). These sites are often situated a few kilometers away from a town center, and tend to be focal points of various ritual practices—in this sense, they are spatially and socially configured as being sacred. In many other cases, material ruins are interpreted both as the residue from a previous era as well as "places of origin for the present era," implying that we are also dealing with a sense of the sacred that is inextricably temporal (Hamann 2002). For instance, the narratives in Mixtec codices construct spaces according to primordial events. The purported distance of these sites, said to be older than time itself, along with the codices' critical role in catering to the cohesion of society through the performance of these cosmological narratives (Monaghan 1990), helped crystallize the notion that these landmarks and sites were symbolically significant.[5] This landscape was maintained even during the Spanish colonial era, albeit secretly. The *Relaciones Geográficas* tell of caves and ancient temple-sites on hills in Oaxaca, asserting that it was in these hidden locales that cases of post-Conquest idolatry persisted (Burgoa 1934: 167-168). It is worth pointing out that the Relaciones also describe how the men caught carrying

[5] In this instance, I refer explicitly to the Mixtec, as they composed the codices. The closest Zapotec equivalent is the lienzo, and they are still in the process of being deciphered.

out these now proscribed rituals were previously *bigana* (Zapotec for "priest"), and that by their very design and nature, were men who had been chosen, as children, by Mitla's oracle, to be ordained and kept apart from others in order to preserve a sense of purity. This is significant because it, along with the performance of rituals and reuse of these contemporary heritage sites in the past, reflects a set of cosmological ideas about the world—that is, how the act of things kept apart, whether physically or temporally, creates a sense of sacrality. What can be preliminarily gleaned from the *Relaciones Geográficas* (and contemporary research into Mixtec codices) is a rough sketch of an indigenous, pre-Hispanic logic that associates temporality with the sacred—or, rather, one that locates the notion of the sacred in the materiality of time.

The tales of idolatry in old ruins and the cosmological importance of Oaxaca's landscapes and geological formations demonstrate the intimate ties indigenous groups formed with the land, and especially the way that religious practices persisted, even after Conquest. We know (from a multitude of sources—archaeological data, codices and colonial documents, and latter-day ethnography) that these sites continue to be reutilized and reinterpreted. In some cases, they are refigured as potent receptacles of magic and enchantment, key locations for contemporary cases of black and white *brujeria* (witchcraft) (Hamann 2002; Parsons 1936; Ramon Celis 2013, personal communication). In other instances, such as in the case of the Ndaxagua Tunnel in the Mixteca Alta, a locale once imbued with powerful sacred valences is now just a regular old tunnel to the community (Urcid 2004). Despite this outlier, Javier Urcid's report points to the way the tunnel is in sharp contrast with another local perception of an ancient palace atop what is known as the *Cerro de la Escalera*. This site has always been recognized as sacred, yet it has been reconfigured into a place of Catholic pilgrimage, commemorating Santo Domingo every August 8th (Urcid 2004: 22). A similar situation arises for the Mixe, but with

unique application. Ralph Beals recounts that the Mixe translation for church is the same term used for cave shrines where sacrifices are made to pre-Hispanic deities and spirits (1973: 64). Here, Christianity merges with and maps onto indigenous cosmology.

All this is to say that Oaxaca was and continues to be composed of ritualized landscapes, dappled with pre-Hispanic sites that were and continue to be sacred and remain the focus of ongoing social, spiritual, and cosmological practice. Some of these sites are designated heritage sites, while some are not, and either continue to be held in secret, an intimate part of local lifeways, or are the subject of ongoing petitions for protection and preservation to these aforementioned institutions. These, it seems clear, form one layer of Oaxaca's symbolic landscape. In my next section, I explore a different layer of the symbolic landscape in Oaxaca, one that emerges from Mexico's nationalist project and the particular role that imaginaries of Oaxaca itself and its indigenous population have been developed to forward a particular agenda and frame a particular vision of the Mexican nation and its identity.

Heritage Makes the Nation: Independence, Revolution, and Patrimonio

An extended discussion of the early colonial history of Mexico is unnecessary for this proposal (but *cf*: Burgoa 1934 [1674]; Chance 1978; Taylor 1979; Hamann 2011; Faudree 2013). However, Oaxaca's symbolic significance for Mexico's Independence and Revolution is worthy of note. As I detail below, the state itself became conceived of as a central repository for Mexico's Indigenous heritage even as the needs and lived experiences of its actual Indigenous populations were erased, setting the stage for a contemporary situation in which, on the one hand, the Mexican state is deeply invested in preserving Oaxaca as a space of national heritage *based* on its Indigenous past, and, on the other, profound tensions with contemporary Indigenous communities over the management of that heritage.

Oaxaca's national reputation as a stronghold of indigeneity cannot be overstated, nor can its formative influence on nascent Mexican politics. Following independence from Spain and the creation of the Republic, two presidents of indigenous descent held notable terms: Benito Juárez, a Zapotec hailing from rural Oaxaca, and Porfirio Diaz, who was of Mixtec descent (Zborover 2015: 22). However, as Paja Faudree points out, the influence of indigenous peoples on Mexico's independence movement and early history was largely symbolic, and the actions of specific indigenous actors were effectively erased by a hegemonic narrative promulgated by *criollo* and *mestizo* Mexican elites up until the 1980s (2013). Faudree, citing Brading, writes that "*criollos* drew on carefully chosen images of indigenous peoples, positioning themselves as inheritors of their glorious but inert past to distinguish themselves from their European-born counterparts" (2013: 44). This strategy denied present-day Indians a place in the nation, marginalizing them in ways that continue to have social ramifications well into the 21st century. Further, this master narrative betrays the nascent development of nationalist attitudes toward patrimony that would become more visible during the Revolution.

It was in the context of such complex representations of indigenous people and tradition towards nationalist ends that Oaxaca entered into the Mexican popular imagination as a bastion of tradition and stronghold of the pre-Hispanic past. In a way, this itself could be glossed as a cosmological project dedicated to redefining Oaxaca. Porfirio Diaz's ascent to power signaled a departure from Juárez's liberal politics, and over a period of almost forty years (1877-1911) known as the Porfiriato, Diaz spearheaded a series of "modernizing" projects. With the image of the "Indian" viewed as an impediment to social and economic progress, urban development was prioritized. Due to Diaz's familial ties to Oaxaca, both the city and the state took center-stage as an emblem of these modernizing efforts (Overmyer-Velázquez 2006: 7). Thus, the Porfiriato in

Oaxaca saw a proliferation of communication and transportation technologies. Yet, as much as the telegraph, telephone, postal services, and printing presses might provide the illusion of social progress, they were mostly designed to attract and serve the upper classes as well as foreign investors. But Diaz was not simply concerned with "modernizing" Oaxaca. Rather, a key characteristic of his regime was the fusion of an industrial present (or modernity) with the monumental past (tradition), subsequently refiguring Oaxaca as a city steeped in paradox. This is to say that Oaxaca was developed and urbanized in order to for the city to become "modern," yet its very "development" hinged on the harnessing and preservation of its traditions. Architecture in Oaxaca blended patriotic symbols and neoclassic iconography, and the first excavations and restoration projects at Monte Albán and Mitla occurred in this period (Zborover 2015: 23). The Porfiriato thus inaugurated an innovative way of thinking about the past with an eye toward the future. It also established Oaxaca as a symbol in the national imaginary representing authentic Mexican culture and the arts (Overmyer-Velázquez 2006).

Diaz's attempts to harness the pre-Hispanic past to build Mexico's future did not, however, extend to preserving the lifeways of Oaxaca's Indigenous people. Quite the opposite, the Porfiriato saw the fomentation of the "Indian" problem – that is, the concern that the "backwardness" of the Indians would prevent Mexico from reaching modernity. Accordingly, Mexican intellectuals promoted assimilation. As Linda King notes, Justo Sierra in 1902 argued that indigenous languages must be suppressed and that doing so would be "the invaluable vehicle of social unification" (1994: 58). In a dialectical fashion, this ideology of assimilation anticipated and, perhaps, provided the backdrop for the indigenismo that became so crucial to postrevolutionary ideology in Mexico (Faudree 2013: 49).

The Mexican Revolution of 1910 interrupted and ultimately severed the long reign of Porfirio Díaz, ushering in the Modern era of Mexico. Searching for a way to bring the Mexican nation together, post-revolutionary leaders took up the idea of mestizos as the national race, which had only started to gain currency at the end of the nineteenth-century (Lomnitz 2001: 51). However, in reality, as Alan Knight explains, indigenismo was a discourse about indigenous peoples by the non-indigenous intelligentsia (1990). For José Vasconcelos, once Secretary of Education in Mexico, mestizos were a "cosmic race," superior to others, who would bring about a peaceful third age, while Indians stood as a remnant of a colonial past to be overcome (1997 [1925]). Moreover, *mestizaje* ideology formed the backbone of mestizo nationalism, where cultural hybridity not only defined the Mexican nation and its people, but glorified miscegenation and assimilation in the name of social progress (Faudree 2013).

Anthropology as Mexican State Project

Since the advent of social anthropology and archaeology in Mexico, nationalist ideologies of race and social science research have become intertwined (Lomnitz 2001).[6] Mexican anthropology was inseparable from state-driven endeavors which sought to "De-Indianize" Indians while reifying their culture and the pre-Hispanic past as heritage that belongs to all Mexicans, even though the elite *criollos* would never claim indigenous descent (Bonfil Batalla 1996). In turn, indigenismo and various forms of *mestizaje* ideology configured national attitudes and conceptions of patrimony and echo into the present. Under the influence of indigenismo, Mexico established INAH in 1939, which institutionalized patrimony, and in the

[6] Claudio Lomnitz puts it quite nicely, writing that "[Mexican anthropology] was charged with the task of forging Mexican citizenship both by 'indigenizing' modernity and by modernizing the Indians, thus uniting all Mexicans in one mestizo community" (2001: 231).

same year also founded ENAH (the National School for Anthropology and History). Both institutions housed a handful of elite Mexican anthropologists, who had studied abroad and dutifully promulgated a nationalist agenda which rendered pre-Hispanic material culture as the legal property of the nation-state (Breglia 2005; Ferry 2005; Schwartz 2016). Pre-Hispanic ruins and artifacts, as well as archaeology's scientific concepts and methodologies "easily mapped onto nationalism's project of locating the authentic nation in the distant past and within a distinct geographic territory" (Brulotte 2012: 11). In other words, both indigenismo and institutionalized anthropology centered on notions of cultural continuity between the pre-Hispanic past and the culture of Mexico.[7] In the process, however, these ideologies reified the actual indigenous population of Mexico (and in turn Oaxaca as a space of indigenous culture) as living fossils in one broad stroke, valued as icons of an authentic past that could act as a symbolic resource for the Mexican nation in the present (Alonso 2004; Bonfil Batalla 1996: 3; Feinberg 2003).

Mexico's nationalist agenda of indigenismo exerted tremendous influence on the kinds of research that has been produced both within and about Oaxaca. For instance, in her 1936 monograph on Mitla, Elsie Clews Parsons remarked that the mingling of the past and present is what drew her and many others to Oaxaca: "…that half-stone, half-plank structure would often entice me; neither Spanish nor Indian, it seemed to be a symbol of the whole mestizo culture" (5). If in this sense Parsons fit within a national narrative, her fascination with the ambivalent

[7] It is well-established that museums have played pivotal roles in nation-making and the establishment of citizenship and identity. Miruna Achim's monograph, *From Idols to Antiquity: Forging the National Museum of Mexico* (2017), deftly illustrates the prominence of the Museo Nacional de Antropología (which began in 1825 as the National Museum of Mexico) in shaping Mexico's image of itself. She astutely observes that, "By the end of the period I study here, Mexican antiquities had become both the objects of a science of antiquity and the objects around which stories of Mexico's triumphant republicanism began to be written. The alliance between the Mexican nation and state-sponsored archaeology had grown so powerful that it is easy to overlook that it took decades for the state to recognize the advantages it would entail and decades more before it became apparent that, in embracing a Mexico that extended back before the conquest, the state had developed a populist ideology" (2017: 15).

material of Oaxaca also aligned her with another discourse, a set of both Mexican and non-Mexican authors, visitors, artists, and more recently philanthropists who have, over the past two centuries, defined Oaxaca as a space of magic and enchantment.

In this sense the quote given earlier by Adolph Francis Bandelier regarding how Mitla's ruins exude an "air of weirdness" forms part of a larger genre epitomized equally by the English explorer Constantine Rickards, who wrote of the "air of mystery" that surrounds Mitla, and the way the ruins on a moonlit night "seem to be enchanted" (1910). This may appear similar to the romanticism invoked by other ruins, but both Oaxacans and scores of visitors over the past century have commented on Mitla possessing an unusually ineffable air. French archaeologist and antiquarian, Guillermo Dupaix's framing of Mitla's inexplicable, bewitching qualities, as quoted by Miruna Achim, describes Mitla as a place known as such "by corruption. But its name in the Mexican language is Miquitlan, which means place of sadness…The locals conserved its ancient name Leoba, which, in Zapotec means sepulcher and, in effect […] I have discovered a subterranean cemetery […] Both names are suitable: the first because of the rarity and lugubriousness of the place, the opacity of the sky and the configuration of the hills that surround it; the second, because of the sepulchers, cemeteries, and mausoleums found there" (Achim, quoting Dupaix, 2020: 322). Novelist D.H. Lawrence, who had resided for some time in Santa Fe and wintered at Lake Chapala in Guadalajara, also visited Oaxaca. It is said he chose to consistently winter in Oaxaca thereafter, and had fled Lake Chapala since it "has not really the spirit of Mexico."[8] Notably, Lawrence, along with his wife Frieda, chose to visit Mitla and not Monte Albán, due to Mitla's purported sacrality (Jones 2012:179). Indeed, one need to only read

[8] http://community.seattletimes.nwsource.com/archive/?date=19950924&slug=2143157. Accessed August 21, 2017.

Plumed Serpent or *Mornings in Mexico* to experience (in a fictionalized manner, of course) the awe Oaxaca inspired in Lawrence. [9]

Such writings continue to be echoed today. For instance, in 2012, Forbes released a story entitled "The Magical and Romantic City of Oaxaca, Mexico," while Kate Hamilton, writing for *Suitcase* magazine, claims: "Before my trip, a Mexican curator warned me against organizing her country's culture into stereotyped motifs of magic, folklore, and myth, and her voice is in the back of my head as I arrive. I try not to think of Oaxaca as magical, but the city resists my efforts from the start."[10] These visions make their way into local and national tourism discourses, too. Especially telling is the way that Oaxaca's governmental website for travel to the state casts the city and its towns in a magical, surreal light, describing how touring Mitla "allows one to cross the border between magic and reality, this life and the other."[11] Finally, the Mexican journalist, German Dehesa, notably wrote that "Oaxaca is like an antidepressant that produces addiction…[He] "suspects that it is neither located in geography or history, but rather in myth…" and "to arrive in Oaxaca one does not travel by airplane nor through time, it supposedly requires a spiritual disposition."

We can also see echoes of the particular ways that *indigenismo* structures space and time in the more recent academic writing focused on Oaxaca. Essentially, research on Oaxaca in the twentieth-century is two-pronged. On the one hand, there is a strong literature on the archaeology of Zapotec and Mixtec civilization, with particular attention toward ancient societal collapse,

---

[9] Ross Parmenter's *Lawrence in Oaxaca* (1984) contains more detailed descriptions of Lawrence's reactions to Mitla and Oaxaca in general.

[10] https://suitcasemag.com/travel/stories/tourism-in-oaxaca-mexico/. Accessed June 14, 2017.

[11] http://www.oaxaca.travel/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=62:mitla&catid=19&Itemid=260. Accessed June 14, 2017.

historical economic exchange, craftwork, and plant domestication (Blomster 2008; Feinman and Nicholas 2001; Flannery and Marcus 1983; Joyce 1997; Winter 1999). On the other hand, there are the many ethnographic studies which have followed a similar pattern to that of archaeology, with work carried out on the production of material culture, markets, and economy (Brulotte 2012; Cant 2014; Chibnik 2003; Cook and Diskin 1976; Malinowski and de la Fuente 1957).

A smaller subset of anthropologists have investigated politics, indigenous subjectivity, religion, and transnational movements (Cohen 1999; Faudree 2013; Monaghan 1995; Stephen 2013). Research conducted by Ronda Brulotte, Michael Chibnik, and Alanna Cant, to name a few, may also be considered studies of tourism and heritage. In their respective ethnographies, they bring to light issues surrounding the circulation and commodification of Oaxaca's "traditional" arts, often addressing how Western capitalism inflects Oaxaca's economy and impacts local communities. Tourism, in part, is responsible for looting, the manufacturing of "fake objects," and threatens traditional ways of being Zapotec. This said, tourism fuels a significant part of the Oaxacan (and Mexican) economy, and is a vital part of Oaxacan life. Most Oaxacans are in the service industry (hotels, restaurants, and cafés), are vendors (selling handicrafts on the periphery of archaeological sites and in markets), or are employed by industries directly adjacent to tourism, such as the case with heritage. What relatively few of these studies address, despite their sophistication, are the ways in which *patrimonio* in Oaxaca's operates to silence Indigenous voices, on the one hand, and, on the other, to offer (often spectral) means through which those same perspectives can be resurfaced. We will see a more detailed discussion of what *patrimonio* means and how it operates in Chapter 2.

Heritage Actors in Oaxaca

In order to understand these complex relations of power, it is useful at this juncture to offer a sketch of Oaxaca's local heritage institutions. I have previously mentioned the INAH, founded in 1939 by the fusing together of pre-existing ethnographic, archaeological, and historical institutions, which serves as the prominent player on the heritage-scene (Vázquez León 1994).[12] The INAH has historically enjoyed little competition in terms of site-management, active heritage projects, and employment. The INAH also has been home to key figures in Mexican archaeology like Alfonso Caso and Ignacio Bernal, both whom made a name for themselves through empirically-minded research in Oaxaca that both deployed a nationalist agenda and dismissed indigenous interpretations of sites like Mitla and Monte Albán as litte more than "quaint folklore" (Jones 2012: 188). Critiques of the INAH as an authoritarian figure run rampant throughout academic literature but also on-the-ground in Oaxaca and Mexico, more broadly[13]; in particular, the institution is often referred to as a kind of *'Leviatán Arqueológico'* (Archaeological Leviathan) a term coined by the Mexican anthropologist Luis Vázquez León (2003). Today the INAH's Centro-Oaxaca is not only a center designed to orchestrate and coordinate heritage management, but also a community of young scholars consisting of social anthropologists, historians, archaeologists, and conservators who are keen on working with and listening to the concerns of Oaxaca's indigenous communities (though, as Macario illustrated, only up to a point).

---

[12] See Luis Vázquez León's, "Mexico: The Institutionalization of Archaeology, 1885-1942" (1994) for a more detailed historiography. Today, the INAH is charged with the task of researching, conserving, and disseminating multiple forms of Mexico's heritage in order to "strengthen the identity and memory of the society that possesses it." INAH, "Misión y Visión," 2015, https://www.inah.gob.mx/mision-y-vision.

[13] Also see Mexican scholar Bolfy Cottom's most recent critique of the INAH in El Economista: "Nuevos lineamientos del INAH 'tienen un carácter bastante punitivo': Bolfy Cottom". https://www.eleconomista.com.mx/arteseideas/Nuevos-lineamientos-del-INAH-tienen-un-caracter-bastante-punitivo-Cottom-20210526-0008.html. Accessed September 15, 2021.

The Alfredo Harp Helú Foundation (FAHHO) stands in slight opposition. A private, philanthropic organization that began only in the 1990s, it derives the majority of its funds from the millionaire businessman (and cousin of Carlos Slim), Alfredo Harp Helú. While the foundation was established roughly 25 years ago, it is unclear when Harp Helú decided to divide his foundation into three parts, creating a branch specifically for the needs of Oaxaca. He is described as "in love with Oaxaca," hoping to share and preserve the state's beauty and cultural wealth. As such, the FAHHO too has emerged as a key player in Oaxaca's heritage scene, spearheading a variety of projects, from the restoration of pre-Hispanic sites and colonial churches to the founding of the San Pablo Cultural Center, a space for locals and visitors to converge and learn about Oaxaca's history, art, and culture. The foundation distances itself from the INAH by explicitly positioning itself as free from ideological tendencies and politics (see Chapter 3 for more on how the FAHHO views itself). A third visible and influential figure in Oaxaca's heritage-scene is the artist Francisco Toledo, who died during the course of my fieldwork. A Zapotec from the Isthmus, Toledo spent most of his life in Oaxaca City, where he set up print shops and other artistic-cultural spaces for young people. Toledo's philanthropy imagined Oaxaca's culture and history as an artistic resource; it also imagines Oaxaca as set apart from the rest of Mexico (as witnessed in his fight against McDonald's and other efforts to shape Oaxaca's image to his liking). Heritage spaces are crafted, refigured, and imagined in Oaxaca in almost constant negotiation between the state power represented by the INAH, the private resources of FAHHO, and Oaxaca's Indigenous communities. And, I would submit, the ways in which these relationships play out reflect a set of distinctly settler colonial relations.

Settler-Colonial Mexico: Mestizaje and Patrimonio as Mechanisms of Erasure

While prior studies have characterized Mexico as a postcolonial space, this dissertation departs from this scholarship, contending that Mexico – and thus, Oaxaca – is more properly understood within a settler-colonial framework. While Mexico, as a mestizo nation, complicates frameworks by claiming diversity, it may still be understood as participating in distinctly settler-colonial modes of erasure. Sandra Rozental expresses this eloquently, writing, "Unlike in many settler-colonial contexts where distinct Indigenous sovereignties have been formally recognized and can, thus, use legal frameworks to claim rights and require the repatriation of significant objects…in Mexico, such claims are complicated by the state's appropriation of indigeneity [emphasis my own], and specifically of pre-Hispanic Indigenous material culture, as the tangible inheritance of all Mexicans" (2017: 238). I thus follow the work of scholars such as M. Bianet Castellanos (2020), Cymene Howe (2019), Maurice Magaña (2020), María Josefina Saldaña-Portillo (2016), and Shannon Speed, as well as the writings of the Indigenous Mixe activist and linguist, Yásnaya Elena Aguilar Gil (2018; 2020) in order to demonstrate the ways that the idiom of settler-colonialism is being taken up and critically applied by both academics and local activists alike.[14]

Settler-colonialism did not necessarily enter lexicons outside of Palestinian studies until Patrick Wolfe's seminal article, "Settler-Colonialism and the Elimination of the Native" (2006), yet anthropologists were already actively trying to make sense of the ongoing legacy of colonialism in Latin America, with debates on whether it should be included in postcolonial

[14] These scholars posit that Mexico's settler-colonial structures operate via modes of Indigenous dispossession and displacement; M. Bianet Castellanos (2020) and Matilde Córdoba Azcárate (2020) build on and elaborate these claims further, suggesting that the emphasis on tourism as an engine for economic development has led to the Mexican state adopting a settler-colonial logic. It would appear that Mexico may present us with a case where a former colony becomes more settler-colonial due to neoliberal demands. In other words, the semi-militarization of patrimony and emergence or implementation of settler-colonial logics are entwined.

studies remaining a "contested issue" at the turn of the 21st century (Millington 2001). Over the course of her article, "Conforming Disconformity: Mestizaje, Hybridity, and the Aesthetics of Mexican Nationalism," Ana Alonso unpacks 20th century Mexican discourses of "racial and cultural mixing" as represented in the postrevolutionary project of 'aesthetic statism', which she argues symbolizes "an authoritative form of 'intentional hybridization'" (2004: 460).[15] While Alonso does not directly gloss these discursive and material practices of the Mexican state as settler-colonial by nature, there are several instances where her analysis suggests a settler-colonial analytic nonetheless. For example, in recounting how "…Mexican official discourses promoted 'racial and cultural intermixture' as the only way to create homogeneity out of heterogeneity, unity out of fragmentation" (462), Alonso highlights one of the key operative modes of settler-colonial governance: an ideological apparatus of exclusion, or alternately, erasure through sustained occupation and absorption.[16] Mestizaje, then, is an ideology that hinges on exclusion, operating according to a logic of erasure via assimilation. Similarly, Alonso highlights how Mexican state projects of aesthetic production – like public monuments, art, and archaeological reconstructions – position the contemporary "mestizo" nation (a deliberate historical revision after the Porfiriato) as inheriting an Indigenous past. In so doing, Mexico grounds its right to territory, staking a claim in continuity of blood, while erasing the possibility

[15] Alonso's "aesthetic statism" is a compelling label for the ways the Mexican state inserts a semi-visible hand into (re)shaping the built environment, controlling aesthetic production according to a set of nationalist ideologies. In order for there to be a true "postcolonial" revision of history, Mexico's environment must be reconfigured in such a way that it reflects the rebirth or renewal of this mestizo nation. In this instance, then, "intentional hybridization" captures the desire of political figures to indoctrinate, or, perhaps, socialize Mexicans into a state of imagined unity through hybridity.

[16] It is widely agreed upon that one of the defining structural features of settler-colonialism is this "logic of elimination"; this includes – and emphasizes – physical genocide, but also refers to how "settler laws, policies, and practices are 'inherently eliminatory' of Indigenous peoples and their cultures" (Barker, quoting Patrick Wolfe: 2018, 23). Policies or practices encouraging miscegenation – such as in the case of Mexico – or religious conversion and linguistic erasure are included within the rubric Wolfe imagines as encompassing settler-colonialism.

that Indigenous communities could make autonomous territorial claims outside the framework of the state.[17]

More recent scholars of Mexico (and Latin America, more broadly) have analyzed these themes through a much more explicit discourse of settler-colonialism. María Josefina Saldaña-Portillo's most recent monograph, *Indian Given* (2016), in part, charts the contours of Spanish racialized geographies across Mexico, tracing both the development of the category of *indio* and how Indigenous people produced Mexican space. She frames her argument of Mexico as a site of white settler colonialism through the language of unwillingness, contending that the Indigenous victims of Spanish colonialism "ceded nothing 'voluntarily' or for a fair price (2016: 13). So, too, Saldaña-Portillo points to the ways mestizaje is a racial form of citizenship, given to the nation through the figure of the Indian (Malinche) and the Spaniard. It casts every Mexican as equally injured by and responsible for territorial dispossession, and provides a symbolically resonant antecedent for the paradoxical ways mestizaje includes in order to exclude. While she acknowledges that Indigenous peoples played an active role in the wars of independence, to list but one example, the rhetoric of admixture combined with a distinct formation of racial discrimination through 'deracination' and assimilation policies means that Mexico's racial geography of nationalism is inexorably contradictory. "[T]he Indian," she writes, "is at once summoned to appear everywhere as the foundation of Mexican character and instructed to disappear into the more perfect union of mestizaje" (2016: 27).

---

[17] I borrow the phrase "continuity of blood" directly from Alonso, when she details how this was critical to Manuel Gamio's allegorical reimagining of a mestizo nation. She writes, "…the Indian element grounds the nation's claim to territory, provides a continuity of blood, and roots the nation's history in that of ancient, Pre-Columbian civilizations whose art and mythology is integral to the 'national soul' (2004: 467).

Such analyses pose a significant problem, however, for how we understand the nature of Mexico's population, precisely because of the mestizaje project. Unlike North America, in which the dominant expectation for Indigenous communities was disappearance rather than (forced) hybridity, it is not necessarily clear in the abstract what would constitute the "settler" population in Mexico. While we might think of the elite *criollo* class as occupying a similar structural role as settler governments in places like the United States – wielding legal, military, and ideological power to enforce domination, what are we to make of the vast majority of Mexico's population, who neither form part of this elite class nor can be said to belong in any immediate sense to an Indigenous community? Moreover, can we consider the *criollo* class to be "white," given the historical power of figures such as Benito Juarez or Porfirio Diaz?

What is important to understand here, however, is that these questions are being asked *by* younger Oaxacans, particularly scholars and activists. Take Tona, a young Zapotec-identifying man who runs a radical bookstore in Oaxaca City. When I asked Tona how he understood the category of mestizo, he responded that, while they'd all "learned in school that they were mestizo," he felt the term was "losing its relevance" now. For Tona, mestizo was ultimately "a narrow concept that emerged from a very particular (but limited) historical experience and juncture," and that now it is mostly a gloss for Mexicanidad. For the most part, he explained, it was simply designed to refer to the meeting of the Spanish and the Aztec, the ensuing colonialism, and their "living together"- a figure, that is, of the conviviality of the cultures. By contrast, Tona sketched out a contemporary landscape in which this image of "conviviality" could be understood as relevant, perhaps, in Mexico City, at the center of the country, but had very little meaning in places like Oaxaca, which had large swathes of unconquered territory. Tona positioned "mestizo" as an outmoded category, suggesting instead that the vast majority of

the country was, in fact, Indigenous, but had not yet revitalized or come to understand the implications of what this meant.

The Indigneous Mixe linguist and activist, Yásnaya E. Aguilar Gil, who is from the town of Ayutla, several hours east of Oaxaca City, makes a similar observation in her essay, "Nosotros sin México: naciones indígenas y autonomía" (2018). Starting with a foray into the etymology of "indigenous" and its translation into Castillian Spanish, she traces how the meaning of this word shifts over time and is deployed by the Mexican state in key moments. According to Aguilar, Mexico is best understood as a state constituted by many nations, but the disconnect occurs at a high-level; the Mexican state insists it is a nation-state with a national culture, when this is not reflected by its laws or actions. For her, Mexico is settler colonial precisely *because* of the ideological project of *mestizaje* and its policies of assimilation, which led to an intentional erasure on a socio-linguistic level – or simply, the 'de-indigenizing' of mestizos.[18] She also adds that the project of mestizaje set up a false binary between the mestizo and the indio, imputing that it aims to make Indigenous people across Mexico disappear through fake miscegenation.

This negation, or erasure, of Indigenous people is what Aguilar continues to unpack throughout the essay. Recounting the ways Indigenous peoples are inscribed into state projects, she demonstrates how these projects utilize the logic of *patrimonio* in order to undermine communal ownership of land, dispossessing Indigenous communities, whether this is viz-a-viz petrol, minerals, or cultural artifacts. Yet perhaps what is most powerful about Aguilar's essay is the way she discloses the tensions bound up in the celebrated, national figure of the 'indio'. The (fictional) narrative of the Mexican state as a nation rich in cultural diversity, "hides the exercise

---

[18] Quote from Spanish: *"El Estado Mexicano ha diseñado políticas públicas, promulgado leyes y ejercido presupuestos para borrar la existencia de otras naciones y de otras lenguas."*

of erasure that its creation implied and the violence that has been exerted on different nations that have their own language."[19] And while language is Aguilar's primary concern, as both an activist and linguist, she emphasizes how "Indigenous" morphs into a cultural category, becoming a veil for the Mexican state to "hide its violent acts and integrationist projects." The dispossession and displacement of Indigenous peoples is always done "for the good of the nation."

This still leaves open the question of what it means to actually *be* Indigenous in a Oaxacan context, particularly outside of the very stereotyped images of purity, isolation and atavism that the Mexican state draws on its projects of erasure. Here the work of Maurice Magaña, an anthropologist of urban Oaxaca, is extremely productive. Working with similar settler colonial themes, Magaña's monograph explores the ways urban youth culture in Oaxaca defies what it means to be 'properly Indian' (2020). The moral valence of being 'properly Indian' is deliberate – in the instance of Mexico, and the Latin American settler colonial paradigm more broadly, Indigenous identity is a spatio-temporal embodied experience. 'Proper Indians' reside in the bucolic countryside, practicing traditions from the past that consign them to the margins of history. They are anachronistic. Yet the dispossession of land in the name of resource extraction results in spatial displacement, and forces Indigenous Oaxacans to migrate to Oaxaca City, as well as other cities across Mexico and the United States (2020: 5). Being both urban and Indigenous, then, destabilizes settler colonial imaginaries and, as Magaña shows, defies the Mexican government. To be Indigenous in the city winds up being a sociopolitical contradiction in terms and robs them of their Indigeneity. Taken together, we can see that both

[19] Aguilar's use of the term 'erasure' refers to both the actual oppression of Indigenous languages and lifeways, as well as an elision or metaphorical silencing of Indigenous rights. Erasure, then, might be considered as a form of disenfranchisement.

"indigeneity" and "mestizo" are fluid terms rather than fixed categories, sites of negotiation for young Oaxacans rather than restrictive boundaries. What the settler colonialism paradigm offers, I think, is a new set of language and a new means for understanding the distinctive challenges of Mexico. I thus offer it not as the conclusive "answer" to how we can understand Mexico, but rather as a means of orienting ourselves to shifting understandings of territory, history, and identity in the country that are as much emic as etic.

And, crucially, all of these authors and interlocutors focus our attention squarely on erasure and extraction. As Magaña's notes, part of what drives Indigenous Oaxacans to move and have their identity erased are often the actions of governmental organizations, which extract resources and seize land in the name of *patrimonio*. These actions are justified, to build directly on Aguilar's points, by the idea that it is "for the good of the nation." This is a logic that extends directly to heritage controversies in Oaxaca. It is "for the good of the nation" that heritage in Oaxaca should ultimately be possessed solely by the Mexican state. As was reiterated to me over and over again by friends in Mitla and Teposcoulula who understood themselves to be dispossessd, Mexican nationalism justifies the violence that erupts in Oaxaca's heritage arena; Mexican nationalism, and its contradictory legislations that claim to endow Indigenous communities with autonomy but then refuse to recognize it, becomes a site of continuous struggle, of empowerment and disempowerment, as these same communities attempt to exercise their power to control their own resources – including their past. State-controlled heritage projects are crucial to mestizaje, giving the state access to the Indigenous past that it can, in turn, claim transparently as its own. If this is the dominant heritage cosmology in Oaxaca, the efforts by Indigenous actors and others who seek to reject or refuse the ideological terms of the state form a series of alternative cosmologies, which can at once reach back to long-standing

understandings of relationality and constitute new ones. We shall see these conflicts unfold throughout the dissertation.

Defining and Mobilizing Heritage

The past is inescapable in Oaxaca, constantly materially present and central to historical and contemporary projects of Mexican nationalism. But it is also a past under contestation, as alternative logics of heritage emerge, functioning through different organizations and according to different ethics. We thus need to understand what heritage itself is – and how it operates. The domain of heritage studies is broad and ever-expanding. Scholarship centering historical and ethnographic studies of heritage or, simply, "the past" stretch back to the 1980s; over time, this has grown to include not only the conventional ethnographies or historical studies of heritage, but also archaeological ethnography, the archaeology of the contemporary, and the anthropology of history. However, it is also worth noting that architectural history has been working on issues regarding preservationist logics and ethics well before anthropology.[20] Given that even today, anthropologists of heritage understand themselves to be engaged in the study of the "politics of the past", I begin here by sketching out how the dissertation conceives of and distinguishes "heritage" from "history." I then follow suit with a discussion of the current debates within heritage studies over whether we should consider heritage to be an object, a discourse, or a practice, once more laying out the stakes of my claim of heritage as constituted by contestations

[20] David Lowenthal's *The Past is a Foreign Country* has an excellent list of sources for tracing heritage's nascent development within architectural history. Lucia Allais, an architectural historian, may not provide a historiographic approach, but her monograph, *Designs of Destruction*, provides a fresh view on the logic of preservation; she charts the creation of monuments across several geographies and highlights them as nodes in a geopolitical network framed by cultural diplomacy that often finds itself in the wake of destruction.

over money, matter, and meaning that (re)configure a broad spectrum of social and affective relations between humans themselves as well as humans and nonhumans. For the purposes of this dissertation, monumental heritage is my primary focus here; however, I wish to quickly acknowledge that cultural heritage includes intangible inheritances such as oral traditions, foodways, dance, and language.

Heritage: What It Is, What It Does

In this dissertation, I understand heritage to emerge in the moment history is possessed. This conception of heritage as a socio-political act that seeks to possess "the past" builds upon the scholarship of David Lowenthal (1996; 2015) and Michel-Rolph Trouillot (1995), among others. Within both Lowenthal and Trouillot's texts, history and heritage are twinned formations, co-constitutive of one another because it is nearly impossible to disentangle our perception that time has passed from the material record. As sensuous beings, humans orient and situate themselves phenomenologically within the physical landscape (Tilley 1997). Simultaneously, we experience physical landscapes as inherently temporal, or even steeped in multiple times (Dawdy 2016; Ingold 1995); after all, landscapes are not only composed of geological strata corresponding to many former eras, but they are also marked by ruins, altered by human and nonhuman activities, and house artifacts and resources, which all point to previous presences – evidence that someone or something was there before us (*cf*. Gordillo 2014).

Upon considering the materiality of time as crucial to understanding how humans construct history and imagine heritage, Lowenthal imputes, "Physical remains have limited evidentiary worth; themselves mute, they require interpretation. Moreover, different rates of erosion and demolition skew the material record" (2015: 19). He is also deeply critical of postmodernist approaches to history, adhering to the Constructivist school. Heritage, for

Lowenthal, is the partisan manipulation of the past – it is always both dangerous and endangered. Heritage is fabricated history, he claims; it is an exercise in telling ourselves who we are and where we came from, as well as to what we belong (2), and it is the historian's task to uncover the truth. It is history possessed improperly, towards partisan ends; this, of course, implies the possibility of a "true" history not so distorted.

Trouillot, by contrast, advances the notion of history as *always* fabricated – or socially made – but also fabric, or material. He argues that we can never uncover any singular "truth" as the production of history cannot be separated from power; moreover, the notion that any unified "history" could exist when what we call history is an archive constituted by actors (and only ever *some* actors) who have their own understandings and experiences is fallacious, at best. Moreover, Trouillot accounts for the ways that material evidence – and subsequently history itself – bears down upon us, emboldening particular narratives over others, creating silences, and reifying power asymmetries. He eloquently captures the ways history operates with his notions of Historicity 1 and Historicity 2, the former referring to the material or event which has happened, the "matter of facts"[21], and the latter referring to the narratives about said material or event, that which is said to have happened or "the facts of the matter." In this sense Trouillot emphasizes not only the material, but also the affective and conceptual dimensions of historical production:

> "…history begins with bodies and artifacts: living brains, fossils, texts, and buildings. The bigger the material mass, the more easily it entraps us: mass graves and pyramids bring history closer while they make us feel small. A castle, a fort, a battlefield, a church, all these things bigger than we that we infuse with the reality of past lives, seem to speak of an immensity of which we know little except that we are a part of it" (1995: 29).

[21] Trouillot also refers to Historicity 1 as "the materiality of the sociohistorical process" (1995: 29).

The last line of Trouillot's quote keys into Lowenthal's notion of heritage as a collective experience or act of imagining and communing with the past.

I offer this understanding of heritage in response to recent calls in critical heritage studies to better understand the polyvalent nature of both the concept of heritage as such and the complex political *and* affective work that heritage projects do "on the ground," as it were – or, perhaps better, "in" the ground. As I detail below, heritage has been conventionally figured in both academic and international political discourses as a well-spring of social, political, and economic possibility – in the simplest terms, a way of harnessing the past to secure better futures, especially for indigenous communities. Yet despite this emphasis on the social, economic, and political, scholars like Lynn Meskell have recently highlighted the other ways in which heritage is complicated and ostensibly polyvalent beyond what was previously imagined. She writes, "There is no unmediated past…[t]he constitution of heritage, rather than just history, often suffers from an overburden of meaning that resists containment in any one particular location. Heritage sites thus become sites of contestation over meaning and practice…requiring ongoing symbolic attention and maintenance" (2015: 2). Taken alongside Denis Byrne's call for anthropologists and archaeologists to attend to the emotive aspects and affective valences of heritage (Byrne 2009; 2014), Meskell's intervention pushes scholars of heritage to interrogate the social power of heritage beyond its clear economic and political implications. In the spirit of Meskell and Byrne, and following the work of Lisa Breglia (2009), Quetzil Castañeda (1996), Elizabeth Ferry (2005), and Sandra Rozental (2012), my project interrogates these *diverse* social worlds of heritage. It not only attends to the actors and communities that surround heritage and produce it as a thing in the world, but the ways that these forces work in tandem to produce and

give shape to the actors and communities themselves. We make the past and are, in turn, made by it.

Scholarship on heritage rose to prominence in the 1980s, and was largely the domain of architectural historians and archaeologists concerned over heritage management (Cleere 1989; Hewison 1987).[22] This first wave of heritage scholarship tended to focus on this industry in the West and had not yet taken on the global nature that so defines it today (Hall 1984, 1988; Meskell 2015; Trigger 1980, 1984). While some would argue that studies in the 1980s lacked reflection on larger intellectual or political concerns (Meskell 2015), David Lowenthal's comprehensive and critical writings on heritage and history stand apart, and are in sync with work produced in the mid-1990s and later (1985). The second wave—in the 1990s and onward—turned toward nationalism and the relationship between identity and the production and consumption of the past (Abu El-Haj 2001; Hamilakis 2007; Lomnitz 2001).[23] However, most studies focused solely on Europe and the symbolic dimensions of the past instead of how reality was experienced. Heritage also welcomed attention from ethnographers and historians, who were interested in how the nation and other colonial regimes promoted nostalgia for the past, reifying heritage and casting it in a desirable light (Herzfeld 1991; Mitchell 1988; Ranger 1989). Others examined heritage within the context of museums, tourism, and performance (Castañeda 1996; Karp and Lavine 1991; Kirshenblatt-Gimblett 1998; MacCannell 1976). The rise of scholarship on the intersections between heritage and tourism ride on the tail-end of this second wave,

---

[22] For examples of interesting and thorough discussions of heritage management and the complications that may arise in Oaxaca, see Nelly Robles García's master's thesis, *Proyecto Mitla: Restauración de la Zona Arqueológica en su Contexto Urbana* (1984) and dissertation, *El Manejo de los Recursos Culturales en México: El Caso de Oaxaca* (1996).

[23] This said, Eric Hobsbawm's 1971 essay, "The Social Functions of the Past," is also particularly prescient and stands out.

overlapping considerably and sharing a set of similar concerns that the third wave of scholarship addresses.

The third wave refers to the growing literature on both UNESCO policies and its impact on local communities. This scholarship explores the increasing tensions surrounding World Heritage Site inscriptions, casting heritage value as often contingent on endangerment, and examining the friction produced between the global and the local.[24]. For instance, we can see this in Charlotte Joy's work in Djenné, Mali, where the French military intervened when destruction of Timbuktu became clear, yet local conflicts and economic asymmetries were flagrantly ignored (2015). Here, "danger" to monumental heritage sites stems from the havoc wreaked by local groups, and galvanizes global action (yet with glaring ethical concerns). Kathryn Lafrenz Samuels and Ian Lilley (2015) cast the trope of endangerment as one that produces desire, highlighting how preservationist and economic impulses within heritage projects are mediated by affect.[25] My project builds, in part, on Samuels and Lilley's study by picking up the thread of attending to heritage's affective valences.[26] It also intervenes by tracing the relationships between indigenous actors and local or national heritage institutions.[27]

---

[24] This particular type of heritage scholarship is often said to be composed of research that can be divided thematically between politics, economics, or institutions (*cf.* Meskell 2015: 1-18). While this may certainly be the case quite often, I would argue we should qualify that statement with the assertion that heritage scholarship may contain elements from one of these themes but does not need to fit neatly into one – or any – of these categories. If "heritage" is an object/subject of anthropological research then it cannot create fixed categories for itself.

[25] A complementary set of literature from art history also examines the role endangerment plays in heritage studies (e.g. Flood 2002; Allais 2013)

[26] Laura McAtackney specifically contends that what is needed next after rigorous archaeological and ethnographic studies into the ways history is layered around us is careful attention to the emotional connections residents have to their material landscapes (2014: 272). Scholars working on the affective dimensions of heritage include Ann Stoler (2016), Yael Navaro (2009), and Shannon Dawdy (2016).

[27] The work of anthropologists, from Elizabeth Ferry, Lisa Breglia, and Sandra Rozental, to Ronda Brulotte and Quetzil Castañeda comes immediately to mind; each of these scholars have written excellent ethnographic accounts of these relations in Mexico. For rigorous historical investigations into the same topic, I would recommend consulting Christina Bueno's monograph, *The Pursuit of Ruins: Archaeology, History, and the Making of Modern*

In sum, this dissertation takes as its foundational premise that heritage emerges at the moment in which history is possessed, taken up towards particular social ends. This means that heritage is *inescapably* political, per Trouillot, Lowenthal, and many other scholars. It also means that attention to heritage requires ethnographic work, whether contemporary or historical. The meaning of a given heritage site is neither fixed nor static, but is rather a site of contestation *by* definition, a space of layered social interventions that coexist with each other heterotemporally even as they represent different actors, communities, understandings, and objectives. Finally, we cannot separate such forms of sedimented contestation from affect; indeed, affect becomes a crucial operator through which we can better understand not only *why* a given history is taken up, but what kinds of social and affective impacts that are generated thereby. The power inherent in both the concept of heritage itself and the act of heritage-making is palpably emotionally-charged; a rigorous ethnographic study must consider the role of emotion and dispel with the notion that this renders the research irrational (Smith 2021: 50). What we might, perhaps, gloss as a fourth wave of heritage studies seriously considers the emotive dimensions of heritage-making (Harrison 2013; Smith and Campbell 2016; Smith 2021), and this dissertation contributes to this burgeoning literature by offering, at multiple points throughout, insight and attention to the complicated emotions that arise in relation to heritage. In Oaxaca, the affective valences of heritage pivot on inducing grief, mourning, confusion, and pride.

Heritage as Haunting

Mexico (2016), Lisa Covert's, *San Miguel de Allende: Mexicans, Foreigners, and the Making of a World Heritage Site* (2017), as well as the work of Samuel Holley-Kline (2019).

It is no coincidence that the affects mentioned above, save perhaps pride, are also those most commonly associated with hauntings. The affective power of absence, for example, is often articulated as haunting.[28] Indeed, it is one of the primary contentions of this dissertation that, if heritage is history possessed, then the process of heritage-making is *necessarily* a haunted one, riddled with spirits and caught up in competing forms of possession and dispossession, absence and presence, all at once. Given the ways heritage objects, projects, and practices realign and reconfigure relations, there is a deep resonance with the mechanism that is said to drive traditional, religious hauntings – that is, the desire to transform or renew relations. In this sense, the appearance of an apparition occurs because of some unfinished business and the apparition is chained to this world until it fulfills what was left undone.

Alongside religious definitions and interpretations of haunting, there are also the temporal and spatial elements that create the conditions of a haunting. Notably, hauntings are temporal ruptures, as Jacques Derrida asserts in *Specters of Marx* (1994). We encounter a ghost – whether the ghost of Hamlet's father or the looming specter of communism – as "time out of joint," an element from the past or the future that has imposed itself on our present. Simultaneously, the "specter" in Derrida is spatially indeterminate – we know the ghost is there, and yet, the ghost cannot be there, the ghost is immaterial, thus, the notion of an *absent presence*, a phenomenon that imposes itself upon us in its very absence. Heritage, at least monumental heritage, generates ghosts because these archaeological sites and collections – whether

[28] While I do not agree, the archaeologist Gaston Gordillo has offered a definition of haunting as, "an affect created by absence that exerts a hard-to-articulate, non-discursive, yet positive pressure on the body, thereby turning such absence into a physical presence that is felt and thereby affects" (2014: 31).

abandoned or immaculately preserved and restored – index the presence of an absence, a history that has now come to pass.[29]

Both Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett and Lynn Meskell have commented on the ways heritage crafts absent presences and present absences (1998; 2015)[30], yet it is Kirshenblatt-Gimblett who elaborates upon this in her monograph, *Destination Culture*. Expounding that heritage can be understood according to a set of seven propositions, her fifth proposition, "Heritage is produced through a process that forecloses what is shown," is salient here (1998: 159-160). She highlights the ways the constitution and performance of heritage relies on acts of dispossession and displacement, as well as how the mechanism of erasure is key. There are resonances with Elizabeth Povinelli's notion of "archaeofossils" (2016), where living people become transmuted into atavistic fossils whose only value is as indexical icons of their own pastness. Recall here Saldaña-Portillo's characterization of the "Indian" in Mexico who is summoned to both "appear" – as an archaeofossil, a remainder of the nation's past that justifies its legitimacy – and to "disappear" in so far as they are living Indigenous actors with political claims which might contravene the purported national unity of the Mexican state's mestizaje ideology. [31]

---

[29] Mónica Salas Landa's article, "(In)Visible Ruins: The Politics of Monumental Reconstruction in Postrevolutionary Mexico" (2018), recounts the ways that patrimonial projects generate and sustain regimes of (in)visibility, producing absent presences and present absences. For more on how this ties into patrimony, specifically leading to the crafting of a kind of 'phantasmal patrimony' across Oaxaca, see Chapter 2.

[30] Specifically, Meskell writes that, "Our negotiations and endless iterations reveal that the past is always and already a representation of a representation" (2015: 2). While she may not explicitly call this a haunting or the creation of an absent presence, the notion that heritage is a copy of a copy allows me to extrapolate and argue that this implies there is a recognized (if not unarticulated) spectral quality to heritage.

[31] In bringing Povinelli into conversation with Saldaña-Portillo, we see how both the Mexican mestizo state and, perhaps, even academics more broadly, require the figure of the Indian to exist primarily for this kind of summoning, which locates Indianness as something continuously being elided and harnessed to reproduce structural binaries between "past" and "future", "White" and "Other", and more. I am grateful to Shannon Dawdy for this insight.

We might push this further, as I suggested in a recent essay:

> Perhaps, as anthropologist Stephan Palmié (2002, 2013) has previously argued, all stories are ghost stories. An assemblage of gyrating stories, history as produced by that which has happened and that which is said to have happened resonates with the notion of what once was and what might be, Mark Fisher's (2012) backbone of haunting. As Fisher contends, haunting occurs not only through spatial and temporal displacement, but through imagined failed futures. Narratives need neither be firmly rooted in the past, present, nor future. Decay, like haunting, indexes the passage of time, but we know little of anything else. What is history, if but a bundle of traces, preserved and animated residues from which we can never escape? If anything, it is an intangible specter constituted by the past lives of tangible things (Leathem 2019).

Tensions between resurrection and suppression also contribute to the constitution of haunting; ghosts can be conjured or exorcised, and both of these acts are hallmarks of engaging with and producing heritage.

Methodology

This dissertation is a multi-sited historical ethnography of heritage sites, or, rather, an archaeological ethnography of material sites of significance. It is based on 12 months of ethnographic fieldwork split between Oaxaca City, Mitla, and Teposcolula, and 4 months of archival research at Paris's UNESCO Headquarters. My dissertation employed conventional ethnographic methodologies, such as semi-structured interviews, oral histories, and participant-observation, and combined these with drawing, photography, and digital mapping.

I primarily lived between Oaxaca City and Mitla, Oaxaca, splitting my time equally between both places by keeping a room in the two locations throughout the course of my fieldwork. For example, I usually spent Sundays to Wednesdays in Mitla and resided in Oaxaca City Thursdays to Saturdays. This schedule was, of course, prone to fluctuations, as it was

contingent on interviews and cultural events. In the interest of absolute transparency, I did not ever reside in Teposcolula; instead, I commuted multiple days over the course of 3 months.

As mentioned earlier in this introduction, San Pablo Villa de Mitla is a town located approximately 45 kilometers east of Oaxaca de Juárez, the capital of Oaxaca state. While Mitleños themselves do not constitute their own ethnic identity, Mitleño residents primarily identify as, first, Indigenous Zapotec, and then mestizo. Mitla has been the subject of multiple archaeological and anthropological investigations over the course of the last century (Barabas et al. 2005; Arfman 2008), including Elsie Clews Parsons' monograph, *Mitla: Town of Souls* (1936), a text that the community members would like access to but has been historically unable given the cost of the monograph and its lack of translation (Leathem 2022).

Mitla, then, is no stranger to visitors and foreigners, and archaeology, history, and anthropology are disciplines Mitleños find legible, if problematic, especially given the ways these forms of knowledge production – or extraction – have keenly reshaped local relationships with the past and even the ruins themselves (Leathem 2019). I first visited Mitla in 2008 as an undergraduate studying archaeology, but when I began graduate studies, I switched to ethnography. I was motivated by conversations with friends and interlocutors in Mitla, who expressed the need for research that would attend to the more symbolic, emotive, and moral dimensions of patrimonial projects.

Between September 2017 and September 2018, I conducted 38 open and semi-structured interviews with Mitleños, Oaxaqueños, and Teposcolulans who were either currently or previously employed by heritage institutions, as well as community members who were adjacent to these heritage projects (as biologists, artists, self-described oral historians, vendors). They also were primarily between the ages of 25 and 65. Some of these interviews were repeated twice or

three times in order to follow up on interesting material. I was a Visiting Researcher at Centro INAH-Oaxaca, courtesy of my appointed mentor and friend, Pame Castillo Cisneros, during this time and this allowed me unlimited access to Oaxaca's vast network of archaeological zones. Alongside interviews and oral histories, I volunteered at the Museo Frissell in Mitla and attended several exhibition openings.

Plan of the Dissertation

These tensions between possession and dispossession and between absence and presence recur throughout this dissertation, which moves between the Zapotec community of Mitla and other spaces of heritage-production across Oaxaca, Mexico. The arc of the dissertation charts instances of possession and dispossession in the first half and then offers close-grained accounts of heritage re-possession in the latter half. Chapter 1, entitled, "Manifestations that Matter: A Case of Oaxacan Ruin (Dis)Possession," explores the relationship between spirit possession and historical dispossession in Oaxaca's heritage landscape. More specifically, it posits that a seemingly "cultural" phenomenon – repeated narratives of ghostly hauntings and possession by the monumental ruins that exist throughout the indigenous Zapotec town of Mitla – is in fact intimately associated with the ongoing forms of historical control, regulation, and dispossession of Zapotec heritage by Mexican state agencies and actors. Part of a larger network of archaeological zones overseen by the INAH across Oaxaca state, Mitla's ruins are emblematic of Oaxaca's many pasts – histories of colonialism, looting, and theft that, I argue, intersect with preternatural phenomena in the present. So too, then, this chapter takes seriously the assertion that stories of ghosts and other entities form an integral part of historical consciousness (*cf.* Blanes & Espírito Santo 2013; Palmié 2002; Stewart 2017), bundles of competing logics and

commentaries on relationality and reality. Chapter 2, "Looting Made Legal: Settler-Colonial Logics of Erasure and the Making of Phantasmal Patrimony," investigates a heritage scandal known as the "sacking of the Frissell," which occurred in Mitla. One evening in 2006, it is said, the Frissell Museum's entire collection of artifacts disappeared. Mitleños were shocked and appalled when it was revealed that the "theft" had been carried out by the INAH, which claimed rights to the collection as national (so Mexican rather than Zapotec or Mitleño) patrimony. This chapter traces the different articulations of (dis)possession and heritage that circulate around this incident, arguing that the INAH's reported actions reflect a distinctly settler-colonial modality through which Indigenous rights to their own past are erased and silenced. In doing so, it suggests that 'looting made legal' not only upholds a nationalist ideology but creates the conditions for haunting. The chapter thus engages with and contributes to anthropological literature from critical heritage and settler colonial studies, as well as ethnographic studies of southern Mexico.

Chapter 3 and 4 constitute the second half of the dissertation, which features ethnographic investigations into local acts of re-possession within the heritage arena. Beginning, then, with "(Im)Proper Relations: A Tale of Ghostly Monuments," Chapter 3 examines the phenomenon of "ghost buildings" in Oaxaca. A conceptual category of heritage utilized by both institutional employees and the local Mixtec community of Teposcolula, "ghost buildings" constitute a part of Oaxaca's broader heritage imaginary. Focusing on the restoration of the Casa de la Cacica, I track how discourses of haunting, looting, and post-Conquest violence converge on-the-ground, conjuring up ghosts in both literal and figurative ways. "Ghost buildings" emerge as a unique formation of heritage and point to the ways that fraught and nested histories produce liminal, ambivalent spaces. Most importantly, "ghost buildings" materialize when the

community feels dispossessed by history or when rights to access a site are scrutinized (*sensu* Povinelli 2016), while for institutional workers, "ghost buildings" represent disconnection and an active rejection of history (and thus, failed heritage projects). I argue that haunting is one of the most important tropes in heritage, and "ghost buildings" are a critical heritage formation, manifestations of violated trust and broken bonds.

Chapter 4, entitled "It's the Debris of Emotion: Oaxacan Street Art as Decolonial Heritage," takes up the question of what a "counter-heritage" might look like, exploring the work of Oaxacan street art collectives as modes of refusing state and federal control of Oaxaca's spaces and, perhaps most crucially, its histories. The chapter contends that these dramatic images emblazoned on public walls in Oaxaca City are not simply "resistance" to the state's heritage project, but they are heritage-making practices in their own right, representing alternative political means of taking possession of heritage by and for local, primarily Indigenous Oaxacans. Building on this contention, the chapter ends by exploring the possibility that the work of these street artists could provide a model for a genuinely "decolonial" heritage, resisting Mexican settler colonialism and inscribing a very different set of relations in Oaxaca.

Dispatch from a Ruin in Mitla, the Town of Souls

(Originally published in Strange Horizons, April 12, 2021)

I.

Travel accounts from long ago declare
there is an 'air of weirdness' about me, amplified by geometric designs
and a landscape of arid cordilleras,
punctured by prickly *tuna*, *maguey*, and violet *jacaranda*.

No writing can account for my grandeur, no human can explain my origins.
I laugh at those self-aggrandizing figures
who build bridges between the dead and the living. To link these worlds
is a dangerous, questionable feat,
but the true human folly lies in their presumption. They do not have permission.

II.

Pastel sunset hugs my body as I hear voices from the metal cloisters.
I sigh and heave
rubble bubbling and gray soil shifting beneath my weight. They evacuate,
these experts of my biography, stewards and *conservadores*.

For a moment, I feel relief but I worry that
with every aching tremor, the agony of the world will fragment me, consume me.
Preservation suddenly feels not enough.
This reminds me of another *cuento*, or story. I might also say to you:
this is true history.

III.

One day a small man came to the land of the dead. But this is the *living* land of the dead!
We may now call it Mitla
from the language of one of the colonizers, *Mictlan*, but my people, my owners,
are Zapotec.
We are in L*yobaa*, place of the souls. Here, the living dwell with the dead. This man declares
his presence: I am Leopoldo Batres!
I hear Sus Ley (Old Stone Woman)'s voice emanate from her petrified form in Mount Guirún.
"Do not trust him."

My restoration becomes – it is considered – a blasphemy. Leopoldo's architectural artistry
takes a heavy hand.
I do not believe in this "science" of truth, but this mustached man speculated too far.

He did not listen
to my inheritors, he dispossessed them in his increasing fervor to conjure up the past.

The ghost of a priest I once knew
pays their dues and visits me one night. Admiring my freshly colored body,
he comments on Leopoldo's art:
"He may not be Zapotec, but he has refreshed your skin, you glow." I am a vibrant red.
Like blood.

IV.

In the past, I've been caressed by rituals that enliven the bonds between this world
and the Spirit World.
The spaces within me both heal and house oracular properties. Long before Leopoldo,
another angry group – Spanish colonizers –
arrived to *Lyobaa*. I watched this turn into a true land of the dead. Bodies splayed, but
not to a god,
I heaved and froze as hordes of Spanish pulverized the oracular stone jewel, killing
the heart of the world.

Now, I sit reluctantly on my heavy haunches, crouching behind metal gates erected
by a governmental bureaucracy
who believes itself to understand why I was made and from whence I came. Ha!
"They are all the same,"
Sus Ley often says with a stony rasp. Here is another *cuento*, a story. Or is it history?

V.

I am different from Sus Ley, who is sometimes called Sus Giber. I never
served anyone.
She cooked for and was mother to legendary Montezuma. I give shelter, I protect. I am not
a petrified supernatural,
but I am *un antiguo*, one of the Ancient Ones. I was built before the rising of this world's sun,
during a time
when darkness cloaked the earth. It was all we ever knew. And when my world passed from

one temporal order to the next, your sun flooded our horizons with neon fire that at once
illuminated every surface
and petrified or killed every being. Some escaped, fleeing into my innards, subterranean tunnels
the Spanish later wrote of as
cursed *bocas del infierno*. But I am not Hell, this would insult my neighbor below me.
I am a deity, an ancestor.

VI.

Don Leopoldo painted me an off-shade of crimson more than a century ago. Or is it more?

There are so many times
and the next temporal order will arrive soon. I have seen empires fall. I am not a thing
to be possessed,
let alone dislodged from my community. The descendants know what I am and who I am.
I defy boundaries.

“Although I have passed through you before, I do not recognize what lies behind me
or before me,” Sus Ley echoes
from Guirún. She tells this to me every day, too. I am now a national monumental zone,
but when the moment is right,
I will free Sus Ley and rescue my people. I will be Mitla’s once again.

Chapter One: Manifestations that Matter: A Case of Oaxacan Ruin Possession in Fragments

"The appearance which the ruins present, and the impression which they create, are certainly very striking. They stand in the midst of this gloomy and cheerless landscape, like the relics of another world. Their ornamentation also, composed exclusively of geometric forms, without any human or animal shapes whatsoever, the absence of vegetation, the dismal silence that reigns around them, all contribute to give an air of weirdness which overwhelms and bewilders."
—Adolph Francis Bandelier, *Report of an archaeological tour in Mexico in 1881* (1884)

"There's no one. Behold the stones." – Pablo Neruda, *The Poetry of Pablo Neruda* (2005: 154)

Introduction

It was an unusually cold day in May 2008, even for Mitla, an indigenous Zapotec town 45 kilometres east of Oaxaca City, in Mexico's Oaxaca state. Standing outside the gated entrance to Mitla's palatial pre-Hispanic ruins, a towering architectural gem glazed in vibrant red, I was struck not by any obvious 'air of weirdness' surrounding the ruins—though they were certainly enchanting—but rather by the ways these impressive structures commanded attention as they crouched behind metallic gates erected at the behest of Mexico's National Institute of Anthropology and History (INAH) (fig. 1).

Oaxaca lacked tourists in this particular moment. The aftermath of the 2006 teachers' strike, which left Oaxacans and foreigners alike maimed and murdered, still felt fresh.[1] Preparing

[1] The 2006 teacher's strike in Oaxaca started much the same as other education strikes, where teachers demanded resources from the government of Ulises Ruiz Ortiz. However, police opened fire on nonviolent protests, prompting Oaxacans to assemble into several grassroots social movements, including the still active Popular Assembly of the Peoples of Oaxaca, which demanded social justice and the removal of Ruiz Ortiz. While these movements were ultimately successful, Oaxaca suffered a series of human rights abuses on the part of the Mexican government. See Lynn Stephen's, *We are the Face of Oaxaca: Testimony and Social Movements* (2013), or Diana Denham and the

to pay a small entry fee to enter the archaeological zone, I noticed the glut of Mitleños[2] watching me from behind the gates, gathering at the edges of their market stalls whispering, "*Señorita, güera*!" I turned to them, and they flashed grins. Small women with braids and beautifully woven smocks and blouses presented me with colourful textiles, but before I could inquire more, INAH custodians hustled them away, berating them. "They should know better," one remarked, "than to just wander on to the site *sin permiso*."[3]

When I returned nearly a decade later for my year of doctoral dissertation work in 2017, I sensed an amplified tension between Mitleños and the INAH's modes of heritage governance. The ways the INAH controlled access and demanded Mitleños request permission to enter a place that seemed part of Mitla yet belonged to the Mexican state generated a peculiar friction. Following Lisa Breglia (2006), we might see this friction as a form of the 'monumental ambivalence' that results from the ideological and ontological clashes heritage projects tend to produce. As in other parts of Mexico, 'monumental ambivalence' in Mitla materializes in the stalemate between the community and the INAH. It includes the distrust that ensues in the face of restoration projects that are intimately bound up in historical relations, reconfigured each time Mitleños enter into conversation with the INAH or pass by the ruins. When I speak of the distrust Mitleños display toward the INAH or other heritage institutions, I draw from conversations with friends and colleagues from a variety of sectors and of different ages and socio-economic

---

C.A.S.A. Collective's, *Teaching Rebellion: Stories from the Grassroots Mobilization in Oaxaca* (2008) for a more in-depth discussion.

[2] 'Mitleños' refers to the local residents of the town. While they do not constitute their own distinct ethnic identity, most Mitleños identify as Zapotec or mestizo.

[3] "'Without permission." I keep the original Spanish above to emphasize the continual invocation and use of 'permiso', which can also connote movement and passing in a formal, polite way. Otherwise, I am freely translating from Spanish into English.

backgrounds. While there is always some form of internal dissonance within communities, the majority of Mitleños simultaneously acknowledge the need for the INAH—and the ways it brings in tourists —and perceive its presence as intrusive and problematic. My goal is not to erase this internal dissonance; quite the opposite, it is material to my argument, which is stitched together from fragments of circulating rumours whose very indeterminacy speaks to monumental ambivalence.

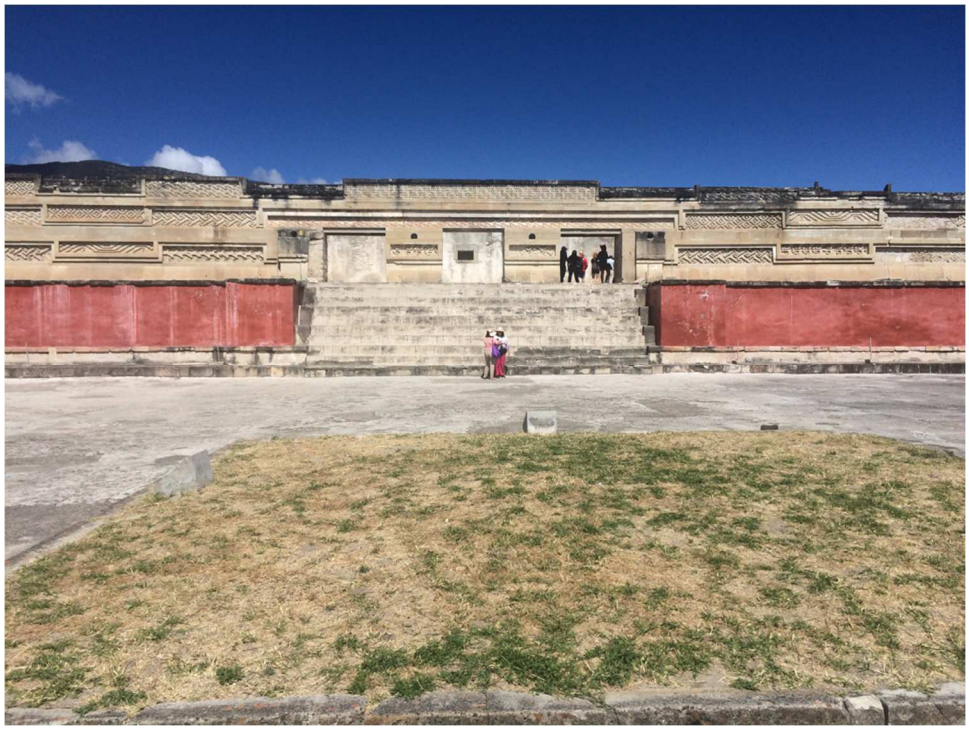

Figure 1: February 2018. Photo by author.

Alongside this growing sense of ambivalence and, for some, betrayal, there was a sudden rise in accounts of possession.[4] These narratives of possession *by* the ruins described situations

[4] Mitleños reiterated this sense of betrayal to me several times during my fieldwork, often citing a recent incident where an archaeologist is said to have visited and informed them that excavations and empirical data pointed to the ruins being Mixtec architectural achievements, rather than Zapotec structures. This, obviously, did not go over well.

where the afflicted person was haunted by recurring dreams. Terrified, the afflicted descended into madness or a form of *espanto*.[5] The cure, I was told, was to visit the ruins after the INAH hours with services from a *curandera*[6] who could perform the appropriate ritual.

In order to understand the tensions and ties between Mitleños and the INAH, I had to consider the role that these 'relics of another world,' as Bandelier (1884) once described the ruins, have in reconfiguring the communities that live within and around them. A striking relationship exists between the production of history, the way it is mobilized and performed, and the vitality or 'becoming' of monumental heritage. Landscapes such as Mitla's are constituted by sedimentations of contested pasts. Saturated with multiple meanings, Mitla's seemingly 'inanimate matter' is animated by conflicts over definition. Indeed, it is continuously resignified by these exact disagreements with potent socio-political, economic, and ontological ramifications. As such, this chapter is an archaeological ethnography[7], interrogating what it means to be possessed by *and* dispossessed of monumental heritage in Oaxaca, Mexico.

There are two particular social formations I am seeking to elucidate. First, I am interested in why it is that the ruins decided to manifest, to 'show themselves', at this moment in Mitleño history and in this particular, intangible yet embodied way. Second, I ask what it means to listen

---

[5] *Espanto* means "terror" or "fright." Found across Mexico, it is similar to *susto* in that fear or trauma precedes its onset. For a further discussion of *espanto* in Mitla, see pgs. 120–123 in Elsie Clews Parsons' *Mitla: Town of Souls* (1936).

[6] *Curandera*, or *curandero*, refers to someone who heals both physical and spiritual ailments. Traditionally glossed as a shaman, every community in Oaxaca has historically had a local healer who possesses a command of traditional plant knowledge and practices white or black *brujería*, 'witchcraft'.

[7] Here I use 'archaeological ethnography' to gesture to the ways that this is both an ethnography of a heritage site in the most basic sense as well as an exploration of the ways that the material past, alongside archaeological practice, retains a salient and gripping hold over the present (Hamilakis and Anagnostopalos 2009). While it is not a direct 'ethnography' of archaeology (or archaeologists for that matter), it is ultimately concerned with the claims and contestations various stakeholders in Mitla mobilize as they exercise rights to patrimony.

to the ruins and to dwell with them, taking seriously their capacity to act on this world? In my response to these questions, I move between posthumanist scholarship in archaeology and anthropology and the cosmological and historical worlds of Mitla, suggesting ultimately that both possession *and* dispossession must be understood in relation to the ruins' own distinctive qualities – the twinning of two distinct becomings – and, equally, the ongoing control of heritage sites by the INAH. My primary contention is that metaphysical possession occurs as result of historical, materialist, and relational dispossession.

As I mentioned at the start, my account of ruin possession is stitched together from multiple rumours. This lends itself to an approach that shares a kinship with literary ethnography. Accordingly, I intersperse ethnographic fragments and historical interlude alongside the core of my analysis of ruin possession. In doing so, a sharper picture of Mitla's social world comes into view, and we are able to see how much it revolves around these palpably material (and affective) encounters between humans and nonhumans. Drawing influence from posthumanist thought and archaeology's 'New Materialisms,' I do not wish to dismiss the validity of these human and non-human relations – their realness, to invoke John L. Jackson (2005), even as this might make it more difficult to offer determinations of what is "true" and what is "fiction" in these complex relations.

Instead, the story fragments woven throughout this piece, marking the wild twists and turns of a journey into a seemingly magical phenomenon, serve to highlight the interplay between permission and possession and the potent role of intervention. While permission and possession denote relatively stable categories and actions in the world, intervention imparts a sense of unpredictability. An intervention can be divine or quotidian, but they are almost never scheduled. So, too, an intervention sets out to call attention to some form of danger or disorder, it

may even cohere around supernatural omens or natural disasters. This is to say, any intervention presumes or attempts to produce realness, no matter whether everyone is a believer.

In what follows, I try to understand why it is that Mitla's ruins are "behaving badly" as one of my interlocutor's put it, and to give life – make *real* – the interventions and relations between humans and nonhumans in Mitla. I stress how these relations seem to be premised on a spiritual, social contract of sorts. Both permission and possession presume a contract or bond, but as we also know, contracts and bonds can be broken. Sudden, wild interventions on the part of both parties – humans and nonhumans – impact the world of Mitla and thus bear down on what heritage means – and even is. These interventions – whether due to permission or possession – structure, define, and articulate access to history.

Fragment 1: A Matter of Permission

The February before I officially began my doctoral fieldwork, I was in Oaxaca City to secure institutional affiliations and finish submitting grant applications. Institutional affiliations required that I either meet with the acting heads of cultural organizations around Oaxaca, such as Marcus Winter at Centro INAH-Oaxaca, or mentors with overlapping interests before I could acquire not only letters of support confirming their interest and enthusiasm for my project, but also their absolute and total *permission* to conduct research. Permission is neither unilateral nor linear in terms of temporality or relationality, at least in Oaxaca. Its constitution is circular and continuously unfolding. To acquire institutional permission meant I needed local, communal permission, while at the same time, I needed to have preliminary permission from institutional heads like Winter or senior anthropologists like Salómon Nahmad Sittón, to convince some Mitleños that I should have local permission to freely conduct research. And while, ultimately, I

felt the most important type of permission to secure is that of the local communities, there was another more metaphysical layer of permission, of which I was previously unaware.

"You must importune *los antiguos*, Hilary. If you don't, bad things will happen to you." I was standing in the middle of the taxi stand and car park that sits directly adjacent to Mitla's official entrance with my friend Faby. The main road snaking into the town was neatly paved in creamy grey bricks, but clouds of dust still hung in the air giving the entire town a hazy aura. Faby was dropping me off after I had spent the night with her in Oaxaca City. A psychotherapist and doula by profession, she was adamant about me being cautious in conducting ethnography in Mitla and respecting the deeply spiritual and inexplicable elements of what it meant to live and work in the "Town of Souls."

"*En serio*," she said to me. "There are many places of respect where one must ask permission to enter. Please ask for their permission to do your research. Whenever people think this is silly or a joke, things start to go wrong, or worse, they wind up getting hurt."

"When you say *los antiguos*, you mean the supernaturals, don't you?" I asked Faby.

"Yes, yes."

"These are also their ancestors, right?"

"Yes. Well, they have many names; they are ancestors, spirits, and gods, but it is very important to remember they are *los gobernadores* and *los guardianes* of the place. They lived here before any of this –" she gestured around us, pointing in the direction of Mount Guirún and then Nueve Puntas. "…Existed. They made the ruins, the sacred sites. They are the ruins, the cross, the mountains - you can see them in the stone. They take care of and protect the Mitleños and Mitla. They dislike outsiders, or anyone who wants to profit from Mitla without giving back

[to them]. You must have a pure intention." She paused. "They can see into our hearts. *Los antiguos* know, even as you importune them, what your true intentions are."

I can't imagine the look on my face, as Faby quickly added, "I am not saying your intention is bad. I am confident you will be able to do your work. But please say this prayer before you attempt to do anything, interviews, film, or photography…I will tell it to you."

"Okay," I agreed. "That would be great."

"You are not starting today, are you?" she asked me.

"My fieldwork? No, not officially."

"Before I tell you what you must say to *los antiguos*, let me tell you a story. You need to know there are rules.[8] And if the laws are violated, it is dangerous. They manifest physical symptoms, accidents, malaise, and other things."

She pointed again to the horizon, saturated on all sides by the rims of distant cordilleras. "You know our friend, Daniela [Dany]? She went on a hike last year with two resident Mitleños who are also biologists working for the INAH in order to both map some of the ecosystems on the mountain top and to also see if the jaguars had returned. Last minute, a friend of a friend – I think her name was Mirna – decided she would invite herself on this expedition. Mirna was not a biologist, she was a writer, and according to Dany, she wanted to go for the thrill. Despite Dany and I telling Mirna that, as an outsider, she must ask for the blessing of *los antiguos* so that nothing would go wrong, Mirna spurned this request, laughing.

When they left the next morning for their hike up the mountain, several misfortunes occurred. At the summit, Mirna twisted her ankle. Dany and the others asked if she had asked for

[8] Faby used the word, "reglas," when speaking of rules and laws.

permission from *los antiguos* this morning, to which Mirna responded, 'No.' Everyone felt uneasy. They helped Mirna with her ankle and everyone was able to keep hiking. But then, even though it was dry season and these creatures prefer to live on slopes, a rattle snake bit Mirna on her leg forcing Mirna and the others to abandon the expedition. This is what happens when one does not ask permission. Mirna was injured, everything went wrong. She never returned to Mitla, and this is because she is not allowed to do so."

"Allowed by…?"

"*Los antiguos*," Faby stated matter-of-factly. "She should have asked permission, and then this all would have been avoided."

Heritage Formations: Folk cosmologies and nationalist ideology

Even in Mitla, where, as Faby warned me, encounters with an array of supernatural beings are perceived as quite ordinary[9] and follow particular rules, the account of possession *by* ruins is an unusual story. In order to understand what makes it so unusual, it is worthwhile to expand on the account of possession to which I gestured earlier. I should emphasize that this narrative is itself a composite of multiple stories — and rumours — that I was told while conducting ethnographic research in Mitla. Accounts occasionally varied in terms of particulars, but the core narrative that follows remained consistent and quotations appear when a certain phrase was used at least several times. This is itself analytically interesting, as it suggests, at the very least, stories of ruin possession were becoming increasingly common as a genre.

[9] For more on these 'otherworldly' encounters, see the essay, "Oaxacan Ruin Lore: When the Stones Come for You," featured on *Folklore Thursday*, January 17, 2019.

The (synthetic) story goes as follows: INAH custodians arrived at the archaeological zone one morning to see that the gates were unlocked. Confused, they argued amongst themselves about whom had left them open, scouring the ruins in the meantime for any unusual activity or presence. For the most part, the INAH's concerns are consigned to the realm of aesthetics. Graffiti or murals are anathema to the institution and defacing the ruins is a criminal offense. So too, it is against the law to remove architectural pieces from the ruins and repurpose them for homes and other buildings.

With their attention fixed on the walls of the ruins, they nearly missed the presence of a young girl's braid on the bottom step of the stairs leading to the main palace. The severed braid was sticky with a red liquid — either blood or plant sap. One of the INAH custodians, a Mitleño himself, nodded and instructed them not to move it for now. "Someone came in the night," he said. "They petitioned *las ruinas*." The other custodians seemed confused; most traditional healing ceremonies had one petition: the supernaturals, a class of spirits that includes deities, energy, and ancestors, but ruins were not historically included in that category. "*Las ruinas son embrujadas* [bewitched], they have become so," the custodian continued.[10] Mitleño rituals revolve around a pantheon of energetic entities that slip among and between Western-oriented categories like spirits, deities, and ancestors (Lind 2015). The ruins are religiously charged spaces that index modes of pastness for Mitleños, yet they are usually not assigned agency, making this account of possession all the more peculiar.

[10] A quick note on language. The use of 'son' instead of 'están' is of interest here, as it is technically incorrect. Mitleño Spanish is a regional variant, but I also believe 'son' is deliberate, pointing in a way to how rather than bewitchment being fleeting, it is now akin to a profession or an identity.

I soon learned that alongside the case of this young girl being afflicted by the ruins, a man in his late 40s was said to be going mad. It began with day-visions of the ruins, particularly of the palace and civic-ceremonial centre, which then became sinister in tone and plagued him in his dreams. "The ruins visited him," one Mitleño, José, explained; the problem was that the ruins would not stop visiting him. Every night they came to him in the form of malevolent dreams until the man, deeply troubled, descended into madness. He was possessed, stricken by 'ruin envy' in the opinion of some Mitleños, though they demurred to define what was meant by this.[11] "It is something very strange," José said. *Curanderas* treated the affliction as if it was a case of *susto*, when the soul is said to leave the body or is under attack by supernatural forces. Aside from a cleanse, they had to determine where the ritual should take place. In choosing the ruins as an instance of sympathetic magic, the *curanderas* and Mitleños wished to know: "What did the ruins say? What did they want?"

The answer appeared simple and to the point: the voice emanating from the ruins in the man's dream demanded that he must pay [his dues].[12] If he would like to be released from the ruins' power, then he must visit and implore them in the physical realm. This is exactly what was done. After the man's ritual, purportedly conducted with INAH's permission unlike the girl's, he was cured.

What might not be apparent from these accounts is that possession in Mitla, particularly possession *by* ruins, was a new phenomenon, unlike *espanto* (see footnote 1). Indeed, despite the presence of deep history all around, Mitleños appeared to visitors like Constantine Rickards

---

[11] Exact phrase used: "*Envidia de las ruinas."*

[12] I heard two phrases used to convey what the ruins reportedly said to the man. Either Mitleños said, "*Hay que pagar las deudas"* [One must pay debts], which is used to express duty, or they used, *"Tu debes pagar"* [You must pay].

(1910) to be rather ambivalent—even 'non-interventionist'—about the ruins until the mid-twentieth century, simply living among them.[13] Before the INAH was founded in 1939, Mitla's palatial ruins and adobe walls were heaps of rubble—ruins in ruins, they required restoration and a certain kind of discipline of care from the local populace (Bueno 2016; Robles García 2016) (fig. 2). Writing in her monograph, *Mitla: Town of Souls*, Elsie Clews Parsons (1936: 1) chides the local community for their apparent lack of concern with the ruins. Instead, she writes, "…it is the modern tourist, Mexican or foreign, who has given the townspeople a more sophisticated awareness of their value and of the need of preservation."

Parsons's observation about "the modern tourist" is not untrue. Under the reign of Porfirio Díaz (1876–1911), Mexico's government went through great pains to attract tourists and immigrants alike through a series of social projects that romanticized the pre-Hispanic past and indigenous art (Brulotte 2012; Faudree 2013; Feinberg 2003; Lomnitz 2001; Overmyer-Velázquez 2006). These projects were meant to refashion Mexican identity by simultaneously celebrating and claiming pre-Hispanic and indigenous achievements as the heritage of all Mexicans. Through these projects Diaz's head anthropologist, Manuel Gamio, brought the relatively nascent nation's diverse population together under the unifying ideology of *mestizaje*. As such, the Mexican government promulgated a preservationist ethic and spearheaded multiple restoration projects in the name of the nation-state. Ruins, as symbols of the shared pre-Hispanic

[13] Rickards remarks, "Part of the present village is built amongst the ruins, but now the government is making these villagers leave, in order to preserve the ruins" (1910: 87). Whether one can correctly refer to the Mitleño orientation toward ruins as one of ambivalence or not, contemporary and historical sources concur that the decision to enter into a relation marked by preservation and restoration was, at least in the beginning, an external bureaucratic demand and desire made on the part of the INAH. See especially Christina Bueno's, *The Pursuit of Ruins: Archaeology, History, and the Making of Modern Mexico*, for Leopoldo Batres' notoriously heavy-handed role in restoring Mitla's ruins into an official archaeological zone, as well as the role the INAH had in re-aligning attachments to these sites.

past, were to be preserved at all costs. By this logic, for the Mitleños to be good citizens, they must care for (and about) the ruins in a particular way. And yet, at least in Parsons's reading, they seemed entirely unconcerned with the ruins on their doorstep. So what, we might ask, has driven the ruins to possess Mitleños, or, perhaps, Mitleños to become possessed?

Figure 2: Mitla palatial ruins, prior to their reconstruction by Leopoldo Batres. February 1860. Photo by Désiré Charnay. Public Domain.

In order to understand the changing relationships between the ruins and Mitleños, I take a cue from Elizabeth Povinelli (2017), who in writing about her fieldwork among Indigenous Australians in *Geontologies* encourages us to consider *why* a thing decides to 'show itself' in a particular moment. Povinelli uses the example of a *durglmö*, a multivalent fossil that appeared to her one day while walking but had previously disappeared for a great number of years. Her Australian Aboriginal interlocutors framed the encounter with the *durglmö* as an instance of the dreaming figure 'showing itself', asking why it had decided to manifest there and then for Povinelli rather than querying its precise nature. For Povinelli's friends, "[e]ach something might be, if we know enough about it, a comment on the coordination, orientation, and obligation of

local existents" (2017: 82). Following from this, I would submit it is worth considering a manifestation as "a sign that demand[s]" heeding. By the ruins manifesting themselves as possessing forces, awakening as it were, what are they calling on Mitleños to heed? What does this particular refiguration of the ruins and archaeological zone signal in Mitla?

Becoming, dwelling, possessing: how ruins make themselves known in the world

The concern with the ways in which nonhuman beings disclose themselves to humans is not limited to either Aboriginal Australia or Indigenous Mexico. Quite the opposite, it has become a driving issue in posthuman scholarship. Scholars such as Julie Cruikshank (2006) and Marisol de la Cadena (2015) have asked, for instance, how nonhuman beings such as glaciers and mountains can act, speak, and listen in relation to human beings, with sometimes devastating consequences. Bruno Latour (2005), Martin Holbraad (2011) and others invested in refiguring the relationship between humans and 'things', ask how objects act in the world and whether concepts such as agency are even appropriate in this context. Alfred Gell's *Art and Agency* (1998) comes specifically to mind here, as does his essay "The Technology of Enchantment and Enchantment of Technology" (1994). Gell's writing is foundational in these debates, but it is still distinctly human-oriented. For Gell, objects are simply things, only existing due to human actions. They acquire affective holds over us—*vis-à-vis* enchantment—through their supposedly obfuscated technological production rather than any 'real' cosmological content. This, for Gell, is the becoming of objects. "It is the way," he writes, that "an art object's construed as having come into the world which is the source of the power such objects have over us – their becoming rather than their being" (1998: 166).

We can extract this notion of distributive becoming for our purposes here even as we might reject Gell's exclusionary emphasis on the human as maker. To do so, we should turn briefly to Mitleño cosmology or mythic-history, which paints a picture of a world without suns—an age of darkness. Mitleños are keen to point out that this age took place on the very earth we stand upon, just in a different, now destroyed, temporal order. Inhabited by figures like Sus Giber, Sus Ley, and other deities or ancestral spirits— *los antiguos* or 'pre-sunrise beings', to borrow briefly from Byron Hamann (2002) —Mitla's landscape took on its current form under their careful stewardship. Not only did these pre-sunrise beings craft the rolling and craggy mountains that surround the town, but they are said to be the ones that built Mitla's ruins (Barabas, et al. 2005; Hamann 2002; Parsons 1936). They eventually turned to stone or hid underground in the subterranean tunnels beneath Mitla and Oaxaca when the sun rose and the world passed from one temporal order to the next. Such is one particular, and important, becoming of Mitla's ruins. If, following Gell, objects derive their social significance from the way that the distributed agency of their maker is materially embedded in the object, then what we might be seeing embodied in Mitla's ruins is the distributed agency—the becoming—of distinctly nonhuman beings—pre-sunrise beings, for that matter, who are understood to have built the ruins and, in some instances, even become features of Mitla's landscape. Mitla's ruins are not only nonhuman: they are nonhumans made by nonhumans from an era devoid of humans.

It is *de rigeur* for posthuman scholarship to consider human and nonhuman actors as animating, articulating forces within the same assemblage—that is, they coexist in one reality.[14]

---

[14] Bruno Latour (1993: 111) even goes as far as to suggest that a society devoid of nonhuman agents defies understanding just as much as a society saturated by spirits might baffle the mind.

As the Mitleño case illustrates, however, the ruins are holdovers, vibrant debris from another temporal order, Mitla's previous reality that does not necessarily preclude the present reality, but rather punctures the landscape, complicating the ways posthuman scholarship conceives of ecological assemblages and relations. These nonhumans embody multitemporal dimensions and form a part of Mitla's historical consciousness, all while seeming to stretch across and break down barriers between space and time. Indeed, rather than thinking of these ruins as foreign and built structures, Mitleños think of them as *vívida*,[15] frequently referring to them as their neighbours.

An 'Enjoyable Kind of Difference': how to make (im)proper dwelling

It would seem that, for many years, Mitleños lived with and around the ruins in a state of relative tranquillity, despite their uncanny qualities. Even if the ruins have the potential to bewitch and are recognized as 'matter out of place' (and time), they offer an 'enjoyable kind of difference' (*sensu* Povinelli 2017). A different way of reading Parsons, then, who scolded Mitleños for not "caring" enough about their ruins is that they were perhaps simply respecting a particular form of relational *non-intervention*. Given this, the ruins suddenly 'showing themselves' as possessors raises questions of what it means for beings to live, and live well, together. Here we might borrow from Tim Ingold (2000), who in coming to terms with the ways humans and nonhumans relate to and subsequently construct the environment, sketches out two opposing perspectives: building and dwelling .

Whereas the building perspective suggests that "worlds are made before they are lived in" (Ingold 2000: 179), the dwelling perspective, invoking Heidegger's phenomenology, argues

[15] Vivid.

the inverse: it is through dwelling that the world is built. Heidegger pushes us to reconsider how cultivation and construction—both in the abstract and concrete—belong to our dwelling in the world. The Mitleño purview is both in accordance with and against Heidegger, simultaneously embodying elements from the building and dwelling perspectives. Pre-sunrise beings dwelt in darkness and through their own volition constructed a world that Mitleños inherited. Mitleños, in other words, perceive themselves as having only ever dwelled in and around the ruins.

Many of these ethnographic fragments indirectly address dwelling. They map out the contours of proper dwelling in Mitla and how it is shaped by a set of parameters that oscillate between intervention and non-intervention, thus exemplifying how the existing and emerging relations hinge on permission. An example, too, of what Povinelli might gloss as a set of mutual disorientations, the ruins possessing Mitleños is symptomatic of a broader problem.

***

Fragment 2: Camera Troubles

In another exciting turn of events, my friend and colleague, Austin, came down to visit me from Ithaca, New York, that February. His mother had excavated in Oaxaca several times in the 1970s, and she always spoke fondly of Oaxaca's people, landscape, and cuisine. A professional photographer, I utilized Austin's skills by asking him if he would join me in filming several locations around Oaxaca, including three different sites in Mitla. The point was to showcase the deep materiality of time in Oaxaca by using the camera to meditate on textures, sounds, and colours emerging from quotidian interactions with ruins, markets, skies, the soil, and more. The three sites I was thinking of specifically in Mitla were its streets, the adobe ruins known as the Arroyo Group, and perhaps part of the abandoned Frissell Museum.

When we arrived to film in Mitla, I felt a pit form in my stomach. I had not yet asked permission from *los antiguos* as Faby had requested, and I sensed something inexplicable gnawing at me. As we stood in Mitla's town center, facing the Frissell Museum, Austin picked up his camera and began to adjust the lens. I pushed his camera down.

"Austin, no. Not yet. I think there's something I need to do."

He paused a second and looked at me. "There's something here."

"What?"

"There's something. I feel it. Does it really want us to do this? Are you sure this is OK?"

"Well, they say that building is haunted by the ghost of Ervin Frissell. But that's beside the point. I have to tell you something. In Mitla, there is a group of spirits or ancestors called *los antiguos*." And so I explained what Faby had told me weeks earlier, including her request that I enter into a sort of social contract with Mitla's spirits by asking their permission to extract any information that could benefit me and others before Mitleños. I also told him the story of Mirna and the rattlesnake, as well as what happened when Paulina asked to be taken to the Cueva de la Calavera.

"There's more, though, isn't there?" Austin asked.

"The archaeologists from the Field Museum, for whom I previously worked, were also thrown out under inhospitable circumstances. And the previous director of Monte Albán and the UNESCO delegate, Nelly Robles García, was also eventually met by a group of machete-wielding Mitleños who demanded she leave…well, after she told them that the ruins didn't belong to them [the Zapotecs] and were actually Mixtec achievements."

"Ok. So this is serious."

"Yes," I said. "I'm going to do what Faby asked. I'm going to pray to them and ask for their permission and blessings. And depending on what happens next, we'll have our answer as to whether we should really film here."

Following Faby's advice, I bowed in silence and repeated the words she had me store away. Austin and I stood in silence for a few minutes and then, after I gestured southwards, we took up our cameras and headed down the street towards Mitla's inner streets and the Arroyo Group. But we would leave with very limited footage. Every time we tried to film, an obstruction would take place in the form of crowds, sudden traffic appearing or noise blaring, or the photos and film itself would become over-exposed despite adjustments. After 45 minutes, I turned to Austin and said: "I think we should leave. This isn't going to happen."

"Yeah," he agreed. "The message is pretty clear. Much respect."

Although, there was one thing that did manage to appear on film: the curious numbers Leopoldo Batres and other INAH archaeologists had scribbled on each rock during their efforts to document and reassemble the ruins for preservation purposes. "In all my time spent visiting the Arroyo Group over the years, I never saw these numbers," I remarked to Austin as we pored over the film in my apartment. "It's weird, almost monstrous."

***

Bifurcated Biographies

The numbers hastily scrawled across the stones that make up the body of Mitla's ruins are certainly real and not at all new. They were – and are – the work of the INAH and its past and present employees. When I showed the footage to a friend, Guillermo, who worked at the Yagul Archaeological Zone, he laughed and referred to the numbering as antiquated but utilitarian and effective. "Sure, it is a bit weird because what the INAH *restauradores* did in their

haste is forget to turn the stones the other way – you know, to keep these numbers hidden from our view."

Before addressing how the presence of the numbers indexes a clerical error and what that might reveal, I wish to underscore the language of 'turning the stones the other way' and the emphasis on keeping the knowledge of the mechanisms that undergird ruins restoration hidden from the quotidian eye. "Turning the stones the other way" denotes not only the physical act but connotes a metaphorical reorientation. The implementation of the INAH protocols required that the stones be refit and reconstituted in such a way that was perhaps contrary to how they had been before. The numbers were to be hidden from public eye not only for aesthetic reasons, but because the person gazing upon the ruins should feel like they are encountering the ruins in their original grandeur. Ostensibly an aesthetic alteration, the error was confirmed further when my friend pointed out that the numbers were "not in the correct order. Someone fucked up," but it was impossible to know whom exactly. Enquiring further, I learned that the numbering of the stones reflected how they had been found at the end of the nineteenth-century, but that their shapes must have changed due to the elements so that the INAH could not piece the ruins back together in a fashion that matched the original. "Well, it is either that," Guillermo remarked, "Or again, they really screwed up and re-assembled these ruins randomly from the rubble. Also, do you know who Leopoldo Batres is? He was a monster with these things…never could agree with the Mitleños on how the ruins should look."

Both Leopoldo Batres and the rubble that Guillermo is referring to requires a historical detour – a trip back in time, as it were, to when the discipline of archaeology and heritage industry in Mexico and Oaxaca were still relatively nascent. This would be the era known as the Porfiriato, essentially the years when Porfirio Díaz reigned. As noted earlier, Díaz's political

regime was dedicated to both the unification of Mexico by any means necessary and also its modernization. Unification did not preclude modernization for Díaz; in fact, modernity was configured in such a way, at least in Oaxaca, so as that the present and future of Oaxaca society pivoted on the harnessing of the pre-Hispanic past as both an economic resource and a shared sense of identity and tradition. This was the beginning of *mestizaje*, a larger ideological project designed by and promulgated by Manuel Gamio. It sought to unify Mexico by claiming that the pre-Hispanic past in all its forms – tangible and intangible – belonged to all Mexicans, no matter whether their roots were White, indigenous, or mixed. For the most part, however, it proclaimed that Mexicans were overwhelmingly *mestizo*, and whether this be true or not, it allowed for a variety of stakeholders to possess a past – or heritage – that might not necessarily be theirs. To this end, under the guise of *mestizaje*, the notion of *patrimonio* in Mexico became even more fraught. Even though the Porfiriato inaugurated the formalization of archaeological knowledge and bureaucratization of heritage through the creation of Leopoldo Batres' role (Federal Inspector for National Monuments), it created a heritage landscape marked by struggles over access and control. It also included shoddy behaviour and absence, notably the illicit collecting of objects, (dis)possession, and cronyism (Bernal 1980; Bueno 2016; Sellen 2015).

Leopoldo Batres Huerta (1852-1926) has a bifurcated biography; within Mexican intellectual history, he is remembered in a mostly positive light, said to have left an indelible mark on (what was and, in some ways, continues to be) a nationalistic approach to archaeology. Industrious and domineering, Ignacio Bernal notes in *A History of Mexican* Archaeology that Batres was a "self-taught archaeologist" (1980: 149-150). The view from the Global North is less kind to Batres' memory, painting him as methodologically sloppy, corrupt, nepotistic, and most significantly, self-aggrandizing. Adam Sellen quoting Ross Parmenter reveals how at Mitla,

"…Batres had ordered his own name carved in letters of gold on a lintel of the first palace, the Hall of Columns" (2015: 155).[16] I can confirm those letters are still there.

Batres, then, appears to be an ambivalent historical figure, visionary in his role inspecting and conserving Mexico (and Oaxaca's) heritage, but nevertheless implicated in dubious practices. He dominated archaeological expertise for 23 years, and in his official capacity as Federal Inspector, a position housed within the Ministry of Public Instruction and Justice at the time, he policed excavations and granted or revoked permission to conduct research at his own absolute discretion.[17] Yet with his powers to limit and control exploration and excavation came a higher obligation: Batres was charged with the responsibility of sending any artifacts received through donations, purchase, or seizure, to the still young Museo Nacional de Antropología in Mexico City (Sellen 2015: 158). Batres fulfilled this duty partially; under his watchful and authoritarian eye, he prevented – for the most part – artifacts from traveling outside Mexico but did not halt the illicit trafficking of the artifacts *within* Mexico. As Adam Sellen reveals, it is under Batres' reign that numerous and impressive, privately held archaeological collections of Oaxacan artifacts take shape and are sold to the Museo Nacional, reconfiguring heritage as private property, even if it symbolically belongs to everyone.

No matter which way we cut it, heritage in Oaxaca emerges within a social world that is at once shot through with nationalism and structured by class division and economic privilege. As much as Leopoldo Batres limited damaging excavations, he often allowed – gave *permission*

---

[16] Notably, the Hall of Columns being a sacred space according to Mitleño sensibilities.

[17] Batres' role was originally conceived of by the government as "General Inspector of Archaeological Monuments" on October 8th, 1885. He was handpicked, and some scholars suspect this had to do with his military background and Parisian education (he studied under the French anthropologist, Ernst-Théodore Hamy). For more on Leopoldo Batres' background, see either Adam Sellen's monograph, *Orphans of the Muse: A History of Archaeological Collecting in Nineteenth-Century Oaxaca* (2015), or Christina Bueno's *The Pursuit of Ruins*.

– to his friends and colleagues to collect without impunity, thereby controlling access to Oaxacan heritage through private ownership/possession (Sellen 2015: 182-186). Unwittingly or not, collectors were engaging with the older connotation of *patrimonio*, linked to the notion of personal inheritance. Collectors figured themselves as possessing the right to this heritage, justifying said right through the nationalist ideology of *mestizaje*. The socio-political and economic ramifications of their collecting are effectively straightforward: the actions of these collectors, as well as those of Batres and other sub-inspectors, reinforced and reified difference; it also dispossessed the local indigenous people living within and around the ruins in the name of proper preservation. Yet the act of collection, I submit, might be seen as an *improper* relation, just as much as the Mitla Leopoldo Batres' created might be viewed as an improper restoration.

…And Bifurcated Becomings

And just as Leopoldo Batres might suffer from a bifurcated biography, the ruins of Mitla are marked by bifurcated becomings. The distributive becoming I extrapolated from Alfred Gell earlier comes into play here. First, there is the cosmological becoming of the ruins as nonhumans made by nonhumans from an era devoid of humans. Although the ruins are holdovers from another temporal order, they make real relations Mitleños cultivate and form with both the past and with the nonhuman creators – *los antiguos* or pre-sunrise beings. The cosmological becoming of the ruins leads to the establishment of contractual relations between these humans and nonhumans, who all abide by a set of mutual ethics and obligations.

The second becoming, which has a particularly legal flavour, is founded in nationalistic endeavors that reaffirmed and crystallized racial and socio-economic difference by limiting direct access and introducing a new regime. Rather than Mitleños entering into a relation with

and respecting a spiritual contract with their predecessors (the nonhuman *los antiguos*) when encountering their heritage sites, Batres (and later the INAH) inserted themselves abruptly into a world already governed by its own unique set of rules and orientations toward reality. Batres' sudden intervention redefined and reconfigured these relations. Instead of asking nonhumans for permission, one must suddenly ask institutional actors – that is, *humans*.

Taken together, these two becomings describe the creation and elision of difference on a multitude of scales and times. The ensuing friction between the two becomings stems from misunderstandings and violations, including the interlacing and imposition of one epistemic order over another. Given the sudden, wild behaviour of the ruins, we might also see how both the historical and current socio-political landscape in Oaxaca is conditioned by violences that originate under colonialism and continue to echo due the structures left behind. Lynn Meskell argues that heritage sites - material condensations of history (and histories, for that matter) – are open to constant signification (2015: 2), which is what leads to their surplus or excess of symbolic meaning. Polyvalent and continuously resignified, Meskell further imputes that heritage is a "dangerous supplement" in the Derridean sense. What she does not address is what I see the case of Mitla illustrating – that is, the imposition of the *wrong* meaning on an already established order. An emphasis on semiotic excess in Meskell's text misses nuance and fails to account for how meaning operates and is refigured between various actors and produced as something moral. In Mitla, Oaxaca, and Mexico at-large, one violent intervention begets another. This said, Leopoldo Batres intervened in these relations more than a century ago. Why the sudden case of ruin possession when restrictions to access heritage have colored history for more than a century? What has changed?

***

Fragment 3: Beware of Dogs

The truth is that I initially read Faby's warning as a simple cautionary tale. Basically, don't be an asshole when you're a guest in Mitla (or anywhere, for that matter) or you'll get thrown out. Anthropologists are well aware of this dictum, and so I made a mental note of the prayer she asked me to say but didn't think too much about it afterward. Since I was not conducting research quite yet, I also decided against importuning *los antiguos* upon my entry to Mitla that day. I was only in Mitla to check out a room that I might rent for the duration of my fieldwork, and was going to stay the week at my friend Paulina's apartment while I waited for a the pending arrival of my colleague and friend, Austin, a photographer for Google Museums and graduate student at Cornell.

Paulina greeted me in the courtyard of the apartment building, which was glazed in a bright yellow with a winding, rickety staircase that led up to the rooftop. "This is where we would run if another earthquake hits," Paulina remarked as we headed indoors and she showed me my room for the week. I have known Paulina since the summer of 2010. A licensed 'visual historian' originally from the northern suburbs of Mexico City, she had lived in Oaxaca for six or seven years with her ex-boyfriend, who was an archaeologist stationed in Mitla working closely with Nelly Robles García. Paulina left Oaxaca for Mexico City around 2015 and had briefly relocated to Oaxaca once more in order to conduct research for her Masters at CIESAS in Mérida. "I am studying the history of family photography here in Mitla," she said as I unpacked. "Like, I want to know how family stories are mediated by the photos and how they are utilized as aids to memory in a place that was originally really hostile to photography."

"That's great," I replied. I was setting out my books and when Paulina spotted the orange cover and spine of Elsie Clews Parsons' thick and heavy monograph, *Mitla: Town of Souls*, she gasped and snatched it from my pile.

"This," Paulina said. "This. I have always wanted a copy. No one has written about Mitla like this again."

"Do you want to borrow the book?" I asked. "I don't need it. I've read it a number of times. And honestly, the most interesting bits are in the footnotes."

"I already have too much to read," she declined, placing it back in the pile. "What are the interesting bits?"

"Well, the information about all the sacred sites."

"In the footnotes?" she asked, shocked.

"Yeah."

"So it is not just the Cueva del Diablo, then, that is sacred to the Mitleños?"

"No, not at all. I mean, you know – all you have to do is ask them. My friend Andreas' father told me about the Cueva de la Calavera, and when I asked around, two other people knew about it but did not know where it is exactly. And then I also saw it was mentioned in Parsons' footnotes where she talks about it as a pilgrimage site with a whole other set of rituals attached to it."

"Would you like to see it?" Paulina asked.

I froze. "Sorry?"

"It's just that…it is a very strange name for a pre-Hispanic sacred site."

"Look, Jorge has heard of this site," I told her. "He's even been. It resembles a skull, and it's very far away. I'm not sure I need to see it."

Jorge was a mutual friend and colleague, still living in Mitla. I did not know yet that they had a falling out. “I don’t care what Jorge thinks,” she said. “How is it sacred?”

“It doesn’t say how or why in the footnotes,” I explained. “And Jorge didn’t say. Most Mitleños say they’re not sure why it’s called Cueva de la Calavera either, and they didn’t offer me any other details…I guess, of course, I would like to see it. Just keep me posted.”

I could tell Paulina had made up her mind, and when she makes up her mind, Paulina gets what she wants. “Hilary, I will ask Marco Méndez tomorrow. You know Marco?”

“No, but I should. I know he runs the Pitao Bezelao Cultural Center.”

“Yes, yes he does.”

“You know who Pitao Bezelao is, don’t you, Pau?”

“No. Who is he?”

“The ancient Zapotec Lord of the Underworld,” I replied.

Pau gave me an impenetrable look and promptly left.

Paulina did, in fact, get a hold of Marco the following morning. And Marco acquiesced to her request that he show her and a few others the Cueva de la Calavera. Apparently, everyone involved got so excited that they wanted to leave the next morning before dawn. What Paulina failed to mention when she invited me the night before they left on their trek out to the site was: 1) Marco only knew where the cave was because he asked his grandma – the knowledge was intergenerational and had to be requested; and 2) this was a rare instance where Mitla’s rocky, vertiginous geography permitted a straight shot from the town’s periphery to the site. So, even if it took half a day to get there, it was a relatively easy, self-explanatory path bound to be trouble-free. In other words, camping around the site was not necessary, yet it was something they desired.

I declined Paulina's invitation. I spent the day, instead, writing and meeting with the director of Mitla's archaeological zone, who I had met nearly a decade earlier when he was married to a good friend of mine. Thinking I would not hear from Paulina until the following day, I was surprised when I received a text around dusk that read: "You are so lucky that you did not come. It was like a horror movie." Paulina wasn't home yet, but when she did arrive close to midnight, she recounted this so-called horror movie.

Things started off immediately on the wrong foot, as it were. Rather than taking the straight path that would bring them to the mouth of the cave, Marco apparently overshot and took them to the other side of the mountain. This half of the trek took them eight hours instead of the predicted six, meaning it was already half past noon. As Marco realized his error, Paulina and the others – whom she never identified to me – realized in synchrony that they failed to bring enough water. Mitla is essentially a desert, so this was a grave mistake. They began to bicker amongst themselves, eventually agreeing that if they were going to be forced to return back to Mitla the same day, then they should at least pass by the cave. According to Marco, they were really only an hour off from the site.

Marco set off again and Paulina and her friends dutifully followed. At this point, a pack of wild, rabid dogs found them and began to circle and chase them. This forced them to run for several kilometres and ended with them throwing away their food in order to escape. Marco claimed they were in the general vicinity of the cave, but they never arrived. Paulina describes the trek as pure madness; they spent two hours walking in circles around a formation that they all claim was a mountainside. Around 6 pm, right as she sent the text, they conceded defeat and trekked back home. As they walked in the direction of Mitla under the setting sun, Paulina remembers that: "Daisy stopped in her tracks, turned around and then demanded we all look

behind us. Directly behind us, in the distance, now surely 40 minutes away by foot, was the cave: it looked like a grinning skull."

***

Mutual (Dis)possessions and (Dis)orientations

Anthropological literature on possession fixates on spirits as agentive nonhuman entities, elucidating how and why they come to occupy—possess—human bodies or things (Boddy 1994; Holbraad 2011; Lambek 2002; Palmié 2013; Pedersen 2011). As nonhumans, then, we might for the moment presume that ruins are prone to 'intervening unpredictably' just as much as spirits (Espírito Santo 2016). And whether they are up to mischief or not, nonhuman intervention through possession is shot through with intention. Paul Christopher Johnson (2011) explores the epistemic formation of 'possession,' tracing how it articulates with political and religious projects (thereby revealing how that porous, overlapping 'boundary' leaks), while also calling attention to the ways spirits and ideas of the body are in conversation with societal issues—especially in terms of governance, contract, and personhood. Johnson highlights how both the etymology and the social life of the word itself—possession—invoke notions of property or ownership. "Possession," he writes, "served as a fulcrum for modern discourses about freedom and autonomy, thrown into relief through split images of the possessed – *those who are like things* – and the possessors – *those who own things*" (2011: 396, emphasis mine). Ruins, in this instance, own the afflicted Mitleños, who are very much rendered into things, mere objects, in a darkly poetic fashion. Yet it is not simply about the thing possessed or the thing doing the possessing.

Johnson reminds us that discourses of possession emerge and take shape under colonialism. Irretrievably tainted by the rank of empire, possession is derivative of slave

discourses and other forms of dehumanization, which produced and reified inequality. Johnson (2011: 300) ultimately asks, "… of what is possession possessed"? I take up this question to investigate of what, exactly, is possession *possessed* in this Mitleño manifestation? In particular, I am interested in turning possession 'on its head' and considering the idea that the ruins themselves might also be possessed – victims, too, along with the Mitleños. Suddenly, the ruins become those who are like mere things, besieged by an external proprietary force.

When Adam Sellen remarks in his monograph, *Orphans of the Muse*, that collecting Oaxacan heritage is a "fetish that is vaingloriously about possession" (229), he is certainly on to something. Moving back and forth through posthumanist scholarship and literature on the history of archaeology in Oaxaca sketches out a framework of human and nonhuman relationships that have become disoriented, figuring the ruins as agentive beings seeking to *intervene* in the social context of Mitla. Far from the typical agency afforded by early scholarship (Latour's ANT comes to mind), I take this agentive being of the Mitla ruins to be constituted and sustained by an 'affective force', made real by the relations between the material and the human, as well as *los antiguos* and the Mitleños (Kay and Haughton 2019). Amidst questions of disclosure, alignment, dwelling, and access, permission emerges as the prism through which we can view possession. The need to ask for *permiso* establishes authority, certainly, but it also offers insight into why the "possessing ruins" asked for their victim to "pay his dues." I contend in this final section of the chapter that the reason for this unique iteration of possession – a fresh development in the social life of ruins, if you will – is the work of the INAH itself. After all, the INAH legally owns—socially and economically possesses—*all* of Mexico's heritage. Meandering over to the ruins instigates a confrontation with the INAH, who by policing entry to these gated huddling ruins, conjures up images of imprisonment.

Ruins possessing Mitleños through dreams speaks to a settler-colonial condition and the ways rights to property function in Mexico. As mentioned earlier in the chapter, notions of property and heritage are quite entangled, even conflated, by the term *patrimonio*—glossed as heritage or inheritance, but with a connotation that links to ownership. There is much slippage with the term; over time it has expanded to encompass resources beyond historic monuments and ruins, while also becoming more rigid (Ferry 2005). For example, on the heels of the UNESCO World Heritage Convention of 1972, the INAH introduced its own set of new and stringent regulations. Mexico's Federal Law on Monuments and Archaeological, Artistic, and Historic Zones provides the INAH with the socio-legal 'teeth' necessary for mounting offensives against any perceived act of violence against heritage, morphing it into an entirely new beast.[18] In addition, Article 27 of Mexico's 1917 constitution specifically states that all archaeological remnants, immovable structures, and transportable artefacts are the inalienable property of the Mexican nation (Litvak King et al. 1980; Rozental 2014). Despite Mitla's ruins being 'vibrant matter' (*sensu* Bennett 2010), Mexican law objectifies heritage, reinforcing a discourse of possession and decidedly dead matter that leans heavily on dispossession—thwarting indigenous relationships with land and history.

INAH should not be asking Mitleños to request *permiso* to enter into a relation with the ruins. First, this is a role reserved for nonhumans, and second, this role is underpinned by a set of relations already governed according to its own established logics. Even in the early days of INAH, well before the institution erected gates around the sprawling ruins, Mitleños asked the

[18] Critiques of the INAH are not at all new or unusual. For a detailed social history of Mexico's 'heritage industrial complex,' see Luis Vázquez León's magisterial monograph, *El leviatán arqueológico: antropología de un tradición científica en México* (2003).

ruins for permission to have their wishes and desires considered and possibly granted (Parsons 1936: 290). By unwittingly violating this spiritual contract and blatantly ignoring this pre-established relation, an intervention occurs in the form of a metaphysical possession. The ruins manifest here because there must be another way to not only get Mitleños to honour the proper relation – that is, asking *los antiguos* for permission – but to regain the intimacy on which the relation relies. Moreover, there is an entire assemblage of rotating (and mutual) (dis)possessions unfolding on account of these disorientations. Quite simply, the ruins – nonhumans - are not supposed to be possessed, just as much as the Mitleños are not supposed to be possessed. In being dispossessed of their right to grant access to humans through the ritual importuning for permission, the nonhumans 'make themselves known' in an unusual and quite political way: *los antiguos* manifest a metaphysical possession through the material, contested possession of ruins (other nonhumans) that demands Mitleños ask permission in another way, thus alerting them to the INAH's relational violations. What's more, there is a particular poetic justice to the ruins taking on the mantle of possession reserved historically for the INAH. The common query within heritage studies of "Who owns the past?" receives an answer here from another realm as a way of pointing to the general injustices and socio-economic asymmetries heritage projects foment and crystallize as they increasingly become key instruments of neoliberal agendas.

Conclusion: A Quick Call to Intimacy

Possessing the ruins does not silence the stones; it is the incredible efficacy of a preservationist agenda gone awry that severs or obscures affective attachments, dispossessing the ruins of Mitla and the Mitleños of the ruins. When the ruins are confronted with an extended second becoming as the inalienable property of Mexico, a double alienation ensues. An improper

dwelling – and improper relation, I might add – in this context is nothing more than the inability to continue building intimate relationships with neighbours. Proper dwelling is the renewal of relations—a sensuous, constructive engagement with Mitla's beings that does not foreclose space and time in the name of heritage. This is an intimacy mediated by a deep spatial co-habitation (*cf*. Shapero 2019). Possession, here, is a critical intervention, a call that demands heeding. A sign that something has gone awry, this is a manifestation that emerges with a potent affective force designed to mend relations, no matter what the cost.

Chapter Two: Looting Made Legal: Settler-Colonial Logics of Erasure and the Making of Phantasmal Patrimony

The Frissell Fiasco

2006 — News across Oaxaca spreads fast, especially when it addresses two media favorites: heritage and the government. The Ervin Frissell Museum, located in Mitla, a town 45 km east of the city, was sacked overnight. In less than 24 hours, locals claim that the nearly 43,000 pre-Hispanic objects[1] housed on the property disappeared, along with the visitors' logbook, pay roll, Ervin Frissell's personal papers—including his will—and various other administrative documents.[2] It must have been strange showing up for work, opening the doors of the museum, and finding absolutely nothing but an empty, silent void. What happened here? Overnight, Mitleños and the rest of the world lost sight of and access to the most complete collection of Zapotec artifacts ever assembled (Brulotte 2012). It was a local scandal: Mitleños claimed that the Instituto Nacional de Antropología e Historia (INAH) – a Mexican state-operated organization responsible for cultural and historical research and heritage[3] – was responsible for

---

[1] "Cuarenta mil piezas de arte prehispánico integran la colección Ervin Frissell. Es considerada la más importante y cuantiosa de Oaxaca, ha estado catalogada etnre las diez más valiosas de todo el mundo y se alista para su exhibición tras permanecer casi dos décadas embodegada, revela a Crónica Jorge Ríos Allier, director de la zona arqueológica de Mitla, en Oaxaca," in *Preparan exhibición de la colección prehispánica más importante de Oaxaca* by Reyna Paz Avendaño and Juan Carlos Talavera, November 5, 2012, La Crónica de Hoy.

[2] One of the few differences among local narratives is the exact number of objects stolen, which varies from 20,000 to 80,000!

[3] Founded in 1939, the INAH fused together pre-existing ethnographic, archaeological, and historical institutions. See Luis Vázquez León's, "Mexico: The Institutionalization of Archaeology, 1885-1942" (1994) for a more detailed historiography. Today, the INAH is charged with the task of researching, conserving, and disseminating multiple forms of Mexico's heritage in order to "strengthen the identity and memory of the society that possesses it." INAH, "Misión y Visión," 2015, https://www.inah.gob.mx/mision-y-vision.

the ransacking of their beloved Frissell Museum, and representatives from the INAH immediately countered, stating they had nothing to do with it. Or so the story goes.

Most people know that 43,000 objects do not simply "disappear" over the course of an evening without somebody noticing. When I first began doing fieldwork in Mitla back in 2008, I heard the story of the Frissell over and over again from local friends and interlocutors. At first, I found records of the events in local newspapers. But as time went on those accounts vanished from the internet, and details on the actual mechanics of how this event took place were difficult to obtain or verify – how, after all, can so many objects be removed so quickly? The absurdity of the narrative escalated when the INAH later admitted that it did, indeed, take possession of the objects, and that they did so within a legal framework.[4] To quote the director of Centro INAH-Oaxaca at the time: "We aren't hiding anything."[5]

As it turned out, the collection[6] had been moved to Santo Domingo; however, it could not be accessed by anyone for any reason, including current employees of the INAH and myself. Moreover, the director noted, it was the INAH's right to take back what belongs to *la patria*— to Mexico. Pre-Hispanic artifacts, no matter where they are found and whatever community might claim them, are the property of the Mexican state—*patrimonio*—bound up within the framework of a nationalist ideology and an intimate part of Mexico's historical imaginary. As anthropologists ask, "To whom does the past belong?" INAH throws out the resounding chorus:

---

[4] INAH admits it seized the collection, insisting, according to an article from June 26, 2008, that only 12,000 pieces ever existed and 43,000 is a gross overestimate. When Mitleños countered with the higher number, INAH officials reportedly shot back: "These people are quite ill-informed" (*esas personas están muy mal informadas*). See the article in Oaxaca's local news outlet, Noticias Voz e Imagen de Oaxaca: *Insiste el INAH que solo existen 12 mil piezas del Museo Frissell*, by Pedro Matias.

[5] Exact phrase used: "No estamos escondiendo nada." *Insiste el INAH que solo existen 12 mil piezas del Museo Frissell*, by Pedro Matias, Noticias Voz e Imagen de Oaxaca, June 26, 2008.

[6] While the precise number of objects in this collection remains a point of contention, it is said to have included Zapotec effigies, vessels, funerary urns, incense burners, bowls, and figurines.

"To all Mexicans." The INAH's answer here is not unique to the Frissell Museum. Over the course of this article, I regularly mark the slippage contained in the INAH's problematic assertion that patrimony at once belongs to "all Mexicans" while also being the inalienable property of the Mexican state, this precise legal configuration being a frequent point of tension between Indigenous and mestizo communities who live adjacently – in the shadows, if you will – of archaeological sites.[7] *Patrimonio*, or patrimony, emerges here as a polyvalent, paradoxical concept and national project that must dispossess particular communities in order for the state to possess its heritage.

Introduction

If the "Frissell fiasco" seems contradictory, sensationalist, or confusing, this is because its looting is, indeed, an inchoate narrative shot through with the ever-evolving frictions between Mitla, the INAH, and thus, the Mexican state. The fraught constitution of patrimony in Mexico is far from a recent development. Ingrained in the constitution and a holdover from its colonial origins as Nueva España, patrimony suffers from an overburden of meaning not only in a symbolic sense but in the political, economic, and pragmatic realm. As the anthropologist Sandra Rozental writes, citing Claudio Lomnitz (2001: 9-11), "The Spanish term *patrimonio* condenses

[7] These conflicts often center on land as well, aside from tensions over rights to archaeological artifacts. Scholars scholars have explored these tensions within different contexts across Mexico. For instance, Sandra Rozental's research is particularly resonant here, from her film, *La Piedra Ausente* (2012), which documents the state-sponsored removal of Tlaloc from San Miguel Coatlinchan, juxtaposing found-footage of the event with in-depth interviews, to her article, "In the Wake of Mexican Patrimonio: Material Ecologies in San Miguel Coatlinchan" (2016), Rozental investigates, much like this article, the fraught quality of patrimony as well as the social ramifications of dispossession. Other significant studies include Ronda Brulotte's, *Between Art and Artifact: Archaeological Replicas and Cultural Production in Oaxaca, Mexico* (2012), Lisa Breglia's, *Monumental Ambivalence: The Politics of Heritage* (2006), and Sam Holley-Kline's, "Entangled Archaeology, Labor, and Industry in El Tajín, Mexico, 1880-2018" (2018).

both its English equivalents 'heritage' and 'inheritance' while also indexing the patriarchal power relations that have historically ensured the existence of the Mexican state" (2020: 237).[8]

The looting of the Frissell – if we may call it that under Mexican rule of law[9] – demonstrates that something is missing in our current understanding of how patrimony operates. It materializes or discloses the conceptual gap – or loophole – present within Mexican law which asserts that patrimony is the property of all Mexicans, while seizing material culture and heritage sites as the property of the state. What I mean by this is that Mexican law inscribed state-sanctioned looting into their legal regime from the start by endowing the Mexican state with the ability to intervene in property relations and by crafting a hierarchy where at the state's desire and discretion, property may suddenly pass from the private to public realm. In other words, Mexico's legal order purposely, and rather cunningly, created the conditions for its "monumental ambivalence," to borrow from Lisa Breglia (2006). So long as the looting is done by a Mexican governmental institution, looting is 'legally illegible' *precisely as looting*. Not only is patrimony, then, a paradoxical formation by way of its simultaneous figuring of property as an entity prone to wild and occasionally unpredictable oscillations between the public and private sphere, but it is also deeply ironic in that looting becomes the vehicle for the continuous growth and maintenance of Mexican patrimony.

---

[8] Throughout this article, I use the term patrimony instead of heritage because it is the most direct English translation of the Spanish term *patrimonio*. This decision is couched in the need to emphasize this is a local idiomatic expression of heritage that cannot be fully captured by Anglo conventions. Patrimony better captures the multivalent nature of Mexican patrimonio, specifically the ways it is also inexorably tied to the distribution of land and assets. Heritage, by contrast, is a term I deploy when referencing international regimes, policies, or the broader concerns of critical heritage studies. See Quetzil Castañeda (2009) for another excellent discussion on the theorization and meaning of the concept of heritage and the ways it is distinct from patrimony.

[9] Mexico's 1972 Federal Law on Archaeological, Artistic, and Historic Monuments and Zones does not offer a precise definition of what counts as looting; however, Chapter 4, Article 47 is often invoked to account for any physical violation or removal of patrimonial material. This legislation effectively prevents trafficking across borders but is less clear about regulating the flow of patrimonial objects within Mexico.

The focus here on the Frissell's looting departs from recent preoccupations with what looting technically *is*, how it works, and why it matters. Colin Renfrew, for example, presents looting as a destructive act that forecloses the production of knowledge (2000).[10] It threatens the Western epistemological machine, which prizes the pursuit of knowledge above all else at the expense of creating a world where our desperate hold to preserve history suffocates the present (*sensu* Nietzsche 1997). Renfrew is not wrong that looting is destructive and must be condemned; however, he misses the mark when he asserts that looting matters simply because it threatens a cogent narrative of the early human past. When he expresses his frustration over how looting disrupts the archaeological record, arguing that, "Such unprovenanced antiquities, ripped from their archaeological context without record (and without any hope of publication), can tell us little is new" (9), he is incorrect again, for as Jacques Derrida (1994) reminds us, an absence frequently points to the presence of something larger and possibly more insidious. Indeed, to quote Diana Espírito Santo and Ruy Blanes, "Absence paradoxically serves to draw and direct attention to presence…or a longing for it" (2013: 11). In the case of the Frissell looting, these "unprovenanced antiquities" are reportedly *made* "unprovenanced" by the INAH in order to facilitate and conceal their looting while also making their absence more palpable. The absences and erasures of looting index more complicated social and political processes at work, so while they may be frustrating for archaeologists attempting to stitch together histories and paint a

[10] Renfrew contends that "the world's archaeological resource…is being destroyed at a formidable and increasing rate" (2000: 9) and that the main perpetuators are looters. He is not incorrect, although his answer to why looting matters is primarily concerned with proper record-keeping and knowledge production rather than how it impacts living communities and shapes the contours of our lived worlds. Renfrew, however, does not take into account subsistence digging, which could be interpreted as a form of 'legitimate looting.' This type of 'legitimate looting' stands in stark contrast to the type that I refer to in this article, which is when a state-apparatus authorizes the removal of artifacts from Indigenous communities within a legal framework. For more on subsistence digging and the ethics of this particular formation of 'looting', see Julie Hollowell's, "Moral Arguments on Subsistence Digging" (2006).

clearer picture of the past, looting – and its spoils, to invoke David Lowenthal (1996) – does offer fresh commentary on how patrimony is being made, remade, and mobilized for particular ends that push beyond mere economics.

Looting is not just a mechanism for the maintenance of patrimony, but it exists to support Mexico's state (and socially) sanctioned nationalist imaginaries of itself, which emerged in the aftermath of the Mexican revolution as solutions to Mexico's diversity.[11] Elizabeth Emma Ferry has argued that the Mexican revolutionary government attempted to remake property relations in order to remake the nation (2005). Building on Ferry, this article contends that the remaking of property relations and the subsequent remaking of the nation reveals the extent by which patrimony, deployed as the conceptual linchpin for the implementation of the nationalist ideology, *mestizaje,* becomes predicated on erasure and silencing. If Mexico is *mestizo*, a mixture of multiple identities, then all Mexicans can stake a claim in possessing Mexico's revered pre-Hispanic past.[12]

Federico Navarrete points out that the category of mestizo is deliberately misleading in his book, *México Racista: Una Denuncia* (2016), arguing that "the new mestizo Mexicans were neither a product of racial or cultural mixture, but instead represented a sociopolitical shift that created a new identity which bore more similarities to elite *criollo* culture than any Indigenous or African traditions." What's more, *mestizaje* conceals racist policies and attitudes by being a "raceless" ideology for a post-racial society (Moreno Figueroa and Saldívar 2015). Yet, most

---

[11] For discussions about anthropology and archaeology's role in Mexican nationalism, see Manuel Gamio's *Forjando Patria* (2010 [1916]) Claudo Lomnitz's *Deep Mexico, Silent Mexico* (2001), and Ignacio Bernal's *Historia de la* arqueología (1979), among others.

[12] As Sandra Rozental writes: "All Mexicans, regardless of their ethnic identity, linguistic group, way of life, or religious affiliation, are by law considered to share a common ancestry, rooted equally in the country's indigenous and Spanish colonial legacies" (2017: 238).

significantly, *mestizaje* enables all Mexicans – no matter their ancestral background – to feel entitled to be occupying Indigenous territory. Again we see the twinned concerns over property and patrimony in all its forms emerge through the operative lens of *mestizaje*, and thus the following crystallizes further: looting is required to uphold the nationalist ideology of *mestizaje*, which through the incorporation of Indigenous people and pre-Hispanic cultures essentially absorbs and eliminates difference even as it claims to celebrate it.[13]

What is at stake in looting made legal – *legitimate looting*, as it were – in this instance is that it upholds a nationalist vision which disguises the fact that Mexican patrimony is predicated on a "logic of erasure" that echoes settler colonial modes of domination. Without sanctioned looting, without these property relations, Mexico could not continue to abide by this illusion and, suddenly, dispossession and displacement would be thrown into bold relief and the rights of Indigenous communities would have to be recognized. This looting, I suggest, works as follows: the disappearance or looting of objects prefigures the disappearance of the communities, facilitating their erasure by forcing them into a cohesive narrative that ironically elides difference at the same time as it claims to celebrate it.

Three concerns animate this article. First, I am concerned with the violent formation of patrimony in Oaxaca, Mexico. Taking the Frissell looting as my launching pad, I expose patrimony as a fractured concept and project steeped in paradoxical relations and regulations. Second, I trace the affective tremors of heritage-making, a process that I take to be

---

[13] In her essay, "Nosotros sin México: Naciones Indígenas y Autonomía" (2018), Yásnaya Aguilar Gil argues that the Mexican state abides by a policy of integration where the inclusion of Indigenous peoples is actively sought out while their participation in civil society remains denied. "It is necessary," she writes, "to create a Mexico that does not absorb or standardize the "we", a state that does not have the ultimate goal of integrating the Indigenous peoples into that fabricated ideal that has come to be called, mestizo."

simultaneously intimate and dissociative; grief and anger are entrenched in the stories that follow, regardless of what side of history the actors stand. Third, I am concerned with how 'legal' looting emerges as a symptom or signal of a broader, socio-political problem in Mexico that until recently has been largely ignored because of its instrumental role in upholding the ideological and material structures of this very regime. As such, I take the fraught relationships between the INAH, the Mitleños, and the Frissell as epitomizing a broader set of structural power relations across Mexico, which by elucidating, allows us to both better understand how debates over who controls patrimony play out 'on the ground' and how ideologies such as *mestizaje* are experienced by those they simultaneously over-determine and erase.

Mexico and other *mestizo* nations complicate this narrative by claiming diversity but, I would contend, they can still be understood as participating in distinctly settler colonial modes of erasure.[14] Sandra Rozental expresses this eloquently, writing, "Unlike in many settler-colonial contexts where distinct indigenous sovereignties have been formally recognized and can, thus, use legal frameworks to claim rights and require the repatriation of significant objects…in Mexico, such claims are complicated by the *state's appropriation of indigeneity* [emphasis my own], and specifically of pre-Hispanic indigenous material culture, as the tangible inheritance of all Mexicans" (2017: 238). Far from postcolonial, I contend, following scholars like María Josefina Saldaña-Portillo (2016), Maurice Magaña (2020), and Shannon Speed (2017), that Mexico is closer to a settler-colonial state, and this particular form of governance promotes the development of *legitimate looting* or the semi-militarization of patrimony's maintenance.[15]

---

[14] For another perspective on how mestizaje erases, see Jafari Allen's monograph, *Venceremos? The Erotics of Black Self-making in Cuba* (2011).

[15] These scholars posit that Mexico's settler-colonial structures operate via modes of Indigenous dispossession and displacement; M. Bianet Castellanos (2020) and Matilde Córdoba Azcárate (2020) build on and elaborate these

Settler colonialism, as Patrick Wolfe has famously argued, is distinguished from modes of coloniality because it is concerned with replacing an existing Indigenous population with a new and distinct settler population. In Wolfe's oft-quoted formulation, "settler colonialism destroys to replace" (2006: 388).[16]

In a space such as Mitla, it is the needs and rights of the Indigenous population that are silenced, erased precisely by the claim that Mexico, as a mestizo nation, has the right to control the nation's patrimony as a whole (*cf.* Navarrete 2011). The issue is not, then, the dispossession of Indigenous communities from their rights to occupy traditional territories, *per se,* but, instead, the erasure of their rights to control their own histories and to manage and actually *determine* the disposition of both their material culture and resource extraction projects in their homelands. This is well expressed by the Indigenous Mixe linguist and activist, Yásnaya Aguilar Gil, who has argued, "The Mexican State has designed political policies, promulgated laws, and exercised legislative acts in order to erase the existence of other nations and other languages [across the country]" (2018). For Aguilar Gil, the Mexican state's negation and denial of Indigenous individuals as sociopolitical actors can be directly linked to the state's violation of human rights. She astutely points out how alongside efforts of erasure, most of the problems that Indigenous peoples face pivot on the ways they are inscribed into state projects that are overwhelmingly extractive in nature and harm individuals and communities.

---

claims further, suggesting that the emphasis on tourism as an engine for economic development has led to the Mexican state adopting a settler-colonial logic. It would appear that Mexico may present us with a case where a former colony becomes more settler-colonial due to neoliberal demands. In other words, the semi-militarization of patrimony and emergence or implementation of settler-colonial logics are entwined.

[16] Wolfe's framework was developed primarily in reference to nations in which this form of occupation appears overt – Palestine, Canada, Australia, for instance – and where we can point to a distinct occupying settler population.

These state projects, which attempt to harness a number of resources ranging from wind energy (Boyer 2019, Dunlap 2018, and Howe 2019) to minerals (Ferry 2005) and petrol, operate under a logic of *patrimonio* that dispossesses and displaces Indigenous peoples through violent mechanisms. Ruins and artifacts are also patrimony, and heritage projects in Mexico are contentious *state* projects given that the INAH, though far from monolithic, is the embodiment of Mexican state power in the culture sector (Breglia 2006). Most importantly, though, wind, minerals, petrol, and artifacts are all resources to be extracted and absorbed into a Mexican state that is underpinned by racism and active dispossession. Settler-colonial governance relies precisely on theft, silencing, and other forceful or insidious acts of erasure. Looting, I posit, not only raises Trouillotian questions over power and the production of history, but it is deeply relational and possesses material, temporal, and affective implications. Taken together, these concerns point to an inescapable haunting: looting's logics of silencing, erasure, and extraction generate absent presences and exchange presences for absence; this illicit and shrouded activity, which may be referred to as an example of a phantom economy[17], leads me to suggest that we are dealing with a deeply *speculative* heritage in Mexico, or a phantasmal patrimony. No one knows exactly what patrimony is, what it should do, how it should work, or to whom it really belongs. This is further exacerbated by rigorous yet capacious legislation that leaves ample room for open interpretations.

---

[17] *Fantasma* is often used to reference shady activities like money laundering aside from a typical ghost that characterizes hauntings. I would like to thank Lisa Breglia for drawing this to my attention. When interlocutors spoke of these phantoms or specters, it is possible they were pointing to the presence of illicit economic activities or they sensed something inexplicably unseemly. Extrapolating figuratively from *fantasma* as an index of illicit or questionable pursuits, then, the term might be taken to also encapsulate deep speculation. What each iteration of *fantasma* has in common is that there is risk and ambiguity involved. Conjuring up the language of the phantom in this context might be both metaphorical and hauntological. For an example of a news story utilizing this language, see: https://www.forbes.com.mx/asi-es-la-reforma-contra-empresas-fantasma-y-la-facturacion-falsa/

In other words, I think of patrimony (in Mexico at the very least) as distinctly phantasmal in that it not only generates regimes of (in)visibility as Mónica Salas Landa has argued (2018), but produces – materially and discursively – absent presences and present absences, which transform human relations. So, too, patrimony creates genuine accounts of specters and hauntings. What I refer to in this article as phantasmal patrimony, then, has antecedents that are Derridean, and thus in direct conversation with the emergent literature of hauntology (c*f*. Mark Fisher 2012), but also take a tack from the anthropology of history. The conceptual and literal architecture of patrimony might be thought of as constituted by ghost stories, in the senses given by Stephan Palmié and Avery Gordon. All histories, Palmié reminds us (2002, 2013), are ghost stories in so far as they are concerned with elisions, absences, and gaps. History is inherently ambiguous and liminal; since patrimony is, in part, one figuration of the materiality of history, it suffers from fissures and silences. Patrimony, in this iteration, can be viewed through the prism of Trouillot's 'burden of the concrete' (1995: 22-29). We will never escape the matter of the facts, nor can we ever fully excavate every sedimented story deposited around us. Given the 'bottomless silence' contained in monuments, artifacts, and fossils, haunting proves inescapable.

Amidst the contestations and clashes over what actually happened and what is said to have happened regarding the Frissell Museum and its collection, an imagined failed future casts its shadow over the present, replete with its host of associated emotions. Avery Gordon writes of narratives "concerning exclusions and invisibilities" (1997: 17) that resonate with affect even as they make it difficult to determine what "really" happened. The absence of the collection grows brighter and more palpable; the specters and fractures in this story demand attention and reconfigure social relations. Yet most of all, the present absence of the collection in Mitla cultivates an affect of grief that is difficult to exorcise. The Frissell is a ghost story that also

speaks metonymically to the constitution of the politics of heritage, more broadly. In the monumental or material sense, we must grapple with that which is made invisible alongside that which is made visible.

With Mitla's Frissell "fiasco" as my springboard, I thus explore these concerns from multiple perspectives. I begin with the Frissell itself and the mystery of the vanished collection, querying whether or not the collection's provenance documents were destroyed by the INAH, a significant local rumor in both Mitla and, as I discovered, among at least some heritage sector workers. I then turn to the affective impact of the collection's looting, with the experiences of Lencho Suárez[18] as my center. Finally, I turn to my most direct critique of the INAH, using as my primary example the brief tale of Macario, a phantom curator for the Frissell's absent collection.

Mitla and the Researcher in Context

San Pablo Villa de Mitla is a town located approximately 45 kilometers east of Oaxaca de Juárez, the capital of Mexico's Oaxaca state. While Mitleños themselves do not constitute their own ethnic identity, Mitleño residents primarily identify as, first, Indigenous Zapotec, and then mestizo.[19] This said, there have been recent efforts to revitalize Zapotec.

Prior to Alfonso Caso and Ignacio Bernal's excavations at the UNESCO World Heritage Site and archaeological zone, Monte Albán during the first half of the twentieth-century, Mitla's

---

[18] All names in this essay are pseudonyms unless in a public context or otherwise noted.

[19] In Mitla, residents take mestizo to refer to the use of Spanish as the dominant language rather than Zapotec. While mestizo also carries racial connotations, those are for the most part outside of the scope of this essay, particularly given the ways in which Mitleños emphasize their Zapotec identities over that of mestizo. See Mary Weismantel's excellent, *Cholas and Pishtacos: Stories of Race and Sex in the Andes* (2003), for more on shifting racial identities.

crimson palatial ruins were Oaxaca's most visited archaeological site, the subject of multiple archaeological reports and travelogues penned by figures such as Guillermo Dupaix, William Henry Holmes, Désirée Charnay and D.H. Lawrence (Joyce 2013). Originally heaps of rubble, their reconstruction was spearheaded by Leopoldo Batres, who was notoriously heavy-handed, even engraving his name in gold letters on a plaque plastered on the ruins (Bueno 2016).[20] Alongside Mitla's archaeological significance, the town has also been the subject of several ethnographic studies over the course of the last century (Barabas et al. 2005; Arfman 2008), including Elsie Clews Parsons monograph, *Mitla: Town of Souls* (1936), a text that the community remembers and would like access to but has been historically unable given the cost of the monograph and its lack of translation (Leathem 2022).

Mitla, then, is no stranger to visitors and foreigners, and archaeology, history, and anthropology are disciplines Mitleños find legible, if problematic, especially given the ways these forms of knowledge production – or extraction – have keenly reshaped local relations with the past and even the ruins themselves (Leathem 2019). I first visited Mitla in 2008 as an undergraduate studying archaeology, but when I began my graduate studies in 2013, I switched to ethnography. My choice to pursue ethnography, or rather, archaeological ethnography (Lafrenz Samuels 2011)[21], was motivated by conversations with friends and interlocutors in Mitla, who expressed the need for research that would attend to the more symbolic, emotive, and

[20] Zelia Nuttall calls out Batres for installing the plaque in Mitla in the following news piece: "Mrs. Nutall Ready to Prove Her Claim Against L. Batres," *The Mexican Herald*. December 10, 1910, vol. XXXI, no. 71.

[21] I refer to 'archaeological ethnography' here because this research is best understood as a study of the ways the materiality of the past bears down on and constantly reshapes the lives of a community (Hamilakis and Anagnostopalos 2009). Archaeology infuses multiple dimensions of Mitleño social worlds in even the most indirect ways. This article is also about a collection and the affective politics of what it means to possess the right to both hold and access patrimonial objects.

moral dimensions of patrimonial projects. As a working-class American, I felt it was more ethical to conduct ethnography and address the desires of the community. After hearing about the Frissell looting and the emotional toll that the loss of this collection had upon the community, I chose to focus a part of my doctoral fieldwork on unraveling this story of loss. Between September 2017 and September 2018, I conducted multiple open and semi-structured interviews;[22] I also volunteered at the Museo Frissell while it was still open. This article is an attempt to bear witness to a part of Mitla's history that is often glossed as a story.

Who's Afraid of the INAH?: The Making and Unmaking of the Frissell

The Frissell Museum is a sensitive topic. What appears below is a synthesis of various ethnographic and archival fragments that paint a picture of what the Frissell was, what Ervin Frissell and the eponymous museum stood for according to Mitleños, and how the seeds of its unraveling can be traced to a cast of rotating mutual misunderstandings about how patrimony *ought* to work and to whom it should really belong. I attempted to talk to multiple senior Oaxacanists about both the creation and looting of the Frissell but most of my queries received no response. The knowledge I have about the Frissell museum and its collection comes from interviews with members of the Mitla community, like Lencho, Mina, Pilar, Manuel, or Jairo, or from junior Oaxacanists. It is also worth reiterating that many of the news articles I cite here are now absent from the internet, having been pulled offline at some point. I only have access to them because of the assiduous archiving of a friend and colleague over the years.[23]

---

[22] Written or verbal consent was obtained for each interview. No one was interviewed who would be unable to evaluate whether they could have this conversation or not.

[23] In Lapham's Quarterly "Memory" issue (Winter 2020), they refer to deleting online content as "memory holing," which has roots in George Orwell's dystopic novel, *1984*.

At a glance, Ervin R. Frissell was a typical expatriate. An American businessman born in Minnesota, raised in Wisconsin, and an admirer of Mexico's art and archaeology, he moved to Mitla in the 1940s and purchased what was formerly a dry goods store known as *La Sorpresa* from the Quero family with his small fortune (García Robles 2016: 126; Parsons 1936). He re-converted the building back into a hacienda, and this eventually became the museum.[24] Immediately recognized as an aficionado of pre-Hispanic art and archaeology by the Mitleños, Ronda Brulotte recounts how Frissell offered money to anyone who would deliver artifacts to him (2012). Children were said to spend time digging around the Arroyo Group with wooden sticks – among several other ruinate locations – in hopes that the ground might reveal *caritas* (little faces), which Frissell gladly accepted, offering up pennies in return. Besides these *caritas* and sherds, Frissell acquired Classic and Early Postclassic period Zapotec effigy vessels – among other artifacts – which were offered to him by families and individuals who were storing these artifacts in their homes or had clandestinely excavated them. After amassing an impressive collection of pre-Hispanic Zapotec and Mixtec material culture, Frissell died on November 16, 1959. His friend, another American expatriate and scholar of Mixtec language and culture, Howard Leigh, continued to acquire and add pieces to the Frissell Museum, growing the collection for several more decades until his own death in 1979 (Robles García 2016: 141).

Ervin R. Frissell reportedly left behind a will. I use the word 'reportedly' because the INAH claims there was no will and says that even if there had been a will, it was never a legally-

[24] It is also, ironically, the same building that Parsons resided in during her fieldwork stints between 1929 and 1933 (1936). Nelly Robles García adds that many of the 'early explorers' of Mitla and Oaxaca in general stayed in La Sorpresa: "Los viajeros pasaban allí días realizando su documentación hospedados en lo que posteriormente sería la posada La Sorpresa (hoy Museo Frissell) propiedad de la familia Quero, donde los exploradores participaban de un ambiente cosmopolitan y podían departir con otros huéspedes" (2016: 126).

binding document and the attorney who helped him draw it up was deeply ignorant. Frissell's death notice from November 17, 1959 says that he bequeathed his collection to Mexico City College[25], an English-speaking junior college that eventually became the University of the Americas and later split into the *Universidad de las Americas* (UDLA) and the *Universidad de las Americas Puebla* (UDLAP). Senior Oaxacanists and multiple sources confirm this to all be true: Frissell's will designated Mexico City College as the steward of the collection, and it stipulated that the collection must not ever be separated from the building in which it resides. So, although Frissell left this collection in the hands of another institution, his will made explicit his desire that the collection be inalienable from the land on which it sits and the building in which it is stored. In other words, the collection must never leave Mitla.

Yet this was obviously not in the cards. The INAH's looting of the Frissell involved alienating the collection in the name of patrimony, the inalienable property of the Mexican state. Unlike most accounts of theft that use the word *robar*, a verb denoting obvious illegality, both locals and news articles deploy the verb *saquear* when speaking of the Frissell looting, which is a word connoting extraction. It does not necessarily imply legalities, and it means to "take out" with force or in another violent way.

I had been warned earlier that the Frissell was "almost impossible to unravel." *How,* my friends and colleagues wondered, could anyone make sense of a 'legitimate looting' that revolves around an empty space (the museum) always about to open and a narrative that features the

---

[25] "En amplia información que publicamos con anterioridad manifestamos que el citado señor Frissell, después de cuatro años de gestiones que ante él habia hecho el Mexico City College, éste adquirió el referido Museo, aun cuando seguía bajo la custodia de su primer dueño." *Falleció en Mitla el Sr. Ervin Frissell*, in El Imparcial, November 17, 1959.

blackholing and burning of documents[26] ? So, too, more confusion abounds with a statement by the former director of Mitla's archaeological zone, Jorge, when he claims that the Frissell situation is not contentious, stating, "it is private property that naturally converted into public property."[27] Wherever more details are needed or desired, they are purposely obfuscated or obliterated. Did the Frissell become the Mexican state's because he died and left it to an educational institution? To wit, the collection may have been passed on to Mexico City College, but the archaeologist John Paddock ultimately presided over it, choosing to utilize the collection as a scientific object of study and site for training future generations of Oaxacanists (Robles García 2016: 142). If the will says the collection must remain in the museum in Mitla, why does this document suddenly cease to have legal teeth? And moreover, if this collection was once the domain of scientific studies conducted by Ignacio Bernal, Alfonso Caso, and other luminaries of Oaxacan archaeology, why extract it from the community and hide it away?[28]

The subheading of this section asks: who is afraid of the INAH? Perhaps Ervin R. Frissell was afraid of the INAH's authoritarian powers to (dis)possess, so this is why he left behind a will like his. Or, perhaps, he wasn't afraid at all. I would reckon, though, this is the wrong question to be asking and can only lead us down a narrow path. The correct question is a modified inversion

---

[26] More on this last point shortly.

[27] "Sobre la colección Ervin Frissell, Ríos Allier detalla que anteriormente era una colección privada pero por su naturaleza se ha convertido en pública. Reconoce que ya existía una fecha de apertura para el próximo 31 de noviembre, pero por cuestiones administrativas la fecha se ha recorrido unos meses más." *(Preparan exhibición de la colección prehispánica más importante de Oaxaca* by Reyna Paz Avendaño and Juan Carlos Talavera, November 5, 2012, La Crónica de Hoy).

[28] Recounts Nelly Robles García, "Paddock intentó, con buenos resultados, convertir el Museo Frissell en una entidad académica seria. Se preocupó por interpreter científicamente las piezas de la colección, que a su llegada sumaban miles, y con su presencia, luego de muchas compras, se acrecentó" (2016: 153). Apparently, an academic council was also established, which featured various archaeologists, collectors, and philanthropists, including Howard Leigh, Juan Bustamente, Jorge Fernando Iturribarría, Jaime Larumbe Reimers, Ignacio Bernal, and Alfonso Caso.

of the former, which appears in a more recent news article out of Oaxaca: What is INAH afraid of?[29] After all, why else would the institution go to such great lengths to create this epistemic murk (Taussig 1986)?

Of Provenance and Pedigree: Silence and Erasure on Two Counts

In order to pose answers to these two questions, I'll quickly recount some details of the looting. Alongside the actual 'sacking', in which I was told that the collection had been placed in gigantic black garbage bags and placed in the backs of pickup trucks right after midnight, Frissell's will and accompanying documents disappeared.[30] "You will not get too far trying to understand the Frissell, or really any projects that we might label as failures or disasters," warned a colleague at the Museo Textil during one of our interviews. "A man named Víctor burned the papers in the Frissell collection that explained how they were acquired and detailed their provenance. I'm uncertain what the motives were, but heritage is just a battlefield here. Objects are pawns, but so are people."[31]

What happened to the collection's documentation? Friends both in Mitla and positioned in various heritage sectors told me the papers were burned. And yet, Jairo has told me that, as a constituent of the INAH, he absolutely disavows the notion that the papers were destroyed. My

---

[29] "A qué le tiene miedo el INAH?" in *Lucra INAH con el Museo Frissell*, Diario Rotativo: Tribuna de Oaxaca, https://www.rotativooaxaca.com.mx/principales/lucra-inah-con-el-museo-frissell/

[30] As noted at the start, the story of the Frissell is far from clear. The image of a collection being lugged away in black garbage bags is quite possibly a narrative flourish, though it does accomplish an affect of shock and disdain. At the same time, it appears impossible since one could never exactly fit 40,000 artifacts inside garbage bags without damaging or destroying them. It is more likely that the INAH transported the collection carefully, though I cannot confirm this either as no one is permitted to view the collection, which is said to reside in Santo Domingo, Oaxaca City's museumfied cathedral, and Cuilapám.

[31] While I am not personally accusing the INAH of burning the papers, it has been my experience that most people in Oaxaca believe the INAH burned the papers. Whether this is indeed true or not, I am analyzing it as a social fact because it illuminates how relations are unfolding between the INAH and local Indigenous communities.

own efforts to access said papers proved fruitless beyond John Paddock's archive, which is split between the San Pablo Cultural Center's Juan de Córdova Library in Oaxaca and the Universidad de las Américas Puebla library. What is most interesting to me is not whether or not the papers really exist (about which I remain somewhat uncertain), but rather the social work that is done by the *idea* that they have been destroyed. Whether or not the papers exist *somewhere*, they are not readily accessible to either local community members or scholars. Their absence forecloses the opportunity to engage with the INAH directly, making it impossible to contest the removal – the looting – of these objects from the Frissell Museum or to directly address the sense of violation this looting engendered. These violent acts refigure an illegitimate act into a legitimate one and generate the epistemic murk that plagues any discussion of the Frissell Museum, its accompanying collection, and its associated relations.

Colin Renfrew reminds us that looting can be combated by the refusal of institutions to collect unprovenanced antiquities, writing "that a pedigree is needed for any acquisition" (2000: 74). Likening provenance to pedigree, we see that the provenance of objects or a collection is an intimate and critical part of their biography, in some ways it conjures up notions of origins, kinship, and ancestry. This pedigree is required for acquisitions and is the backbone of legal transactions, meaning this is necessary information when staking claims of legitimacy. It is also required for proof of authenticity, and as Lisa Breglia details, a provenance is a "record of the ultimate derivation and passage of an item through its various owners" (2006: 26).

What does it mean to destroy a pedigree or, at the very least, to imagine that a pedigree has been destroyed? I prefer Renfrew's term here as it highlights the perceived personhood of these objects and avoids imposed dichotomies. From the perspective of my friends in Mitla, the destruction of the pedigree in the instance of the Frissell is an intentionally transformative,

oppressive act. Knowing that a pedigree is needed for legitimacy and authenticity, it seems counterintuitive for the INAH to erase this information, yet this is essential to the INAH's task – it must reconfigure Frissell's collection into loot, into something illegitimate, so that the INAH's own looting of the Frissell can be legitimatized. In so doing, the INAH also creates a symbolic death of sorts, or even an unmooring. Destroying the pedigree or the biography of these objects makes it impossible for anyone to illustrate that this is a looting. When the INAH eliminates the pedigree, morphing the material into something unprovenanced, it also erases previous ownership, symbolically cutting Mitleños off from their heritage and *de facto* erasing their existence. As Espírito Santo and Blanes remind us (2013: 11), the presence of these absences makes the collection's own absence even more palpable in the present. For this reason, I take a position alongside Espírito Santo and Blanes who encourage us to "follow the ghosts." Here the 'death' in this biography indexes a new social life of the Frissell. Rather than the possibility of the collection's future return to its original 'rightful' Mitleño owners, the symbolic death and unmooring manifests an alternate 'return' – this is an unsettling 'return' that hangs like a specter over the heads of the community and the state-at-large. Reborn in this form, the Frissell collection and museum occupy a site of liminality, their return endlessly oscillating between what might have been and what might come to happen if the correct conditions emerged. Spatially and temporally the collection comes to exist in a mythic past, contentious present, and potential future that is always seemingly foreclosed.

The erasure – whether actually material or simply procedural – of the Frissell collection's pedigree achieves two things: (1) it eliminates the previous legitimacy and authenticity of the collection and reinforces the authority of the Mexican State's actions, rendering contestation moot; and (2) the erasure serves as metonymy for the erasure of Mitleño pedigrees. Put another

way, it undercuts ancestral claims to land and prefigures the State's erasure of Indigenous communities within a legal framework. As such, the INAH set out to create a condition of social and semiotic ambivalence that is seemingly incomparable to the ambivalence Lisa Breglia speaks of in her monograph (2006). Rather than ambivalence being the myriad frictions generated between multi-scalar conflicting heritage policies and practices, which are recognized by the State and other parties as legitimate, ambivalence in this particular context is purposeful and results from the grafting or layering of exclusions. We might even say the INAH has consciously produced a series of convenient silences in the story of the Frissell in order to avoid any question of legitimacy (*sensu* Trouillot 1995). It appears that the INAH is afraid of exactly this – any questions of its legitimacy and thus any challenges to its authority. I would not be the first person to impute this. Luis Vázquez León's, *El Leviatán Arqueológico: antropología de una tradición científica en México* (2003), is a magisterial work critiquing the authoritarian structures of this scientific and educational institution, outlining how the INAH is an extension of the Mexican state that has historically abused its power.

The salience of the Frissell as an instance of legitimate looting is further confirmed by its erasure from Nelly Robles García's recent monograph on Mitla (2016), which is said to be the most up-to-date history of the town and archaeological zone. Multiple pages are dedicated to Mitla's pivotal role in the history of collecting and the development of archaeological science in Oaxaca; as such, she outlines the formation of the Frissell and how it was passed on to John Paddock and utilized as a pedagogical resource but actively and decisively excludes the fate of the museum and its significant collection. This exclusion is a silence in the creation of the archive and has palpable consequences on the formation and maintenance of patrimony in Oaxaca. These archival inequalities constitute the conditions for the production of an uneven,

asymmetrical history. When Robles García and others omit the story of the Frissell, they control the means of historical production and withhold the necessary transformation of this event into *fact*. Whether or not we can determine the truth about the Frissell's 'looting' is not the point here because this may never be achievable. Instead, what we are confronted by is the ontological clash between the INAH's federally mandated power to control the narrative and Mitleño accounts of history that are politically rendered as 'story' or rumor. As Trouillot so eloquently put it, "Power enters here obviously and surreptitiously" (1995: 53).

***

"I will not tell you the History": Field Note #33

January 23, 2018

I returned to Mitla this past Saturday in order both pay rent and poke around. It was blistering hot, and Mina, my *dueña*, who runs a *panaderia* off the *zócalo*, told me that there are only a few people left who had worked at the Frissell Museum.

She and her daughter Pilar laughed about how I was "two days late"—the sweet old man who had worked there and was a close confidante of Ervin Frissell had been buried two days ago and died a few before that. So, they exclaimed, "What horrible luck!" I pushed them on the fact that, surely, he couldn't have been the only person left in town who was both a former employee and willing to chat. Then Mina made a noise of exclamation. "There is Lencho! He is the man right outside the market. He is there all the time. He lives by there."

Pilar and I headed over to the market. When we arrived, Pilar pointed to a crumbling adobe structure that literally had a hole in it for a doorway. "I think this is his place."

The man that was Lencho quickly burst out of the hole with a stick in his mouth. He was short with a mustache and ruddy complexion, and his white polo had a bunch of holes in it. "Who are you?" he barked at Pilar.

"I'm Pilar, Joel's daughter. My family owns the panaderia…we are panaderos. You know…" She gesticulated silently.

"Hah!" Lencho laughed.

Pilar and I exchanged looks. "I present to you, Hilary," she said.

"I have never seen you, and I don't know who your family is. And you bring me this *gringa*?" Lencho snapped. He would have none of it. "What do you want? Why are you with her?"

Pilar decided to ignore the question in general, and cut to the chase, asking him if he had, indeed, worked at the Frissell Museum. Lencho nodded and explained it had been for about 12 years, but that he was nothing more than a custodian. He was "nothing more" than a guard; although, as he pointed out animatedly in the midst of the conversation, he spent a lot of time looking after displays, exhibition spaces, and the contents of the vitrines that hugged the white walls of the Frissell, and stood as creolized temporal centerpieces in the courtyard—pre-Hispanic effigies and *caritas* imprisoned behind manufactured wood and glass.

Lencho finally said to me directly that he will not tell me a thing until the government returns the collection to Mitla, its rightful home. I tried to explain that I wanted to understand the history of Mitla, but particularly the history of the Frissell Museum and the Mitleño relationship with it, but it did not click with him. "Go talk to a historian," he snapped to no avail.

I listened to him tell me a story that he said *"me molestó mucho"* about Nelly Robles García, who used to head Centro INAH Oaxaca. He was bothered by how Nelly asserted that

according to some "made up chronology" imposed by random scientists (and how other archaeologists do exactly this) the Mitla palace and its majestic ruins were not actually Zapotec, but rather Mixtec. Apparently, Nelly had come to Mitla in the 1990s when Lencho was still working at the Frissell and talked to Mitleños about cultural patrimony. She told the Mitleños that according to the timeline in Oaxaca, evidence pointed toward a Mixtec occupation during Mitla's opulence. This obviously rubbed locals the wrong way.

"Do you know her?" he yelped at me, as he finished. I remained silent as he would not like my answer. "Bahhhh," he said, gesturing at me. "She was awful. All of you are awful, thinking you know everything."

We stood in silence again for a minute.

"I only worked there for 12 years."

"Yeah, but that's a lot of time," I said again.

He shook his head. "Come in, come in." He motioned to the hole in the adobe wall.

Pilar and I exchanged another look and decided we would go in together. Once inside, Lencho sat down at his sewing machine and put down the stick he'd been chewing on. He fumbled through an enormous pile of newspapers that bordered the entire wall next to him – the stack measured nearly three feet high – and pulled out a clipped news article.

"I am not telling you anything until the collection is returned."

"I've told you, I'm a student, I don't have a PhD yet, I don't' have that kind of power."

"I'm still not telling you anything."

"Then I guess it's settled. Let Mitla forget these histories. Is that for the best?"

I could tell Lencho was thinking. "I am not telling you anything," he sniffed, sitting back down in his gnarly wooden chair.

"Okay," I capitulated. "But you need to know that I will help in any way I can."

"I don't understand why you want to know about the museum, and I don't understand why you don't care about the objects stolen. You saw. I spoke about it. The government stole from us," said Lencho.

"I know that the INAH took the objects. And I do care. I just can't do anything. I don't ever think those objects will come back. No one knows where they are."

"Hah!" he snorted. "Dirty institutions. They forget that we are *mestizo*, too! Except when we are not."

I was silent for a moment as he rocked back and forth. I had no response to that comment.

"Why do you care about these stories? Or about our history? And I mean *Zapotec* history. You now that the past does not exist here. Yes, there are the ruins, yes, there is archaeology everywhere. But the youth do not care for the past! It is forgotten! They don't know what it means to be Zapotec." He was red now. "All forgotten!" he barked. "And who knows? This history, too, should be forgotten." He gestured in the direction of the Frissell. "Without the collection, we have nothing."

"There is a lot at stake," I said, "in remembering."

Lencho gave me an exasperated look. "I will not tell you the history! And then, like the Zapotec past, this past will be forgotten. I don't care!"

"Did Frissell do something wrong? Or John Paddock?" John Paddock was the Frissell's last curator, and with whom Lencho would have spent quite a bit of time working.

"No," he snapped quickly. He looked away. "Paddock was a *gran hombre*. He was very good to me. *Mi compadre*. He would have not allowed this. Hah! They [the people at the INAH]

wait, then they strike and take it all when there is no white person – like you!—to protect. We can protect it ourselves."

***

Grief as Looting's Lamentation

There are multiple layers to unpack in this "interlude" taken from my fieldnotes, but before anything, I want to highlight the degree to which grief is deeply palpable. As I've suggested, the looting of the Frissell engenders multiple (and multifarious) deaths and disconnections; it is, in short, a fundamentally relational mode of (dis)possession and erasure that leaves melancholy affects in its wake (*cf*. Navaro-Yashin 2009). As we witness with Lencho, affective ties to the collection, building, and its figures – like John Paddock and Frissell himself – provide the illusion of physical links to Mitleño pasts. These are then reconfigured in such a way that this response to loss – or keening over absence – permeates and reinforces social bonds and binds *between* Mitlenos. I describe grief as a keening over absence because it emphasizes how this emotion hinges on experiences of loss in all its forms (compare Scott 2014). What the Mitleño case illustrates is that there is another sensory element in the mix: the act of silencing, which points not only to textual silencing but the stifling of voices. Lencho speaks up about the Frissell and he speaks *loudly*, hence my choice of keening.

Although I am not interested in applying psychoanalytic terms to the Mitleño situation (which feels dangerously like a diagnosis), I see grief in this context as an inescapable affective part of mourning designed to help humans grapple with loss. This grief, I would contend, was not Lencho's alone; rather, it was shared by many of my friends and interlocutors in Mitla whenever the Frissell came up. "INAH is the enemy, you can't trust them. We had heritage, now we don't," remarked Andreas, a local artist. In this way, grief is one of Mitla's most resonant

structures of feeling (Williams 1977). And if grief, figured as a keening over absence, becomes the community's connective tissue, we can see further how absence and all of its manifestations – such as erasure and silence – structure Mitleño lives. So, too, it points to the growing sense of exile in the wake of the unmooring that 'legitimate looting' brings. Exile might impart the notion that one has been banished or isolated physically – estranged, if you will – but this is exactly what has happened to the Frissell collection and thus just as the collection is forcefully estranged from Lencho and the Mitleños, likewise they perceive themselves estranged or uprooted from these material receptacles of history.

Yet I would also posit that this is not solely a grief about the loss of the collection – arguably constituted by vessels representing and linking Mitleños to their ancestors and the past– but about the loss of Mitla's cultural advocates, Howard Leigh, John Paddock, and Frissell himself. Two sides of the same coin, both of these 'griefs' or grievances are inextricably intertwined, and one compounds (and presages) the other. Scott writes that "…the force of the sense of loss will be all the more compounded where the ideal is already personified, already invested in the body of an individual – a beloved leader, say – and where the loss of that ideal is at the same time, the concrete death, perhaps violent elimination, of the idealized person" (2014: 100). The potent affective power of grief in Mitla stems from how they experienced these two losses. First, there is the death of Ervin Frissell, a local figure who symbolized three things: 1) adoration of Zapotec art, culture, and history; 2) access to the material traces of said history by way of his museum; and 3) the setting apart of Mitleño patrimony from the rest of Mexico's industrial heritage complex. The last point, perhaps, is particularly important, as Émile Durkheim (1995) reminds us that the act of setting apart is a declaration of significance and sacrality. To this end, however problematic Frissell's position of 'steward' might be when we look back on it,

Frissell cultivated a distinct set of social and affective attachments to Mitleño patrimony that encouraged a communal sense of pride. This is distinct from Mexico's uniform project of mestizaje. Rather than this patrimony belonging to 'all Mexicans,' or even all Oaxacans, Frissell reportedly made Mitleños feel like it was exceptional and theirs alone. If anything, Frissell personified ideals of ownership and possession over Mitleño heritage, which are not rights extended to individuals or communities in Mexico.

Upon his death, stewardship passed on to Howard Leigh and soon after John Paddock. The collection in the Frissell was left behind by the death of its appointed – and foreign – stewards. Obviously, it may have continued to reside in the Frissell if it had not been for the looting, which amplified the sense of loss and subsequent mourning precisely because after the deaths of Frissell, Leigh, and Paddock, the collection became synonymous (and eponymous) with the former. Since Frissell had promised that his death would herald the inauguration of a new kind of Mitleño cultural stewardship, the loss of the collection is experienced as a portentous absence. Here the violent elimination that Scott refers to is the sacking of the collection, the forced removal of numerous patrimonial objects that were at the center of a series of historic and contemporary social and affective relations. The INAH's looting made the potential for closure, a healthy mourning, impossible. It also revealed that Mitleño patrimony was *not* exceptional, it belongs with everything else, the rightful heritage of the *mestizo* nation.

Lencho's immediate embodiment and expression of ambivalence in his encounter with Pilar and myself provides further commentary on the relations unraveling around the Frissell collection and museum. The last living employee of the Frissell, he appears jaded and resentful while at the same time he seems invested in having some kind of conversation with a person (myself) who represents a form of authority both the Mexican state and Indigenous Mitleños

recognize. However, Lencho's recognition of my presence (and subsequent knowledge) is repetitively stalled, granted, and recanted in an almost theatrical way. What may appear on the surface-level to be a man simply exhibiting refusal, disavowal, and a whole host of ambivalent emotions, discloses itself to be about a set of broader concerns. The stakes of Lencho's story lie in his (un)knowing performance of Mexican state authority when he is confronted with the memory of the Frissell and a conversation about patrimony. Lencho nuances the structural regimes and tactics of settler-colonial governance when he simultaneously recognizes and refuses my presence, rendering me absent, silent, and however briefly, worth a few moments of his time due to my positionality, which places me within the uncomfortable realm of racialized expertise.

Amidst his stacks of newspaper clippings, vehement quips, and displays of fervent irreverence for the INAH, he inverts and reiterates the very structures that enable the existence of these conditions that marginalize and delegitimize Indigenous Mitleño rights as he enters into a relation with a foreigner who he endows with an authority premised on coloniality or Whiteness. "They [INAH] wait, then they strike and take it all when there is no white person – like you! – to protect [it]. We can protect it ourselves." Briefly undercutting his own statement, Lencho enlivens the ambivalence of settler-colonial relations, pointedly illuminating the infinite fault-lines and cracks intrinsic to the landscape *mestizaje* has made. The construction and maintenance of patrimony in Mexico demands White expertise and ownership while simultaneously promulgating the belief that patrimony is for all Mexicans, no matter their background. "They forget that we are mestizo, too! Except when we are not." The nationalist project of *mestizaje* is just a tattered veil between worlds; here Lencho exposes the frayed fabric of Mexican society and pulls it back for all to see. Yet despite Lencho's efforts to unsettle the structures governing

his life and that made the looting legitimate – the absence so keen – he rearticulates and resettles these settler structures through requesting and thus presuming that I can return the collection. This 'return' is a return of state power in a phantom form; without full cognizance, we participate in a form of social exchange designed to reinforce asymmetries of power.

Macario's Story: Asymmetries of Power

So far, this article has charted the multiple ways that heritage is refigured through a set of violent relational practices that are always articulating with questions of history and power. While the primary thread unravels around the Frissell looting and investigates 'legal looting' as a symptom of settler colonialism, what becomes more palpable through each respective story is that looting is a processual act with material, temporal, and affective ramifications. Looting, figured simply as theft or extraction, presumes the existence of socioeconomic and racial inequality, even inferiority. It may even signal the ways that objects achieve a personhood that is more desirable, recognized, and less threatening than Indigenous people who, in losing access to these material conduits of history, are objectified and silenced by the state. Their personhood, in other words, is denied. And if this is not the case, how else does an institution decide, under a mythic ideology, who has the right to steward or 'possess' something like patrimony?

Allow me to illustrate once more through this encounter with Macario, the INAH installed "curator" of the Frissell Museum. Intrigued by the paradox made obvious by Macario's curation of a non-existent collection and "absent" cultural institution, a friend at Centro-INAH put us in touch. Upon meeting Macario, I was told that despite the stories of looting, the INAH wanted to take the objects back in order to register, catalog, and restore them properly. Macario's job as a curator of a phantom collection and museum that is always about to open but never

does[32] seemed to instill him with a peculiar sympathy for Mitla. Yet although he sympathized with Mitleños, he did not see them fit to care for their patrimony. He recognized that objects from Mitla's past were, indeed, of the province and undeniably Zapotec, but legally (and ideologically), he knew pre-Hispanic artifacts are the property of the Mexican state, and thus viewed their care as the responsibility of the state.[33]

One might imagine that Macario's attitude toward the Mitleños would not afford him a long residence in the town nor the job security he sought. After all, the town is notorious for welcoming outsiders graciously in and then, in an unpredictable fit, viciously spitting them out— not to mention that these outsiders are often either heritage workers or heritage scholars. At the heart of such tensions are important questions: Who owns the past? Who has the power to determine how heritage sites should be treated? Who has the right to "protect" and set apart heritage objects? The answer to these questions, legally, is the INAH as dictated by Mexico's 1917 Constitution. As an employee of the INAH, Macario was incontrovertibly associated with the institution, and although he was not employed by the INAH at the time the collection went "missing," the fact that they paid his salary at the end of the day meant Macario was implicated. He was an aid in undermining Mitleño rights to heritage. The INAH, as Macario explained to me much later, "lost Frissell's will so no one could ever dispute. Plus, the Mitleños never thought they would need an archive or copies."

---

[32] At the time of writing, the Frissell is closed once again, about to reopen under a new yet-to-be-hired curator. It was reported back in 2012 by then-director of Mitla's Archaeological Zone, Jorge Ríos Allier, that the Frissell would open its doors in 2013, which was then delayed until 2017 *(Preparan exhibición de la colección prehispánica más importante de Oaxaca* by Reyna Paz Avendaño and Juan Carlos Talavera, November 5, 2012, La Crónica de Hoy). During my fieldwork in 2018 it closed once more.

[33] More specific legal details can be found in Bolfy Cottom's, *Nación, patrimonio cultural y legislación: los debates parlamentarios y la construcción del marco jurídico federal sobre monumentos en México, siglo XX* (2008). Open-access link here: http://biblioteca.diputados.gob.mx/janium/bv/ce/scpd/LX/nacionpatri.pdf

Two years after my first meeting with Macario, I received a text message from him that read: “I quit. In bad circumstances. Will explain.” I was due back in May, so upon my arrival I headed straight to Mitla to meet with him and learned that among a series of threats made on his life, Macario had chosen to quit his position and leave town. However, before he could formally make his announcement, he was slandered in Mitla’s newspaper and fired.

“They think I am the bad guy – they claim I am against development and progress. And you know, I was fired so now they will have no museum. Again.”

“Is there anything you could have done?” I asked.

Macario paused for a minute to think. “No,” he shot back. “The place is cursed.”

“What?”

“It’s cursed. No doubt haunted by the ghost of Frissell, who knows that no one has honored his wishes. And the gods. They hate what the Mitleños are doing.”

I could not get Macario to elaborate on his rather elusive statement about the gods and the Mitleños. I later read the article that was written about Macario. There, he was described as an enemy of the people, solely responsible for the instability and closure of the Frissell Museum. I was surprised by the description, to say the least, as I’d known Macario for a number of years and he’d always represented himself to me as an ally to Mitla.

And yet, Macario had curated an entire exhibition celebrating Porfirio Díaz, ignoring requests from the community that the Frissell showcase histories relevant and connected to Mitla. He also was overly zealous about the source he used to realize a smaller Day of the Dead exhibition, proudly exclaiming to me once the museum was empty: “I drew entirely on Elsie Clews Parsons. But the Mitleños made me do it! You see, they are the ones who keep telling me, ‘Oh, we know nothing about our past, our heritage – it was taken from us, and the best account is

Parsons.' So, I got this." He held up Parsons's gigantic orange monograph, which is now out-of-print and expensive. "I consulted her. Made the exhibition. When I left this in the Cultural Center, they fought over [ownership of the monograph], can you believe it? Most Mitleños can't even read her as this is in English – she never wrote in Spanish, right? When they fought over it, I took it back to the museum and locked it up!"

There was something disturbing about Macario's reaction to Mitleño attempts to access Parsons's monograph, which is an indispensable text for Oaxacanists due to its Boasian tendency toward the collection of data from all facets of Mitleño life. Here, the 'return' of patrimony in the form of Parsons's monograph haunts the Mitleños through its known presence. In some ways, we might say Macario 'looted' the cultural center to fill his empty spectral museum, but this is not the point. Rather, what is significant here is that Macario believes it is his right to *possess* the book, alienating it from the community, which leads to communal dispossession. This is not unlike the sentiments of Ervin Frissell or the INAH, and it exemplifies an emergent problem within heritage discourse: if patrimony is inalienable yet always in the throes of being alienated, then what?

Conclusions: Mexico and The Rise of Phantasmal Patrimony

"When possession and stewardship are contested…risks to heritage are heightened." – David Lowenthal, *Possessed by the Past* (2006: 30)

The Frissell Museum's looting and accompanying biographies are morally dubious; this is further amplified by the evolving moralities of the twenty-first century (Renfrew 2000), a

result of archaeologists, anthropologists, and the public becoming cognizant of and sensitized to the violent constitution of patrimony. “There can be no preservation without plunder,” remarks a British collector in Alonso Ruizpalacio’s 2018 film, *Museo*, a modern retelling of the notorious 1985 looting of Mexico’s own National Museum of Anthropology. The fact that the groundwork for the formation of archaeological knowledge is historically bound to the destructive acts of colonial authoritarian regimes is well acknowledged (Abu El-Haj 2001). Looting makes nations, and Mexico recognized – along with countries like Turkey, Egypt, Greece, and Italy – that the protection (and thus preservation) of its patrimony was essential to the project of modernity (Bueno 2016; Herzfeld 1982; Luke 2019; Mitchell 1991). The Frissell fiasco throws a wrench in previous heritage frameworks because its contents, web of relations, and acts of looting are not only constantly redefined and resignified, subject through the sheer passage of time to conflicting legal regimes and multiple jurisdictions, but because the theft is made legitimate through illegitimate means. From the symbolic deaths of the museum and its collection to the death of Ervin Frissell himself, the specter haunting this looting resurrects questions of stewardship and belonging through the language of extraction, phantoms, and imminent returns.

As the quote from *Museo* suggests, it is challenging to disentangle preservation from looting and theft. What’s more, the practical and even conceptual conflation between these categorical, twinned acts of heritage-making are strategic efforts of the state. Historically, preservation distinguishes itself from looting by achieving legitimacy through legal means. Collecting in order to preserve is a scientifically endorsed excuse to extract patrimonial objects and land from local, Indigenous communities who, more often than not, have refused permission. As such, collection and preservation are manifestations of an ambivalent sentiment that affectively pulses with admiration and pride, “great love for my country” to quote Carlos de

Sigüenza y Góngora (Florescano 1993: 82), but is tainted by the insidious presumptions and futures it belies. Writes Enrique Florescano, "During the 17th century, this interest in the preservation of the Indigenous past became part of the growing creole compulsion to identify themselves with the soil on which they lived and with the remote past of its original inhabitants" (1993: 82). The contemporary Mexican state imagines itself in popular and civic discourses to be the direct successor to the Aztec empire (Lomnitz 2001), mobilizing symbols from Aztec myth and legend – such as the famous snake ensnared by an eagle on their flag – in order to strengthen ancestral links to the past and legitimize the continuous occupation and wresting of Indigenous land for nationalist interests.

Preservation and legitimate looting become mechanisms for the maintenance of a coherent, cohesive state, and remain entangled at this temporal juncture unless Indigenous communities, like Mitla, were to accept the narrative of *mestizaje* and grant the state permission to steward their patrimony. But, as Lencho and my friends in Mitla have made clear, they had no intention of doing this. In the absence of any real permission, Mexico must instead mobilize patrimony as a double-edged sword that seeks to bring the nation together through, ironically, cleaving them apart via cultural theft and extraction. In other words, the nationalist construction of patrimony as both shared inheritance and the exclusive property of the Mexican state relies on co-opting pre-Hispanic pasts and claiming them as everyone's through processes of silencing and erasure that must dispossess in order to possess. As Yásnaya Aguilar Gil has argued, the mere existence of Indigenous peoples is a threat to the Mexican state's imaginary since the objective of the mestizaje ideology was to make Indigenous peoples disappear through fake "miscegenation" (2018).

What is at stake in recognizing legitimate looting, then, is not simply the flouting of global forms of patrimonial governance but rather the maintenance of a distinctly settler colonial mode of domination. J. Kehaulani Kauanui, building on the scholarship of Patrick Wolfe (2006), contends that settler-colonialism unfolds through a set of constitutive paradoxes, and it is exactly these paradoxes that serve as the cornerstone of settler-colonial regimes (2018). The Mexican state's relationship to its Indigenous populations and with its own figuration of patrimony is riddled with paradoxes. The ability to legally loot pre-Hispanic patrimony is essential to the nationalist project of mestizaje, which operates paradoxically by way of it being premised on homogenous heterogeneity, or a nearly fantastical notion that every citizen is the result of racial admixture when this is not the truth and unattainable given historical and socioeconomic conventions (Bonfil Batalla 1996). When a community protests against the INAH seizing or 'sacking' patrimony, it is refusing the project of mestizaje, subsequently shattering the state's image of itself as a cohesive and cosmopolitan nation. This translates as a threat to the Mexican state (Aguilar Gil 2018).

Legitimate looting in a Mexican context allows for the dispossession and displacement of Indigenous communities at the expense of a nationalist agenda, further crystallizing Mexico's translucent settler-colonial structures. Patrimony, premised on the silencing and erasure of difference in order to make a nation that sees itself as exactly this – distinct and different – becomes caught in the throes of a Derridean double-bind (Aguilar Gil 2018); to be present it must create absences and these absences persist and reverberate into the future reminding communities of former presences. Absence operates or is achieved through the acts I gesture to above – silencing, erasure, and looting – but what the Frissell illustrates is how one form of absence begets another form of absence. It highlights the extent to which Mexican patrimony and

property claims require the disappearance of Indigenous peoples in tandem with the continued presence of their material accomplishments (*cf*. Povinelli 2011). This is the "Deep Nation" that Denis Byrne writes about, in which the colonial state appropriates the material traces of a "distant" past as its own in order to legitimate itself, erasing contemporary Indigenous rights in the process (Byrne 1996). Looting thus becomes an absolute necessity. It achieves settler-colonial objectives by re-inscribing patrimony as an ambivalent domain, one that belongs to no one and everyone. Yet looting also does something more otherworldly.

While it is true that other scholars have observed heritage to be an inescapably paradoxical and multifarious formation (Kirshenblatt-Gimblett 1998; Meskell 2015), few have acknowledged that these characteristics are what also figures heritage as a concept and practice rooted in spectrality. The persistent tensions between past and present, absence and presence, possession and dispossession, manifest phantoms and lead to rumors of haunting. It would be no coincidence, then, that the ghost of Ervin Frissell is said to roam the building and its surrounding land. This said, it was stressed to me that Frissell only appeared *after* the looting; Mitleños interpret the haunting as a mode of return that is waiting for another more imminent return: the re-acquisition of the collection. Scaling up from these two returns is the hope for a different kind of return, but one that is gestured to often: the return of land. The notion and affective experience of imminent return defines settler colonialism in Mexico. Imminent return, in light of looting and other forms of theft, silencing, and erasure, serves to further solidify heritage – an already spectral project in many contexts – into something inexorably speculative and phantasmal. To briefly recall Lencho's story, the grief that rips through its metaphorical pages is no other than an affective fallout: Lencho realizes and sensuously experiences a future that never comes but might possibly arrive if the correct conditions can ever be met. The incessant waiting coupled with the

constant generating and exchange of absent presences (or present absences, for that matter) structures Mexican patrimony and perhaps heritage more broadly. Looting creates the conditions for haunting.

Chapter Three: (Im)Proper Relations: A Tale of Ghostly Monuments and Admonishments[1]

"It's quite difficult," my friend, Dario, remarked to me at a small exhibition opening in Oaxaca de Juárez on a pleasantly warm April afternoon. "It cannot be defined, but it makes me feel many things… It's heavy. I care about it because it connects me to my history but I can't explain it." Nicholas Johnson, a colleague employed first as an archaeologist for the San Pablo Cultural Center (funded by the Alfredo Harp Helú Foundation) before taking up a community-outreach position at the Museo Textil de Oaxaca, stated heritage carries a "[b]urden. It means too many things and is completely overdetermined, if you ask me. Heritage in the end is a political discourse, and one that is used to identify material culture and give it social capital." Gabriela Sánchez, previously employed at Centro INAH-Oaxaca as part of a restoration team stationed in Mitla, sighed when working through her conceptions of patrimony: "*Siempre, siempre es algo lo que necesita resignificar*."[2]

The shape of heritage remained nebulous in Gabriela's gesture to resignification and Dario and Nick's laments about patrimony's "burden." Indeed, their comments resonated profoundly with Lynn Meskell's claim that heritage "suffers from an overburden of meaning" (2015: 2). "Because it is overburdened with meaning, it can also be entirely emptied of it. And this is what we have to think about when embarking on heritage projects," Nick explained one day. We were having an early lunch at a bakery in Oaxaca de Juárez. I had just returned from a

[1] The title of this chapter borrows from the artist Michael Rakowitz, who's invoked similar phrasing in a number of his talks, which also explore monumentality, heritage, and ghosts.
[2] "It is always something that needs redefining." The Spanish verb, *resignificar*, may also mean "to change or shift meaning or importance."

trip to San Pedro y San Pablo Teposcolula, a mid-sized town in the Mixteca Alta, following a suggestion from Gabriela and was already six months into fieldwork. As Nick had recently switched out of his former position at the San Pablo Cultural Center, he was able to suddenly speak more openly about the inner-workings of Oaxaca's arguably first introduction to a philanthropic institution.[3] Although his position at the Museo Textil was a far cry from his previous work excavating, Nick still found himself being dispatched quite often for ethnographic work across Oaxaca's numerous indigenous communities. Having just returned from the Mixteca Alta, and knowing that Nick had been part of one of the most contentious restoration projects undertaken in Oaxaca, I asked him about the Casa de la Cacica.

"I know you and many other archaeologists were part of the team that worked on Casa de la Cacica," I said. "How do you think this 'overburden' plays out in real life? From what I have heard, the Casa de la Cacica was deeply complicated. And I honestly would have never guessed I'd be asking about this, since as you know, I've mostly been thinking about Mitla and the Frissell."

"Well, I'd describe both the Casa de la Cacica and the Frissell as important historical sites that are now ghost buildings…if I was to use a bit of institutional-speak."

---

[3] Many people I interviewed asserted that before the Alfredo Harp Helú Foundation existed, Oaxacans – and to a certain extent, Mexicans – did not have philanthropic institutions actively investing in culture, the arts, or education. The closest thing was the Catholic church, yet its ideologically-charged nature meant individuals regarded philanthropy as a political act with 'strings-attached.' I have suggested, in turn, that every act of giving might be a political act, but here, I think what Oaxacans are pointing to is the ways that FAHHO presents itself as anti-political. By situating the institution as in opposition to recognized ideologically-colored spaces, communities often prefer to cooperate with the FAHHO in heritage projects rather than the INAH. According to a whole array of scientists in Oaxaca, the INAH's legacy gets conflated with that of the churches and missionaries, though it is unclear why save for its 'colonial' tendencies. Rather than giving, the INAH "takes."

I nodded as Nick continued. “When you say ‘real life,’ I presume you mean in practice or on-the-ground. All of these things congeal around heritage projects, which as you know, either succeed or fail.”

It became clear that in order for Nick to answer, he needed to first quickly explain the ways these institutions deliberated or made decisions, thus offering insight into a highly-bureaucratic epistemology. Alongside a strong focus on investment and value, the FAHHO considered heritage projects in terms of risk and logistical ease. A preference for larger projects was notable, but most intriguing was how the institution ultimately felt that caring *for* and *about* heritage was a behavior that was acquired or learned. If this was absent, it needed to be inculcated. A kind of pedagogy of heritage slowly emerged.

“One of the questions we ask,” explained Nick, “is how exposed has a community been to heritage discourses? Like, what are we dealing with? It is easy to restore a church. The symbolic power and its obvious religious function means a heritage project restoring chapels is consistently legible between institutions and communities. It’s when you get to the other stuff that it gets muddy…it gets difficult to convince communities to embark on these kinds of collaborations when the heritage project revolves around something with no direct connection to contemporary life.”

“So, heritage projects become difficult or, perhaps, contentious when their social role…or immediate relevance isn’t obvious?”

“Yes, and the Casa de la Cacica fell into this category. And it was a ghost building, and it continues to be a ghost building.”

“Are you saying it was haunted?”

"The people in Teposcolula believed that. What the institution saw, and I as well, was an empty, derelict pre-Hispanic/early colonial ruin that required both preservation and restoration. But to do that we had to figure out how to connect it back to the community, and this is exactly why education is so important. If the younger generation can be taught to care about their heritage, then these projects would be much easier."

"This is about reintegration, then," I responded. "The renewal of connections and bonds to history."

"Yes. Heritage sites must be utilitarian and serve a concrete purpose. When it has a functional social value, it creates emotive responses."

While many Oaxacans had highlighted relationships with patrimonial sites by speaking of things in terms of "stewardship," Nick completely eschewed the term, frequently deploying instead the word 'emotive' and speaking of the need to foster "emotional attachments." His preservationist ethic was couched in sentimental relations to history (and histories), and threw into bold relief the moralizing mission behind the unwieldy concept of heritage.

"Cultivating these emotive relationships," he remarked, "is the only thing that will prevent everything from falling down again."

***

Introduction

Taking my conversation with Nick as its starting point, this chapter follows the institutional and indigenous mobilizations of the phantasmagoric figure of the 'ghost building' across Oaxaca's heritage landscapes. I draw attention to the ways multiple interlocutors described monumental heritage as 'symbolically loaded,' 'overburdened,' and continuously 'resignified." These keen observations on heritage as being full of meaning, affectively charged,

and morally imbricated in sociopolitical endeavors reveals the extent to which monumental heritage or patrimony is an inexorably cosmological project.[4] Monumental heritage crafts worlds of meaning and bestows meaning across multiple avenues of life in Oaxaca. Heritage cosmologies provide scaffolding that simultaneously supports and contests institutional ideologies while also embodying local indigenous ontologies that unsettle or intensify relations by collapsing the preternatural and natural worlds. So, too, they often disrupt conceptions of temporality. These heritage cosmologies clash and generate frictions that manifest through robust negotiations or debates over what counts as a heritage site, why it matters, and to whom it belongs.

Since cosmologies must be understood through a close analysis of the processes of signification – we are speaking here of heritage as characterized by constant resignification – I take 'ghost buildings' to be both a vernacular analytic and symbol of a larger heritage apparatus. On the one hand, a ghost building refers to, quite literally, a haunted and undesirable space. On the other, ghost buildings are something akin to 'ghost towns', deriving their ghostly aura from being abandoned structures that speak to absence on multiple levels. So, too, they are concrete exemplars of imagined 'futures past' (Koselleck 2004).[5] I make two interrelated claims through a

---

[4] My use of 'cosmologies' draws on Marshall Sahlins' discussion in C*osmologies of Capitalism: The Trans-Pacific Sector of 'The World System'* (1988), which highlights the ways people across the Pacific conceptualized (and received) the arrival and establishment of capitalism. Like Sahlins, I take cosmologies to be organized systems of meaning through which we interpret the world and which, in turn, are re-constituted by these acts of interpretation. I also use 'cosmologies' in order to emphasize how heritage is a spatio-temporal project that is dialectical and dialogic, re-arranging and reinforcing conceptions of space-time that structure or transform worlds. In so doing, I'm also indebted to the work of Nancy Munn (1992) and Alfred Gell (1995).

[5] In using 'futures past', I am invoking Reinhart Koselleck's claim that with the advent of modernity, conceptions of temporality and our entire idea of history shifted and twisted in relation to one another. He asserts that each present was once an imagined future. This twins quite nicely with literature on hauntology, which claims it is this very realization – that every present was once an imagined future – that works against us to create spectral qualities, for the conditions of modernity and globalization are such that imagined futures often never fully materialize, leading to an overwhelming phenomenological sense that 'some thing' has been foreclosed or failed.

textured analysis of these ghost buildings: first, as sedimentations of non-relationality or symbols of disconnection, ghost buildings both represent and mediate local relations to history. Whereas these heritage sites once stood before the community as mere shells of buildings long abandoned, the fresh appearance of a 'built apparition' and the metaphorical haunting that heritage institutions speak of link to conflicting ideas over how one should form 'proper' relationships with history, which histories should be commemorated and cultivated, and, to a certain extent, which histories themselves are proper and deemed appropriate for a community.

Second, as a heritage formation – and part of a distinctly Oaxacan cosmological order that mediates relationships with history vis-à-vis a preservationist ethic – ghost buildings are acutely moral and ritualized manifestations that by congealing around a set of contestations, provoke feelings of alienation and the uncanny on both institutional and indigenous sides (Freud 1919).[6] This accounts for the trope of haunting that is attached to ghost buildings, and finds its roots in a complex assemblage that churns together notions of mythic-history, property, and labor. As I will explore throughout the chapter, ghost buildings both shape particular understandings of Oaxaca's 'heritage worlds' and manipulate orientations towards them. The profound moral aspects of ghost buildings are made obvious in the conflicts surrounding what counts as a proper relation, attempting to configure how a community relates to the past. Ghost

[6] When I use the term 'alienation' here, I do not mean it in the purely Marxist sense. I am thinking of it psychoanalytically and in line with Claude Lévi-Strauss, who wrote in his "Introduction to the Work of Marcel Mauss," that alienation occurs as soon as one agrees to live in a world defined by relations with others. Since heritage sites are sustained by a composite of affective ties and social relations, they morph into 'ghost buildings' when these relations erode or are severed. The feeling of alienation engendered by 'ghost buildings' is less about the mystification behind its labor or its commodification, and more about a distancing or estrangement from history. Echoes of Walter Benjamin and his essay, "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction," which links this perceived distance to the intensification of aura and Freud's "The Uncanny," where he posits liminality as the source of this phenomenological experience. 'Ghost buildings,' in some ways, are deeply liminal, occupying a space between, not quite fully incorporated into the social fabric but a perpetual phantom on the horizon.

buildings can be said, then, to come into being through a set of ritualized enactments that reveal heritage-making to be about obligation, acceptance, and admonishment (Rappaport 1999).

Heritage projects, accordingly, can fail, translating failed heritage projects into *failed rituals*. At least in Oaxaca, this means the ghost buildings persist from the purview of institutions, even after a community reintegrates the heritage site into their social fabric. The Casa de la Cacica is the *de facto* example in Oaxaca of a failed heritage project and restoration act "gone too far." [7] Yet, the deep irony of it all is that the community is currently utilizing the space as a children's library meaning that in some ways the FAHHO's desire to cultivate relationships with the heritage site through the next generation is occurring, but not in the ways imagined. We might say the town of Teposcolula practices an (im)proper relation to the Casa de la Cacica, depending on the vantage point we assume.

The chapter is thus arranged into three sections: the first sketches out a typology of ghost-buildings, which situates them in broader cosmologies of heritage. Institutions and communities both refer to this formation yet opposing moral orders emerge and generate friction as the image of the ghost building symbolizes and mediates multiple relationships to history. The second section follows and unpacks the intricacies of the Casa de la Cacica heritage project, illustrating how acts of preservation and restoration are essentially ritual acts, while the final section asks what it means that the ghost building remains. It explores the Casa de la Cacica's categorical failure as a heritage project and thus a *failed ritual*. Aside from this failure resting at the morally-tinged nexus of acceptance, obligation, and admonishment, I posit that as material traces of failed ritual, ghost buildings are left forever open to resignification, potent receptacles of

[7] From an interview with Dante García Rios, dated June 12, 2018.

meaning. They serve to further amplify and reconfigure relationality, complicating what it means to properly dwell within Oaxaca's heritage landscape and often coming to represent temporal displacement and disavowal, as well as dispossession on the part of indigenous communities.

***

Towards a Typology of Ghost Buildings

July 22, 2018
Casa de la Cacica excursion #3

This is my third time visiting the Casa de la Cacica, but my first time with company from friends. I also usually visited on weekdays. Today is a Sunday and the CC is suddenly pulsing with life. Lidia, Memo, and I tour around the 'ruins' of the CC. There is nothing ruinate about it – in fact, it is almost too manicured. This makes Memo uncomfortable, and in a moment of animated *chisme*, accounts for his feelings by telling us that it was the "most contentious restoration project in Oaxaca. It is an example of *restauradores*[8] taking too much liberty." To take too much liberty in a heritage project is an intriguing idea – for me, it highlights the formulaic and moral nature of these state-sponsored projects. Memo ends by motioning to the ornate flower-disc motifs strewn across the peaks of the CC, hugging the building like a bejeweled tiara. "This borders on reconstruction. It is bad." Another moral judgement. Lidia, a translator of German literature, laughs about the implication that this was (and is) a 'job badly done' as well as the uncanny quality of the Casa de la Cacica. She states that she enjoys the local and institutional language of the 'ghost building.'

Since we arrived, the CC has been full of laughing children attending a workshop and a surly librarian, who has begrudgingly answered my questions about its current use. The *joie de vivre* simmering inside the Casa de la Cacica stumps me. Nick had said he felt that the CC was an exemplary failure, but I would say it is a success given the presence of bodies. What is very odd is that no plaques or materials are present – built into the walls of the building and otherwise – that serve to remind the Teposcolulans of their history […].

[8] *Restauradores* are experts trained in restoration work; quite literally, "one who restores."

Figure 3: La Casa de la Cacica prior to any preservationist efforts circa 1991. Photo courtesy of John Monaghan.

Figure 4: The restored Casa de la Cacica, July 22, 2018. Photo by author.

Two Perspectives

I lead with this excerpt from my field notes in order to highlight the extent to which the Casa de la Cacica is cloaked in ambivalence. It is simultaneously a success and failure, beautiful and ugly, a job done well and a 'job badly done.' So, too, by its very nature, the Casa de la Cacica is a heritage site straddling the cusp of time. Erected during a particularly tumultuous historical period, its very becoming is tied to the transition between the pre-Hispanic period to the early Colonial. In this sense, it simultaneously represents the twilight of Mixtec civilization and violent upheaval of Spanish dominion. Alongside its chronological significance, it is locally conceived of as a symbol of *mestizaje*, a confluence of indigenous and Spanish power and authority – "*un palacio indígena donde se tomaban las principales decisiones políticas durante la Colonia*."[9] And this is not only meant in practice. Aesthetically, it is one of the only surviving examples of hybrid architecture. Emblematic of a *mestizaje* way of life and history, the Casa de la Cacica continues to be a space of liminality, eliciting strong sentiments. In January 2019, the edifice was vandalized with aerosol, resulting in considerable damages that worried *restauradores* due to the porous nature of the stones. The aerosol, when coupled with the Casa de la Cacica's porosity, translated into the potential future of a building that was more than just stained by the past but wounded by the present.

But can one wound or scar a ghost? What crystallizes through ethnography and news reports is that the Casa de la Cacica perdures as a ghost building because there is no consensus on its meaning. Despite great efforts on the part of the Alfredo Harp Helú Foundation (FAHHO) to reincorporate it back into the social fabric of the community, it continues to occupy a space in-

[9] "an indigenous palace where they made significant political decisions during colonial New Spain." http://oaxaca.eluniversal.com.mx/especiales/29-01-2019/vandalizan-casa-de-la-cacica-joya-colonial-del-pueblo-magico-de-teposcolula#imagen-1

between, a perpetual phantom on the material (and temporal) horizon. As Peter Probst and Finbarr Barry Flood remind us, the destruction of a site discloses the erosion of social relations (Probst 2007; Flood 2002). Acts of vandalism are social commentary and reflect values; Teposcolulans (as well as other Oaxacans) are not just engaging in the active rejection and disavowal of relations, but are also rejecting the moral impositions of heritage-making.[10]

These observations lend themselves to a rough sketch of ghost building typologies. On the one hand, there is the Teposcolulan ghost building. In some instances, we might call this viewpoint indigenous, but since some community members choose to identify as mestizo while others oppose this altogether, I will gloss this iteration as simply a 'local' category. The local ghost building takes up a traditional vocabulary of haunting. Teposcolulans believe ghost buildings to be occupied by *fantasmas*.[11] *La fantasma* is a category distinct from *el aparecido*[12]*;* while the latter appears in religious discourses recounting tales of miracles, saints, and pilgrimage, the former imparts suspicion and is linked to witchcraft – *brujería negra*. By their nature, *fantasmas* are more fantastical. They are also unspecified, usually malevolent and attributed agency, making them potentially dangerous. As visible intangible entities – or absent presences – they can leave a mark on this realm. At times, as in the case of the Casa de la Cacica, ghost buildings are explicitly understood as the prior seats of indigenous nobility, material reminders of colonial power and broken trust – thus, they evince affects of uncertainty, anxiety, and disavowal. But even more broadly, the phenomenological experience of the ghost building is

---

[10] The destruction of monumental heritage can also be understood as a ritual of purification in the Latourian sense; it is an attempt to cleanse the environment of one type of history in favour of erecting another. Moreover, ritualized destruction often leads to the renewal or realignment of relations. In this way, destruction can be both a proper and improper relation.

[11] Simply, "Ghost."

[12] Apparition.

essentially an unhomely one (Enwezor 2006).[13] Locals perceive the figure of the ghost building as residing on the margins; once identified as an integral part of the community, it is now a flicker, both familiar and strange. Aside from being sites of haunting, then, the ghost building is devoid of sincere, sentimental attachments. An encounter with the 'ghost building' is defined by de-familiarization and detachment. As the Casa de la Cacica librarian, Mariela, described to me, "Before the project, relations with the building did not exist."

On the other hand, there is the institutional rendering of the category. For employees of the FAHHO, a ghost building is a heuristic device that is borrowed from "the time they spoke to locals" who indexed the Casa de la Cacica as "*lleno de las fantasmas*."[14] It is a deeply moralized heuristic, and one that attempts to structure and mediate Teposcolulan (and Oaxacan) relationships to history. Rather than considering the Casa de la Cacica's ghosts in a serious fashion (Nadasdy 2010), FAHHO employees interpret spectral presences to mean that the community is both "haunted by and disconnected from the past." Moreover, the ghosts are said to appear when a space is no longer a part of the social fabric. Nick had emphasized that the institution recognizes there are "multiple ghost buildings." The Frissell Museum in Mitla, for example, is a ghost building because the Mitleños feel they have been dispossessed *by* it (Leathem 2019). A building that was previously a space of hospitality, connected to the community by way of social and affective relations, now stands empty, serving no purpose. "By losing access to it, it becomes a kind of ghost," he explained. Conversely, the Casa de la Cacica

---

[13] In this edited volume, Okwui Enwezor riffs off of Sigmund Freud's "the uncanny" taking the direct translation of the German "unheimlich", which translates as the unhomely, as the conceptual scaffolding for a way to re-theorize how we experience contemporary global society. Enwezor submits that the unhomely captures the ways 'modernity' and 'late capitalism' reconfigure relations, leading to processes that uproot and 'defamiliarize' humans from one another.

[14] "Full of ghosts." From an interview with Macario González Santiago, dated February 8, 2018.

is the kind of ghost-building that the community dispossesses – that is, Teposcolulans actively chose to not form attachments to the building in the recent past, so it becomes haunted. Put another way, rather than Teposcolulans being dispossessed by history, it is the Casa de la Cacica that is dispossessed of intimate relations *with* the community that surrounds it.

The FAHHO's assertion that the Casa de la Cacica is the type of ghost building that emerges because it is dispossessed by Teposcolulans conceals the presumption that Teposcolulans are denying and disavowing their own history. As Nick remarked, "The choice to not care for the Casa de la Cacica, in some ways, has much to do with how they don't see the pre-Hispanic past as part of their identity, when it is definitely a part. They say they are mestizo." Consequently, Teposcolulans are figured as not only responsible for this particular formation, but are fashioned as subjects practicing *improper* relations with these heritage sites. To a certain extent, they are the reason the site is disconnected and dislocated. This language admonishes Teposcolulans, placing the onus on them. In so doing, it enshrines ghost buildings – and heritage-making – in a morally and affectively-charged register.

Theorizing typologies of ghost-buildings

Let me reiterate the emphasis on *connection*, *relations*, and *attachment*. They are part of a vocabulary – a discourse – that is designed to establish a moral order, forming the cornerstone of Oaxacan heritage cosmologies. Many scholars have written about heritage-making as a project predicated on regimes of economic value and exchange (Comaroff & Comaroff 2009; DiGiovine 2008; Labadi & Gould 2015; Samuels & Lilley 2015), yet only a smaller substrate have attended to how heritage-making also unfolds through a complex web of social and affective relations that reaffirm and disrupt ties to sites (Byrne 2014). In some ways, then, my theoretical interventions

in this chapter are well-positioned to not only expand the horizons of critical heritage studies, but also contribute to debates regarding how nationalism, democracy, and citizenship articulate with heritage through the prism of relationality (Abu El-Haj 2001; Breglia 2006; Hamilakis 2007; Herzfeld 1991).

Rather than thinking of heritage projects as propagated by coherently structured regimes of differing values (economic, political, or moral) as Sandra Rozental has (2012), for example, I argue that it is more productive to conceive of heritage as an assemblage, a set of embodied practices that generate symbolic meaning and shape materiality. In this way, I am building on Peter Probst's assertion: "…[H]eritage needs to be understood as a relationship embedded in spheres of symbolic exchange that generate both social and material forms of value" (2016: 266). 'Regimes' implies there is a strict structure to heritage itself, and I disagree that its constitution is easily outlined or formed by political intentions. Instead, the composition of heritage is always in flux and subject to human whims given the way it is governed by sentiments. It emerges through agreements and disagreements, attachment and detachment. It is absolutely nothing until a society says it is something. This is precisely why it is a cosmology, a way of believing and ordering our world.

And, as Nick and other heritage actors remind us, what is most at stake in ghost buildings is precisely that: the proper modes of attachment and detachment in relationship to the past. The emerging literature on hauntology can help us further develop this point. In his essay, "What is Hauntology?" Mark Fisher contends that the secret to understanding haunting is coming to the realization that it is just as much about the future as it is about the past (2012). There is an anticipatory flavor to haunting for Fisher, who describes the twenty-first century as one marked by "lost futures" that we are "taught" to anticipate. What's more, he writes, "…the disappearance

of the future meant the deterioration of a whole mode of social imagination: the capacity to conceive of a world radically different from the one in which we currently live" (2012: 16). The "failure of the future" thus becomes the hallmark of contemporary civilization. We cultivate attachments with particular histories as a way of facing and moving toward the future. These attachments are frustrated when an individual, community, or institution decides a future is foreclosed, perhaps either by a sense of impending failure or the notion that the future might not ever occur (as settler colonialism literature often explores).[15]

Both institutional and community renderings of the ghost building utilize the formation to implicitly comment on the failure of present relationships to the past, and each represents in its own sense a failed future of so-called 'proper' relationality. For institutional actors, this is a future in which, as we shall see, locals form proper affective ties to their own history – the indigenous pre-Hispanic past. But for locals, this is *no* future at all, as for them, the Casa de la Cacica is a distinctly anti-modern symbol, one that the community does not wish to embrace or recognize for fear that it relegates them to the past, only reinforcing Mexican narratives of indigenous communities as "living fossils" (Bonfil Batalla 1996).

In order to understand this complex temporality, it is necessary to emphasize the heterotemporal qualities of both haunting and heritage sites. Haunting, as Derrida has argued foundationally, emerges fundamentally from a sense of 'broken' or fragmented time (2006). As Fisher points out, this establishes hauntology as possessing two directions – it can move

---

[15] See Joseph Weiss's, *Shaping the Future on Haida Gwaii: Life Beyond Settler Colonialism* (2018), for an excellent and critical take on the ways futurity both operates and is imagined in Massett, British Columbia by the Haida Nation. Drawing on work by scholars such as Elizabeth Povinelli and Kevin Bruyneel, Weiss posits that indigenous communities historically have been perceived as being without a future – the future is either foreclosed or never fully realized.

backward or compel one forward through time. The collapse of past and future is critical to haunting, and it is exactly this condensation of 'time out of joint' around a particular building or site that highlights the material aspects of specters. An encounter with dislocated time also disrupts and defies location. As such, temporal displacement leads to an uncanny *spatial* displacement – space and time are refigured and entwined in haunting. In some ways, then, ghost buildings are matter-out-of-time (*sensu* Byron Hamann 2008). They represent matter from another era and provoke or sever relations.

Monumental heritage sites are embodiments of history (Augé 2006) and composed of nested sedimentations of time. As such, they are constituted by the materiality of time, making heritage sites intrinsically heterotemporal entities. I draw on Shannon Dawdy here when I suggest that heritage may be conceived of as a "churning assemblage," a kind of whirling and dynamic concept and practice. And this assemblage is materially *and* socially heterotemporal – it also sustains and suspends affective ties and social relations. Its sheer existence hinges on (re)figuring connections to history and undergirds broader cosmologies.

Successful heritage projects do not produce ghost buildings. Once a heritage site is reincorporated into the social fabric of the community, it has become a recognized and accepted *place*. Ghost buildings are the inverse, conjured in the wake of disagreement and located on the margins of society. The manifestation of ghost buildings, as well as their continued presence, gestures to the ways that heritage projects assume a 'one-size fits all' mentality, and in so doing, potentially generate sameness. Marc Augé's concept of the "non-place" is useful to think with here (2006). Augé's non-place arises through his theorization of supermodernity, where global processes and circulations of goods strip places of their history and former meaning. He also hints that they break down human relations given the fleeting quality of late capitalism, which

views everything as temporary. Ghost buildings, then, are instances where the global branding of heritage projects turns into a kind of *global blanding*.[16] In a sense, the 'sameness' or blanding caused by adhering to branding contributes to a sense of non-place. The incursion of global heritage in a local context creates paradoxical effects. As it attempts to preserve places of history and meaning, the unruliness of heritage creates the inverse, leading to failed transformations.

The ghost building is a failed transformation. It occurs when the experience of non-place takes over non-time (or time out of joint). While institutions endeavor to realign affects and cultivate the proper relations, the ghost building endures as sedimentations of nonrelation or the *wrong* relations – it is a congealed inflection of moral order. Since heritage is sustained by a composite of affective ties and social relations, ghost buildings 'make themselves known' through the erosion or severance of attachments. The feeling of alienation engendered by the ghost building is less about the mystification behind its labor or its commodification, and more about a distancing or estrangement from history. Steeped in liminality, the ghost building is not fully incorporated into the social fabric – a perpetual phantom on the horizon – uncanny in the Freudian sense. And it is at this exact moment that we see through all the talk of *connections*, *relations*, and *attachments*, and realize that heritage is about belonging. The ghost building either no longer belongs to a community or is yet to belong, much akin to Mark Fisher's assertion that spectrality marks the space between that which *has* happened or is *yet* to happen, making relations known without being either absent or present (2012: 20). History is dispossessed or

[16] The 'blanding' effects of global heritage have been commented on by other scholars, including David Lowenthal in his book, *Possessed by the Past: The Heritage Crusade and the Spoils of History*, where he speaks of global "popularity" as the force behind the homogenization of heritage (1996: 5).

about to *be* possessed. This is a powerful formation that endows heritage with a palpable moral and symbolic potency.

Rituals of Heritage: Between Preservation and Restoration

From where, exactly, does heritage – as both an idea and thing in the world – derive this incredible potency? It seems that heritage is either a project that people believe in or reject altogether, which not only supports the notion that heritage is very much constituted by various cosmologies, but deeply ritualized. Regardless of whether a project pursues a preservationist or restorationist angle, both of these actions seek to transform a site and, subsequently, the relations within which it is embedded. In other words, preservation and restoration are, inevitably, heritage rituals. Let me jump back in time for a moment in order to revisit a bit of *ethnographica*.

***

It was late in the evening and I was wrapping up a day at the John Paddock archives housed at the San Pablo Cultural Center in Oaxaca de Juárez. Teo and Jazmín, two Zapotec linguists, met me outside the library, which is housed in glass on the second floor of a stunning, recently renovated Dominican convent.

"There is another archaeologist here," Teo told me, pointing down the hall as we headed around the corner toward the ex-convent's massive stone staircase. "You might want to speak with him – he worked on the Teposcolula project. You know, with Ron Spores. His name is Agustin, and he's only here for a few days."

Suggesting that we invite him to dinner, I followed Teo and Jazmín to the end of the hall and through a series of small doorways that end with an airy office. Agustin was sitting at his desk and jumped a bit upon our arrival. He seemed young – about 30 – and tall and slim with dark hair in a ponytail.

"*Buenas noches*," he said, greeting us all.

"This is my friend, Hilary," said Teo.

Agustin and I shook hands. "You're an archaeologist?" he asked.

"Sort of," I responded. "I'm now working on an ethnography of heritage-making across Oaxaca."

Agustin nodded and paused. He looked uncertain about something. "So, you are between the two worlds. Anyway, Teo told me you are interested in hearing about the Casa de la Cacica, and the entire Teposcolula project?"

"Absolutely!" I said, looking over at Teo. Jazmín hovered in the background, staring at her phone.

"Well, yes. We can speak about it. But not too much. It was a very weird project. Successful in an archaeological sense, but it is very controversial. You have the INAH and the Harp Helú Foundation working together, and everyone wants this building to be perfect. But they ruined it. They completely ruined it."

A moment of extremely awkward silence ensued. Agustin's eyes darted around the room.

"Who ruined it?" I asked.

"The *restauradores*…you know, their job is to make it presentable, not turn it into a work of art."

I folded my arms amidst the tension. "What do you mean?"

"I say too much. We can talk about the excavation, yes. But anyway, this is an opinion. But an opinion of many. It is an...how you say…botched project. A failure. They tried to make it match a photograph, but we don't even know if it is a real photograph."

That really got me. They didn't know if it was a real photograph, which implied that there are also doctored photographs of heritage sites circulating around Oaxaca. Before I could ask about this, Agustin continued.

"We don't even know for certain whether it is supposed to be that color stone, or whether those floral disks they made are accurate…well, actually, it is true that those designs might be accurate. But it isn't supposed to look new! And that's what they did. It looks brand new – so you can tell that it has been remade. People don't like that. It is not the goal. It must still *feel* old – you have to be able to tell it is full of history. Now, when I stand near that building, I feel nothing. *Nada*, *y no me gusta este sentimiento*. Heritage should be full of emotions."[17]

***

The Casa de la Cacica, to quote Agustin, made him "feel nothing." This was problematic, since at least for heritage workers in Oaxaca, "Heritage should be full of emotions." And much like Memo, Agustin expressed his shared disdain for how the Casa de la Cacica turned out. Memo castigated the site for being a "restoration gone awry," bordering dangerously on "reconstruction;" when pushed to elaborate, Memo reacted like Agustin and confessed that he had "said too much." Both Memo and Agustin agree in the sense that the typical preservationist efforts of an INAH or FAHHO sponsored heritage project should allow the spectator – visitor, community, or whomever – the ability to sense that the building was old. The problem with the Casa de la Cacica is that it pushed beyond even restoration – it looked *new*, or, better, renewed, when the only thing that was supposed to be renewed was the Teposcolulan web of relations with the site.

---

[17] "Nothing. And I don't like that feeling. Heritage should be full of emotions."

"It's too shiny," said Memo, as we circled around the building with Lidia on that stifling hot day in July. "It's like a jewel! But it shouldn't be. You can't tell it is historical."

For my interlocutors, preservation, restoration, and reconstruction are part of a spectrum, bleeding into one another. Ultimately, the transformation of the Casa de la Cacica led to something undesirable, a strange, uncanny type of 'newness' rather than the patina that many prefer to see in buildings and objects that enshrine history (Dawdy 2016: 12-15). This 'newness' did not elicit the correct affective attachments or social relations with the site. And it is exactly these two latter points that I wish to take up here – preservation and restoration are two sides of the same coin, that is, they are rituals of heritage cosmologies, concerned with transforming our lived world.

By 'ritual' I mean the set of symbolic and agentive practices meant to anchor social reality. Designed to transform society and (re)configure or (re)affirm relations, then, it is very much the glue that attempts to hold society together. The anthropology of ritual has a long history – and many an Annual Review has been dedicated to addressing this massive corpus of literature (Kelly and Kaplan 1990; Stasch 2011). Accordingly, I view 'ritual' as having three properties, I am drawing on a long list of anthropologists, including the *oeuvre* of Victor Turner, Roy Rappaport, Clifford Geertz, and Webb Keane (among others). First, there is the *formality* of ritual, which is a quality that Victor Turner reminds us of in the *Forest of Symbols* (1967: 19). Rituals tend to take on particular recognizable (and approved) forms or patterns. The instigation of social action manifests through repetitive formula, providing a framework for society, politics, economy, or religion. Put another way, its performance orders the world. Second, ritual is productive and generative – it makes things in the world, which is why its very definition revolves around the concept of transformation. Yet there is a caveat to this – ritual must be

grounded in agreement if it is to be productive. As such, this leads me to what I take to be ritual's third property – that it is essentially social. In other words, it must be recognized by the social body as being efficacious or as possessing value, otherwise it becomes an empty gesture. When taken together, we see how these three properties endow ritual with its capacity to reconfigure, rearrange, and validate relations of all kinds; in fact, relationality hinges on ritual and rotates between oppositional energies of obligation, desire, and agreement (Rappaport 1979).[18] But these qualities are also what makes ritual so incredibly vulnerable, as one might presume from the details above. If one of the properties are couched in disagreement or lead to discord, then the ritual suddenly can fail. There is a palpable contingency to ritual.[19]

And while Turner, Rappaport, and Geertz might have emphasized the ways ritual is almost always directed at supernatural or mystical forces, I take ritual to be a social process that straddles the border between the 'otherworld' and this world, condensing politics and divine authority. It is inseparable from both spheres, and as anthropologists like Webb Keane (1997) and James Ferguson (1985) have explored, ritual can be deeply embedded in political projects, an instrument of power and hegemony in a rather insidious sense. Writes Webb Keane, "Rituals, moreover, may be subject to manipulation by the colonial and postcolonial state precisely because of their apparent role in reproducing order" (1997: 6). Within Oaxaca's heritage realm, the Mexican state – that is, the INAH – is charged with 'ordering' and orienting local and national sentiments toward heritage sites. So, too, UNESCO governs local, national, and global

---

[18] Roy Rappaport puts it quite nicely when he contends, "Ritual may, and doubtless frequently does, do nothing more than validate and intensify the relationships which integrate the social unit, or symbolize the relationships which bind the social unit to the environment," in his essay on "Ritual Regulation of Environmental Relations among a New Guinea People," in *Ecology, Meaning, and Religion* (1979: 41).

[19] Webb Keane describes the contingencies of ritual – how and when it fails – in his *Signs of Recognition: Powers and Hazards of Representation in an Indonesian Society* (1997: 9).

attitudes towards heritage sites through the preservationist policies it promulgates. To this end, rituals of heritage appear to form an integral part of state-sponsored, fraught ideological apparatuses.

Yet as I have previously argued, these rituals are directed toward a complex of intersecting heritage cosmologies, as assemblage of converging and diverging thoughts and beliefs about heritage. Although the political motivations of preservation and restoration are obvious, the supernatural elements still remain, sedimented just below the surface. Preservation and restoration emerge as rituals because they exert both a symbolic and "practical result in the world" in that they seek to tangibly transform heritage sites and objects into former selves (Rappaport 1979), while simultaneously serving to cultivate and regulate local, national, and global relations with and to particular histories. Both of these approaches – preservation and restoration – fulfill all three properties of ritual; their undertaking is a collective effort that is highly formalized and designed to literally "remake" heritage and figuratively "remake" social and affective relations. Rituals of preservation and restoration engage and transform the built environment; they maintain and intensify the relations between human and nonhuman actors, crafting societies into "proper" citizens by reconnecting them to a site that is also undergoing resignification. To invoke Victor Turner again, they make the obligatory – that is, a proscription to Western attitudes toward history and the 'past' – desirable (1967).

At the same time, the very goal of heritage projects – and thus the rituals of preservation and restoration – are inherently and irrevocably transgressive, oriented toward a preternatural order. After all, these rituals are practical and symbolic actions enacted by teams of scientists and artists who wish to reverse the passage of time (or part of it), transforming sites into copies – or perhaps holograms – of their past selves. They also are constituted by condensations and

oscillations of emotion (*sensu* Turner 1967); as Agustin, Memo, and Nick revealed in conversation, one must feel something in the presence of the heritage site, and it must be related to an institutionally-approved narrative of history. In this way, the entire project of heritage is aimed at altering and refiguring the cosmos; it is an unwieldy, multi-scalar, and emotional program that conjures ghosts in its efforts to 'control' and 'fix' time. If this is not supernatural, I am not sure what is. Any human knows that the manipulation of time is unnatural, its reversal, impossible. And yet, this ghostliness of heritage does not register when the rituals of preservation and restoration are met with communal acceptance, nor when it successfully rearranges relations in a mutually desirable way. Under this transformation – ultimately, the realignment or re-establishment of affect – we do not see a ghost. It is only when disagreement ensues that the haunting begins.

When Heritage Rituals Fail, What (of the) Remains?

What does it mean that the Casa de la Cacica remains a ghost building, and why? As I gestured to above, it is its categorical failure as a heritage project that leads to its status as a ghost building and thus, an 'artifact' of failed ritual. I call it an 'artifact' of failed ritual, because the Casa de la Cacica is a fascinating instance where there is a material trace – an index, if you will – pointing to a failed transformation and thus a foreclosed future (Koselleck 2004). A desired event was projected forward with much alacrity and emotion, but it never came to fruition – the failed ritual left its structure behind for all to view, a mark or stain on the landscape. Failed rituals generate ghostly effects and affects, and in order to understand how and why, I will quickly turn to Webb Keane, Victor Turner, and Roy Rappaport once more.

Writes Victor Turner, "…the ritual symbol [is]…a compromise formation between two main opposing tendencies" (1967: 37). If there is no compromise – an agreement – ritual loses its control, resulting in fragmentation or eruption on both a social and emotive level. As an intricate 'compromise formation' constituted by multiple, revolving parts, ritual reveals itself to also be about the intersection of relationality and the politics of definition (Ranciere 2004). Following Rappaport, then, we realize the ineffable significance of relationality, the ways ritual validates, intensifies and creates social and affective relations. Not only must communities and institutions agree about the fate of the building, but they must also agree on what type of relationships are to be forged. In other words, heritage projects draw on a wellspring of practices and instigate a set of encounters that precipitate confrontations over *what history is worth remembering* and *what a proper relation is*, besides prompting all participants to consider at what point preservation has spilled into restoration, and whether this is 'good' or 'bad.' Inextricably enmeshed in an aesthetic discourse brimming with moral judgements, the contingency of heritage rituals suddenly comes into view. Sheer disagreement, or a performance taken too far – such as the Casa de la Cacica's "restoration gone awry" and the audacious liberty of the *restauradores* – leads to alienation within and between all those involved, distancing and creating boundaries instead of fomenting and solidifying relations.

Taking all these points into consideration alongside ritual's other three properties, we see that the Casa de la Cacica project was doomed to fail from the start. For it was not just the disinterest of the Teposcolulan community that hampered the project, but rather the fact that even the heritage workers themselves could not see eye-to-eye on how the building should be remade. While the teams dispatched by the INAH and the FAHHO enacted a set of formal actions with the intention of preserving and restoring the Casa de la Cacica, the web of social

relations they found themselves (and the building) entangled in churned and frayed. On the one hand, heritage workers for this particular project did not share similar aesthetic visions and sensibilities; on the other, Teposcolulans, such as Mariela and Faby, saw the building as a haunted – and haunting – reminder of the "wrong" past.

"Anti-progressive," Mariela told me, when I asked about how she saw the Casa de la Cacica. Faby also articulated that it was an anti-modern relic – to preserve and then restore it revitalized a relationship to the pre-Hispanic past in order to relegate the majority Mixtec and mestizo community once again to the margins of Mexican history. In other words, members of the Teposcolulan community interpreted the project to be not only practical but symbolic, designed to link Teposcolulans to a reified, pre-Hispanic past that freezes them in 'mythic time' without their full approval and at the expense of potential failure. What's more, despite wishes to be viewed as mestizos of Mixtec descent, the attempt to link Teposcolulans to the pre-Hispanic past subjects them to a reconfigured identity that 're-indigenizes' them against their will. The return to the past, for Teposcolulans, reeks of colonialism and fraught discourses that subjugate indigenous-identifying communities. Echoes here of a civilizing or moralizing mission, where outsiders admonish locals, teaching them how to care properly for the past, thereby inculcating a set of Western ethics (and aesthetics) for purposes of control and exploitation. So, too, the community and institutions could not agree on how to utilize the space, with institutional employees vying for the Casa de la Cacica to be used as a museum or other type of sterile repository and Teposcolulans arguing for a more dynamic, creative space. A ritualized project from the start, and steeped in a broader institutional heritage cosmology, no less – failed and brought on a transformation that led to another ghostly formation.

The rituals of preservation and restoration were formalized and productive in the sense that they succeeded in physically transforming the Casa de la Cacica. However, the desired emotional transformation between the community and the site never took place – no reinvigorated affective attachments, no realignment of relations. It is as if the ritual simultaneously worked and failed, creating a liminal space in its wake given the palpable split between the heritage site and the communities – a split that could be likened to the fracturing of the body and soul of society (Ruskin 1989). In some ways, the failure of ritual leads to a tripartite split – spatial, temporal, and spiritual.

In his monograph, *Signs of Recognition: Powers and Hazards of Representation in an Indonesian Society*, Webb Keane draws on pragmatist and phenomenological approaches in order to speak of the ways that intentional action is situated within a temporal structure. Citing sociologist Max Weber's model, which states: "the meaning of any action is its corresponding projected act," we see how intentional action prompts a split between subject and object because the intended result of an action is anticipatory and imagined (Keane 1997: 12). To this end, rituals of preservation and restoration, as well as the project of heritage itself, operate at the nexus of pragmatic and phenomenological (sensuous and emotive) orientations toward the world. Moreover, the anticipatory nature of heritage comes to the fore; by seeking to resuscitate history for the future, institutions and communities alike attempt to govern and adjudicate temporality, occasionally leading to dissonance. What's more, Teposcolulans like Mariela and Faby saw the harnessing of the past for the future as a backward moving act; they interpreted heritage-making's aspirations as undesirable rupture.

The splitting of subject and object, the fracturing of a society's soul from the body, occurs when heritage rituals fail. Ghost buildings manifest because a particular kind of future

was anticipated, but it never *fully* came into being. I emphasize fully in order to point to how I take ghost buildings to be a formation marked by partiality, characterized by a seemingly successful (if contentious) physical transformation, yet the desired contents – the emotional condensations and affective attachments – wind up missing or are in disarray. In other words, ghost buildings, and thus the Casa de la Cacica, represent multiple fragmentations. More than anything, they symbolize the deep fracture between the material world and the emotional realm, the incongruence of space, time, and spirit. Mark Fisher's hauntology helps us once again—senses of fragmented time, the 'failed' future, and oscillations in space-time cohere in order to not only conjure apparitions but reveal the extent to which failed rituals provoke sentiments of displacement and dispossession. "The disappearance of space goes alongside the disappearance of time: there are non-times as well as non-places," he writes (2012: 19). Yet, haunting is taken to be resistant to this contraction of time and space. For Fisher, haunting "[H]appens when a place is stained by time, or when a particular place becomes the site for an encounter with broken time" (2012: 19). And this is exactly what happened during the rituals of preservation and restoration at the Casa de la Cacica – disagreements and the inability to pursue a shared aesthetic (and ethical) vision, alongside the dismantling of relations – resulted in a partial transformation, a failed ritual that, to invoke Victor Turner and Webb Keane one last time, shattered the temporal structure of the spatially-oriented practice of heritage.

Concluding Thoughts: An Architecture of (Im)morality

The partial transformations brought on by failed ritual, which lead to the poignant disconnections between the physical site and the human actors involved, are demonstrative of the ways the project (and process) of heritage rests at the morally-tinged nexus of acceptance,

obligation, and admonishment. As the ritual fails, not only are affective and social relations severed or eroded alongside the fragmentation of time, but the failure amplifies and transcends scales. Ultimately, it translates to a rift between society's soul and body. Shannon Lee Dawdy writes that architecture is full of morality, contending "that in describing the proper relationship between the 'body and soul' of architecture, one is at the same time describing the proper relationship between the body and soul of society" (2016: 14). I would argue that monumental heritage sites often serve as metonymy for relationships to and mirrors of society. Ghost buildings, as a heritage formation, are a type of sociopolitical commentary. They describe what an (im)proper relation looks like between the heritage site and the community, the institutional actors and locals, and the body and soul of society. In so doing, ghost buildings are instrumental in understanding the moral and affective dimensions of heritage-making. Distinctly cosmological, they order (or perhaps disorder) the heritage imaginary. Yet, above all, ghost buildings are constituted by battles over how one should relate to history, and what histories are worth remembering. What is at stake in recognizing their existence and exploring their becoming is relationality – they are a critical category of heritage-making that carry conceptual relevance outside of Oaxaca, and perhaps even Mexico.

Artifacts of failed ritual, manifestations of fractures across multiple scales, the figure of the ghost building is inescapable. The partial transformation of the failed heritage rituals leaves behind a skeleton, a vessel or material trace of 'failed' collective effervescence. Forever both empty and full of potential meaning, they are left open to constant resignification. So, too, they serve to further reconfigure relationality, complicating what it means to properly 'dwell' within Oaxaca's heritage landscape, coming to represent temporal displacement and disavowal, as well as dispossession on the part of the Teposcolulans, who elect to not revitalize their connection

with the pre-Hispanic past. No matter that the Casa de la Cacica now stands as a children's library – the phantom remains as long as its becoming is defined as fraught and couched in struggle. At the same time, as mirrors of society, heritage sites and ghost buildings trouble notions of citizenship and humanity. When Faby and Mariela speak as Teposcolulans wishing to remake the site into an emblem of another past for the future, institutions indirectly admonish them by continuing their efforts to engender what they take to be a proper relation and thus a proper Mexican citizen. Heritage emerges here as an architecture shot through with (im)morality.

Chapter Four: "It's the debris of emotion": Oaxacan Street Art as Decolonial Heritage

Two Different Kinds of Silence: Erasure and Censure

Erasure. Strolling through the streets of Oaxaca City's Historic Centre, a UNESCO World Heritage Site and capital of the Mexican state of Oaxaca, one may find themselves engrossed by the beauty and vivid color of its walls. Buildings are splashes of bright blue, yellow, crimson, and sea green that hang against a dramatic natural landscape of sweeping celadon *cordilleras* and swathes of desert brush, all replete with cloudless skies. Yet these walls are far from static, empty canvases waiting for their next touch-up; instead, they are prime sites for street artists, who decorate them with images that are constantly in flux. Under the scrutable gaze of these street art collectives, these walls tell us a coterie of crucial stories about the use and disabuse of history in Oaxaca, exposing human rights violations and the searing inequality that plagues the city despite its rapid development and popularity with tourists. As this chapter will explore, the walls of this Oaxacan heritage site stand as testaments to the uneven production of history and the ways that the Mexican state weaponizes patrimony in order to paint a picture of Oaxaca as a tranquil, secure, and enchanted space.

Street art contradicting the government's narrative – or image – of Oaxaca provokes violent reactions.[1] While wandering across Calle Tinoco y Palacios in the summer of 2015, I spotted one of these polarizing images (Fig. 5). Sprawled across a vibrant blue corner building,

[1] I define street art here as encompassing mostly murals and recycled imagery that draws on Mexico's many histories. Tagging and graffiti fall within the bounds of street art. The street artists I spoke to acknowledge that street art begins with these two forms of aesthetics, which are often glossed as vandalism. They credited the enigmatic artist Banksy in large part with the transformation of tagging and graffiti into 'art.'

the mural featured a young indigenous girl holding a flowering heart, sitting atop a quote from Mixtec activist, Beti Cariño, who had been assasinated in 2010. The quote read: "Brothers, sisters, we open the heart like a flower that waits for a ray of sun in the morning, we plant dreams and harvest hopes, remembering that their construction can only be made below, to the left of the heart."[2]

Figure 5: Lapiztola mural, located on the corner of Tinoco y Palacios and Allende. Photo by author, July 2015.

At the time, I had little knowledge of Beti Cariño and her activist role in defending human rights as well as promoting conservation and indigenous sovereignty in Oaxaca, but it was clear that

[2] *Hermanos, hermanas abramos el corazón como una flor que espera el rayo del sol por las mañanas, sembremos sueños y cosechemos esperanzas, recordando que esa construcción solo se puede hacer abajo, a la izquierda y del lado del corazón*"

she was a contentious and significant figure.[3] Quickly, I took a photo of the mural before another car could speed past. I was shocked when, two weeks later, I mentioned the image to a friend in Oaxaca City who told me that it had been erased: "Tragic! The government ordered it erased. It's incredible. The Oaxacan governor brings foreigners in to promote our local art and then eliminates the best of it! He, who is actually of our city!"

Nobody agreed with the government's decision to erase the mural, authored by the street art collective, Lapiztola. The image expressed shared sentiments across the city of the brutal oppression and marginalization Oaxaca's indigenous communities continued to face in the hands of the Mexican state. Quite simply, it revealed the felt *realities* of Oaxacans rather than allowing a state-sponsored version of history – arguably, a *fiction* – to prevail in order to push forth the image of the city as a fantasy space, full of magic and tradition.[4] Yet despite the negative sentiments it elicited on the part of governmental authorities, I later discovered that the mural spread across multiple digital (Facebook, Instagram, etc.) and physical spaces.[5] In fact, by ordering its erasure and silencing this historical moment, the government unwittingly gave the mural even more power over the local and global imagination.

Censure. City walls animated with images are suspect and subject to a number of political players. The walls fall under the jurisdiction of not only their current owners – often local Oaxacans or immigrants from neighboring states and Mexico City – but also Mexico's National Institute of Anthropology and History (INAH), the governor himself, and UNESCO. A

---

[3] Cariño was director of CACTUS (Centro de Apoyo Comunitario Trabajando Unidos). For more on her work, see: https://www.frontlinedefenders.org/en/profile/alberta-bety-cariño-trujillo

[4] Alongside Mark Overmyer-Velázquez's monograph, *Visions of the Emerald City* (2006), the media features myriad articles boasting of Oaxaca as a fantasy space. See my introduction for further details.

[5] The mural is featured on much of Lapiztola's merchandise, such as t-shirts, purses, and bags.

palimpsest of tenous property relations scaling up from local regulations to the mandates determined by UNESCO, Oaxaca City's walls are regulated by a set of ordinances designed to control its aesthetic image.

I learned this while walking intently around the city, observing and documenting the street art during my year of doctoral fieldwork in 2017 and 2018. "*Obra suspendida*" read multiple signs from the INAH pasted above woodcut prints festooning most of the Centro Historíco (Fig. 6), the heart of Oaxaca City. Many of these images were intentionally damaged, visibly missing parts or peeling away. No surprise, however, as these images exposed the faults of Oaxaca's government, illustrating the greed, corruption, and violence commited on the part of political leaders who embraced (and continue to embrace) late capitalism.

Figure 6: Stencil and wheat-paste image of a government official hoarding money and consuming paperwork. Photo by author, November 2017.

Yet what I was told is that it was not simply about the street art – though this was a major concern of authorities. INAH and UNESCO dictate what color one may paint their building if it is located within the limits drawn up by this institutions, which means anyone with property in the Centro Historíco must pick from a specific palette of colors when painting their buildings. This is strictly enforced, and it extends beyond choosing an approved color. To maintain Oaxaca's best image, properties adjacent to one another must not repeat colors and be complementary or deemed visually pleasing. Usually, the INAH's public condemnation of property that breaches these conventions falls solely under this rubric of 'regimes of color'.

Using it to censure street art presented an interesting and new development, suggesting here a certain complicity between heritage management and state-oriented supression of non-dominant voices.

Street Art: Historical Images; the Images of History

Whereas a heritage institution dictating color palettes feels more like an inconvenient bit of bureacracy, the INAH's sudden mobilization of the language of 'work suspended' in relation to street art was a fascinating invocation of their state-endowed authority over 'history' and 'heritage', the facts of the matter and the matter of facts, to borrow Trouillot's famous turn of phrase on historicity or the making of history (1995). The Centro Historíco is a purportedly shared, public space – a UNESCO World Heritage site belonging at once to all the world and all Mexicans. However, in practice, these regimes of heritage management have the effect, whether intentional or otherwise, of participating in the supression of the voices of actual Oaxacans. Attempts to reconfigure Oaxaca's public space, and specifically the walls of a carefully curated local and global heritage site, are efforts to interrupt history and 'take back the city' for the people (de la Rosa 2014). Street artists reveal the asymmetries of power inherent in Oaxaca's political system, conjuring images from history that others would prefer to delete.

To propose that both the government and the INAH are viewing street art as art and artifact (or something inbetween) adds another tack to the mix: it figures history as an aesthetic image, something deeply material, alongside suggesting that the primary threat of street art lies in its ability to (re)make and (re)possess heritage. Otherwise, why would it be policed? The threat of the pursuant images lies in both their symbolic content and their materiality, which simulatneously punctures the abstract imaginary of Oaxaca City as a picturesque colonial town

frozen in time and sullies the physical walls or integrity of the World Heritage site. Street art is the state's nightmare made manifest. As the government propogates a particular image, street artists interrupt it with revelatory images that are erased and the process repeats until narratives are superimposed upon one another, creating a palimpsest of Oaxacan histories – a material condensation of history that then masquerades as monumental heritage.

My aims in this chapter are twofold: first, I want to explore how street art unsettles the national and global image of Oaxaca as a tranquil, 'modern' bastion of indigeous tradition and enchanted UNESCO World Heritage site; second, I investigate how street art is a sociopolitical project with an affective tenor and query whether we can think of it as a form of heritage when the practice is committed to being against the state. My guide in this exploration is the artist Yescka, founder and leader of the street art collective ASARO. I begin with an extended vignette of our conversation. I then draw on ASARO's principles as a loose structure, considering, in particular, Yescka's own framing of the work of street artists as an explicitly Marxist mode of "time-blasting," as Benjamin might have it. With this framework in place, I show how Oaxacan street art interventions are precisely historical, intervening in a complex history of aesthetical *cum* political domination of Oaxaca as an "emerald city,"[6] a bastion of consumable heritage that has, from the start, fixed Indigenous Oaxacans as easily consumable icons of pre-Hispanic culture. The government and the INAH's mechanisms of silencing point to some unresolved tensions about history and heritage, as it is difficult to separate both of these concepts from the construction of nationalist ideological projects at the start of the twentieth century.[7] While state

---

[6] Oaxaca City's buildings are composed of a stone that once gave it a green sheen, hence the nickname, *Verde Antequera*, or the Emerald City. See Mark Overmyer-Velázquez (2006) for more on this.

[7] While the INAH and the provincial government of Oaxaca are not always necessarily aligned in practice (and are sometimes opposed in terms of the individual strategies of their representatives), from the perspective of my

actors are charged with curating an image of Oaxaca that is ostensibly at odds with quotidian life, street artists arrive on the scene to combat historical dissonance and recent dispossession. This resistance, I further argue, is essentially *affective*, charged with complex emotions which cannot be seperated from the political interventions that street artists make or, perhaps even more importantly, from the way history itself is layered into Oaxacan spaces. Finally, I contend that, *contra* the idea that heritage must always be a state-legitimating project (*cf:* Lowenthal), street art is irrefutably heritage; it remakes and repossesses the past *for* the people. As an act of reclamation, street art takes command of historical production and speaks back into the void of silences as to fragment monolithic authority. Against the system, anti-state at all costs, rebellious – even occasionally glossed as deviant – I thus assert that street art is decolonial heritage, particularly building on the work of Maurice Rafael Magaña (2020).

***

During Oaxaca's heatwave of June 2018, when temperatures soared to nearly 43 degrees Celsius, I scuttled beneath the meager shadows of Oaxaca City's low-rising colonial buildings and eastward down Calle Porfirio Díaz to the official workshop housing ASARO, the Assembly of Revolutionary Artists of Oaxaca.[8] It was unbearably hot, the sun also piercing through the relatively insulated edifice, and I'd have preferred to remain inside given the advice from the government, but it was one of the few days where tourists were not crowding ASARO's space. A slight Oaxacan woman in her early 20s sat at a thin, metallic desk at the backend of the studio

interlocutors, the INAH typically appears as an extension of Mexican governance. For more on these intricacies, see the introduction.

[8] Asamblea de Artistas Revolucionarios de Oaxaca.

where I caught sight of part of the collective drinking iced coffees and laughing. Realizing she was the receptionist, I presented myself to her and mentioned that I was an anthropologist and poet, and that I was wondering if anyone from ASARO would be open to speaking with me about the history of their collective and their artistic practice. “I’m specifically interested in the relationship between street art and Oaxacan heritage,” I explained, and she nodded. Yet, before she could get up and retrieve one of the street artists in the backroom, a tall man with a faint beard and mustache, in either his late twenties or early 30s, rushed through the entrance and interrupted us. “Lety, who is this? Is this a customer?”

He spoke in English immediately, which was unusual. Lety responded in Spanish, explaining that I was here to ask for an interview about the history of ASARO, street art, and Oaxacan heritage.

“Hi, I’m Yescka, you’re an anthropologist, what’s your name? I know what you do, that’s very interesting. You can interview me, it would be no use speaking to anyone else: I am the founder of ASARO.” Yescka spoke quickly, gave a big grin, and shook my hand vigorously.

Prompted in such a manner, I introduced myself and expressed my gratitude. “When is best for you? Should I come by here on a certain day or time?”

Yescka held up a finger and said, “No, no, let’s plan this over WhatsApp. You have WhatsApp, yes?” He turned to Lety, who had already written his email on a small sliver of paper for me, and ordered her to give me his phone number, too. “It’s fine, she’s cool,” he said, seeming to reassure her of me. “What’s your number?”

I wrote my number down on another small scrap and handed it to him.

"*Estamos en contacto*, Hilary. *Nos vemos prontito*! Ciao!"[9] He waved, heading away from Lety and I and towards the backroom.

"*Aquí tiene*,"[10] Lety said, passing the slip to me. She assured me if I needed anything else that I shouldn't hesitate to also reach out to her, offering me her card. "Yescka's a great guy," she told me. "He knows everything there is about ASARO, about street art; you are very lucky."

And I do count myself as lucky. As I later learned, many writers and foreign academics arrive on the doorsteps of ASARO hoping for an interview with him, and he was apparently highly selective of whose offer he accepted. Before I could send Yescka a message the following morning, I received a WhatsApp from him that very evening, around 8 pm. While he was, in fact, inviting me to a party that evening and seeing whether I was single (he literally said it would be considered *chido*[11] to bring a *gringa* from Chicago writing about street art with good Spanish to this party),[12] I managed to convince him that even if I was married, it would be worth his time to, first, let me decline the party because I am old before my time and need to go to bed before 10:30 pm, and second, I would take him for coffee at Boulenc, the nearby trendy café on Porfirio Díaz, the same street as the ASARO workshop, for our interview. Yet Yescka was not fully satisfied.

"Ok," he typed back in the WhatsApp. "But no, we go at 4 pm, not 11 am, and we drink mezcal together." He inserted a grinning face emoji and I weighed my other options. This

---

[9] "We're in touch, Hilary. See you very soon! Bye!"
[10] "Here you are."
[11] A colloquial way of saying something or someone is "cool" or "awesome."
[12] I bring this up because, as I later learned from an interview with Hoja Santa Taller, an all female-led graphic artist collective, street art is heavily male-dominated and notoriously sexist. This is one reason why young Oaxacan women have started their own collectives, both to combat the sexism and to provide a safe space free from possible gendered demands.

seemed like the best compromise for an interview with someone who founded the organization and who also was clearly an amiable but tenacious man.

"*Sería perfecto, nos vemos mañana a las 4,"* I wrote back. "*Te invito*,"[13] I confirmed again.

The next afternoon, I walked over to Boulenc and asked for a large table near the door in the courtyard that was both shaded from the sun, so cool, but also had decent natural light. Boulenc is housed in a beautiful, slightly dilapidated colonial-era building; iron gates guard the entrance and dozens of plants and flowers make up for the peeling pale blue paint on the walls. It was ten minutes until 4 pm, so I turned to my notebook and reviewed the questions I wanted to discuss with Yescka. I waited more than 45 minutes for him, nearly giving up before he sent me a WhatsApp message to profusely apologize.

"Don't worry, Hilary, I am coming, sorry. Only one block away," he wrote.

As soon as Yescka arrived, a waiter in his late twenties with dreadlocks, piercings, and tattoos flocked to the table to greet him profusely, grabbing his hand and embracing him.

"I didn't know that you know Yescka!" he remarked to me, energized. "What are you doing? Can I get you to drink?"

"We're doing an interview about street art and heritage in the city," I said, as Yescka responded about the drinks for both of us.

"First, two coffees! And then, we'll have two house mezcal margaritas! This is the proper way to do the afternoon, no?"

---

[13] "That would be perfect, see you tomorrow at 4; I'm inviting you."

I admit that I laughed, not only because I hadn't imagined Yescka drinking cocktails (and remembered how he had also shunned coffee last night), but because I was relieved that he'd shown up in the end.

"Hey, sorry again that I'm late," he said, officially greeting me, shaking my hand, kissing my cheek, and sitting down.

"No problem at all! I'm glad you're here." I took some time to review with Yescka the basics of the interview, including whether he would like this to be recorded and anonymized.

"Yescka is already my street name, you use that, not the one you have in your WhatsApp."

I nodded and wrote his request down in my notebook, crossing out his name.

"Hilary, I will do this interview in English. I speak good English; you know, I have been to Sweden, London, and Germany!"

"It's whatever you prefer, I'll defer to you," I said, underlining a few questions. "But first, Yescka…is there anything else you want to say before I ask you about street art? How old are you, if you're comfortable saying, and are you from Oaxaca City?"

Yescka nodded vigorously, laid back in his chair, and tilted his head to the sky. "I'm thirty years old, and yes, I am from the city, but from a distant *barrio* you have probably never heard of and never seen. I am Yescka because I like the way it feels to write this name. It also means 'a stone to make fire' in South America, not sure whether in Venezuela or Honduras. It is like, 'the chip that lights a flame,'" he exclaimed, "small but mighty!"

We sipped our coffees from clay mugs and I paused. "That's really interesting. Anything else you think is important as we head into the interview?"

"I wrote a section of the book, *Getting Up for the People.* Have you heard of it?"

I nearly dropped my coffee, because of course I had.[14]

"So you have heard of it!" he grinned.

"Of course, of course!"

"So you know a little bit of the background. I can tell you first who I am and then more on the street art and graffiti."

I nodded, and Yescka explained how he'd always been a creative mind, imagining things. He reflected on how he started doing graffiti in a poor *barrio* and had no money.

"When you're living like that, and you're impoverished and brown," he asserted, "you don't have *reconocimiento*." He switched into Spanish. "And no opportunities. I desired this recognition. To be recognized is having an identity." He then switched back into English. "Like, it is the proverbial 'who are you, what do you do?'"

Yescka began to paint everywhere and, eventually, all the youth knew him and he became famous among the street artists.

Here Yescka held out his hand as we were finishing up our coffees. "I am part of the second generation of Oaxaca's street artists, though you hardly hear much of the first generation because it is not considered art. In the moment that I met the first generation of street artists, I painted trains, just everything in sight. But in this moment, the painting is *vandalismo*, illegal graffiti, making me – and the first generation – simply *grafiteros*, or taggers."

"This changes in 2006, right?" I asked, thinking back to what I'd read in *Teaching Rebellion* and in other ethnographies about Oaxaca's protests and social movements.

---

[14] *Getting Up for the People: The Visual Revolution of ASAR-Oaxaca* (2014) is one of the few texts that explicitly discussed the 2006 Teachers' Strikes in relationship to street art until the arrival of Maurice Magaña's monograph, Cartographies of Youth Resistance: Hip-Hop, Punk, and Urban Autonomy in Mexico (2020).

"Yes! Exactly. 2006 is the point of rupture. 2006 is when graffiti becomes street art. This is a global decision, riding on the emergence of Banksy. Also, it's now art because the art is against capitalism."

"Can you say more about that? On how art is against capitalism?"

As the waiter came by to drop off our mezcal cocktails, Yescka emitted a laugh. "Well, I am a true Marxist. Everything is controlled by a small sector of rich, powerful people. All of this is about class, wealth, power. For something to be art, it is complicated. There is a lot of art that is capitalist, but I like to think our street art is *against* the system, meant to help. The public must identify and recognize the symbols, you know. And this related to class. When we started to paint the walls, Oaxacans loved it! It spoke to them."

Yescka didn't provide a direct answer to my question, but he continued to elaborate, speaking of the emergence of street art as an act done to "support the sociopolitical moment."

"Let's make something for us, for the people," he stated. "You know, when we started (ASARO), we didn't call it art, it was something sensitive, something more."

"What do you mean by sensitive?"

"I mean it came from the heart, we wanted to help. We figured we can do art for people, even if they say no. What the system says and what people say are different things. There are two levels of *permiso* – owner and municipal government – when it comes to painting the city's walls."[15]

I paused to think about where I wanted to take the conversation. So far, Yescka pointed to the dissonance intrinsic to the practice of street art, highlighting the ways it was anti-state.

---

[15] While *permiso* – permission – is not an idea I explore further in this chapter, different renderings of what 'permission' means in the context of Oaxaca's multiple heritage cosmologies occur throughout the dissertation.

"Do you think we could return to the part where you mentioned 2006 as a point of rupture before we go back to what you were saying about street art from the heart?"

"Before 2006, art was 80 to 90 percent Oaxacan, very traditional. There is a rupture because there was an economic crisis, and the strikes. People had nothing. People want to support you if the art is against the system."

"The rupture is crisis, and one on the socioeconomic and political front?"

"Exactly," he said. "I'm not sure street art is always political, but most of the time, yes, it absolutely is. For me, art is an expression. I'm very sensitive so when we are suffering, I have something that I want to produce. With my street art, I want to make an emotional connection to people and their conscience, to speak for the people."

"I was going to ask you what you thought about street art and whether it's always political," I responded, "but you beat me to it! What I'm hearing is that you view your street art as a vehicle for emotions, in some ways. Like, you're trying to form bonds with people."

"Yes, and it is more than that. Do you know much about the *muralistas*? How it is public art? It is different from street art. The *muralistas* are Diego Rivera and such. With public art, you have more people watching, but then the artist takes responsibility for the narratives – what you are telling the people. It becomes about making identity for the people, too, aside from creating narratives," Yescka explained. "It is not that we don't take responsibility for narratives," he added. "Our street art is more of a provocation, it's Socratic. There is an internal and external dialectic occurring."

I took a moment to take what Yescka was saying in, and he continued, passionately.

"You see, Hilary. The images are like writing, they're reminders for Oaxacans of certain histories, for what's happening. It's like a conversation on the walls for all to witness. We

ourselves either offer possible answers to the injustices that befall us or we ask Oaxacans themselves to answer."

Here Yescka deployed the Spanish verb, *responder*, which not only means "to answer" but connotes that a response is expected or desired.

"So. Street art is an emotional and sociopolitical provocation, it's how you write and document, but also speak back to Oaxacans, while hoping they'll speak back?"

"It is only possible through the crisis, through the rupture, and fueled by how we feel. It's the debris of emotion."

***

There is much to unpack in this conversation with Yescka. According to ASARO's philosophy, as well as his own, street art is a way of writing with images, an aesthetic production of history, and it serves a three-fold purpose. First, it is meant to counter dominant hegemonic narratives, disrupting the images promulgated by the state and UNESCO of Oaxaca as a space of tranquility; Yescka emphasizes rupture, which destabilizes, unbinds, and fragments the bounded state-sanctioned image, flooding the city walls and, consequently, making 'wholeness' or UNESCO's criterion of 'integrity' nearly impossible to fulfill or sustain. Second, through its materiality and emotive dimensions, street art recasts Oaxaca City's walls as a sprawling palimpsest that not only interrupts or seizes particular historical junctures, but captures and cultivates particular social and affective relations towards Oaxaca's many histories. Third, street art emerges as a form of decolonial heritage-making – Yescka understands himself and the street art collectives of Oaxaca, more broadly, to be against the system, which in Oaxaca is neoliberal and settler-colonial. Yescka's framing is cosmological in its own sense – a way of ordering and reordering the sociopolitical world and the material landscape through the synthesis of Marxian

principles and a particularly Oaxacan sense of history. He might not have explicitly mentioned the term decolonization, but his ideas resonate with debates happening in Oaxacan activist circles attempting to understand the relevance of the term, such as the contestations over the term mestizo and mestizaje (as Tona mentioned in the introduction) and whether Mexico is, indeed, settler-colonial. Street art, then, becomes a powerful sociopolitical, aesthetic, and affective technology for taking control or, "getting up for the people" (de la Rosa 2014). In the remainder of this chapter, I will address and further advance each of these three contentions, drawing on the work of Walter Benjamin, Michel-Rolph Trouillot, and Peter Probst among others. But first, we must understand why Yescka takes 2006 as his moment of rupture, when "graffiti" becomes street art.

Fractured Image(s) of Oaxaca: the Porfiriato, UNESCO, and the APPO

There are two markedly distinct 'images' of Oaxaca in local (and global) circulation[16]: first, there is the image of Oaxaca as a tranquil bastion of a static Indigenous culture nestled in between colorful buildings. This is the image promulgated by the government and heritage institutions that seek to curate the space for touristic and elite consumption. These actors encourage visitors to experience the city as a 'living fossil' – or, rather, a vessel – of a reified Indigenous pre-Hispanic past (Bonfil Batalla; Faudree 2013; Overmyer-Velázquez 2006). By contrast, the the second image of Oaxaca highlights the city and state's political instability, human rights violations, and massive socioeconomic and racial inequalities (Stephen 2013; de la Rosa, et al. 2014). This is also the image of strikes and streets crammed with protestors, crowded

[16] Several interviews with local Oaxacans – all between the ages of 30 and 38 – identified Oaxaca as having two distinct faces or images (imagenes). This logic or 'typology', then, emerges from fieldwork as an emic mode of conceptualizing the tensions between how the locals understand the city versus how foreigners perceive and experience it.

with tents and traces of tear gas epitomized in photos taken during 2006's unrest. The "first Oaxaca" – a central figure in the dominant Oaxacan heritage cosmology, has roots that can be traced back to Mexico's Porfiriato, Revolution, and is now upheld by the INAH and UNESCO. The "second Oaxaca" as we shall see, is the figure epitomized by Yeska and other artists like him, a vivid example of a 'deep, silent Mexico,' to borrow from Claudio Lomnitz (2001). I begin by sketching out these two images in order to juxtapose them and illustrate the ways these two opposing images create the conditions for a fractured history that is always under construction and contestation.

Image No. 1: Mexico's Bastion of Tradition

Oaxaca became conceived of as a central repository of pre-Hispanic and Indigenous heritage - even as the needs and lived experiences of its actual Indigenous populations were erased - during the Porfiriato, a historical period referring to the nearly 40 year reign (1877-1911) of Mexico's second president, Porfirio Díaz. Under the hands of Díaz, who himself hailed from Oaxaca and was of half Mixtec ancestry, Oaxaca would "modernize" and be refigured as a space of pride and tradition (Overmyer-Velázquez 2006: 7). The Porfiriato sets the stage for a contemporary situation in which, on the one hand, the Mexican state – and subsequently, Oaxaca state – is deeply invested in preserving Oaxaca – particularly its urban center - as a space of national heritage based on its Indigenous past, while, on the other, profound tensions with Indigenous communities perdure over the management of that heritage.

Díaz's "modernizing" projects were, in one sense, aimed to craft a particular image of Oaxaca City as a unique architectural gem and space of authenticity and aesthetic beauty. At the same time, however, Díaz's projects took aim at Mexico's image of the "Indian" as an impediment to social and economic progress. Urban development was prioritized, and Oaxaca

witnessed the proliferation of communication and transportation technologies. This said, however, the introduction of the telegraph, telephone, postal services, and printing presses were mostly designed to attract and serve the upper classes as well as foreign investors, while Indigenous Oaxacans were further marginalized. At the heart of Díaz's "modernizing" madness was the fusion of an industrial present (or modernity) with the monumental past (*patrimonio*), subsequently refiguring Oaxaca as a city steeped in paradox. In other words, this is to say that Oaxaca was developed and urbanized in order for the city to become "modern" yet its very development hinged on the harnessing and preservation of its traditions, as long as those traditions remained asthetically pleasing and did not challenge the state. Architecture in Oaxaca blended patriotic symbols and neoclassic iconography, and the first excavations and restoration projects at Monte Albán and Mitla occurred in this period (Zborover 2015: 23). As evidenced here, the Porfiriato inaugurated an innovative – and domineering - way of thinking about the past with an eye toward the future. It also established Oaxaca as a symbol in the national imaginary representing authentic Mexican culture and the arts (Overmyer-Vazquez 2006).[17]

One might ask why tensions over Oaxacan heritage existed and remain so resonant into the present, especially when we read over Mexico's history and observe the formative role Indigenous figures such as Benito Juárez and Díaz played in shaping the freshly independent nation-state. Paja Faudree asserts that Juárez and Díaz – as well as other Indigenous political actors – occupied mostly symbolic roles, their actions often effectively erased by a hegemonic narrative promulgated by *criollo* and *mestizo* Mexican elites up until the 1980s (2013). Faudree, citing Brading, writes that "*criollos* drew on carefully chosen images of Indigenous peoples,

[17] For a more detailed overview of Oaxaca's florescence into a tourist destination, see my introduction.

positioning themselves as inheritors of their glorious but inert past to distinguish themselves from their European-born counterparts" (2013: 44). This strategy denied present-day Indians a place in the nation, marginalizing them in such a way that its social ramifications continue into the 21st century. Further, this master narrative betrays the nascent development of nationalist attitudes toward patrimony that would become more visible during the Revolution. These sentiments and their accompanying imagery, I would submit, dovetail directly into how Oaxaca gets taken up as a stronghold of the pre-Hispanic past in Mexico's popular imagination.[18]

Glossed as colorful, tranquil, and authentic, the first image of Oaxaca paints the capitol and its surrounding towns as idyllic or pristine, and is obviously designed to commodify Oaxaca's pre-Hispanic past and Indigenous lifeways for touristic consumption. The INAH upholds this image of Oaxaca as a link to Mexico's authentic and glorious past through its multiple projects, pushing a preservationist agenda (sometimes for the worst, as we have seen) or restoring damaged pre-Hispanic or early Colonial heritage sites. Recall the walls of the city, which must be precisely and perfectly maintained to cultivate the colorful image of the city at the expense of the ability of residents to alter, expand, or develop their homes. Moreover, the INAH is cognizant of the number of tourists archaeological zones such as Monte Albán, Mitla, Yagul, and Lambityeco are capable of drawing, with Monte Albán currently the crowning jewel given its prestigious UNESCO World Heritage Site status.

UNESCO and its accompanying legal and socio-political mechanisms, in turn, take up this first image of Oaxaca – as vibrant, as peaceful, as authentic – and legitimates it officially.

---

[18] This is not to say that there are no Oaxacans who take this image of Oaxaca's traditions as points of pride. A dominant cosmology dominates for myriad reasons, after all. What concerns artists like Yescka, however, are the ways in which the 'global' image disguises present-day (and historical) violence.

Through its opaque World Heritage Site nomination process, UNESCO literally and metaphorically inscribes this particular, static rendering of Oaxaca, etching it into international law and our global imagination. By designating the Centro Historíco and Monte Albán as UNESCO World Heritage Sites[19], UNESCO reproduces an image of Oaxaca, crystallizing it in the world's imagination, as it were, that is remarkably akin to the one that emerged from the jaws of the Porfiriato. This dominant image – the universal picture of Oaxaca – is carefully curated, but also paradoxical, full of contradictions.

For example, take these two excerpts from a document entitled, "Draft Retrospective Statement of Outstanding Universal Value Completeness Check," found inside Mexico's World Heritage Site nomination folder for Oaxaca's Monte Albán and Centro Historíco (emphasis my own):[20]

> "Criterion (i): "…Around the plaza were built the icons of economic, political, and religious powers, a fact that makes the heart of the city from its origins to present a *permanent dynamism*, which is a contribution to universal urbanism."
>
> Criterion (ii): "The layout/architecture led to the merging of cultural traits among the Spanish and the indigenous population…traits that are manifested today in the cultural manifestations of the population of the city."[21]

---

[19] Both Monte Albán and the Centro Historíco were inscribed as UNESCO World Heritage Sites on December 11, 1987.

[20] No author, "Draft Retrospective Statement of Outstanding Universal Value Completeness Check," 23 November, 2010. Box: World Heritage Centre: CLT/WHC/Nom 208/1987; Folder: Mexico, No. 415, Historic Centre of Oaxaca and archaeological site of Monte Albán; UNESCO Paris archives. Consulted April 17, 2019.

[21] In total, UNESCO has seven criteria, though only six are often applied to monumental heritage sites. Criterion (i) refers to "a masterpiece of human creative genius," after 2005. Criterion (ii) is about the impact of a heritage site. As of 1996, it was defined like so: "Exhibit an important interchange of human values, over a span of time or within a cultural area of the world, on developments in architecture or technology, monumental arts, town planning, or landscape design." For a thorough overview and discussion of UNESCO and ICOMOS's criterion and history, see Jukka Jokilehto's ICOMOS study compilation entitled, "What is OUV? Defining the Outstanding Universal Value of Cultural World Heritage Properties" (2008), which includes contributions from Christina Cameron, Michel Parent, and Michael Petzet.

The discourse emerging in this document contains the paradox of "permanent dynamism," and the notion that dynamism is the reason for Monte Albán and the Centro Historíco's universal relevance or contribution. While UNESCO does not provide clarification on what is meant by the phrase, "permanent dynamism," I would suggest that it might point to a kind of cultural vibrancy that is difficult to capture – perhaps it may even point ot the auratic qualities of these two heritage sites. However, this is contradictory as integrity and authenticity – two of UNESCO's five criteria determining universal value – are based on presumed stasis. Such paradoxes abound, suggesting that the presumption of Oaxaca's stability as a heritage site is precisely that – presumptive.

This same document also endows the INAH with even more authority to regulate these heritage spaces, and consequently, with the power to define Oaxaca's image. Under UNESCO's guidelines, the INAH gained control over the buildings in the Centro Historíco by UNESCO agreeing to share the management of land-use. The first image of Oaxaca appears as determined – or, rather, overdetermined – by government hands and supranational institutions. The first Oaxaca is a tranquil, enchanted World Heritage Site, as it is so often characterized in travel writing. It is a "modern" bastion of Indigenous tradition, exemplified by its "permanent dynamism." At the same time, it is also a heavily manicured or micro-managed image, allergic to the presence of humans, as witnessed in the last part of the document under Article #5, which states it is within the INAH's purview to ensure that "…[t]he destruction of the area of monuments by irregular settlements can be avoided."[22] Within this image, Oaxacans dwelling in

[22] Article #5 also includes the language of governmental intervention. On December 23, 1997, according to this section of the document, Oaxaca's state government publishes a paper entitled, "Partial Plan for the Conservation of the Historic Center of Oaxaca City," which stipulates land uses and purposes; the classification of buildings according to their importance; and the standards that should be the subject of all interventions in the Historic Center.

their own city are refigured as forces of "destruction" just as their presence as "cultural manifestations of Spanish and Indian fusion" contributes to the city's authenticity and desirability. Given the stability, ideological force, and, especially, state and supra-national infrasctures that participate in this carefully curated image of Oaxaca, it should not surprise us either that the paradoxes it suppresses explode into violence or, significantly, that artists such as Yescka view their work as manifesting precisely this necessarily explosive force (fig. 7).

Figure 7: Stenciled and painted mural on the corner of Alcalá and Morelos. Depicting several Indigenous Oaxacans wielding machetes and Molotov cocktails, the mural refers to multiple accounts of conflicts between Indigenous communities and representatives of the of the federal

Much power, in other words, is granted to the government to control the built-environment and allow for dispossession and displacement in the name of preservation and integrity.

(Figure 7 Continued) and local government over the last decade or more. The face-coverings pay homage, perhaps, to the Zapatistas, and thus possess a particularly potent local significance. So, too, as discussed over the course of this chapter, this mural has been strategically placed on the corner of an intersection in the Centro Historíco that experiences one of the highest degrees of foot traffic (it is only two blocks from the zócalo). Here, street artists expose another side of Oaxacan life for tourists to see and for locals to remember. Photo taken by author, August 2016.

Image No. 2: Violence, Rupture, Internvention

The second image of Oaxaca stands in deep contrast to the first one outlined above; the 'other' Oaxaca presents as politically unstable, unruly, and dangerous, racialized (in the sense that Indigenous Oaxacans are pushed further away from the city center every year while simultaneously having to rely on the city for employment), and socio-economically disenfranchised. In other words, the second Oaxaca circulates as a counterimage, existing in direct opposition to the government (and UNESCO)'s fantasies, clashing and creating friction with what the space – and its history – *means* (*cf:* Tsing 2004). Quite frequently, my friends and interlocutors in Oaxaca City cited the existence of these two conflicting images. As Alejandro, a young Zapotec-identifying man in his mid-30s and lifelong Oaxaca City resident, put it to me: "There is the Oaxaca that is sold to you on colorful billboards, which Mexico and UNESCO wants you to see. Then there is the underbelly, the real Oaxaca, the one we live in everyday that you should not see. Violent and full of injustice, how the people of Oaxaca continue to suffer."

This second Oaxaca – the *real* Oaxaca, as Alejandro refers to it – can be directly traced back to a series of historical events that shaped the state (and city) into what it is today. Reaching as far back as the pre-Hispanic era when Oaxaca continuously fought off multiple Aztec incursions (Magaña 2020) to its eventual conquest by the Spanish, to federal and local legislations pre- and post-Revolution, and finally to the teachers' strikes and formation of the

People's Popular Assembly of Oaxaca (APPO)[23] and ASARO itself, these unesettled images of Oaxaca – and Oaxacan histories - throw violence and injustice into bold relief. Like the rest of Mexico, Oaxaca is a settler-colonial space of dispossession, displacement, and racialized governance (Aguilar Gil 2018; Magaña 2020: 5; Saldaña-Portillo 2017), yet unlike the rest of the country, it is the poorest and second most Indigenous (insert reference). In order to understand the second image of Oaxaca, it is necessary to present a quick overview of when and where, as Yescka argued, this second image erupts and crystallizes for the Oaxacan and Mexican public: during and after the 2006 teachers' strikes.

It was June 14, 2006. The teachers' unions had been protesting for months about the lack of money and basic resources from the federal and state government to perform their tasks. They not only set up barricades (*bloqueos*) across Oaxaca's main traffic arteries, but they camped out in the *zocalo*—the heart of the beloved and UNESCO World Heritage site-protected Centro Historíco—stringing blue *lonas* (tarps) from the fronts of buildings and the branches of old trees. Scattered ropes, cardboard signs, sleeping bags…the piles of human bodies, this continued, troubling occupation of a key tourist site tarnished the tranquil image of Oaxaca in the national and global imagination, and it could not be tolerated by the governor at the time, Ulises Ruiz Ortiz, much longer. With support from Mexico's president, Vicente Fox, Federal riot police were dispatched in order to *silence* and punish the teachers and their accompanying protestors. The Federal police attacked the "protesting teachers and supporters with tear gas, and helicopters circled overhead. By the end of the day, 92 people had been seriously injured and four unarmed

[23] Asamblea Popular de los Pueblos de Oaxaca

teachers were dead" (de la Rosa, et al. 2014)[24]. These militaristic open-fire attacks by armored police[25] on the striking teachers sparked massive public outrage and galvanized Oaxacans from across the city and neighboring *colonias* to organize. This broad horizonal-move toward grassroots organization birthed a number of social movements, a point of note for several ethnographies of Oaxaca (Stephen 2013). Of importance here is the founding of ASARO, the street art collective that falls under the umbrella of the APPO. Responding to their perception of injustice, ASARO decided that art would be the tool by which they would attempt to mend social and political wounds, and reconstitute histories denied.

The ASARO Manifesto states that "ASARO is a gathering of artists from various artistic disciplines which creates public art for the purpose of restoring social order." Written during Ruiz Ortiz's term in office, ASARO believed the key to restoring this social order was to depose of him, since he continued the decades long tradition of enacting various discriminatory practices that went against Oaxacan interests. For Ruiz Ortiz, Oaxaca was just the launch-pad for a career in politics, nothing more. And since the Mexican state worked so assiduously to manufacture an image of Oaxaca as authentic and bucolic, street art was one of the most vivid and effective ways of interrupting this imaginary. ASARO flooded the walls of the Centro Historíco with powerful murals that assembled or sampled imagery from Oaxacan history and combined graffiti and traditional printmaking. They disrupted the nationalist fantasy by taking back Oaxaca's city

---

[24] Rubber bullets and gas bombs were deployed aside from the tear gas (Magaña 2020).

[25] These black armored cars and police forces patrolling the streets of the Centro Historíco are now a ubiquitous presence, meant to loom in the background and quell any sign of possible civil unrest in order to protect Oaxaca's image. Over my time working in Oaxaca, I have encountered these packs of cars while I walk, and also seen them spew tear gas across the city to stop political demonstrations. Here, the neoliberal militarization of Oaxaca's security forces (to borrow from Maurice Magaña) helps enforce and curate the state-sanctioned image of Oaxaca, literally policing its boundaries and constitution.

walls, "inviting passerby to see what officials have been hiding" (2014). These social and artistic practices continue into the present with offshoots of other collectives, such as Lapiztola (a play on the Spanish "*lapiz*"—pencil--and "*pistola*"—pistol).

ASARO's Theses on History: Street Art as 'Time-Blasting' and Fragmenting the Image

When Yescka describes street art as a direct response to sociopolitical upheaval and economic crisis, a sort of rupture in the face of rupture, we can identify echoes of Walter Benjamin's philosophy of history. And, perhaps, this comes as no surprise given that Yescka identifies as a Marxist and views street art as a historical materialist endeavor. Concerned with truth and justice, it is Benjamin who insists that, "…nothing that has ever happened should be regarded as lost for history" (1969: 246). The silences and erasures that characterize the production of history are retrievable, for Benjamin, through the redemption of humanity, and specifically, the oppressed classes.[26] However, despite this, we do not normally have the means to see outside the bounds of the historical master narrative, and so we need something to explode this singular, co-opted conception. This resonates with Yescka and ASARO's mandate, which conjures up contrasting images and contests authoritarian narratives in order to provoke Oaxacans and rescue them from the task of taking the city and its past back solely by themselves. Consider again the ways that street art acts as a forbidden intervention on Oaxaca's very walls, confronting passersby with that second, ugly image of Oaxaca as a place of marginalization and oppression. As an act geared toward attaining justice, then, street art is a key part of social activism. Like the street art collectives of Oaxaca, Benjamin stresses how the past can be

[26] What's more, Benjamin writes, "Not man or men but the struggling, oppressed class itself is the depository of historical knowledge" (1969: 251). It is the working-class, the street art collectives like ASARO, the APPO, and other grassroots organizations across Oaxaca that will liberate.

weaponized and manipulated in all of its invocations. The global and national image of Oaxaca is, of course, in this context, a weapon to control the masses, to control its image, and avoid responsibility for human rights violations and perduring socioeconomic inequalities and racist policies. Yet street art is also a tool, a Nietzschean hammer, in fact, that doesn't destroy the city but strikes history sideways and fragments it so all of the silences begin to sing with the stroke of their paintbrushes.[27]

All of Oaxaca's histories, all of Oaxaca's times, are omni-present, co-mingling in the present. Benjamin recognizes this phenomenon, too, when he writes about history as "the structure whose site is not homogenous, empty time, but time filled by the presence of the now [*Jetztzeit*]" (1969: 252). He argues that humanity can only begin to redeem itself through "blasting the time of now" out of the continuum of history. In other words, every historical juncture requires a series of wars or ruptures in order for us to unsettle the structure of history and retrieve or excavate histories lost images and silenced voices. Street art is "time-blasting" technology; it responds to ruptures and, likewise, creates ruptures in its own unique dialectic of aesthetic historical production.

Yescka and Benjamin both conceive of history as a string or constellation of images, history embodied in flashes that must be seized and are designed to liberate the masses from authoritarian political regimes. As a Marxist and Historical Materialist mobilizing a "time-blasting" technology, Yescka and ASARO reach out into the ether and arrest time and the state's images. Yescka is clear about the ways ASARO does not claim to be recognizing (and thus

---

[27] Friedrich Nietzsche describes "striking with a hammer sideways" in order to not smash the idols but make them ring and reverberate to discover new meanings in his book of aphorisms, *Twilight of the Idols, or, How to Philosophize with a Hammer*.

representing) history "the way it really was", but rather that they seize whatever flits past in these moments of chaos and *re-present* it to Oaxacans as a provocation, an experiment in thought that can instigate change. Here, the arrested flashes unsettle or "shock" the flurry of UNESCO and state-sanctioned images, which are pregnant with a set of tensions no one may ever fully disentangle; moreover, these arrested images physically materialize on the city's battered walls (*sensu* Trouillot 1995), blasting "a specific era out of the homogenous course of history" (254) and allowing Oaxacans to both reckon with their past and speak back, thus enabling a dialogue that had previously been impossible. Under the shadow of a government known for its silences, injustices, and lack of transparency, a vital conversation finally unfolds through the production of counterimages, facilitated by ASARO and other street art collectives. Constituting a counter-history, these counterimages, the residue of "time-blasting", are the fragments of hidden histories, previously unexcavated. In this sense, it would appear that Yescka, ASARO, and other street art collectives have managed to "grasp the constellation which [their] own era has formed" (1969: 255), linking present-day conditions to multiple pasts and establishing a contemporary moment "shot through" with aspirational futures.[28] Present absences come to life in the official historical archive, the images not only haunt the city (and its government) like specters, but they reveal another critical point: how *unbounded* images are in the context of Oaxacan heritage and history.

[28] The direct quote comes from Benjamin's final thesis, which conceives of time as neither linear or pure. "Instead, he grasps the constellation which his own era has formed with a definite earlier one. Thus he establishes a conception of the present as the 'time of the now' which is shot through with chips of messianic time" (1969: 255). An image of time polluted with multiple times, or as fractured and unbounded, emerges with Benjamin's words here, alongside the notion that 'messianic time' may be interpreted as symbolizing the promise of redemption or salvation – an aspirational future free from the inevitably haunted present we all occupy.

In emphasizing this unbounded quality of the image, part of what I refer to here is how history, or simply, the past, is figured and mobilized as an image on multiple scales and valences. On the one hand, we have the image of Oaxaca promulgated by UNESCO and both the Mexican and Oaxacan state, which attempts to 'freeze' and purify Oaxaca into an idyllic version of the past. Freezing or binding this image not only reifies the pre-Hispanic, Indigenous past, but as a global and state-project, renders history into heritage, if we are to follow David Lowenthal (1996). However, unlike Lowenthal, I do not agree that there is an objective process to history that sets it apart from heritage; rather, like Michel-Rolph Trouillot (1995), I contend that there is no history that is not bound up in struggles for power and which avoids silences. The hegemonic '*heritage image*' of Oaxaca is socially and politically motivated and affectively-charged with a set of searing economic implications. On the other hand, we have the aforementioned second image of Oaxaca, which encompasses a history filled with conflict, injustice, and colonization. As a local formation, it exists in direct opposition to the curated image and refigures Oaxacan heritage as something else: a set of power struggles and perduring inequality.

Figure 8: Roughly translates to: "Never forgive, never forget." This assemblage of images and writing, composed of stencil and spray paint, was made by ASARO shortly after the massacre at Asunción Nochixtlán on June 19, 2016. Based in the Mixteca Alta, Nochixtlán is another predominantly Indigenous and mestizo town. After a series of protests and bloqueos on the part of professors and teachers, federal police descended upon Nochixtlán via helicopter to put an end to it all, especially since the bloqueos were disrupting transportation and the flow of goods. It's reported that six people died and 108 were injured. Here, ASARO pays homage to the fallen, labeling one teacher in particular a hero, and invoking once more the imagery of the Zapatistas with the face-covering on the face printed against the flaming heart. The burning heart may also be deliberately evoking Catholicism's sacred heart imagery, which signifies a kind of divinity through suffering and sacrifice. Photo taken by author, August 2016.

While this second 'heritage image' is silenced by the first, the counterimages rapidly and consistently produced by Yescka and ASARO clash and unbind through the ways they conceptually crystallize and materialize rupture. The flurry of images, the "seizing of the past" and its re-presentation on the city's walls, highlights how the two juxtaposing images themselves become unbounded, re-opened and re-signified – even shattered – as they are arrested, blasted, and reassembled onto the city's walls. Consequently, as Maurice Magaña has also noted, both

the Oaxacan government and the street artists "damage" the space (2020: 125), endangering the UNESCO World Heritage Site's integrity, through their unending struggle to not only control Oaxaca's history but heritage image. Even the erasure of street art paradoxically reproduces its time-blasting properties, as we saw with the virally vanished Lapiztola image with which I began this chapter.

Arguably, UNESCO is responsible for two distinct phenomena here: first, the ways heritage is an image-generating machine; and second, how the notion of integrity, or 'wholeness', is nearly impossible to fulfill. Starting quickly with the latter, and for the sake of clarity, what I mean to draw out here is that the notion of integrity is haphazardly applied to each of UNESCO's criterion and attempts to bind or freeze sites physically and temporally into a branded heritage image. Integrity is responsible for the strict regulations dictating the color palette of Oaxaca's walls, inasmuch as it also regulates the wholeness of the space. Unlike the archaeological site of Monte Albán, the Centro Historíco, which serves as both the street artists' canvas and living archive, is distinct in that a stone from a pyramid can't be removed. Instead, the erection of new buildings and demolishing of old is nearly unheard of; erecting or demolishing edifices would threaten the heritage image inscribed in the UNESCO World Heritage List.[29] In other words, any alteration fragments the proscribed image and leads to rupture. So, too, following Peter Probst's assertion that heritage sites are "image-machines," we see how UNESCO's vision – or image of heritage – is at once "totalizing and totalitarian" (155).

[29] Exact language from article 6 of the Venice Charter, which serves as part of the backbone of UNESCO's legislation: "The conservation of a monument implies preserving a setting, which is not out of scale. Wherever the traditional setting exists, it must be kept. No new construction, demolition or modification, which would alter the relation of mass and colour, must be allowed" (Jokilehto 2008: 43).

Yet if we bring Probst's claim into conversation with the work of Lynn Meskell (2015), who contends that the power of heritage lies in the ways it is overburdened with meaning, we come to a different conclusion. Despite the attempts by UNESCO and governments alike to 'bind' heritage images, in reality, heritage images are unbounded, reflections of these polyvalent material sites they represent. What's more, heritage images are deeply semiotic, sensuous, and constantly proliferating as actors negotiate what heritage means, why it matters, and especially in the case of Oaxaca, to whom it belongs. It is impossible to control heritage images, and likewise, impossible to abide by any notion of integrity. Street artists, from Yescka and ASARO to Lapiztola, are enmeshed in this image economy, contesting, crafting, and commanding the images that circulate across Oaxaca. Street artists fracture these branded images and use rupture to reclaim heritage for Oaxacans. In the process, they affectively saturate the walls of the city.

The Debris of Emotion: Street Art as Image Palimpsests and Poetic Archaeology

> […]an important part of the story becomes the layering of histories of activism and, in places like Oaxaca, competing regimes of space-making…In present day Oaxaca, then, the politics of heritage tourism involves histories and artifacts of pre-Hispanic and colonial space-making, entangled with deepening geographies of inequality that push Indigenous migrants to the edges of the city – as well as to the edges of the economy, politics, and society. In part because of these histories, Oaxaca has also been the site of organized resistance for centuries – a legacy that the youth featured in this book claim as their inheritance. One way to envision this layering of activism and space is through the metaphor of the palimpsest, or the 'layered space of movement, epochs, objects, information and ideas, actual, imposed, and superimposed'[…] (Magaña 2020: 3-4).

Here I lead with this quote from Maurice Magaña's ethnography of urban Oaxaca because he traces the space of Oaxaca City as a site of contested materiality and heterotemporality. In order to do so, he develops the concept of *palimpsestic space*, which for him, "When applied as an analytic for understanding space and time…illuminates the horizontal

and vertical entanglement involved in their production. Each layer and set of meanings is enmeshed in the previous iterations in ways that do not abide by the logics of linear time or Cartesian space" (4). Shannon Lee Dawdy considers the presence of multiple times in objects and landscapes to exemplify heterotemporality, and would perhaps refer to Oaxaca's urban spaces and monumental heritage sites as examples of 'churning assemblages,' especially when we recognize their affective dimensions (2016).

Even before I had a chance to engage with Magaña's work or read Dawdy's monograph, *Patina*, I had written about the layering of time, or co-mingling of multiple histories that infused Mitla – and Oaxaca's – landscapes.[30] In an article for the Mexican heritage magazine, *Arkeopatías*, I developed a cognate concept for discussing these phenomena that I termed "poetic archaeology," which understands the landscapes, built environments, and artifacts of Oaxaca to be constituted by multiple, conflicting sedimentations of history that are infused with, or solicit, particular affective formations through the accretion or association of specific 'images' of the past (Leathem 2019a). Poetic archaeology draws on prior literatures in the philosophy of time and anthropology of history including the work of Reinhart Koselleck, who marshalled the use of spatial metaphors for conceptualizing time and 'history' themselves. He coined the use of "sediments" or geological strata (*die Zeitschichten*) in order to capture the ways that the world is composed of "…multiple historical times present at the same moment, layer upon layer pressed together, some still volatile, others already hardened" (2018: xiii). Put another way, the term is meant to capture an image of differing "co-existing layers, but also alludes to the process of these layers accruing or sedimenting at different speeds" (2018: xiv). 'Sedimentations' proves a

[30] For another interesting discussion on the co-mingling of multiple times, see Diana Espiríto Santo's introduction to *The Social Life of Spirits* (2009) and Stephan Palmié's afterword.

useful metaphor, since it also highlights some of the key ways in which history actually works – how some layers are open to excavation and interpretation, while others seem to erode, erased intentionally or silenced simply by the build-up and inactivity of many eras. Furthermore, it illuminates how rupture often plays out – as tensions increase and fault-lines appear, certain histories can be activated and result in fissures or cracks that create the opportune conditions for a reckoning.

Thinking together with Magaña's palimpsestic space and my own poetic archaeology, I want to take seriously Yescka's final claim to me that street art is "the debris of emotion," especially since he invoked another geological or archaeological term, *debris*. Graffiti and street art isn't simply a tool of sociopolitical transformation – or a visual intervention. Rather, as another heritage formation in Oaxaca rooted in historical dispossession, it, too, is designed to cultivate a set of affective relations, and re-shape or reconfigure people's relationships to history. In what follows, I analyze two images as "the debris of emotion,"[31] showing how they both represent and re-present history as a remix of affect and politics, and excavate and recombine stratigraphies of silences in order to elicit emotive reactions.

Example 1:

[31] In some ways, Yescka's "debris of emotion" resonates with Ann Laura Stoler's colonial debris (2013). Stoler contends that there are durable, material remainders of the colonial order that structure and build the world around people, hence her evocation of the poet Derek Walcott's phrase, "the rot remains." The corrosive orders of domination leave material traces behind. The debris of emotion seems to be the ways multiple affects get embedded in these material traces; the difference being, though, that street artists deliberately craft these images or 'debris'.

Figure 9: Oaxaca resiste mural. Photo taken by author, July 2015.

This first image (fig. 9) of street art was taken in the summer 2015 during preliminary fieldwork. It was painted on the front of the building that houses the law faculty of the Benito Juárez Autonomous University of Oaxaca (UABJO). A message of hope and resilience, the phrase, *Oaxaca, la tierra donde Dios y la resistencia nunca mueren: Oaxaca resiste*,[32] contains a two-fold meaning. In the first instance, it refers to the national anthem of Oaxaca, "Dios nunca muere," which comes from the eponymous song Macedonio Alcalá composed when he was ill and impoverished in 1868.[33] There are two stories surrounding the origins of Alcalá's waltz, though both tell of a time in his life where he was at risk of dying and received a gracious gift of silver last minute, which allowed him to write the melody. *Dios nunca muere*, in other words, came to represent gratitude and the contention that unseen forces intervene or people help when

[32] Translation being, "Oaxaca, the land where God and the resistance never die: Oaxaca resists."
[33] Famously, both Pedro Infante and Javier Solís performed covers of this song, as well as Oaxaca's own Lila Downs. Vicente Garrido Calderón is credited with assigning lyrics to Alcalá's composition in 1955.

needed. In the second instance, the phrase points to Oaxaca's history of Indigenous resistance, or anti-state and anti-colonial rebellions.[34] The sketch of Mexico straddled across a chessboard, replete with a bleeding gunshot wound marking Oaxaca City and a giant dollar sign hovering above, points to the commodification of Oaxacan heritage and the slew of extractive industries – from the silver mining and petrol to coffee and mezcal – that reign throughout the state. Additionally, the invocation of chess symbolizes the ways Oaxacans are seen as pawns, manipulated across time and space in order to acquire land and resources.

If we apply Yescka's "debris of emotion" here, we see how the image draws from a wellspring of socioeconomic, political, and cultural issues that take root amongst multiple historical junctures, and combines or rearranges them in order to channel a sense of betrayal and anger. I would be remiss to say that my interpretation represents the limits of the affectively possibilities generated by this image but one can at the very least read the "debris of emotion" here is the materialization or aesthetic manifestation of histories negated or silenced. So, too, the emphasis on resistance and pairing with the state's national anthem, "Dios nunca muere," is highly emotive for Oaxacans, provoking pride in the state's histories of resistance and rebellion, while connecting resistance to salvation and salvation to resistance, another very Benjaminian relation to history. Money from tourism and extraction, "the storm of progress," makes it difficult for the younger generation of Oaxacans to salvage silenced narratives and stitch together the fragments. Street artists, by arresting and re-presenting the flash, awaken part of the dead.

Example 2:

---

[34] Just as Oaxaca is seen as ungovernable by both the Oaxacan and Mexican state, it also has historically been unconquerable, falling to Aztec and Spanish incursions quite late when compared to other parts of Mexico. So, too, certain regions of Oaxaca were never conquered, such as the Mixe. This is reflected in the name for themselves, Ayüük, which translates to "never conquered."

Figure 10: Bourgeois Calavera on Bike, woodcut stencil and wheatpaste. Photo taken by author, November 2017.

This second image (fig. 10) is known colloquially as, "La Burguesía Calavera," (Bourgeois Skeleton), and was found gracing the walls right outside the main cathedral in the Centro Historíco, Santo Domingo in 2010, 2016, and 2017. Much like figure 6 at the beginning of the chapter, it depicts greed through the bloated figure being peddled around by working-class Oaxacans of all ages, who grimace as they are crushed by the figure's weight. Unlike the *Oaxaca resiste* mural, this image has frequently re-circulated and been recycled over the years. While part of this frequent recirculation is due to the image's woodcut stencil and wheatpaste technique being one that caters to speed and 'illicit' activities, I would also submit that its re-use is also

predicated on its sociopolitical, economic, and affective potency.[35] After all, it resurfaces most frequently in tandem with Oaxaca's major protests and sociopolitical upheavals –violent "ruptures," to borrow from Yescka again. For example, the image appeared all over the walls of Oaxaca during a conflict in the Mixtec community of Asunción Nochixtlán on June 19, 2016, when federal police were dispatched to quell rioting teachers and students who had set up blockades across key highways in Oaxaca state (Magaña 2020: xvii). 108 people were injured and at least six protestors died at the hands of the police violence; evidence, once more, that the government would rather silence or repress Oaxacans than negotiate. In 2010 Oaxaca also experienced notoriously violent protests and civil unrest, which was attributed as the fallout from the 2006 teachers' strikes.

By re-appearing or coinciding with Oaxaca's "ruptures", *La Burguesía Calavera* not only blasts time, but marks it, becoming a polysemous and deeply emotive image embedded across Oaxaca's many layers of time and space. As both a deliberate provocation and exercise in the "debris of emotion," the image resuscitates silenced voices and critiques the dominant neoliberal logics governing Oaxaca (and Mexico, more broadly), while also condensing affective valences of frustration and betrayal. "The *calavera* represents the anger at how fat they [Oaxaca's government] get off our labor," Yescka told me during a later conversation. At the same time, the image motivates action[36] as people walking through the streets bear witness to an image of suffering and oppression.[37]

---

[35] While this may also be read as a class critique, the state is associated with an elite, criollo class. In this sense, the state seems to stand-in – or serve as an analogue – for one segment of society.

[36] Magaña refers to graffiti and murals that possess "the capacity to spark and inform dissident politics" as rebel aesthetics (2020: 125).

[37] This image also disrupts the touristic consumption of calavera imagery by making it intensely political. I'm grateful to Shannon Dawdy for this insight.

These two images are only a small (if metonymic) fragment of the entire 'archive' or image palimpsest contained within Oaxaca City's walls, which is maintained, activated, and constituted by street artists in opposition to governmental figures and supranational institutions. As these images are layered – painted, erased, painted again, and censured – they represent a physical build-up or accumulation of different, juxtaposed histories and their associated meanings and affects occurs. Ghosts of many pasts and unresolved psychic wounds return over and over again to haunt Oaxaca City. Moreover, the city's walls become affectively-charged discursive battlegrounds that speak to and yet transcend the politics of the moment; they occupy a space between art and artifact, the living and non-living. Once again, in other words, a heritage site in Oaxaca is rearticulated as something saturated with multiple meanings (as was the case in Chapter 1); 'inanimate matter' animated by conflicts over definition and ownership.

Magaña argues that the palimpsestic space being created by the street artists allows them to respond to the violence and reclaim an urban space governed by a political regime premised on displacement and dispossession; I agree, in part, but would add that this is a direct response to history, and one undergirded by the desire to reconfigure affective relations and provoke a total reordering of the Oaxacan imaginary. Also, these images spread across the city, such as this one, evoke absent presences, enacting the conditions of a haunting. History is at once seized, subverted, and yet reinscribed in a new form, one that aims to re-orient Oaxacans (and, one might imagine, tourists) away from the static image of a tranquil Oaxacan heritage space towards an affectively charged outrage at oppression. History, here, will continue to weigh on the minds of the living, to conjure up the ghost of Karl Marx, as long as street artists take to the city's walls and make them speak.

Towards a Decolonial Heritage

My final contention in this chapter is that Yescka, ASARO, and street artists, more generally, are participating in the creation of an innovative form of decolonial heritage in Oaxaca. On first glance, it may appear that street art is anti-heritage, because it disrupts the UNESCO World Heritage Site itself and Oaxaca's curated image as a space of tranquility and unadulterated tradition. Yet, as we have seen, street art is a multifarious *practice* that attempts to intervene socially, politically, morally, and even emotively, through the aesthetic production of history. Considering this fact alone – that the making of street art is embedded in an indelibly material set of future-oriented practices premised on reconfiguring social relations – affirms that street art is, irrefutably, a heritage formation (*sensu* Laurajane Smith 2006 and Rodney Harrison 2020). And as my own research has shown, street art as heritage is even further buttressed by the fact that it serves a moral purpose – street artists want the right to cultivate or determine proper relationships to Oaxacan history (Leathem 2019b). In this way, street art is quite similar to formations of heritage across the globe, which either commodify or seize cultural images, and abide by preservationist logics and ethics. We can't forget that any act of resurrecting silenced histories is an attempt at preservation, no matter what the agenda. What's more, my use of agenda is deliberate here: street art, even if it is "against the system" and anti-state as Yescka and Magaña's monograph show, adheres to its own ideology. Might we call this framing, itself a heritage cosmology, "anti-colonial" in the sense that we have seen in prior chapters?

If Oaxaca's mode of coloniality is settler-colonial, as scholars from Yásnaya Elena Aguilar Gil (2018), M. Bianet Castellanos (2020), and Monica Moreno Figueroa and Emiko Saldívar (2015) to Shannon Speed and Lynn Stephen (2021) have argued, then decolonizing must reckon with, fragment, and undo Mexico's current power structures. So, too, for the

heritage-making to be decolonial, it would need to address more than 500 years of Indigenous erasure, dispossession, and displacement in Mexico. This is precisely what Yescka, ASARO, and the youth involved in these counter-movements understand themselves to be doing; they are unsettling the settler colonial power structures and neoliberal logics that permeate Oaxacan – and Mexican – lives, but through the production of a new form of heritage that draws on an older form of heritage or inheritance – these legacies of dispossession and resistance. The unbounded, fractured, polyvalent quality of street art contests state-sanctioned and colonial-era epistemologies notions of singular, universalist histories, illuminating the ways in which Oaxaca's ongoing history is anything but monolithic. And while street art as time-blasting, as image palimpsest, or as unbounded, is all theoretically interesting, the most significant part of street art is that it is an act of spatial and temporal re-possession. "Taking back the city" and "getting up for the people" are far from mere phrases or political declarations, they are a way of living for many Oaxacans. Moreover, they reflect in the present and project into the future the re-possession of these silenced stratigraphies with vibrant images that appeal to people's senses *and* sentiments.

Epilogue: From Manifestations that Matter to Phantasmal Patrimony: Heritage as History that Always Returns

July 2021 – Stepping off the plane at 8 o'clock in the morning, a golden light illuminated Oaxaca's verdant cordilleras, conjuring up the same image that greeted me more than 13 years earlier when I first stepped foot in this land as an overly-enthusiastic student of archaeology. I had worried that I would not make it back to Oaxaca before the end of my dissertation, given both the global pandemic and unusual tropical storms battering the American South, which made travel chaotic. After being guided toward the entrance of the airport where a young medical doctor quickly took our temperatures and collected our paperwork, he made each one of us promise to never remove our *cubrebocas* in public, and to not travel to any of the towns – mostly vulnerable Indigenous communities – outside of Oaxaca City unless we had permission or business to attend. Most Oaxacans remained either unvaccinated or had only one dose of a vaccine that was neither approved nor recognized by the United States or the European Union. This palpable, geopolitical asymmetry filled me with an intense sadness.

I nodded and agreed; I would reside in Oaxaca for close to a month but knew that it would be nearly impossible to safely see my friends in Mitla more than once. Instead, I spent time reading, writing, and meeting friends and interlocutors for coffee whenever it was possible to do so in a safe, socially-distanced manner around the *centro historíco*. This said, five of my meetings were cancelled in the matter of a week, as Oaxaca was seized by another wave of COVID. Along with my friend and colleague, Guillermo, we drove to Mitla once to meet with Marco in order to discuss the future of the Pitao Bezelao Centro Cultural, which is a site and source of cultural empowerment Marco founded nearly a decade ago for the youth in Mitla. I also met with Andreas and a few other friends.

Over the years, and especially after my doctoral fieldwork, the people of Mitla have become more than friends or interlocutors: they are my collaborators. The project with Guillermo, "Este Lugar Tiene Muchas Historias," generously funded by a Digital Knowledge Sharing Fellowship from the American Philosophical Society, is a digital repatriation of the Elsie Clews Parsons archive, which includes her notebooks, photography, papers, and portions of her monograph, *Mitla: Town of Souls*. Together, Memo and I have translated significant texts from Parsons' into Spanish and Mitleño Zapotec and then attached these texts to their associated historical landmarks through Google Maps to create an interactive heritage map. This map is curated by Marco and the Pitao Bezelao Cultural Center; they will be – are, and always have been – the stewards of the historical and ethnographic knowledge Parsons and other anthropologists and archaeologists, have produced about their community for the last 150 years. Alongside the digital repatriation project, I also began translating Andreas' poetry and writing, placing it in paying literary venues that wished to amplify Indigenous Mexican voices. I suppose that one of the questions following me everywhere I went as I wrapped up my time in Mitla and Oaxaca was: for what I have been given, what could I give in return?

***

As usual, on the day that Guillermo and I visited Marco, Mitla had delightful weather. It was in the high 70s, perfectly pleasant compared to Oaxaca, with a pallid light and cool wind that rattled the trees and metallic components of the buildings in such a way that made Memo jump.

"What's wrong?" I laughed.

“That wind,” he remarked. “I find it creepy, it always sounds like a voice, like it’s trying to say something. And it goes right through you. It actually always bothered me when I was living here.”

We hurried from his car to the Pitao Bezelao Cultural Center where we proceeded to have coffee with Marco and chat about finally building the interface for our project’s website. It was great to see Marco again, but there was a tinge of grief to the entire interaction. He spoke of the ways that COVID had nearly crushed Mitla’s economy from the dearth of tourists.

“It has been hard. But we’ll always have the center; you can see I’ve been hosting art workshops with the children,” he said, gesturing to the wall next to us.

Memo and I nodded, acknowledging our favorite drawings. Our meeting with Marco was short, and before we knew it, we had to return to the city. Stepping back out into Mitla’s harsh sun, Memo placed his hat back on his head. “Is there anything else we should say hi and bye to?”

The answer was absolutely obvious to me. “The ruins,” I blurted. And we laughed.

“Not the Calvario or the Frissell?” he asked, as we began walking up the steep cement road dotted with cacti toward the archaeological zone.

“We already saw the Frissell,” I shrugged. We’d driven by it when we entered Mitla; the museum was the same as ever, a sprawling, ivory Spanish colonial hacienda bereft of any life save for some weeds and a lone police officer, standing guard and chomping gum. This said, the shell of a future hotel was rising from behind the entrance of the Frissell, within the bounds of its courtyard.

“I thought you might want to see it again, since you have written about it in your dissertation,” Memo laughed. “Though now we will just have to ask Jorge about the Frissell. Do

you think he knows? He will die when he hears that there's a hotel being built inside it. Basically on top of it. Will you stay there when it opens? It's probably haunted!"

"Oh, sure, I'll absolutely stay the night. But you're correct, it doesn't feel quite right." As I finished the sentence, we turned the corner past the line of *puestos* and noticed the ruins behind the gates.

"It seems they are closed. They must have reached their quota for the day," Memo lamented, jangling the heavy chains and large padlock.

I emitted a heavy sigh. "A quota? Because of COVID, I imagine."

"Yes, I forgot that's what the INAH had started to do."

I'd known that Oaxaca's museums remained closed, but I didn't realize that despite the archaeological zones being 'open' for the public, that there was a cap on visitors. I inched closer to the gates and eyed the palatial ruins from behind the very frame this dissertation begins with – barred gates and chained fences. They really did look to be imprisoned.

A cool gale of wind swept down and kicked up dust in front of the ruins, and I noticed one of the archaeological zone's custodians in the small booth avert his eyes. He'd been watching Memo and I gaze at the ruins.

"It's a pity," I said to Memo, "that we do not have permission."

***

Unanswered Questions, Unfinished Business

Throughout this dissertation, questions of permission, of obligation, and of proper relationality to history come together in a rhizomatic-fashion to offer us an image of what heritage is and what it does: socially, politically, morally, and even emotively. So, too, the trope or figure of 'imprisonment' emerges repetitively as does the possibility of a 'return' whether this

return may be material (the restitution or repatriation of concrete artifacts) or immaterial (haunting, apparitions, or the resuscitation of historical narratives) in its manifestation. From the very start, we are presented with the phantom images – illicit reproductions – of Mitla's crimson palatial ruins, unwittingly wielded by a foreign artist who believes himself to have permission to capture and circulate their likeness. Soon after, in "Chapter 1: Manifestations that Matter," we begin with the sight of these ruins crouching behind metallic gates, their relationality with the Mitleño community at the total mercy of the INAH, which dictates and forcefully reshapes a local assemblage of social, economic, and affective attachments to this heritage site. Likewise, the looting of the Frissell presents itself not only as a political act or moral violation, but as another iteration of imprisonment – the Frissell collection is being held hostage by the very institution charged with its protection. The return of the collection, the return of entry to the ruins – or, ultimately, to a proper relationality to history – looms on the horizon, always imminent but never coalescing. And so it goes. History as embodied by monumental and material heritage is always at once both an act of possession and dispossession, and through the figure of the ghost building and the counter-heritage efforts of street artists, we are left at the end of this dissertation with the sense that the haunting is inescapable. Heritage is constituted by the tensions between absence and presence.

This dissertation, then, exists within the interstices of critical heritage studies, the anthropology of history, hauntology, and archaeology. It derives its identity from the emergent field of archaeological ethnography, but ultimately understands itself as moving beyond a set of concerns that usually preoccupy this scholarship. Rather than examining the socioeconomic and political ramifications of tourism or positing heritage as a kind of panacea – a tool for (and index of) sustainable development – I have focused on what is often left unseen or unnoticed and asked

the questions such as: How and why is heritage always being resignified? What does it mean to live, and to live well, with heritage? How does it make people who must dwell within it or alongside it actually feel? Might there be a local cosmology or historically rooted way of relating to Oaxaca's myriad monumental heritage sites? And finally, why is it that efforts to preserve and restore material culture often generate modes of destruction? This dissertation offers no solution nor resolution, but does propose a few answers.

When we understand that the conceptual architecture of heritage is contingent on a particular geographical and historical context, and that it is both locally and globally constituted by a system of beliefs that simultaneously converge and contest its meaning, then the unwieldy and paradoxical qualities of heritage begin to make sense. The very bones of heritage are fraught and fragile; it is an unstable formation. Yet this is not the point of the dissertation; rather, what I hope to suggest is that heritage is ultimately about a set of ever-evolving moral obligations and value-judgements that seek to cultivate – or sever – social and affective attachments both among humans and between humans and nonhumans (the things themselves). It is less about what heritage is, or what it does, and more about comprehending, from context-to-context, the contours of a proper relation or orientation towards the past. Grasping heritage, then, would mean understanding how the past makes itself known, as well as how to both wield it and unarm it. Does the context within which you work require an intervention? Put another way, is preservation or restoration always the answer, and why or why not? Caitlin DeSilvey's work does not explicitly claim that heritage is about proper relationality but she comes close to the mark when she advocates for allowing heritage to decay and decompose.

The sensuous experience of living in a landscape where one is alienated from history because the materiality of the past – monumental heritage sites, for the most part – is *possessed*

as the inalienable property of the Mexican state fashions a very specific figuration of heritage: a phantasmal patrimony. Yet for all the ways that heritage – and looting, in particular – generates haunting across Oaxaca and most likely in Mexico, it may not operate this way everywhere. A question going forward for other scholars of heritage would be whether similar acts of theft or dispossession create the types of events or encounters described herein.

There is also the Nietzschean concern that state and supranational efforts (by UNESCO and ICOMOS, etc.) to preserve the past above all else suffocates the living. I think, unfortunately, Nietzsche may be half-right; as the dissertation shows, the attempts to preserve only disturb the living – and enliven the dead. Quite possibly, aside from this phantasmal patrimony, we have been presented with a kind of global phantom economy. The constant exchange of absent presences (or present absences) renders an entire industry as a séance. As this 'worldly' concept of heritage utterly reconfigures the lives of those across the globe, 'otherwordly' effects – and affects – proliferate. This is the world that heritage has made.

Bibliography

Abu El-Haj, Nadia. 2001. *Facts on the Ground: Archaeological Practice and Territorial Self-Fashioning in Israeli Society*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Aguilar Gil, Yásnaya E. 2018. "Nosotros sin México: naciones indígenas y autonomía." *Nexos: Cultura y vida cotidiana*. https://cultura.nexos.com.mx/?p=15878

Allen, Jafari S. 2011. *Venceremos? The Erotics of Black Self-making in Cuba*. Durham: Duke University Press.

Arfman, William. 2008. *Visiting the Calvario at Mitla, Oaxaca: A Critical Look at the Continuity of a Religious Practice*. Leiden: Sidestone Press.

Bandelier, Adolph Francis. 1884. *Report of an Archaeological Tour in Mexico in 1881*. Boston: Institute by Cupples, Upham, and co.

Barabas, Alicia, Marcus Winter, et al. 2005. *La cueva del Diablo: Creencias y rituals de ayer y de hoy entre los zapotecos de Mitla,* Oaxaca. D. F., México: INAH.

Bennett, Jane. 2010. *Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things*. Durham: Duke University Press.

Bernal, Ignacio. 1979. *Historia de la arqueología en México*. Mexico City: Porrúa.

Boddy, Janet. 1994. "Spirit Possession Revisited: Beyond Instrumentality." *Annual Review of Anthropology* 23: 407-434.

Bonfil Batalla, Guillermo. 1996. *México Profundo: Reclaiming a Civilization*. Philip A. Dennis, trans. Austin: University of Texas Press.

Boyer, Dominic. 2019. *Energopolitics: Wind and Power in the Anthropocene*. Durham: Duke University Press.

Breglia, Lisa. 2006. *Monumental Ambivalence: The Politics of Heritage*. Austin: University of Texas Press.

Brulotte, Ronda. 2012. *Between Art and Artifact: Archaeological Replicas and Cultural Production in Oaxaca, Mexico*. Austin: University of Texas Press.

Bueno, Christina. 2016. *The Pursuit of Ruins: Archaeology, History, and the Making of Modern Mexico*. Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press.

Byrne, Denis. 1996. "Deep nation: Australia's acquisition of an indigenous past." *Aboriginal History* 20: 82-107.

Castañeda, Quetzil. 2009. “Heritage and Indigeneity: Transformations in the Politics of Tourism.” In *Cultural Tourism in Latin America: The Politics of Space and Imagery*, edited by Michiel Baud and Annelou Ypeij, pp. 263-295. Leiden: Brill Publishing.

Castellanos, M. Bianet. 2020. *Indigenous Dispossession: Housing and Maya Indebtedness in Mexico*. Palo Alto: Stanford University Press.

Córdoba Azcárte, Matilde. 2020. *Stuck with Tourism: Space, Power, and Labor in Contemporary Yucatan*. Berkeley: University of California Press.

Cottom Bolfy. 2008. *Nación, patrimonio cultural y legislación: los debates parlamentarios y la construcción del marco jurídico federal sobre monumentos en México, siglo xx*. México: Porrúa.

Cruikshank, Julie. 2006. *Do Glaciers Listen? Local Knowledge, Colonial Encounters, and Social Imagination.* Vancouver: UBC Press.

Dawdy, Shannon L. 2016. *Patina: A Profane Archaeology*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

De la Cadena, Marisol. 2015. *Earth Beings: Ecologies of Practice across Andean Worlds*. Durham: Duke University Press.

Denham, Diana. 2008. *Teaching Rebellion: Stories from the Grassroots Mobilization in Oaxaca*. Oakland: PM Press.

Derrida, Jacques. 1994. *Specters of Marx: The State of the Debt, the Work of Mourning and the New International*. Peggy Kamuf, trans. London: Routledge.

Dunlap, Alexander. 2018. “The ‘solution’ is now the ‘problem’: wind energy, colonization and the ‘genocide-ecocide nexus’ in the Isthmus of Tehuantepec, Oaxaca.” *International Journal of Human Rights* 22(4): 550-573.

Durkheim, Émile. 1995. *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life*. Karen E. Fields, trans. New York: The Free Press.

Espírito Santo, Diana. 2016. Recursivity and the self-reflexive cosmos: Tricksters in Cuban and Brazilian Spirit Mediumship Practices. *Social Analysis* 60(1): 37-55.

Espírito Santo, Diana, and Ruy Blanes. 2013. *The Social Life of Spirits.* Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Faudree, P. 2013. *Singing for the Dead: The Politics of Indigenous Revival in Mexico.* Durham: Duke University Press.

Feinberg. B. 2003. *The Devil's Book of Culture: History, Mushrooms, and Caves in Southern Mexico*. Austin: University of Texas Press.

Ferry, Elizabeth Emma. 2005. *Not Ours Alone: Patrimony, Value, and Collectivity in Contemporary Mexico.* New York: Columbia University Press.

Fisher, Mark. 2012. "What is Hauntology?" *Film Quarterly* 66(1): 16-24.

Florescano, Enrique. 1993. "The Creation of the Museo Nacional de Antropología of Mexico and its Scientific, Educational, and Political Purposes," in *Collecting the Pre-Columbian Past: A Symposium at Dumbarton Oaks 6th and 7th October 1990*, edited by Elizabeth Hill Boone. D.C.: Dumbarton Oaks.

Gamio, Manuel. 2010 [1916]. *Forjando Patria: Pro-nacionalismo*. Fernando Armstrong-Fumero, trans. Boulder: University Press of Colorado.

Gell, Alfred. 1994. The Technology of Enchantment and the Enchantment of Technology. *Anthropology, Art, and Aesthetics*, edited by Jeremy Coote. Oxford: Clarendon Press.

Gell, Alfred. 1998. *Art and Agency: An Anthropological Theory*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Gordon, Avery. 1997. *Ghostly Matters: Haunting and the Sociological Imagination*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.

Hamann, Byron. 2002. "The Social Life of Pre-Sunrise Things: Indigenous Mesoamerican Archaeology." *Current Anthropology* 43(3): 351-382.

Hamilakis, Yannis, and Aris Anagnostopoulos. 2009. "What is Archaeological Ethnography?" *Public Archaeology* 8(2-3): 65-87.

Herzfeld, Michael. 1982. *Ours Once More: Folklore, Ideology, and the Making of Modern Greece*. Austin: University of Texas Press.

Holbraad, Martin. 2011. *Can the Thing Speak?* Working Papers Series #7. Open Anthropology Collective Press.

Holley-Kline, Sam. 2018. *Entangled Archaeology, Labor, and Industry in El Tajín, Mexico, 1880-2018*. PhD dissertation, Stanford University.

Hollowell, Julie. 2006. "Moral Arguments on Subsistence Digging." In *The Ethics of Archaeology: Philosophical Perspectives on Archaeological Practice,* edited by Chris Scarre and Geoffrey Scarre, 69-94. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Howe, Cymene. 2019. *Ecologics: Wind and Power in the Anthropocene*. Durham: Duke University Press.

Ingold, Tim. 2000. *The Perception of the Environment: Essays on Livelihood, Dwelling, and Skill*. London: Routledge.

Johnson, Paul Christopher. 2011. An Atlantic Geneaology of "Spirit Possession." *Comparative Studies in Society and History 53*(2): 393-425.

Joyce, Arthur. 2013. Mixtecs, Zapotecs, and Chatinos: Ancient Peoples of Southern Mexico. Hoboken, NJ: Wiley-Blackwell.

Kauanui, J. Kehaulani. 2018. *Paradoxes of Hawaiian Sovereignty: Land, Sex, and the Colonial Politics of State Nationalismf*. Durham: Duke University Press.

Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, Barbara. 1998. *Destination Culture: Tourism, Museums, and Heritage*. Berkeley: University of California Press.

Lafrenz Samuels, Kathryn. 2011. "Field Work: Constructing Archaeological and Ethnographic Intersections." *Cambridge Archaeological Journal* 21(1): 152-156.

Lambek, Michael. 2002. *The Weight of the Past: Living with History in Mahajanga, Madagascar*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan.

Latour, Bruno. 1993. *We Have Never Been Modern.* Cambridge: MIT Press.

Latour, Bruno. 2005. *Reassembling the Social.* Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Leathem, Hilary Morgan. 2019. "Manifestations that Matter: A Case of Oaxacan Ruin Possession." *Archaeological Review from Cambridge 34.2: Beyond the Human*: 92-110.

--- 2022. "Este lugar tiene muchas historias": Alternative Forms of Archiving and Community Engagement in Oaxaca, Mexico." In *Culture Work: Folklore and the Humanities for a 21st Century Public*, edited by Tim Frandy and Marcus Cederström. Madison: University of Wisconsin Press. Forthcoming.

Lind, Michael. 2015. *Ancient Zapotec Religion: An Ethnohistorical and Archaeological Perspective*. Boulder: University Press of Colorado.

Litvak King, Jaime et al. 1980. *Arqueología y Derecho en México*. Serie Antropológica: no. 23, México: UNAM.

Lomnitz, Claudio. 2001. *Deep Mexico, Silent Mexico: An Anthropology of Nationalism*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.

Lowenthal, David. 2006. *Possessed by the Past*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Luke, Christina. 2019. *A Pearl in Peril: Heritage and Diplomacy in Turkey*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Magaña, Maurice Rafael. 2020. *Cartographies of Youth Resistance: Hip-Hop, Punk, and Urban Autonomy in Mexico.* Berkeley: University of California Press.

Meskell, Lynn. 2015. *Global Heritage: A Reader*. Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell.

Mitchell, Timothy. 1991. *Colonizing Egypt*. Berkeley: University of California Press.

Moreno Figueroa, Mónica G. and Emiko Saldívar. 2015. "We are Not Racists, We Are Mexicans": Privilege, Nationalism, and Post-Race Ideology in Mexico. *Critical Sociology* 42: 515-533.

Navarrete, Federico. 2016. *México Racista: Una Denuncia.* Barcelona: Grijalbo.

--- 2011. "Ruins and the State: Archaeology of a Mexican Symbiosis." *In Indigenous Peoples and Archaeology in Latin America*, edited by Cristóbal Gnecco and Patricia Ayala, pp. 39-52. Walnut Creek: Left Coast Press.

Navaro-Yashin, Yael. 2009. "Affective Spaces, Melancholic Objects: Ruination and the Production of Anthropological Knowledge." *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute* 15 (1): 1-18.

Neruda, Pablo. 2005. *The Poetry of Pablo Neruda.* Ilan Stavans, ed. New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux.

Nietzsche, Friedrich. 1997. *Nietzsche: Untimely Meditations.* Edited by Daniel Breazeale and translated by R. J. Hollingdale. Cambridge University Press.

Overmyer-Velázquez, Mark. 2006. *Visions of the Emerald City: Modernity, Tradition, and the Formation of Porfirian Oaxaca.* Durham: Duke University Press.

Palmié, Stephan. 2002. *Wizards and Scientists: Explorations in Afro-Cuban Modernity and Tradition*. Durham: Duke University Press.

--- 2013. "Historicist Knowledge and Its Conditions of Impossibility." In the *Social Life of Spirits*, edited by Ruy Blanes and Diana Espírito Santo, 218-240. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

--- 2013. Signal and Noise: Digging up the Dead in Archaeology and Afro-Cuban Palo Monte. *Archaeological Review from Cambridge* 28.1: 115-131.

Parsons, Elsie Clews. 1936. *Mitla: Town of Souls.* Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Pedersen, M. A. 2011. *Not Quite Shamans: Spirit Worlds and Political Lives in Northern Mongolia*. Cornell University Press.

Povinelli, E. 2017. *Geontologies: A Requiem to Late Liberalism.* Durham: Duke University Press.

--- 2011. *Economies of Abandonment: Social Belonging and Endurance in Late Liberalism.* Durham: Duke University Press.

Renfrew, Colin. 2000. *Loot, Legitimacy, and Ownership: The Ethical Crisis in Archaeology.* Bristol: Bristol Classical Press.

Rickards. Constantine. 1910. *The Ruins of Mexico*. London: H.E. Shrimpton.

Robles García, Nelly. 2016. *Mitla: su desarrollo cultural e importancia regional*. Mexico City: Fondo de Cultura Económica.

Rozental, Sandra. 2017. "On the Nature of Patrimonio." In *The Routledge Companion to Cultural Property*, edited by Jane Anderson and Haidy Geismar, 237-257. London: Routledge.

--- 2016. "In the Wake of Mexican Patrimonio: Material Ecologies in San Miguel Coatlinchan." *Anthropological Quarterly* 89(1): 181-219.

--- 2014. "Stone Replicas: The Iteration and Itinerancy of Mexican *Patrimonio*." *Journal of Latin American and Caribbean Anthropology* 19(2): 331-356.

Salas Landa, Mónica. 2018. "(In)visible Ruins: The Politics of Monumental Reconstruction in Postrevolutionary Mexico." *Hispanic American Historical Review* 98(1): 43-76.

Saldaña-Portillo, María Josefina. 2016. *Indian Given: Racial Geographies across Mexico and the United States*. Durham: Duke University Press.

Scott, David. 2014. *Omens of Adversity: Tragedy, Time, Memory, Justice*. Durham: Duke University Press.

Speed, Shannon. 2017. "Structures of Settler Capitalism in Abya Yala." *American Quarterly* 69(4):783-2790.

Stephen, Lynn. 2013. *We are the Face of Oaxaca: Testimony and Witness.* Durham: Duke University Press.

Taussig, Michael. 1986. *Shamanism, Colonialism, and the Wild Man: A Study in Terror and Healing*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Trouillot, Michel-Rolph. 1995. *Silencing the Past: Power and the Production of History*. Boston: Beacon Press.

Vázquez León, Luis. 1993. *El Leviatán Arqueológico: antropología de una tradición científica en México.* Mexico City: Miguel Angel Porrúa Books.

Weismantel, Mary. 2003. *Cholas and Pishtacos: Stories of Race and Sex in the Andes*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Williams, Raymond. 1977. *Marxism and Literature*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Wolfe, Patrick. 2006. "Settler Colonialism and the Elimination of the Native." Journal of Genocide Research 8 (4): 387–409.