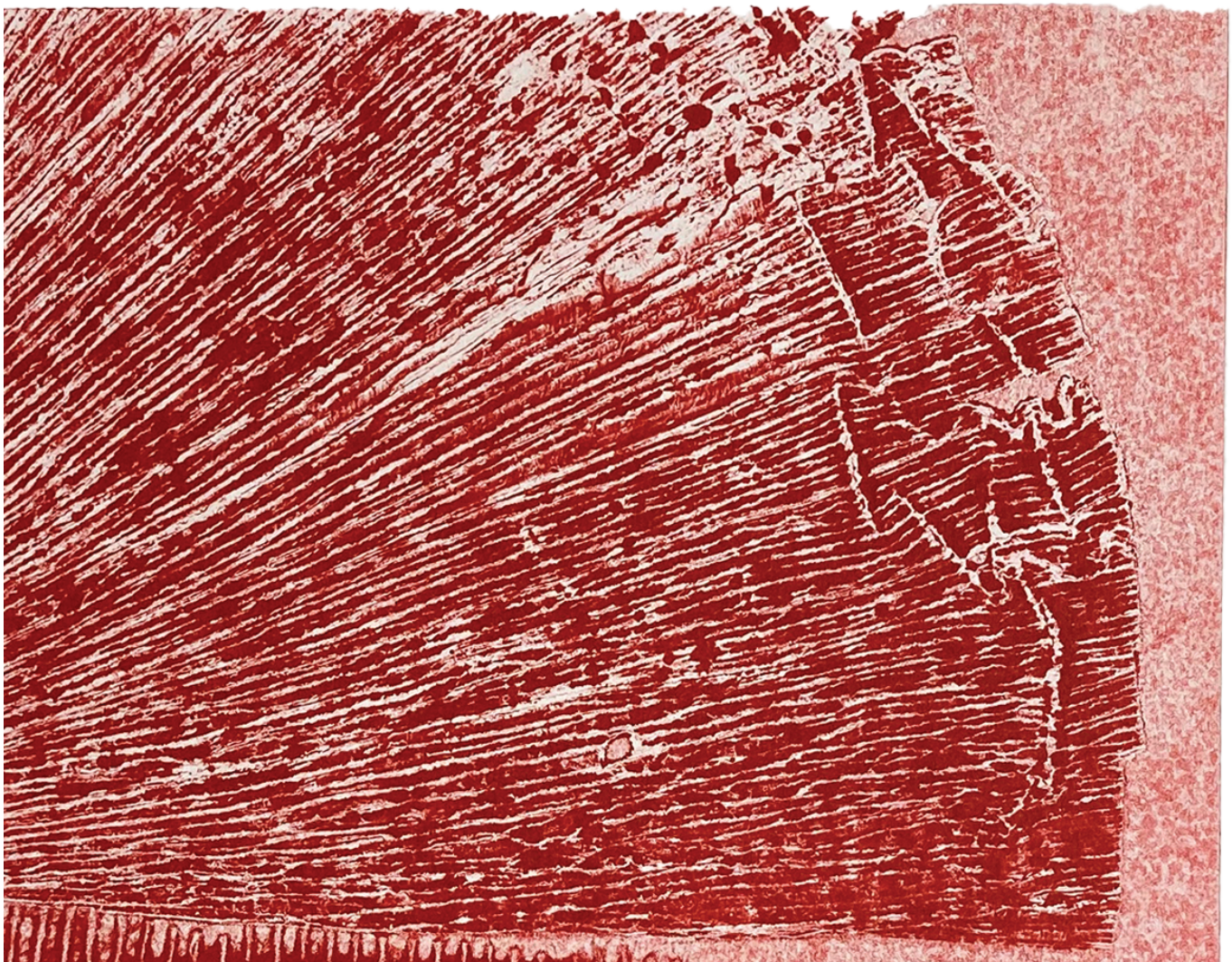

some theses on corn:

gente de maíz, mutual domestication, nonhuman relationality

Olivia Vela Page - American Studies Senior Project - Spring 2023

Vassar College

American Studies 302: Senior Project

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Readers

Prof. Lisa Collins

Prof. Hiram Perez

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From this corner of the library, I drink my mate and imagine running out into the April sun, putting this project to rest for a moment. Reluctantly hoping the archive has some life. All this time thinking and looking and asking and learning, only made possible with everyone around me, near and far to where I sit now, on the homelands of the Munsee Lenape peoples, displaced and ongoing as the Stockbridge-Munsee Community in Wisconsin, the Delaware Tribe and the Delaware Nation in Oklahoma, and the Munsee Delaware Nation in Ontario.

Thank you to the many places, people, and nonhumans I get to call home. Un abrazo siempre a mi querida familia, roomies, amigues, amores, y les sabies por el camino. None of this would be here without the meals and the music, the long distance phone calls and kitchen table rambles. Thank you for always reminding me to play. Nos vemos en el camino.

WHAT/HOW IS THIS?

In this project I attempt to resist the academic urge to portray the idea of gente de maíz (people of corn) as a myth or cultural belief (that can be discredited as such), examining instead its intersecting racial, social, and ecological implications. First, I focus on its capacity to de/construct American, Latinx, Indigenous, and Chicanx identities that resist their colonial formulations. I then examine the personal and political potential in highlighting corn as an object that, if attended to, challenges Western understandings of human/nonhuman binaries and relations.

How to engage with this stack of half-letter pages? To me, this is a sort of handbook for thinking together, meant to be picked up for what you want, when you want. There's a lot of different pieces. So go where you're most drawn – start with a footnote, a maybe-not-so-true-story, a mini-essay, an image, an untranslated word. It's up to you. There's some progression, but no right order. I hope somewhere in this mess, we can think together.

La teoría me la sé.
Pero cómo me la meto al cuerpo.

Gabriela Wiener, Huaco Retrato, 2021

INTRODUCTION: NICE ROUND STORIES

#1

My whole life, Mami has been telling me a story about hands and teeth and hair. There's more to the story, but most of it has been transformed and distorted with time, memory, the bad weather, the sun. The rain every time we came to my cousins' portón negro in those first 11 years of my life, suitcases full of fruit roll-ups and wind-up robots. Run-on words.

In the story, the hands are a constant (grabbing), the teeth (biting), the hair (none), and the place (Echo Park Lake, Los Angeles). Mami is there with me, older sis who remembers it differently, younger sib yet to be born giggling from afar. Two logical conclusions: I couldn't have been more than one and a half years old, my mom was at least a little pregnant. But logic doesn't have much to do here, just facts:

1- We were walking around the park, me in a stroller.

2- I grabbed an elote from one of the local vendors, who would usually sauce it up with mayo and chile and queso fresco for a dollar or two.

3- I saw, I grabbed, I ate.

4- Been eating corn ever since.

I see myself, so white and pink and chubby, Mami not so white, kernels so shiny. Teeth to baby teeth. I see the palm trees and the fountain and Mami telling this now, over the phone, cheer-up-you're-not-dead like my sister's stuffed animal. And I think I've heard it too many times for any of it to be true, but here I am, trying to put something together and for some reason I'm back with this story, trying to grab and bite and swallow something. Not sure what.

I'm not bald anymore.

just hope you're not spinning your wheels

Corn on the cob, elote, corn with kernels that are dientes, corn that is so hairy it fills your dientes. Corn with a million names: elote, humero, choclo, maíz, sara, millo, maize. Names I've never heard, stories I don't know. Corn that is kandy, corn that is corny.

A nice round story.

#2

With origins in innovations developed for centuries by Indigenous peoples of Mesoamerica between 7,000 and 10,000 years ago, corn confounds many historians, geneticists, geographers, and anthropologists, who still discuss how it was developed from inedible Teosinte grass into nutrient-rich varieties of maize. Today, the corn that occupies over ninety million acres of the United States' colonized land is mainly one single, genetically modified variety of the plant that is used for products ranging from fuel to animal feed to high fructose corn syrup: Yellow Dent Number 2. Corn has many overlapping, contradicting histories that are constantly being retold and revised, beyond those strict academic disciplines. Many are stories of a plant that began from a grass called Teosinte, that co-evolved with humans and spread across the Americas[1] as a food.

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1 The term "Americas," and all land-naming practices, are a multi-layered issue particularly discussed within the Native and American Studies lens I am working through in much of this research. I have chosen to use the term Latin America/America/s, but recognize that many peoples across the continent use other names with much personal and political weight, such as Turtle Island, Abya Yala, IndoAmérica, and more.

As Marisol de la Cadena notes, "Abya Ayala [is] the name with which indigenous social movements refer to Latin America," where "Indigenous practices have always been there; they remain strong and currently guide the political project" (De La Cadena 2010, 335). Emil Keme similarly explains that "Abiayala is a concept that challenges the idea of Latin America or the Americas precisely because these projects continue to be constitutive of colonialist logics" (Keme 2018, 32), presenting Abiayala as a civilizatory project for trans-hemispheric indigeneity.

With these come stories of a gift, of creation, of a bringer of life, a certain understanding of land relations and time cycles, ongoingness and transformation, migration and exchange[2].

The once common conception that corn in Mexico[3] was the single starting point for agriculture on this continent, spreading across the Americas as a mechanism that led to what colonial history often refers to as an "enlightened," sedentary lifestyle, has come into question. Recent discussions illuminate the possibilities of a much more fragmented history, in which the ancient Oaxacan crop isn't the only epicenter. In a 2022 article for the Atlantic, Sarah Laskow describes dozens of different plants that Native peoples domesticated across the Americas, forming a unique food system that is mostly lost today[4]. "Why did these plants fall out of use? And, in turn, why did corn succeed?" she questions (Laskow 2022).

The success she is describing is reflected in the many narratives that intimately tie humanity to corn, what Taino scholar and activist José Barreiro describes as "the first treaty between humans and nature in the Americas," in Gary Farmer's documentary exam-

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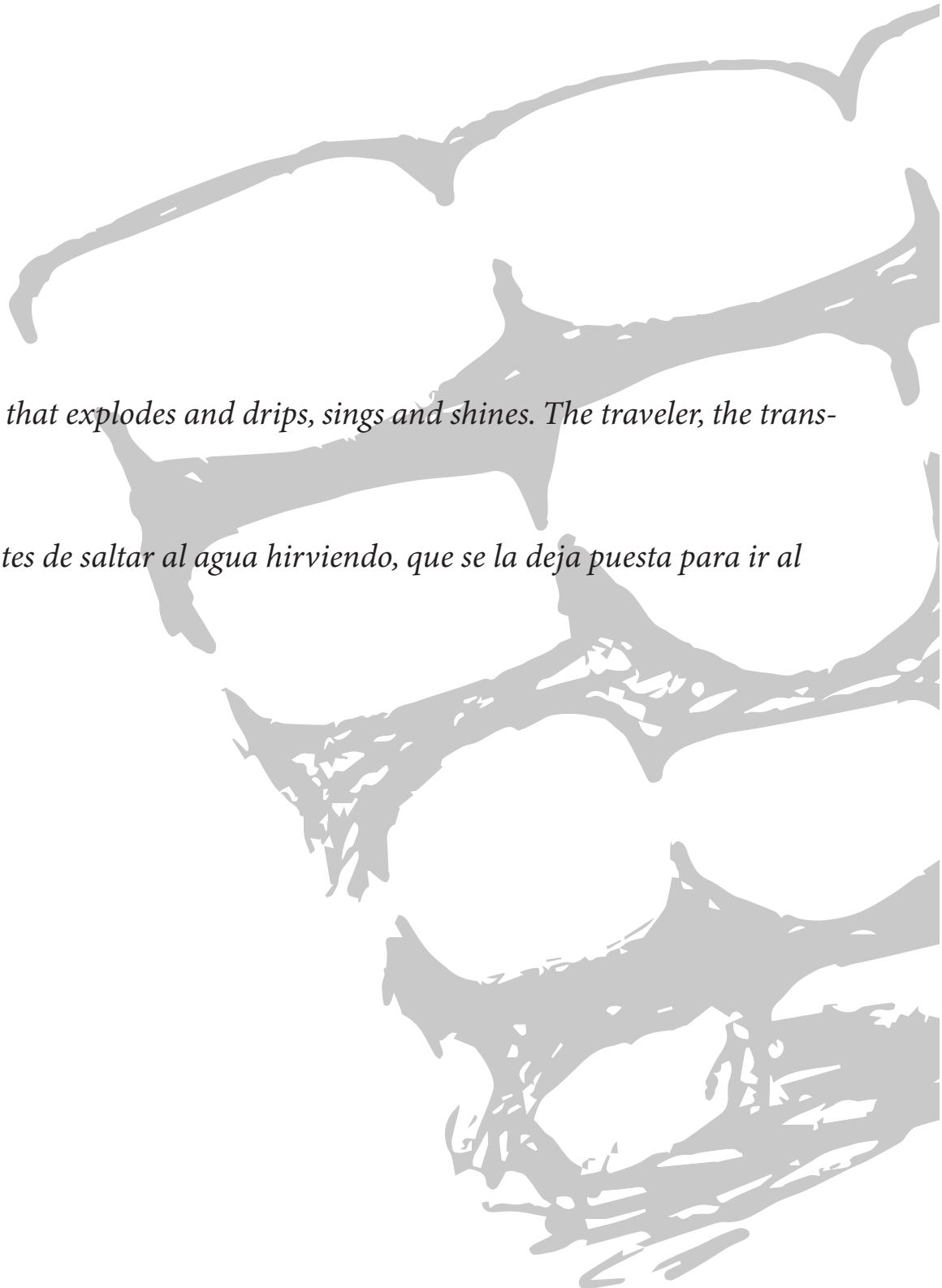
2 For more on exchange routes in relation to corn, see: Rodriguez, Roberto Cintli, and Patrisia Gonzales, dirs. 2005. Amoxtli San Ce Tojuan (We Are One). Xicano Records & Film. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Kv9FyvAIfzQ.

3 Similar to Footnote 1, I am using this name of a nation-state while questioning the work it does and the colonial implications of Western cartography, border drawing, and naming practices.

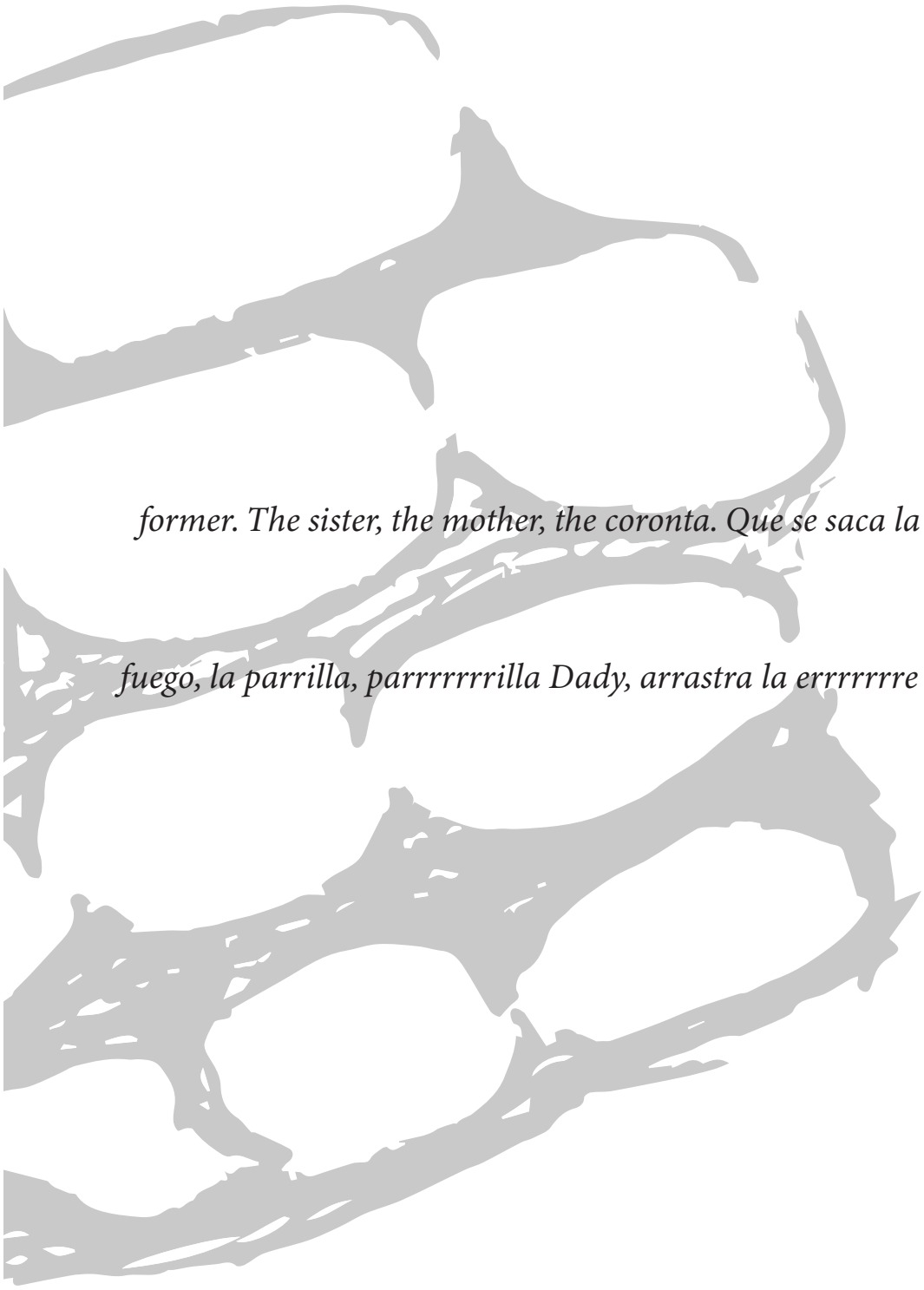
4 For an example of lost crop revitalization projects see Sarah Laskow's discussion of Natalie Mueller's work with *Iva annua.* (Laskow 2022).

ining the role of corn in the lives of Indigenous peoples across the Americas (Farmer 1998). While this may not be the first — or the only first — treaty for all peoples on the continent, it is one that has persisted for millenia, and has somehow become characteristic of 'the Americas.' I argue that corn as an object, food, plant, and non-human entity, collapses the very distinction between nature and humans through the many ongoing, contradictory treaties between us.



Corn that explodes and drips, sings and shines. The traveler, the trans-

antes de saltar al agua hirviendo, que se la deja puesta para ir al



former. The sister, the mother, the coronta. Que se saca la chaqueta

fuego, la parrilla, parrrrrrrilla Dady, arrastra la errrrrrre in español.

September 20, 2022

This year, corn in the park again for my birthday. Un asadito like the ones t
game while we sold lemonade at the bottom of the hill, 3 sisters, knees scrape
Not to be gruesome, but I always preferred pink lemonade, and I'm telling y
so I tried every/only fish and chips and lemonade at every/any pit stop whe
bound.

My friend wrote "you don't know how much growing up with a rooster can
I didn't, I don't, but in the New Mexican sticker fields I dreamt myself nam
in my corduroys, always corduroys never just jeans. The New Mexico my s
the famous potter and that time with the leeches that we all remember diff
The land where I spent months of quarantine in the distant adobe shack, w
mostly for the elk — beans and corn bitten to stubs.

This year un asadito sin choripán ni cueca, my birthday the day after Chile's
capital C as in independent Country.

Un asadito by el Hudson, this other place that's also sort of home.

this brown river of water chestnuts-bat nuts-dev*il* heads-ca

he real Latines' used to have in Elysian Park, pregaming the Dodger's

ed.

ou because I know, because I still can't make a decision to save my life

n we hit the road once a year, gringo-grandparents-in-New-Mexico

change you."

ned Fern, whistling to chicks until they sang back, swatting mosquitos

sister wrote all those poems about, the porch and the concrete wall and

ferently except for the salt that shriveled it off of someone's foot.

wanting to swim in leechy waters, growing plants to see some life but

s,

ltrops

where I get to play grillmaster

PART 1:
¿SOMOS GENTE DE MAÍZ?

Corn, maize, or Zea Mays, known with many names across the continent, is often particularly associated with Mexican national culture, as a food staple and "a central element in the cosmogonies of Mexico's Indigenous peoples" (Rico and Villalobos 2015, 10). In 1899, the denounced racist 'cientifico' intellectual Francisco Bulnes divided humanity into three categories: wheat people, rice people, and corn people, coming to the unfounded conclusion that "maize has been the eternal pacifier of the American Indigenous races and the foundation of their refusal to become civilized" (Rico and Villalobos 2015, 91).

Gary Farmer's 1998 documentary similarly names all Indigenous peoples of the Americas as "corn people," contextualizing this idea, rather, in the a diversity of narratives that highlight corn's protagonism, from Tzoltzil healers and painters to Six Nation seed growers, from Mayan theater groups to an Andean rural technology project[1]. Roberto Rodriguez and Patrisia Gonzales' documentary Amoxtli San Ce Tojuan (We Are One), follows corn's migrations

1 See more about the Proyecto Andino de Tecnologías Campesinas on their website: pratec.org/wpress/.

via commerce and cultural exchanges throughout the continent as a vehicle to illustrate the interconnectedness of Native peoples across colonial nation-state borders, particularly between Mexico, the United States, and Canada. Maize has existed for centuries as both a vital form of sustenance and a fundamental part of identity and spirituality for heterogeneous peoples. (Rodriguez and Gonzales 2005).

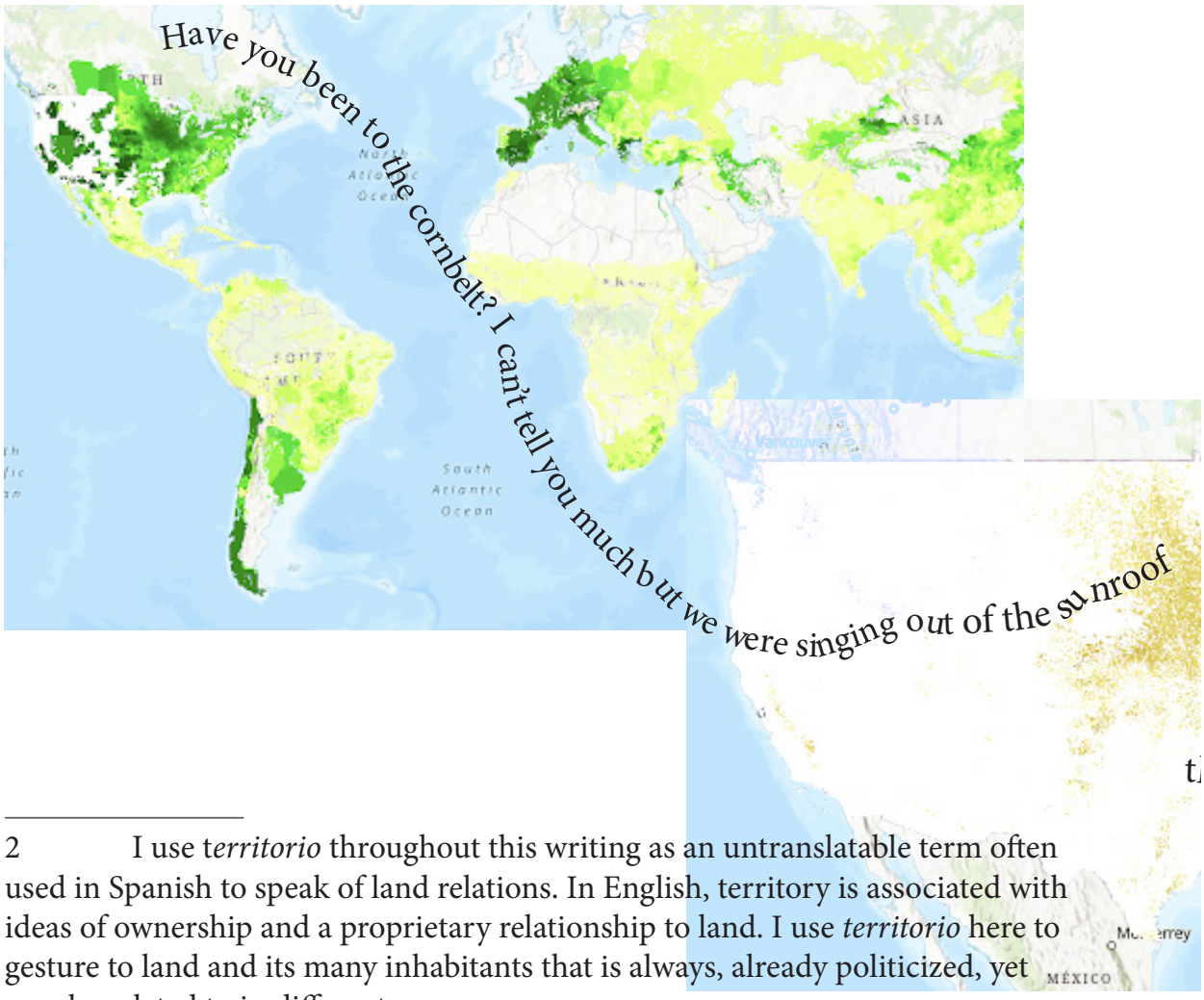
Katsi Cook, interviewed in Farmer's documentary, describes the importance of seeing other peoples' knowledge to understand your own. Cook is a Mohawk healer, midwife, and environmental health researcher, who intertwines traditional Indigenous knowledge and Western scientific knowledge to underscore the ways in which "The stories of how we're born are so important and give so much guidance to a child's life" (Cook 2018). For many people on this continent, corn is essential to that very story of how they (or humanity itself) were born and continue to exist in relation to each other and the nonhuman world around us.

"Corn is central to both indigenous and agro-industrial societies, but the way in which Zea mays is understood and used by each could not be more different," (Wall Kimmerer 2018). So **how do peoples' relationships to this entity implicate their de/Indigeneity, their personal and collective histories, and their very sense**

of belonging and relation to *territorio*[2]? When I think of corn people, it goes beyond recipes, crop acreage, or 'ancient' creation stories. "The Seed of Seeds, Our Daily Bread, Wife of the Sun, Mother of All Things," (Wall Kimmerer 2018) this plant is a figure of life and lifeways, with particular iterations such as "Mother Corn [that are] a felt presence in many Mexican mestizo and Indigenous communities" (Aguilera 2016, 208).

How is that presence felt?

Where to look to understand its multiplicity?



2 I use t*erritorio* throughout this writing as an untranslatable term often used in Spanish to speak of land relations. In English, territory is associated with ideas of ownership and a proprietary relationship to land. I use *territorio* here to gesture to land and its many inhabitants that is always, already politicized, yet may be related to in different ways.

buckle up!

he tallest flatness I've ever seen

Robert Cintli Rodriguez's book Our Sacred Maíz Is Our Mother, is an interdisciplinary investigation that works from academic research as well as the author's personal experiences, conversations, relationships, and critical engagement with elders' knowledge. The book creates conversations around "historias profundas" (deep stories), which refer to "the foundational stories of peoples and cultures, including those with roots prior to maíz" (Rodriguez 2014, 10). Engaging with them on different levels,[3] he explains that "Mesoamerican narratives appear to have sprung from a common root and that root is maíz" (Rodriguez 2014, xix) — as a mother, a grandmother, a giver of life and knowledge. Rodriguez speaks of the simultaneously wide-ranging and interconnectedness of corn's

3 There are specific stories in distinct chapters throughout the book, told by the elders the author has personal conversations and built relationships with. He notes the ongoing debate of "how much of the deep meaning — the historias profundas— should be revealed to the public" (Rodriguez 2014, 148), in which it is fundamental to understand that these stories cannot be decontextualized, and to truly engage with each one is a bigger conversation than the scope of this project. Thus, I do not explore most of them specifically here, but encourage readers to refer to Rodriguez' work and many other corn stories in contextualized works such as:

Farmer, Gary, dir. 1998. The Gift. Documentary. National Film Board of Canada. https://www.nfb.ca/film/gift/.

Awiakta, Marilou. 1994. Selu: Seeking the Corn-Mother's Wisdom. Fulcrum Publishing. https://www.barnesandnoble.com/w/selu-marilou-awiakta/1122980115.

Vigil, Angel. 1994. The Corn Woman: Stories and Legends of the Hispanic Southwest. World Folklore Series. Englewood, Colo: Libraries Unlimited.

cultural significance, that is not just Mesoamerican but spreads across the entire continent, informing how peoples throughout the Americas have structured their governments and economies for centuries, drawing attention to the cyclical nature of time and the four cardinal directions of space.

Rodriguez emphasizes that these stories are not frozen in time, and cannot be understood out of context, therefore his work is also about "how peoples' beliefs are perceived" (Rodriguez 2014, 20), because *all peoples* have inherently intertwined histories and foundational stories/myths, but the ways in which we value these forms of knowledge vary greatly. The central question he is asking is not *whether* maíz culture exists, or *if* it is central to Indigenous peoples of the Americas, but rather its role in what he describes as mestizo or de-Indigenized communities in what is today called US territory. Early on in this book, Nahuatl educator and Tlahuica knowledge keeper, Paula Domingo Olivares, outlines the inter-dependence between humans and corn, asserting that "it is our Indigenous belief. 'We are men and women of maíz'" (Rodriguez 2014, xvi). Starting from questions of migration, indigeneity, and belonging in the US, Rodriguez connects the resilience of maíz cultures and narratives to the layers of contradicting identities held within the term mestizo.

Laura Catelli's essay Arqueología del Mestizaje highlights

the conditions of possibility for the emergence of the concept "mestizaje," which was imposed on a pre-existing racialized and caste social imaginary in Latin America. Often associated with José Vasconcelos' (1925) 'cosmic race,' this application of the term rests in eugenecist ideas of *blanqueamiento,* a colonial project of racial and cultural "mixing" to create the fantasy of unified national identities in Latin American nation-states. Catelli highlights the danger of mestizaje as a metaphor, the term often slipping between abstraction and reality. It is casually used and ambiguously translated as cultural mix or hybridity, setting the "basis for conceiving a homogeneous national identity from a heterogeneous population" (Catelli 2020, 66).

This colonial project furthers ideologies of blood cleansing and whitening to sustain the narrative of Latin American homogenization and erasure of heterogeneous identities. In Latin American nation-states, there is a constant slippage between the abstract conceptualization of this term and its lived, felt implications. The contradictory nature of mestizo identity lies in its attempts to claim complete white europeanness, shaming and denying the indigeneity inherent to the category itself. If successful mestizaje is equivalent to *blanqueamiento,* then any other non-white identity is mestizaje gone wrong — mulato, cholo, roto — putting indigeneity in opposition to mestizo identity. Given the violence that's been done

in its name, and that it's used so pervasively to deny racism and erase histories, who and why claim mestizaje? And what does this imply today?

Yásnaya Aguilar Gil considers these implications by deconstructing the contradictory binary in her critical essay Un Nosotrxs Sin Estado (An Us Without A State). Looking at formulations of the Mexican nation-state, the Ayuujk-Mixe writer, translator, linguist, and activist imagines a scenario in which the terms Indigenous or indian cease to have any basis, starting from a profound questioning of the division of lands as territories, into "legal entities called states" (Aguilar Gil 2018, 15). This leads to the simple, radical act of imagining other forms of political-social organization that go beyond the nation-state. The creation of states with militarized borders, official language(s) and cultural practices, only works through the elimination and/or assimilation of the many [Indigenous] nations subsumed within the facade of a 'unified' national identity. In many Latin American nation-states, that identity is synonymous with mestizo. Aguilar points out that Indigenous nations have in common with each other that they are nations encapsulated within another nation-state that's not their own (Aguilar Gil 2018, 16) — they are "nations without a state" (Aguilar Gil 2018, 20).

As I mentioned before, she is determined to imagine a future in which the notion of indigeneity as a category ceases to

have relevance, and is simply replaced by each of the thousands of autonomous nations, called by their name. Today, however, it functions as what she posits as a "temporary political feature" (Aguilar Gil 2018). Similarly, Emil Keme highlights Craig Womack's perspective, explaining that despite the multiplicity of identities encompassed and frequently hidden under the veil of a singular "Indigenous" identity, these peoples/nations have in common being subjects of colonization, or rather, being to whom it is considered acceptable to steal land in current and past colonial configurations (Keme 2018, 24).

Aguilar Gil proposes that resistance to the project of mestizaje, which continues to advance and succeed today, should not seek integration into the state and its structure, but rather fight for ways to "dispense of state services, and strengthen self-management spaces" (Aguilar Gil 2018, 49). It seems to me implicit in her argument the point that Keme also makes of the value of "Indigenous" as a unifying category that is combating homogenization. By highlighting the existence and permanence of Indigenous peoples (not as elements of cultural diversity, but as independent nations), this challenges neoliberal multiculturalism and the colonial idea of a unified mestizo nation that is the basis of Latin American state nationhood, such as Mexico.

Rodriguez's formulation of mestizo identities must be understood within a different — yet closely related — context of United States immigrant communities. He examines two sets of narratives that resist the "master narrative" that "locates Mexicans and Central Americans within U.S. society as alien, suspect, illegitimate, and nowadays inferior" (Rodriguez 2014, 15). One of these is the "somos gente de maíz" (we are corn people) narrative used "by Mexican and Central American peoples, including Chicanos/Chicanas[4], to assert a sense of belonging on this continent" (Rodriguez 2014, 13).[5] In his framework, the survival of these creation narratives — associated with cuisines, worldviews, and life practices — is a form of rooting in the face of forced displacement and de-indigenization.

De-indigenization is a central mechanism through which mestizaje operates, centering the erasure and assimilation of autonomous nations' languages, cultures, and religions. Bringing in Bon-

4 In general terms, Chicanx refers to people born in the U.S. whose family comes from Mexico. Distinguishing themselves from Mexican American or Latinx identities, the term was reclaimed in the 1940s by youth as a form of political empowerment and rejection to cultural assimilation into whiteness. Embracing these unique identities as a form of resistance to dominant narratives, the Chicanx community formed an independent, interconnected political and cultural movement. I am not exploring this identity and movement's work specifically here, but it is closely related to and in conversation with my project and ideas discussed here, such as Chicana Environmentalism mentioned in the "naming the nonhuman" section of this project.

5 The second narrative he examines similarly furthers Chicano political assertion in what is now called US territory, through "aztlan resistance narratives" (see more: Rodriguez 2014, 14).

fil Batalla's arguments, Rodriguez explains that "de-Indigenization has forced Mesoamericans to renounce their collective Indigenous identities" (Rodriguez 2014, 40), which is a part of what Aguilar Gil previously described as the state-making project. This converses with Gloria Anzaldúa's reformulation of "the new mestiza," that urges us to move beyond the category's opposition to Indigeneity, to understand Chicana *as* Indigenous, and the "contradictions inherent to the idea of mestizaje, which evokes racial categories and undoes them simultaneously. It is the turning 'into something else' that is the creative and productive component of Anzaldúa's articulation of mestizaje" (Pérez-Torres 2013, 2)[6].

Looking specifically at the imagery on corn wrappers in the U.S., in his "Tortilla Mapping Project," Rodriguez uses visual semiotics theory to analyze how maíz itself is represented as a symbol of indigeneity (Rodriguez 2014, 123). In some ways, it is a symbol appropriated by the Mexican nation-state as part of that false 'uniting' mestizaje project, present in such everyday instances as food and its packaging. Rodriguez, however, proposes its converse power as a uniting symbol across Indigenous and de-indigenized peoples, in a sort of transcontinental indigeneity.

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6 I do not deeply engage Gloria Anzaldúa's foundational work and its many derived conversations here, but reference it throughout this section and encourage readers to see:

Anzaldúa, Gloria. 1987. Borderlands: The New Mestiza; La Frontera. 1st ed. San Francisco: Spinsters/Aunt Lute.

Unlike wheat or rice, similarly ancient and fundamental grains, products derived from corn are commonly marketed as 'ancient' and 'authentically' Mexican and/or Indigenous foods — the two identities converging in a narrative of neoliberal multiculturalism. Native peoples are thus depicted as disappearing, rural cultures without a nation or autonomy, whose presence today is simply an element of the Mexican state's multicultural mestizo identity. This symbolism infects the American cultural imagination, so that "to say Mesoamerican culture, maíz culture, culture of the poor, Indigenous culture, campesino and Mexican culture, is to be redundant," and "tortilla equals Indigenous equals Mexican" (Rodriguez 2014, 111).

how are wrappers wrapped for wrapping?


Tamales are one of the most typical recipes of Mexican cuisine. They are mainly eaten for breakfast as a great way to start the day. These specially picked corn husks are a must in the preparation of this delicious dish.
Ingredients: Corn husks.
CORN HUSKS – HOJA DE TAMAL
Los tamales son una de las recetas más típicas y populares de la comida Mexicana. Se consumen principalmente en el desayuno y son una forma deliciosa de comenzar el día. Estas hojas de maíz especialmente escogidas, resultan imprescindibles para su preparación.
Ingredientes: Hoja de Tamal.
MADE IN MEXICO
RECIPE / RECETA
TAMALES
Cooking directions / Modo de preparación
Place the husks in water for two hours or overnight to soften them. Make tamales by spreading the corn dough over the husks and then spoon in center a savory chicken or meat filling. Wrap them and steam them. After cooking, unwrap and serve with your favorite sauce.
Ponga las hojas en agua por dos horas o durante la noche anterior para ablandarlas. Haga los tamales esparciendo la masa de maíz en las hojas y luego en el centro de la masa ponga el relleno de pollo o carne. Envuélvalos y cocínelos al vapor. Después de cocinados, sáquelos de las hojas y sírvalos con su salsa preferida.
Badia Spices, Inc.
P.O. Box 226497
Doral, FL 33222-6497
Packed in U.S.A.
Visit our website/Visítenos...
www.badiaspices.com
Please Recycle
¡Por favor reciclar!
0 33844 00645 7
a great way to start the day.
a great way to start the day.
a great way to start the day.
a great way to start the day.

Resisting hybridity

Corn is simultaneously a symbol of the cultural appropriation of the Mexican nation-state's facade of multiculturalism, and essential to many Chicanx and Mexican-American peoples' rootedness, identity, and sense of belonging. Rodriguez posits maíz as the core of what unites Native peoples of this continent — much like Emil Keme's transhemispheric indigeneity — as a form of resistance to the nationalist rhetorics of mestizaje that make illegible its continued implications of oppression, stratification, erasure, and violence. Identifying as 'gente de maíz' is thus in conversation with Keme's understanding of Abya Yala — a political naming project that collapses the already blurred binaries between European and IndoAmerican, mestizo and Indigenous.

To claim "amoxtli san cejuan" (we are one), as Rodriguez and Gonzales' aformentioned documentary is titled, in the context of forced migration, displacement, and removal is perhaps best summarized in the song lyric and long-standing rallying cry of Mexican and Chicanx immigrant rights movements in the U.S. that this documentary cites: *we didn't cross the borders, the borders crossed us* (McCaughan 2020). This invokes "gente de maíz" as a form of resistance to colonial border drawing and the conflation of

national and state identities, to return to Aguilar Gil's framework. She describes the tangible realities of what truly "autonomous" or sovereign Indigenous (and non-Indigenous) communities could mean, examining some possibilities of current systems: culturally situated justice, community public security, intercultural health, education independent of state ideologies (Aguilar Gil 2018, 57), etc. **How does *gente de maíz* — both in its symbolism and as a form of sustenance, associated with everyday practices — not fall into a nationalist rhetoric?** Can Rodriguez' arguments be applied without "reproducing any practice that reinforces the idea that Mexico is a nation" (Aguilar Gil 2018, 47)?

Thinking about *gente de maíz* as posited by Rodriguez gives rise to the possibility of a sort of resignified mestizaje that affirms indigeneity rather than obscuring it. Is it possible to inhabit the very contradiction of mestizaje, not as a merging of identities or an unequivocal binary, but as an irreducible tension with power in its contradiction and tensions? Situating these racial formulations within the U.S. (particularly Rodriguez's focus on the four corners/ southwest region), Mexico, and other *territorios* in Latin America alters the ways in which these categories and identities hold meaning, especially in terms of the land relations at their root. Like Gloria Anzaldúa in the U.S., Silvia Rivera Cusicanqui in Bolivia presents forms of resistance to the "official mestizaje ideology" that

is tied up in violent rhetorics of fusion and *blanqueamiento*, in which a mestizo national identity is inherently that of a centralized nation state (Cusicanqui 2018).

In an interview with Francisco Pazzarelli titled "Jiwasa, the individual-collective" (Cusicanqui 2018)[7], Cusicanqui presents and analyzes what she calls a *chi'xi* epistemology as a form of decolonized mestizaje that "exceeds the integrationist horizon" (Cusicanqui 2018, 145). She affirms mestizo identity as a function of the nation-state, which in Bolivia is in tension with *choledad* — one of those "mestizajes gone wrong." C*hi'xi* is not another identity, but rather a way of inhabiting the contradiction of the colonial mestizaje project, resisting that hybridizing impulse. In her interview, she is concerned that words often become a veil, insisting that "we will not talk about decolonization, we will do everything possible to get closer to that practice" aware of the "gap between words and actions" (Cusicanqui 2018, 151).

7 This interview is in Spanish, so all textual citations are my own translations.

The gap

In Chile, corn is part of the national "mestizo" cuisine, as exemplified in Sonia Montecino Aguirre's cookbook La Olla Deleitosa: Cocinas Mestizas de Chile, in which she explores chilean food as a celebration of cultural fusion between spanish colonizers and native peoples (Montecino Aguirre 2004). Using the example of *humitas*, *empanadas*, and *pastel de choclo*, she describes their literal and metaphorical form as containers with a hidden interior, which can be understood as a reflection of chilean "stuffed" identity (Montecino Aguirre 2004, 75). They are "a living testament of the fusion between what is Indigenous and Spanish, giving rise to the flavors, aromas, and traditions of our culture" (Montecino Aguirre 2004, my translation).

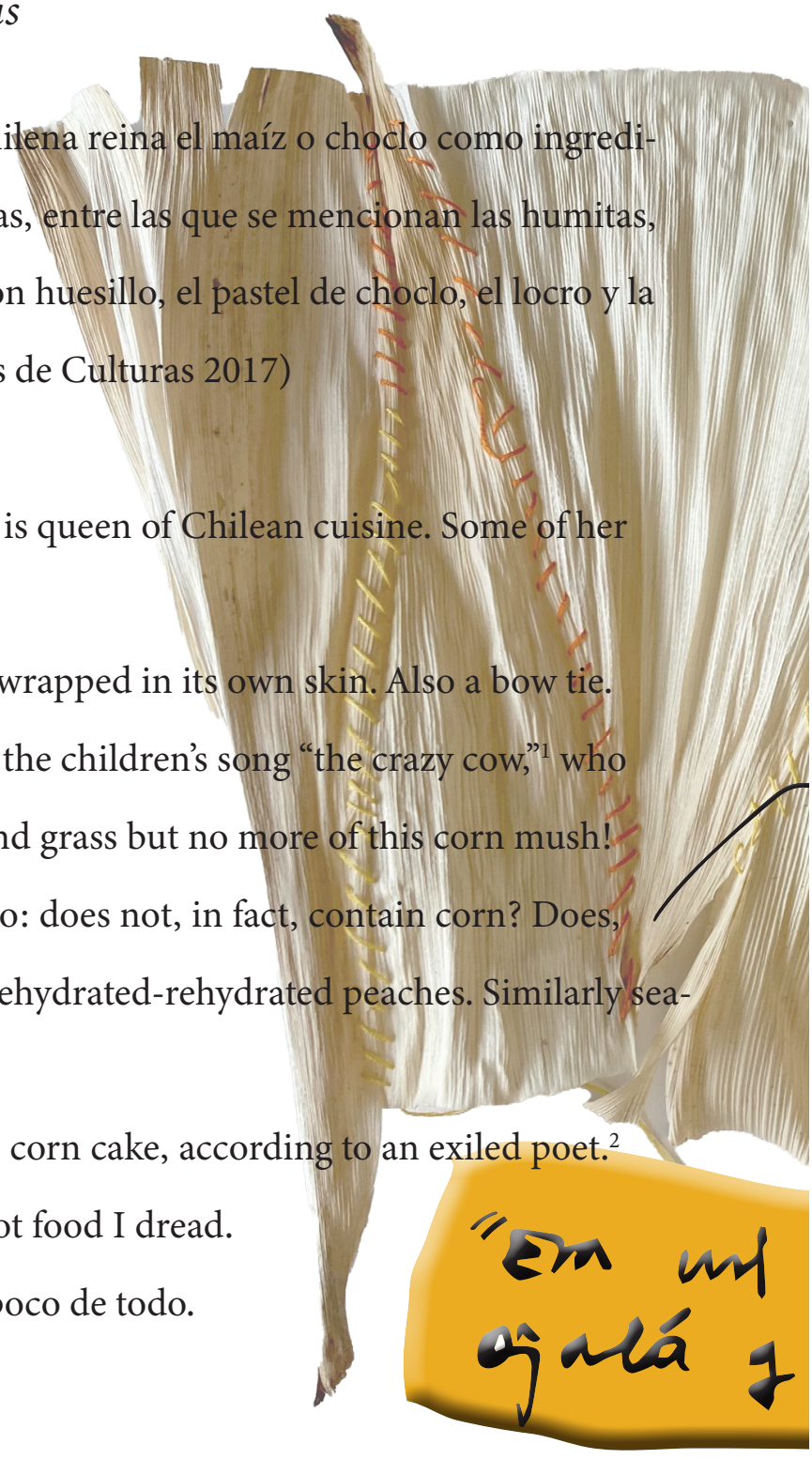
These traditions and culture are not only tied to strong nationalist rhetorics, but also to a deeply ingrained cultural appropriation that creates this neoliberal fantasy of multiculturalism in nation-states like Chile. At the same time, especially in the years I have spent away from the territorios known by that name, I have grown nostalgic for certain things that remind me of that far away home. That very national, traditional 'mestizo' cuisine is part of what I associate with ideas of home. So, how do I understand my own 'chilenidad' and nostalgia for 'my traditional cuisine' as they

are also part of colonial projects of nationhood and mestizaje?

Mestizaje is so integrated with dominant cultural nationalisms and personal identity that it is easy for it to become depoliticized and disconnected from the peoples and territorios that it implicates. To speak of belonging thus urges me to interrogate forms of relating to land and its nonhuman or more-than-human inhabitants. Time and again, people in the Americas refer to our/themselves as corn people, gente de maíz, made *of* corn, born *from* it, equivalent to it, intoxicated with its genetically modified derivations. And yet, that is not the cosmogeny I was brought up on in my mixed american and chilean "mestizo cultures," despite its centrality to the nation-state's traditional cuisine.

This underscores the tensions and confusions of an imagined home and a real one, connecting nostalgia not just to any idea of home but that which is related to a nation-state. **What kinds of land relations stem from corn's presence and gente de maíz? What happens if we "try to engage with[gente de maíz] for what it says, expressing a form of reciprocal being between humans and corn, perhaps even an ontological relationality that transgresses physiological boundaries" (Alain 2017)?**

Hablemos de culturas



"En la típica comida chilena reina el maíz o choclo como ingrediente de múltiples recetas, entre las que se mencionan las humitas, la chuchoca, el mote con huesillo, el pastel de choclo, el locro y la carbonada." (Hablemos de Culturas 2017)

Let me translate: Corn is queen of Chilean cuisine. Some of her kingdoms:

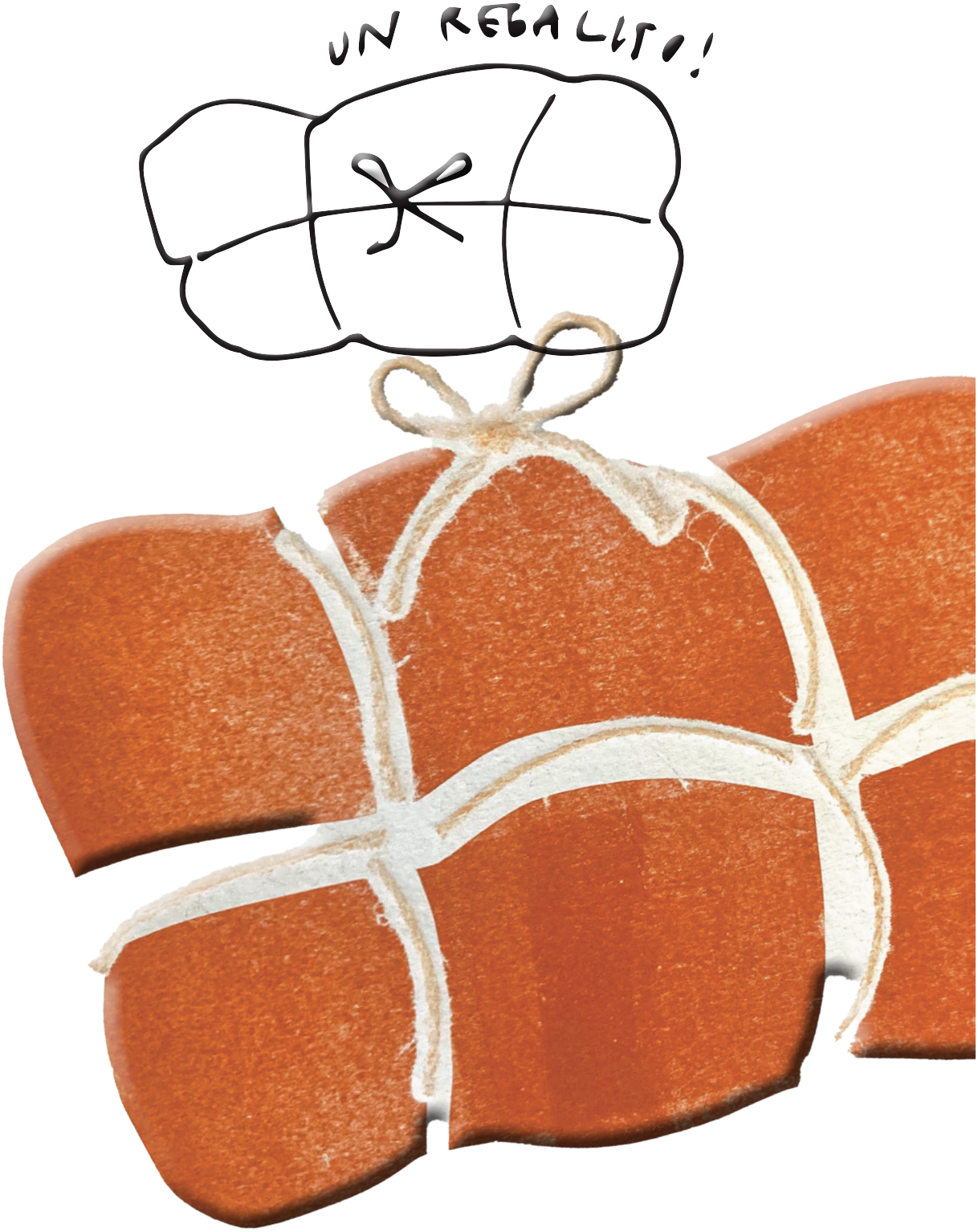
- Las humitas: a gift wrapped in its own skin. Also a bow tie.
- La chuchoca: from the children's song "the crazy cow,"[1] who should eat alfalfa and grass but no more of this corn mush!
- El mote con huesillo: does not, in fact, contain corn? Does, however, contain dehydrated-rehydrated peaches. Similarly seasonal.
- El pastel de choclo: corn cake, according to an exiled poet.[2]
- El locro: the one-pot food I dread.
- La carbonada: un poco de todo.

1 See: "La Vaquita Loca" song by Mazapán.

2 See poem titled "Pastel de Choclo / Corn Cake" on page 12 of the book: Dorfman, Ariel. 1986. Pastel de choclo. 1a ed. Colección Manieristas. Santiago: Editorial Sinfronteras.

- La mazamorra: the one they forgot. Blended, grated, mashed, ready to mix in.

oye pero ponle pino


UN REGALITO!

la señora que llama de la reja de la casa arrendada,
un cooler lleno
en esta
isla
que no es isla solo histórica solo sombras
negra
y otra humita
dulce o salada dime tú.

PART 2:
BEING IN RELATION WITH CORN

On [mutual] domestication

In a multimedia writing and animation piece for Emergence Magazine, the mother, scientist, writer, and professor Robin Wall Kimmerer describes her own relationship to and cultural understanding of corn as an enrolled member of the Citizen Potowatami Nation, in which it is known as *mandamin*, or the Wonderful Seed (Wall Kimmerer 2018). Observing her neighboring industrial cornfields in present day upstate New York, she reflects on the different relationships to technology that are embedded in different peoples' relationships to the plant, and the Traditional Ecological Knowledge (TEK) embedded in corn's domestication.

To me, the concept of domestication serves to emphasize that what was once a wild grass was domesticated to the point that it can no longer self propagate, it cannot exist without humans. Rather than Western academia's "standard definition of domestication as the adaptation of species to human environments"(Blake 2015, 20), maize urges us to think in terms of reciprocal relationships, to "imagine our utter dependence on the resources we think

we control" (Blake 2015, 22). As a plant, corn depends on humans to develop, plant, grow, and disperse its seed, to say the least. But seeing the multiplicity of its presence in urban and rural spaces; as a symbol of domination and resistance; as a food, industrial commodity, and sacred being; the dependence is no longer one-sided and our relationship seems to be more so one of mutual domestication. **Could we self-propagate without corn? How are humans a resource to her/it/them? How are we affected by this being; what makes us people of corn, or not? And who is this we?**

In many ways, corn is the epitome of plant domestication, a capitalist success story in agriculture that has led to the U.S. becoming the world's largest corn producer (Wall Kimmerer 2018). Of the 11 million square kilometers occupied by croplands on the Earth's surface, 17% are dedicated to corn — seconding only wheat at 20% (ESRI Storymap Team 2022). Corn's unique metabolism make it "up to three times as productive as the unfortunate 95 percent" (Haspel 2015) of other crops. As Tamar Haspel argues in this article in The Washington Post, many people celebrate corn's productivity and its potential even as a solution to the global hunger crisis. There is more at stake, however, than a simple equation of productivity. In the 2008 documentary King Corn, the filmmakers zoom in on the massive, government subsidized industry upholding this single crop in the midwestern U.S. — where it is mainly

used for biofuel and livestock feed.

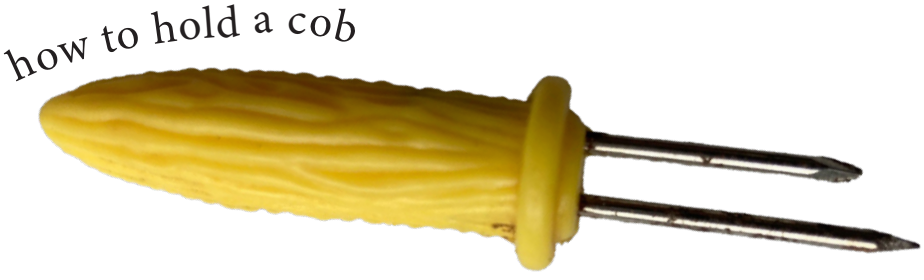
The documentary illuminates its hidden centrality to the American diet and, in their perspective, “americanness” (as in United Statesian-ness). The story follows the process of growing one acre of corn in Iowa, a place deemed the “ideal” environment and conditions for this crop. Thanks to government incentives and industrial infrastructure, a single farmer here will often work across 1,000 acres, with 31,000 kernels to the acre. (Woolf 2008).

Driven by a strong philosophy of expansion, the infamous strains of GMO corn have been genetically modified to resist certain herbicides that kill weeds, engineered so that each plant doesn't individually produce as much but is able to grow in much closer proximity to others, and an array of other adaptations that respond to market needs. It is a matter of mass, leaving us with an extremely productive crop with lowered nutritional value and overflowing silos that have led the U.S. government to specifically invest in a *search* for derived corn products since the 1970s. (Woolf 2008). The vast array of nearly unrecognizable derived products that exist today make use of all parts of the plant, so that it is somehow invisible yet widespread knowledge that "it is beneath our feet, in our cars, and an invaluable part of our diets, both directly and indirectly" as the massive agrochemical seed company Corteva describes (Corteva n.d.).

One of the main uses of the crop is cattle feed, an industry of its own. This practice is rife with contradictions when we think of feeding as the basis for giving life. But in this scenario, feeding is meant only to produce unhealthy, overweight animals for human consumption — if the cows weren't slaughtered for meat they would die within 6 months from sicknesses caused by their corn diet. Woolf's goes on to apply this irony to the people growing this

"food": there are over 2 trillion corn plants across this single state, and yet "an Iowa farmer can't feed themself" (Woolf 2008).

Food's central role in human life is a growing area of emphasis across academic and non-scholarly areas alike. Arizona State University's Associate Dean of the Food Studies program explained in a lecture series that "Every loop in our social fabric involves food... Food is an object through which humans construct the powerful imaginary of belonging, nostalgia, safety, pleasure, and loyalty, which in turn construct our fundamental ideas of home, family, nation, and community" (Arizona State University 2019). Food studies encompasses questions that range across nearly every discipline — culture, psychology, economy, health, policy, spirituality, environment, and the list goes on. In practical terms, however, food is recipes and crops, it's wheat, potatoes, cows, eggs, the dinner table, weeding, seeds.



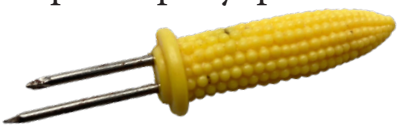
The years that I loved it fresh from the freezer bag, boiled until it floats, strain and lather in butter, next to some cous-cous and nothing else. A dish with *sabor a poco y nada*. Just, sweet, corn.

And that funny place on Melrose Ave, *El Rincón Chileno,* Mauricio the waiter brought out pan amasado and they somehow managed to make the *humitas* right. Not savory like tamales, just sweet corn mush with basil and I would add *azúcar flor* (you know, flowering sugar) on one side, a little spicy *pebre* on the other. But how could they possibly get those big cobs of Humero all the way up the continent? Maybe from the streets too, the *ferias,* in the city I sometimes call home, Santiago. A select few cobs stripped naked, glowing in the sun, announcing summer, the *feriantes* singing its praises with yours, *casi tan dulce como usted, mi reina.*

Then there was the summer where we watched the Coldplay music video on repeat, all the girls huddled around an screen with the CGI monkeys dancing in the sahara. There was a lot of yellow then, what with the beach and all. It went well with my maroon bikini top, new from that unethical superstore store, pushing up the little boobs I wish had never grown. Days of unfinished card games blown into the sand, chips with salsa americana or salsa golf as you called it — the pink one. Then we would get too hungry to

keep staring at the hot girls with californian highlights, just a little blonder and more *cuicas* than us. So we would walk up the 97 steps and take turns in the shower and Elisa always took so long but she kind of looked like Selena Gomez so maybe it was O.K.

At night we went back down, walked the feria that didn't have any veggies, just a piercing stand and spanish churros and the latest platform sandals and shell necklaces, and every year it was bigger and things were less made in China, more expensive, but really probably also made in China just hiding it better. Every night we walked the same rows of shiny trash in skinny jeans and sometimes someone got a belt or a fanny pack. Not me, but yes I could have, we were so rich with $20.000 pesos. I mean we were rich, it was Maitencillo *pelolais* and one year there was a food truck with corn on the cob, a selection of sauces. Choclo *Po* it said, like *pues* in chilensis, with no s or e or most of the letters that make up the *actual* word. A word with all the wrong letters, that doesn't really mean anything but still hola po, cómo estás po, sí po, nopo, yapo.



A cob on the beach, what more could I ask for, except this isn't elote territory so everyone else has empanadas, and the corn is never sweet enough in this home.

Entangled, collective work

In her book The Mushroom at the End of the World, Anna Lowenhaupt Tsing studies matsutake mushrooms in an attempt to make sense of "the possibility of life in capitalist ruins" (Tsing 2015, subtitle), examining how this single food reflects moments of entanglement among institutional alienation. She looks at the precarious conditions Matsutakes need to exist, and the similarities between the object and the people who forage it, cultivate it, consume it, and interact with it on different scales.

Thus, thinking through the idea of entanglement[1] is an attempt to decenter humans by looking at the instances in which we are inherently intertwined with more-than-human beings, simultaneously acting on each other, rather than simply framing the world around us as an inactive setting that we humans act upon. Marisol de la Cadena further develops the idea of ecological entanglements as relations between entities that "emerge inherently together" and are "needy of each other in such a way that pulling them apart would transform them into something else" (Gerrity and Huberman 2022, 102). **What would corn be transformed into if it were**

1 I use the term entanglement here to think about instances that illustrate how the very distinction between humans and nature collapses, which I further explore through new materialism in the section titled "Naming the nonhuman."

pulled apart from people? And vice versa? Would either survive?

Corn is cultivated on every continent except for Antarctica, there's some form of it in nearly 70% of American processed foods, and still another 90% of the crop is used for its myriad derived products (Wall Kimmerer 2018). But there is much more to this omnipresence than the data or the complex industry of the American corn belt. Not only has corn seemingly defeated many valuable, wild plants throughout North America's history of plant domestication, as Laskow points out, but the crop's own internal varieties have been manipulated to the point that maize overruns itself – at the hands of massive industrial agriculture.

Today, the maintenance of maize diversity and its rich associated traditions outside of industrialism are central to the fight for food, seed, land, and cultural sovereignty. "The food sovereignty movement, by calling corn into the political realm, advocates modes of living that challenge over-consumption and neoliberal developments that put older lifeways and traditional methods of farming at risk" (Aguilera 2016, 206). One particularly relevant articulation of this developed in Mexico with the introduction of the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) in the 1990s and the closely related Zapatista resistance.[2]

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2 I only provide a limited, general outline of NAFTA and the EZLN here. For more history and context of the Zapatista movement, see:

Adamson, Joni. 2012. "Seeking the Corn Mother: Transnational Indig-

NAFTA allowed for extremely cheap GMO corn from the U.S. to be imported into Mexico, threatening the sovereignty of local corn production systems, economies, and ecologies (including Native seed strains); "before NAFTA, more than a third of the corn produced by rural farmers was retained for consumption at home, and the rest was sold on local markets" (Santini 2010). Similarly, before NAFTA's modification of the Mexican constitution, Article 27 guaranteed a tortilla a day, mitigating food insecurity at the most basic level in the country (Aguilera 2016).

This agreement, which went into effect in 1994 under the presidency of Bill Clinton, is still extremely contentious today, and is far from the only factor in the changing social, political, and ecological environment of corn and Mexico. However, it changed how we eat, sell, and grow food particularly in the U.S., Mexico, and Canada. The Zapatista Army of National Liberation (EZLN), an Indigenous-led group born in the southernmost region of Mexico in the 1970-80s, stormed six cities in Chiapas the day NAFTA was signed, highlighting the intersecting negative effects of policies like this on Indigenous, peasant, farming communities and live-

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enous Organizing and Food Sovereignty in Native North American Literature." In Indigenous Rights in the Age of the UN Declaration, edited by Elvira Pulitano, 228–49. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. https://doi.org/10.1017/CBO9781139136723.009.

Morton, Adam David. 2002. "La Resurrección Del Maíz': Globalisation, Resistance and the Zapatistas." Millennium 31 (1): 27–54. https://doi.org/10.1177/03058298020310010301.

lihoods. This revolt forced the Mexican government to confront the presence and ongoingness of Indigenous peoples in the region and across the state (Rodriguez 2014), explicitly challenging the government's indifference to their poverty and marginalization with phrases such as 'enough of being forgotten' and 'never again a world without us'.

The EZLN's San Andrés Accords — one of their main proposals — attempted to address the ongoing marginalization, discrimination, and exploitation of Indigenous communities, as well as increasing their political autonomy, but was not passed by the Mexican government. Today, they continue to fight within the frameworks of anti-capitalism and anti-globalization, advocating for land reforms and Indigenous sovereignty. The EZLN is widely known for achieving reforms from the Mexican government, but mainly for establishing their own autonomous community that is often considered a global model of self-organization outside of and opposed to the nation-state and its mechanisms. Rather than attempting to seize state power, the Zapatista tactic is in conversation with Aguilar Gil's previously noted framework. It "is an attempt to establish alternative forms of social organisation beyond the realm of traditional politics" (Morton 2002, 43), summoning all "citizens of the nation to the process of remaking [the nation]" (Adamson 2012, 240).

With one of their slogans stating "long live the collective work of corn," the EZLN in many ways illustrates the simultaneously metaphorical and political power of corn as a contradictory figure of ancientness, erasure, and ongoingness, resisting both marginalization *and* assimilation. As this briefly outlines, particularly since the 1990s maíz has come into international political arenas, with the "Zapatista struggle, the controversy over the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA), the immigration crisis, and the highly contentious issue of genetically modified (GM) corn" (Rodriguez 2014, 170).

While initially alarming, to many of us, instances that illuminate the contradiction and collapse of the capitalist idea of progress no longer seem unique. How to overcome the all too familiar affective sense of overwhelmed abjection or apathy invoked by the world around us (CymeneHowe et al. 2020)*?* **Where do we turn to respond to these crises? What does corn have to do with it?**


Bien
me Sabe

Si quieres mirar una comida: el ají, right?
pebre, salsa, chancho en piedra,
picor en todas las tierras.
Merkén ahumado el mejor souvenir —
que tenga un kultrún o algo así pa' la autenticidad artesana del
Pueblito Los Dominicos.

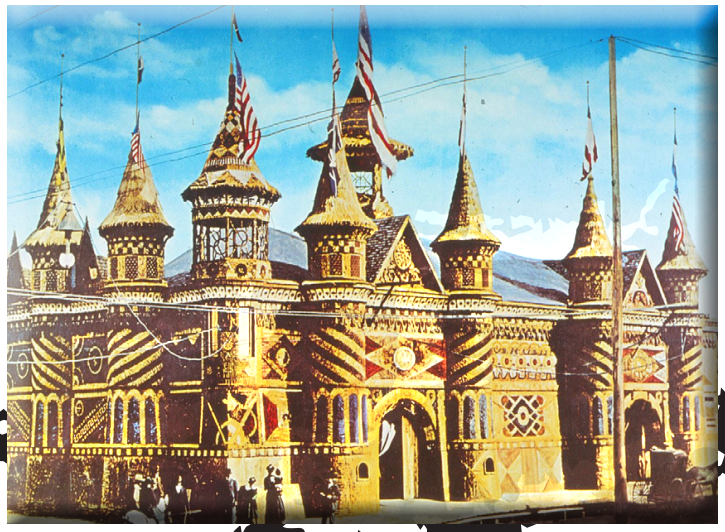
¿El choclo a quién le importa?
solo arepas de la mamá de la Elisa,
la mamá política gay progre que no dejaba su hija ir a marchas,
las arepas ecuatorianas el último año en ese localcito al lado del
colegio,
las carreras por limpiar la coronta,
comer los granos en filitas ordenadas o redondelas o como sea más
rápido y que sin querer queriendo refleje tu personalidad.

¿Y por qué choclo *dulce*
si a mi me gusta el picante?
La peruana en Italia me dijo *eres fuoco* y creo que le entendí
el cineasta colombiano que me llamaba picante en su acento new
yorker
la white new yorker en New Mexico que LOVES blue corn because
it's blue, she's an artist.

Nixtamalizar, she says, but I only speak metaphors.

I know, not everything is a metaphor

here's a corn palace

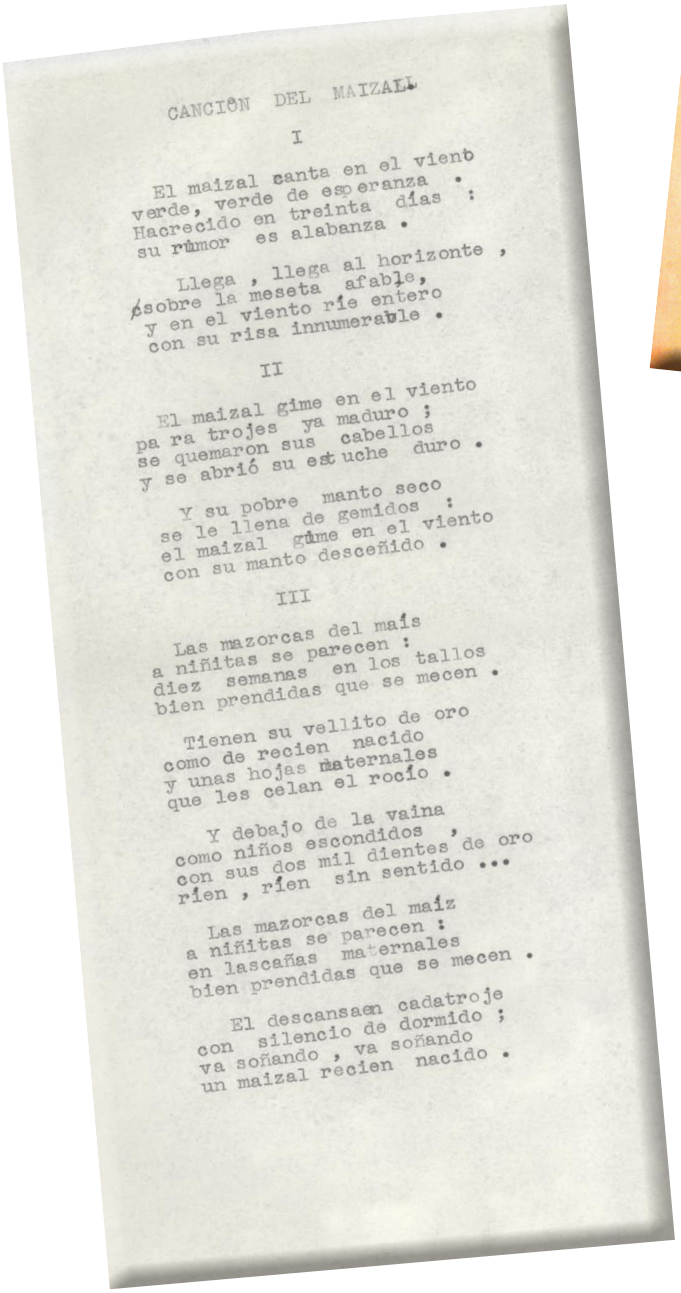


a maze

a political cartoon

incluso un tango,

un poema de la estimada Gabriela Mistral:



CANCIÓN DEL MAIZAL

I

El maizal canta en el viento
verde, verde de esperanza .
Hacrecido en treinta días :
su rumor es alabanza .

Llega , llega al horizonte ,
sobre la meseta afable,
y en el viento ríe entero
con su risa innumerable .

II

El maizal gime en el viento
pa ra trojes ya maduro ;
se quemaron sus cabellos
y se abrió su estuche duro .

Y su pobre manto seco
se le llena de gemidos :
el maizal gime en el viento
con su manto desceñido .

III

Las mazorcas del maís
a niñitas se parecen :
diez semanas en los tallos
bien prendidas que se mecen .

Tienen su vellito de oro
como de recien nacido
y unas hojas maternales
que les celan el rocío .

Y debajo de la vaina
como niños escondidos ,
con sus dos mil dientes de oro
ríen , ríen sin sentido ...

Las mazorcas del maíz
a niñitas se parecen :
en lascañas maternales
bien prendidas que se mecen .

El descansaen cadatroje
con silencio de dormido ;
va soñando , va soñando
un maizal recien nacido .

"a niñitas se parecen"

como esas nuevas historias antiguas de la Mami

cuando fue pequeña terrateniente

antes de que Santiago subiera la cordillera

antes de que el Tata lo vendiera – mal ojo pa' los negocios –

y nunca supe hasta ahora.

DECEMBER 15, 2022

It's my first night back
second walk around the block
Is it too much to tell you
that dog is named *choclo*?
like the indie band
I'm not supposed to like
y la casa de la mami amarillita llena de tesoros

Naming the nonhuman

New materialism[1] provides an interesting theoretical framework to think about some of the questions I have posed. This line of thought, as Jane Bennett introduces in her book Vibrant Matter, poses the central question of "how political responses to public problems change if we were to take seriously the vitality of nonhuman bodies" (Bennett 2010, viii). Largely informed by other currents of Western academia such as rhizome philosophy, deep ecology, ecofeminism, and posthumanist theories, this is an attempt to respond to the multifaceted crises of what is often denominated as the anthropocene. I aim to engage with this thinking critically here, situated within the limitations of Western academia and interrogating the lack of non-Western, Indigenous perspectives in this "emerging" current.

With this in mind, new materialism is an attempt to shift away from the anthropocentrism that shapes much of Western dualist thinking — distinguishing nature from culture, matter from meaning, life from non-life, minds from bodies, etc. (Dolphijn

1 There are many related fields such as object oriented ontology and posthumanism that I am not directly engaging with here. Kim TallBear contrasts other recent currents such as interspecies thinking and multispecies ethnography with an Indigenous metaphysic in her discussion that I further engage with below.

and van der Tuin 2012, 88). While challenging the notion of a passive environment (and traditional environmentalism based on this conception), the nonhuman is conceived of as an actant, that is affected by other humans and nonhumans, and vice versa, in unique, patchy assemblages. The thinking goes that humans are both *in and of* nature, and it "makes no sense to withdraw from nature" (Bennett 2010, 116), although as "modern, urban selves" we are simultaneously more and more entangled with nature, we are also increasingly removed from the abstract, distant idea of it (Bennett 2010, 110-122). Nonhumanity, thus, does not only exist as a distinct ecosystem, but inherently infects culture, as has been historically argued and embodied by many intersectional thinkers and movements.[2] Today, many environmental movements are eager to highlight the ways in which humans infect nature, but opening our eyes to the reverse flow of that channel, or rather, the collapse of that separation "entails the blasphemous idea that nonhumans — trash, bacteria, stem cells, food, metal, technologies, weather — are actants more than objects" (Bennett 2010, 113).

Bennett's "vital" materialism is founded on what she describes as a radical gesture to see the agency of the nonhuman,

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2 One such example, particularly relevant to this project, is Chicana Environmentalism, further explained and analyzed here:

Cheng, Emily. 2020. "The Vietnam War and Chicana/o Environmentalism in El Grito Del Norte (1968–73)." American Quarterly 72 (1): 55–73. https://doi.org/10.1353/aq.2020.0003.

breaking with the cannonic monopoly of humans on this capacity. She is urging herself (and readers) to be surprised by what she sees in the world around her, to linger in moments of fascination (Bennett 2010, 18), in an attempt to induce an attentiveness to objects so that we humans can actually perceive them as vibrant things, with their own thing-power. This emphasizes the nonhuman's power as a degree of independence from what they provoke in us as humans, horizontalizing relations between humans and nonhumans, in addition to drawing attention to "the alien quality of our own flesh," to say, we humans are made of nonhuman particles: "The human is not exclusively human, we are made up of its" (Bennett 2010, 113). Yet, is it not us humans assigning this agency, which continues to center us, our authority, and our inherent human uniqueness? What would happen if we let go of the idea of agency and the category of the human altogether?

Many thinkers have responded with other approaches to the idea of the nonhuman, or similar terms such as inhuman, posthuman, and more-than-human. Bennett is far from the only thinker in this current, but before moving into complementary discussions, I would like to return to her central question that I began with: to think about the role of nonhuman bodies in politics. As Marisol de la Cadena notes, "many scholars have written about sentient other than human beings," however, "none of these stud-

ies consider these beings as potential actors in national politics, let alone their different ontology disrupting the conceptual field of politics" (De La Cadena 2010, 365). The Spinozist conception of politics that Bennett poses centers any body's capacity for activity and responsiveness. A public is thus constituted by groups of bodies with the capacity to affect and be affected by socio-political problems (Bennett 2010, 94-109). Thus, both in the public political sphere and the — equally political — intimate encounters between humans and non-, and *among* nonhumans, the affective quality of these interenvolvements and interdependencies is the basis for the attentiveness of new materialism (Bennett 2010, 104).

Felix Guattari's three ecologies[3] similarly illustrate this dimension, emphasizing the ways in which environmental, social, and mental ecologies are co-constitutive: ecological conditions, problems, and events form the psyche of all its inhabitants, which is the basis of cultural [trans]formation. There are many currents of theoretical discussion that engage with adjacent ideas such as Donna Haraway's nature-cultures, Bruno Latour's collectives[4], and Anna Lowenhaupt-Tsing's entanglement, but as Dolphijn and van der Tuin outline,

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3 See:
Guattari, Félix. 2008. The Three Ecologies. Translated by Paul Sutton and Ian Pindar. Continuum Impacts. London: Continuum.

4 For more on Bruno Latour's conception of the nature-culture binary in relation to new materialism see Bennett 2010, 115.

> We need this new materialism because, whether it concerns earthquakes, art, social revolutions, or simply thinking, the material and the discursive are only taken apart in the authoritative gesture of the scholar or by the commonsensical thinker; while in the event, *in life itself, the two seeming layers are by all means indiscernible*. (Dolphijn and van der Tuin 2012, 92).

This current, while sometimes defaulting to confusingly abstract and theoretical language, is essentially grounded in the tangibility of our world and the intangible connections among its participants. It is important to note that "the political goal of vital materialism is not the perfect equality of actants, but a polity with more channels of communication between members" (Bennett 2010 104). While much of the current discussion focuses on revindicating the "vitalism" (Bennett) or "animacy"[5] of the nonhuman, **the more essential question to me seems to be how we can induce this attentiveness in Western thinking, and what these "channels of communication" may look like.**

Beginning with discussions, like Bennett's, situated mostly within Western academia can be an entrypoint for those of us within these confines. However, Dr. Kim TallBear (Sisseton-Wahpeton Oyate) offers a feminist-Indigenous reading which interrogates the

5 For more on the concept of animacy see:
Chen, Mel Y. 2011. "Toxic Animacies, Inanimate Affections." GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies 17 (2): 265–86.

lack of non-Western, Indigenous perspectives in these academic conversations. While attempting to challenge the cannon, new materialism continues referring to Indigenous theory as "'beliefs' [...] to be studied but not interacted with as truths about a living world" (TallBear 2017, 198), largely due to the epistemic threat this poses to "scientific paradigms (ecological and economic) and their cognate policies" (De La Cadena 2010, 349).

TallBear is a Professor and Canada Research Chair in Indigenous Peoples, Technoscience, and Society, whose work focuses on genome science disruptions to Indigenous self-definitions, and colonial disruptions to Indigenous sexual relations. In her essay *Beyond the Life/Not-life binary* she connects cryopreservation (the deep freezing of tissues) and the associated cryopolitical project of "maintaining genetic material from Indigenous bodies" (TallBear 2017, 180) with academic conversations such as new materialism, that, "to different degrees, labor under and seek to repair the same life versus death and animate versus de-animate dichotomies" (TallBear 2017, 180).

In my work I am engaging with some of these frameworks that "seek to dismantle hierarchies in the relationships of Westerners with their nonhuman others" (TallBear 2017, 188). A great deal of the efforts to re/incorporate animal, multi-, and inter-species studies into humanities and social studies have mostly centered

their understandings of non humanity around *life*. New materialism attempts to extend this understanding of the nonhuman to include the nonliving, with thinkers such as Jane Bennett introducing the *vitality* of things, or Mel Chen's idea of *animacy,* that extend the language itself of life and liveliness. Chen toys particularly with the death-life binary and attempts to disrupt the hierarchy of animacy, in which greater/lesser agency, mobility, awareness, and liveness is attributed to some humans over others, and to humans over nonhumans. (TallBear 2017, 190)

TallBear puts many of these non secular, non-Indigenous frameworks that are at the forefront of new materialisms in conversation with an "Indigenous metaphysic:[6] an understanding of the intimate knowing relatedness of all things" (TallBear 2017, 191) intrinsic to many Indigenous[7] cosmologies for centuries. While we engage in these conversations, particularly within the confines of academia, she urges us to "remember that not everyone needs to summon a new analytical framework or needs to renew a commitment to 'the vitality of [so-called] things'" (TallBear 2017, 193).

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6 She presents this term in conversation with Vine Deloria's American Indian Metaphysic and Charles Eastman's "American Indian 'spiritual' approach to the US Christian reader" (TallBear 2017, 191).

7 As examined in previous sections, the category of Indigenous can often become an obscuring generalization, but is used here as an indicator of "collective resistance to assimilative tendencies of nation states" (TallBear 2017 186). Indigeneity here is thus a political and belief system, as well as a category of being, origin, and geography.

In much Indigenous theorizing,[8] TallBear explains that human identity is co-constituted with the nonhuman communities of the *territorio*, creating a set of "land-human co-constitutive relations" (TallBear 2017, 186), that is often illustrated in Indigenous peoples' origin stories. This restates the conception of nonhuman beings'[9] agency in our world, as they press into and co-constitute the human (TallBear 2017, 189). What, then, would happen if we collapse the knowledge/belief divide so ingrained in Western academic knowledge-making practices, in which stories and spirituality are pushed aside for secular, empirical, *materialistic* investigations?

This brings me back to corn: a nonhuman protagonist of so many of these situated narratives. Working outside of Western academia's association with Judeo-Christian understandings of sacredness is fundamental to truly engage with these narratives: the stories behind *gente de maíz* that illuminate its role as a political actant and the channels of communication between entities that it opens. Religious and spiritual colonialism (LaDuke 2005; Rodri-

8 I speak of cosmologies, stories, metaphysic, and theory somewhat interchangeable here because they are all forms of theorizing that go beyond the limited scope of Western academic "theory," as Dian Million explains in her essay Intense Dreaming: Theories, Narratives, and Our Search for Home (Million 2011).

9 "Beings" as used here includes entities such as animals, plants, objects, rocks, their memories, stories, and spirits. In TallBear's framework, this is an attempt to think outside of the biological life/not life binary.

guez 2014) that center Judeo-Christian perspectives have largely disseminated a commemorative, ancient, timeless conception of what is sacred. In many Indigenous cosmologies, however, origin stories are ways of understanding the present, in a constant search for re-affirmation that is making sense of the world (LaDuke 2005). The aforementioned Roberto Cintli Rodriguez does this himself as he critically engages with elders' stories, and participates in the creation of his own maíz narrative (Rodriguez 2014, 162).

Not-so-round stories

Rodriguez' work exists within "a large corpus of artistic production including literary production, digital humanities, performance studies in Mexico that are questioning transnational forces impacting local food systems" (Aguilera 2016) and the tangibility of maize and its blurred boundaries as a plant, cultural symbol, and food. Abigail Perez Aguilera studies some examples of this corpus in a chapter of the 2017 collection of essays Ecocriticism and Indigenous Studies. She looks at Mikeas Sánchez's interactive collection of poetry Mojk'jäya-Mokaya (2013), and Minerva Hernández Trejo and Héctor Cruz's multimedia installations in the collective art exhibit "Slowly Shelling a Corn" at the Museum of Contemporary Art

of Oaxaca (2014). By examining these transdisciplinary projects, she brings into focus corn's associated cosmologies, biology, and politics, questioning "notions of 'the human' by raising questions about what we know about the relationship of maize to humans" (Aguilera 2016, 205).

The creative projects that Aguilera underscores, and the perspectives presented in both Farmer's documentary and Rodriguez' projects are some initial approaches to the immense physical, oral, and artistic record of corn's widespread presence, that is both ancient and ongoing, tangible and intangible. "Despite industrialization, high technology including genetic modification, and unfair trade practices by global corporations, maíz culture is alive and well among Indigenous and Indigenous-based peoples throughout the continent" (Rodriguez 2014, 50). As Rodriguez explains, these stories continue to live, passed down through people and communities, and many new stories based on the ancient ones continue to be created and adapted to modern society, such as the poetry and imagination of Marilou Awiakta in *Selu: seeking the corn mother's wisdom*, and José Manuel Tec-Tun's bilingual metaphors in *Cuentos de la Abuela Mazorca*.

Tec-Tun's contemporary Maya story[10] was written in Maya

10 In other sources, "cuentos" is translated as "tale" rather than story, but "tale" in Western academia seems to me to connote the very ancientness and lack of theoretical credibility that I am contesting.

and translated to Spanish for the Yucatan Autonomous University's (UADY) National University Literary Contest (Tec-Tun 2010)[11]. In conversation with the widespread stories from the Popol Vuh[12] which relates the oral creation story that people are created from white and yellow corn, Tec-Tun's narrative illuminates how people and corn are not only similar but reflections of each other. xNuk Nal, the abuela Mazorca or corn grandmother, passes on knowledge of this relationality to her five grandchildren,[13] remembering ways of interacting and understanding the land and species around the people [of corn], and reflecting on current shifts in these. She describes the story of human emergence from maize, and that the plant's diversity is central to understanding our place and relationship with the universe around us — namely within and in relation to the nonhuman. Therefore, the literature illustrates how the loss of diversity of maize implies a loss of human situatedness and relationality.

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11 As noted, the story is written in Maya and Spanish languages, therefore all translations to English are my own.

12 This text is an oral transcription of Maya-Quiché origins, traditions, and history from the mid-16th century, foundational in illuminating lifeways that define corn cultures and milpa-centered peoples, also often referenced by outside researchers condusctin archaeological and historical studies of corn such as Staller et al.'s Histories of Maize. See:

Staller, John E., Robert H. Tykot, and Bruce F. Benz. 2010. Histories of Maize in Mesoamerica: Multidisciplinary Approaches. Walnut Creek, Calif: Left Coast Press.

13 Grandchildren are not necessarily related by blood, but are kin, urging us to reconsider hegemonic ideas of both human and nonhuman relationality.

In the story, maize and humanity constantly emerge and re-emerge in a cyclical relationship of co-constitution, as Charles M. Pigott explains in an essay analyzing Tec-Tun's story to speak of emerging biological concepts (Pigott 2019). To Pigott, this story is part of a contemporary Mayan literary renaissance, and can be used to understand biological processes increasingly studied in the field of biosemiotics. He describes the "structural coupling" (a scientific concept attributed to Humberto Maturana and Francisco Varela) of maize and humanity, as habitant and inhabitant that mutually nurture each other, and co-create the human ecological niche (Pigott 2019).[14] Tec-Tun's contemporary story speaks to the constant yet changing roles of corn and corn people, and the ongoingness of these cosmologies. Pigott's engagement with the narrative is a gesture towards enriching the dialogue between Mayan and Western philosophies (Pigott 2019, 116, citing: Villegas-Carrillo 2016, 59).

Tec-Tun illustrates how the verticality of humans reflects the upward movement of plants, deriving our "ability to mediate between land and sky" (Pigott 2019). Tec-Tun dedicates two pages to creating a detailed bullet list of how human life is similar to corn's (pages 119-121), with articulations ranging from our hairi-

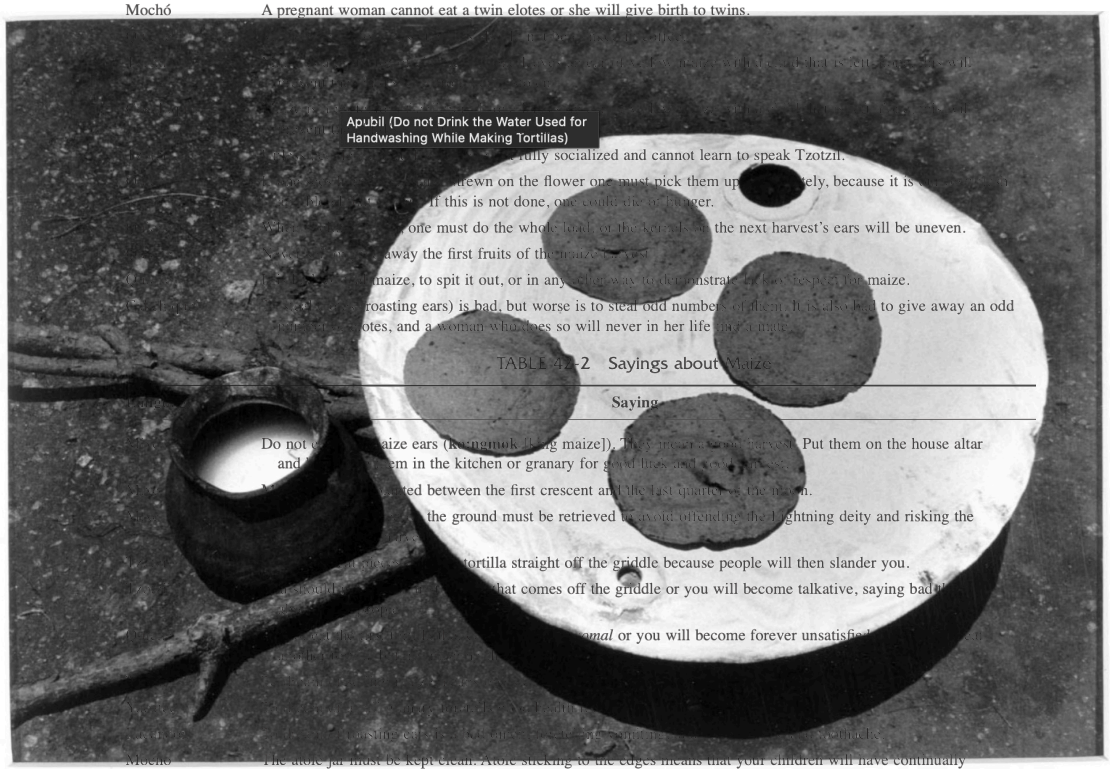
14 I will not further engage with these biological and philosphical terms here, but am interested in considering the connections across disciplines and knowledge systems that Pigott draws in his study (see: Pigott 2019).

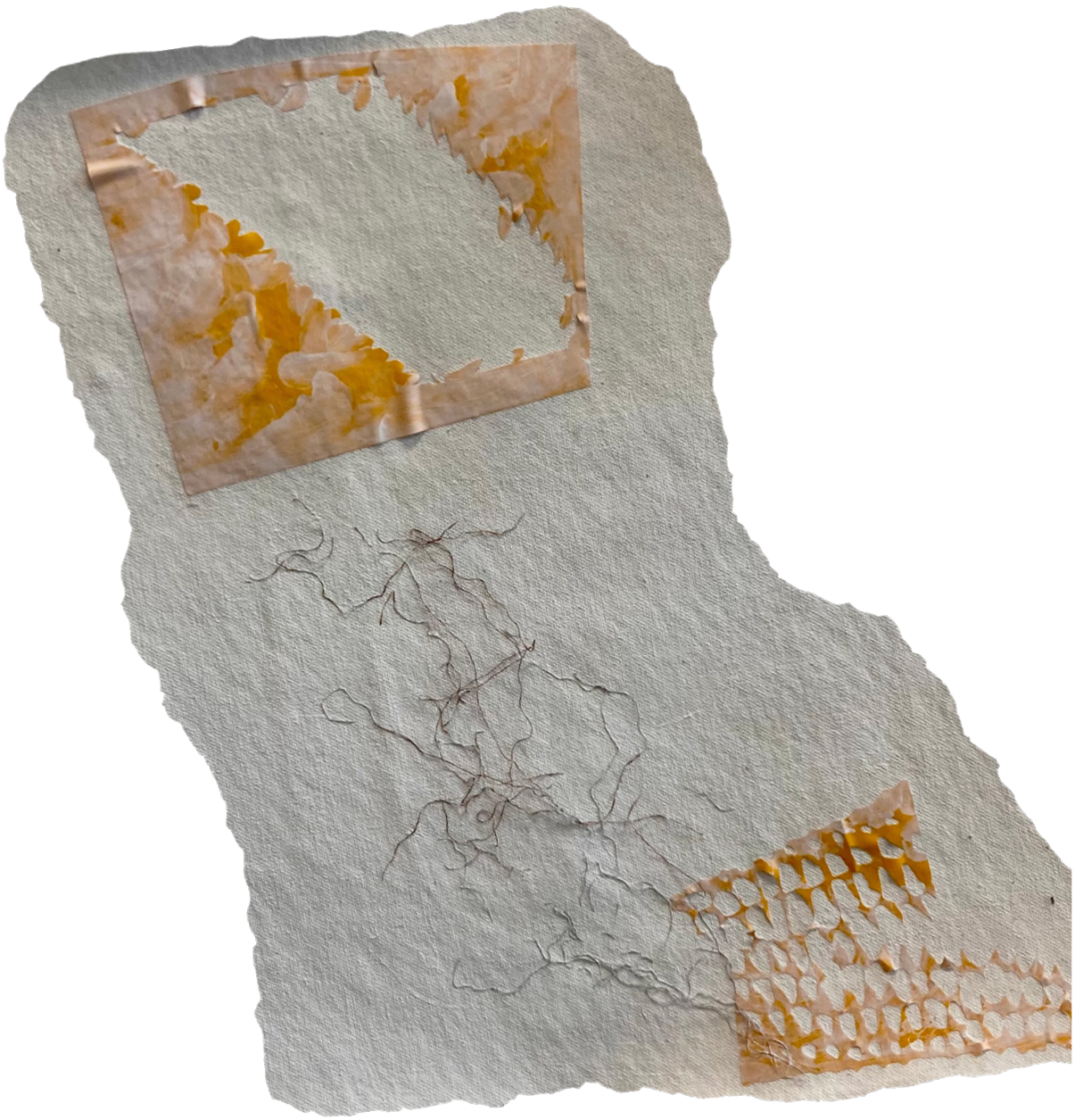
ness, clothedness, and growth, to our need for water, ability to get sick, and that we "should not go extinct on earth" (Tec-Tun 2010, 121).

In one scene, the narrator illustrates the practice of corn burning as a form of dialogue and negotiation between the *milpero* (person who works on the Kool or milpa,[15] in short, a farmer and corn guardian) and other beings who are coming to eat the corn on the field. "The wind will then carry the smell of toasted corn to the mountainsides, and in this way the animals will understand that the corn has an owner" (Pigott 2019, 116). In the contemporary context, Tec-Tun depicts a xNuk Nal that is troubled by the potential loss of ancestral knowledge like this that the *milpero* inherited from his grandfather, that brings with it an "ability to dialogue with the rest of the universe" (Pigott 2019, 121).

15 The kool (in Mayan) or milpa (in Spanish) is a name for the cornfield as a place, with unique time, stories, and lifeways, as well as an agricultural method that has sustained many Mesoamerican peoples over millenia. As a form of ongoing Traditional Ecological Knowledge, the milpa is "based on a type of rotational 'shifting cultivation' slash and burn agriculture with a traditional low-intensity practice in which staples of maize, beans, and squashes are produced" (Rodríguez-Robayo et al. 2020, 47). The milpa's agricultural activity gives rise to agrodiversity, culture, and local knowledge. These interconnected sociocultural, environmental, and economic aspects are at the base of what is threatened by agroindustrial forces such as NAFTA.

Language	Saying
Mixe	Do not eat twin maize ears (**ko:ngmok** [king maize]). They mean a good harvest. Put them on the house altar and later hang them in the kitchen or granary for good luck and good harvest.
Mixe	Maize should be planted between the first crescent and the last quarter of the moon.
Mixe	Maize kernels spilled on the ground must be retrieved to avoid offending the Lightning deity and risking the loss of the next harvest.
Tzotzil	It is bad to eat pieces of burnt tortilla straight off the griddle because people will then slander you.
Tzotzil	You should not eat the first tortilla that comes off the griddle or you will become talkative, saying bad things about other people.
Quiché	Do not eat the first tortilla that comes from the *comal* or you will become forever unsatisfied. Same if you eat another tortilla before finishing the first.
Tzeltal	To dream of selling maize means one's child will die (of soul loss).
Yucatec	To dream of a full granary foretells good health for the dreamer
Lacandón	To dream of roasting ears is a bad omen, foretelling vomiting, abdominal pains, and toothache.
Mochó	The atole jar must be kept clean. Atole sticking to the edges means that your children will have continually runny noses.
Mochó	A menstruating woman who weeds in the *milpa* will cause the maize kernels on the ears to be sparse and widely separated.
Mochó	Do not blow on atole (boiled maize gruel) to cool it or your teeth will fall out.
Mochó	A pregnant woman cannot eat a twin elotes or she will give birth to twins.
Quiché	Maize resents coffee, so tortillas should not be dunked in coffee.
Tzeltal	Maize is a protector of children. If one leaves an ear of yellow maize with a child that is left alone, this will prevent the child's soul from being stolen.
Cakchiquel	Maize is a protector of children. If one leaves an ear of yellow maize with a child that is left alone, this will prevent the child's soul from being stolen.
Tzotzil	Unless people eat tortillas they are not fully socialized and cannot learn to speak Tzotzil.
Quiché	If one sees kernels of maize strewn on the flower one must pick them up immediately, because it is our own flesh and blood that suffers. If this is not done, one could die of hunger.
Quiché	When shelling maize, one must do the whole load, or the kernels on the next harvest's ears will be uneven.
Quiché	Never sell or give away the first fruits of the maize harvest.
Quiché	It is bad to steal maize, to spit it out, or in any other way to demonstrate lack of respect for maize.
Cakchiquel	To steal elotes (roasting ears) is bad, but worse is to steal odd numbers of them. It is also bad to give away an odd number of elotes, and a woman who does so will never in her life find a mate.





JANUARY 26, 2023
my teeth are hairy, rotting too
pero voy al dentista,
pronto,
cuando salga el sol,
en el cumpleaños de tu hermana, tu mamá
la más querida más extrañada
boca anestesiada para no sentir tanto

The questions that this storyteller poses, as TallBear's framework explains, are in direct conversation with the very "channels of communication" that new materialism attempts to conceptualize. How can we shift our inherited Western epistemologies towards an "understanding of humanity from a being that is ontologically separate from the nonhuman world to a becoming that is constantly emerging and transforming through symbiosis with other species" (Pigott, 116)?

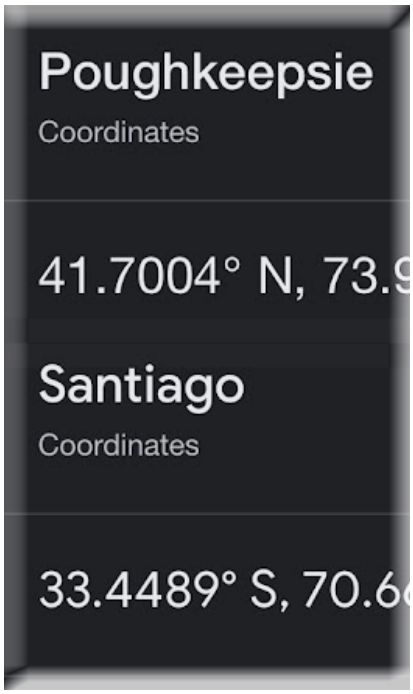
Tec-Tun's extensive list of shared characteristics is perhaps the most direct illustration of what *gente de maíz* is literally saying. In this straightforward list, expanded throughout the narrative, the author puts into practice a sort of anthropomorphization that depicts the reciprocal being between humans and corn, that seems to transgress physiological boundaries and, perhaps, resist translation. "A careful course of anthropomorphizing" (Bennett 2010) is precisely what Jane Bennett proposes as an everyday tactic to comprehending the vitality of nonhuman bodies, forces, and forms. I am particularly interested in this practice, as exemplified by Tec-Tun's literature and as an application of TallBear's relationality. **How does anthropomorphizing simultaneously center and decenter the human? Further, what channels of communication does it create?**

Corn on the cob, elote, corn with kernels that are dientes, corn that is so hairy it fills your dientes. Corn with a million names: elote, humero, choclo, maíz, sara, millo, maize.
Names I've just heard, stories I hardly know.

Corn that is everywhere and nowhere and the stories are not round at all.

Seasonal closure

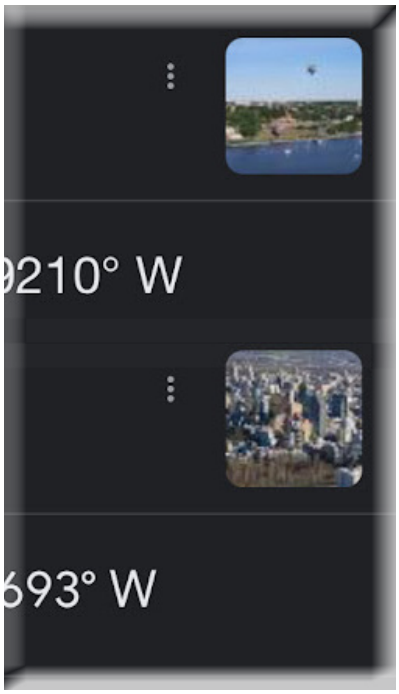
The winter came all of a sudden, we were waiting but she was late and now my scalp is snowflakes. It's the change of weather, rub in some vinegar in the shower, but it smells like *piojo* treatment, salad dressing the cousins never ate because too many nits were killed this way.



Mami me dijo, creo que eres especialmente sensible a las estaciones. No mami, es que estoy a 41.7 grados al norte. Hacia el sur 41 grados está Lago Llanquihue, región de los lagos, así de North estoy del ecuador. Algún punto entre Maullín y Carelmapu. Casi Chiloé.

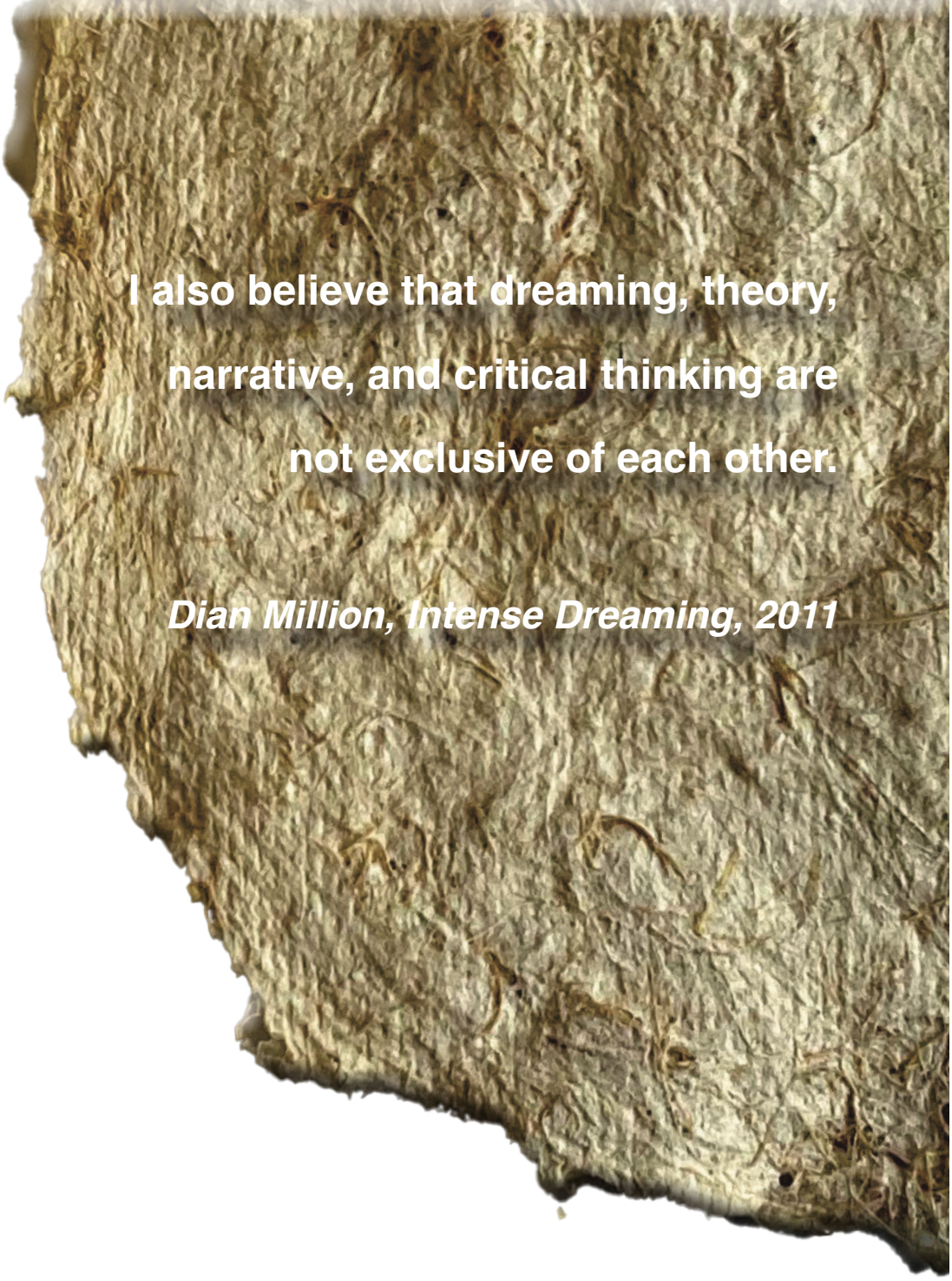
Queríamos vivir ahí, por Valdivia, pero tuvimos miedo del invierno. Llamó la capital que atrapa porque la familia, la vida, la oportunidad urbana. Porque allí llegamos y nos quedamos. Sí, hay otros factores en las decisiones, otros factores in the weather here, pero te cuento, mami, que a los 41.7 grados norte, todes somos sensibles a las estaciones. Seasonal depression, we call it, just SAD.

I guess I'm a snowbird now. De verano en verano. I only know corn as summers, humitas congeladas en el freezer de la Ia, mi madrina, por si veníamos a visitar en el invierno. Regalos congelados. Ia who taught me to never give back a gift: it is accepted and kept, as she handed me a small stuffed seal from her shelf of treasures. I wanted so badly to gift it back, to be the one giving. But you have to learn to receive before you give.



I learned that peaches are another gift of the summer, not always sitting in a neat pile in the Trader Joe's on Melrose. Duraznos conserveros, nectarines, peludos, pelados, appear in the feria in November, leave in March. Months of glory, to be treasured. Peaches that were my drink every 3-5 years on LATAM airlines, Watt's nectar in a cup for 13 hours with not too much turbulence.

Migrating with papers, having some choice, living for the summer.


I also believe that dreaming, theory,
narrative, and critical thinking are
not exclusive of each other.
Dian Million, Intense Dreaming, 2011

ENDNOTE

Through this project I have been thinking about corn as a political object, gente de maíz and its associations with mestizaje and human-nonhuman relationships. Learning from and about the tangible and intangible presence of corn and corn peoples across the Americas has served as a starting point to question what it means for humans to make treaties and be in relation with the nonhuman, to consider how people interact with our everyday surroundings on minor levels that often apply to the most macro levels of society. Behind this is the underlying question of domestication, and how corn has become such a protagonist of the human-plant-land relationships of the Americas, ideas of belonging and situatedness, and in many ways, of different "American" identities. I have drawn from Native studies' relationality, critically engaged with new materialism, spent time with some of the corn stories, media, and histories across the continent, and considered strands of personal narratives and images from my own experiences and conversations.

I began with a story about myself as a child that I have been told my entire life, but don't really remember experiencing myself. Somehow, it has become a part of my personal identity and the

very cultural, national identity that I am now interrogating. I don't question that I have a relationship with corn as a food, plant, and object. Yet I don't identify with it to the same extent, in the same ways, or for the same reasons as many of the mesoamerican, mexican, Indigenous, or chicanx peoples who have ancestral, personal, and/or socio-political histories of relation to this being on this continent. Looking at corn, people, and their cultural connections, I keep returning to the idea of gente de maíz, or people of corn, questioning who identifies with this expression and how it both connects to and resists the violent colonial project of mestizaje in creating unified nation-state identities, particularly in Latin American countries like Chile and Mexico.

Similarly, I am urged to think about the practice of anthropomorphizing as a method to consider the categories people use to describe our relationships with all the actants in the world around us — whether we call them nonhuman, inhuman, more-than-human, post human, or do not name them at all. This has led me to revisit ideas of nostalgia and home that are inherently tied to food studies as a field, and corn as an object. Considering the tensions and confusions of an imagined home and a real one connects nostalgia not just to any idea of home but that which is related to a nation-state. What about peoples' personal and/or cultural memories of corn urges them to revisit them, or not? What resonances

do these moments have in their present? Do they have relevance to their senses of identity, belonging and situatedness, or home, territorio, and nonhuman relationality?

I have just begun to think through these questions, from my own personal perspectives and by engaging with some other peoples' cultural and everyday dis/connections to corn. There are many strands of conversations and action, past, present, and future, that continue this work beyond the page. This creative essay project is an attempt to collect some of these strands for myself. It has taken many forms over the past months, but today it is starting point: a scrapbook, a picture, an accordion, a song, a map.

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The images included throughout this project are a jumble of personal photographs, illustrations, original and intervened archives. I provide context for some of them here, if desired, but unless noted below, they are from personal sources or public domain.

Page 9: Elotero cart in Echo Park, retrieved from Yelp, April 2023. (https://www.yelp.com/biz_photos/elotero-de-echo-park-lake-los-angeles?select=wmQVONUWadfkQkv-8J1oBTA)

Page 20: Maps retrieved from ESRI's Living Atlas, April 2023. (https://vassar.maps.arcgis.com/home/item.html?id=6d9c03213d874def89663afc26189acf; https://vassar.maps.arcgis.com/home/item.html?id=483b04e781c64996954c33eeb27e681e)

Page 29-30: Photographs by author of tamale wrapper packaging from Poughkeepsie gorcery stores February 2023. (Market Fresh and Stop and Shop, respectively.)

Page 43: Still images from King Corn and The Gift documentaries, respectively. (See bibliography.)

Page 55-56:

Photograph of the Corn Palace in Mitchell, SD, in 1892 (https://cornpalace.com/gallery.aspx?AID=2)

Cartoon by political cartoonist Lalo Alcaraz for the #NoJusticeNoElotes campaign in 2017. (https://remezcla.com/culture/elotero-benjamin-ramirez-assaulted/)

Manuscript of poem by the chilean poet-diplomat, educa-

tor and humanist Gabriela Mistral. Retrieved from the Biblioteca Nacional Digital de Chile, April 2023. (http://www.bibliotecanacionaldigital.gob.cl/bnd/623/w3-article-141097.html)

Cover of the sheet music for Ángel Villoldo's piaano tango. Public domain. (https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:El_choclo.jpg)

Page 71:

Photograph by Maruch Sántiz Gómez, titled "Apubil (Do not Drink the Water Used for Handwashing While Making Tortillas)" (1975), as part of the series Creencias de nuestros antepasados (The Beliefs of Our Ancestors), which seeks to document and compile the traditions of the Tzotzil people.

Compilation of sayings about maize listed in the extensive encyclopedic volume of "multidisciplinary approaches to maize," that refers to the sayings as "metaphors" and "traditional beliefs" that are "particularly useful to record and interpret." (See Page 586: Staller, John E., Robert H. Tykot, and Bruce F. Benz. 2010. Histories of Maize in Mesoamerica: Multidisciplinary Approaches. Walnut Creek, Calif: Left Coast Press.)

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