The Poetics of Fieldwork: Geographies of Difference and Togetherness

Victor Ivan Arroyo Avila

A Thesis in the Centre for Interdisciplinary Studies in Society and Culture
Faculty of Fine Arts

Presented in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements

for the Degree of

Doctor of Philosophy (Humanities)

at Concordia University

Montréal, Quebec, Canada

June 2023

CONCORDIA UNIVERSITY
SCHOOL OF GRADUATE STUDIES

This is to certify that the thesis prepared

By: Victor Ivan Arroyo Avila

Entitled: The Poetics of Fieldwork: Geographies of Difference and Togetherness

and submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY (Humanities)

complies with the regulations of the University and meets the accepted standards with respect to originality and quality.

Signed by the final examining committee:

_____ Chair
Dr. Adel Jebali

_____ External Examiner
Dr. Susana Vargas Cervantes

_____ External to Program
Jean-Claude Bustros

_____ Examiner
Dr. Silvano De la Llata

_____ Examiner
Dr. Rosanna Maule

_____ Thesis Supervisor
Tim Clark

Approved by _____
Dr. David Morris, Humanities Ph.D. Program Director

August 1, 2023

_____
Dr. Annie Gérin, Dean, Faculty of Fine Arts

Abstract

The Poetics of Fieldwork: Geographies of Difference and Togetherness.

Victor Arroyo, Ph.D.
Concordia University. Humanities Programme. 2023.

This thesis examines various logics of extraction in the Indigenous P'urhépecha community in Cherán, in the Mexican state of Michoacán. It comprises field-based artistic research in the Cherán forest, investigating various articulations of colonial violence manifested in diverse forms of resource extraction, state-sponsored violence, appropriation of land, enforced disappearance, and unevenly distributed visual rights. The experiences of the Indigenous communities in Michoacán are rooted in longstanding histories of exclusion, disappearance, colonialism, and genocide.

In 2015, I initiated a long-term investigation in the P'urhépecha landscape, examining social relations and tensions following the 2011 P'urhépecha uprising in Cherán. In 2011, the people in Cherán locked down the town and took up arms, engaging against organized criminal cartels, whose drug-related violence and illegal logging had plagued the area for decades. In 2012, the P'urhépecha legally took political control of the town, expelling the police and other state institutions. An autonomous Indigenous government has been consolidated, without a mayor, police, or political parties. Cherán is the first autonomous Indigenous community with a new governance system built on P'urhépecha traditions to be recognized officially by the Mexican government.

The Indigenous autonomous government in Cherán stands as a successful case of political emancipation and environmental protection against extractivist practices. Through an extensive process of community-based research, I combine personal, political, and theoretical, in order to grapple with the complex relationship between culture, positionality, ethnicity, and class. This thesis builds upon three moving image artworks, investigating the impermanence and malleability of spatialities of memory, exception, erasure, and disappearance.

Acknowledgments

I would like to begin by acknowledging my presence in two unceded Indigenous territories upon which this research was conducted. The first is the territory of the P'urhépecha people of Michoacán, in Mexico, descended from the early Pre-Columbian Tarascan state that once existed in the geographic area of the present-day states of Michoacán, Guanajuato, and parts of Jalisco. My family walked upon and lived throughout this land as far back as 1775, my fourth great-grandparents having been born in El Ancón, Ixtlahuacán del Río, Jalisco.

The second is the Kanien'kehá:ka nation, recognized as the custodians of the lands and waters upon which we gather today. Tiohtià:ke/Montréal is known as a historic gathering place for many First Nations. It is also where I started a new family, here in Tiohtià:ke/ Montréal, beginning with Anggie and Kai in 2011. These two unceded Indigenous lands have nurtured and welcomed me, as they continue to do, and have done for so many since time immemorial.

Table of Contents

Conclusion
Circulating Discipline and Knowledge

INTRODUCTION

Becoming a Nation

The 2011 P'urhépecha Uprising

In September 2006, in the city of Uruapan, Michoacán, a group of gunmen broke into a nightclub and threw five human heads onto the dance floor. Such public demonstrations of extreme brutality became the hallmark practices of Mexico's drug cartels, initiating an unprecedented regime of violence. The state of Michoacán, in central Mexico, is the birthplace of the Mexican government's war against drug traffickers. In 2006, Felipe Calderón, the president at the time, initiated *Operativo Conjunto Michoacán*, the first large-scale deployment of federal troops to combat drug trafficking. The Mexican drug war is an ongoing, asymmetric conflict that has lasted for more than fifteen years, resulted in over 120,000 deaths, and brought with it indescribable social ramifications.

Mexican drug trafficking organizations have existed for several decades, with sporadic bursts of violence occurring here and there across the country. However, this latest manifestation presents distinctive characteristics. One of the most salient aspects of the current phase of the drug war is the direct intervention by the military on the streets of Michoacán, which sweeps inevitably into every aspect of everyday life. In December 2006, when President Calderón, newly elected, sent more than 6,000 army soldiers to Michoacán, no one could have predicted the full scope of the various ramifications and social consequences to result from this first major retaliation against the drug cartels and their violence. As Alejandra Guillén writes: "In Mexico, el Cartel de los Caballeros Templarios has ventured into other businesses, such as agriculture, extortion, kidnapping, mining, logging, transportation, trafficking of organs and women" (1).

Michoacán's drug cartels, such as *Cartel de los Caballeros Templarios* (Knights Templars' Cartel) and *La Familia Michoacana* (Michoacán Family), are well known for their involvement not only in illegal logging but also with all sorts of industries — including, most recently, avocado farming. A wide range of practices — from drug trafficking, illegal logging, and dispossession of people from land so as to repurpose it for agro-industrial uses, to labour exploitation and human rights violations — are made possible in the state of Michoacán by extensive corruption within the political system. As Mexico's drug war expanded into the country's rural areas, cartels became particularly interested in gaining control over Indigenous territory. Although Indigenous P'urhépecha communities own much of Michoacán's forest, support from the authorities is rare as the local government — like those in many other poor, rural areas of Mexico — is complicit in the problem. Over the course of decades, P'urhépecha lands in Michoacán have been dispossessed by organized crime operating under the protection of the state, a result of corruption and collusion by authorities. Against this violent backdrop, the fate of the P'urhépecha people and their territory is closely bound up with struggles against various forms of extractivism, narco-industries, and land disputes.

On the morning of April 15, 2011, as the story goes, a group of P'urhépecha women from Cherán, armed with only sticks and stones, detained a busload of illegal loggers transporting wood that had been stolen from their forest. Following this incident, it took just a few days for the P'urhépecha community to organize and assume political control over the town, blocking all entry roads and expelling the police force, bribed politicians,

and state authorities. What resulted from the women's confrontation with the illegal loggers was the emergence of a new political structure in the community.

For decades, illegal logging has been one of the dominant industries in Michoacán and has been linked closely, in recent times, to several of the world's most violent drug cartels. As the P'urhépecha community reacted against illegal logging to protect its territory, a series of important political and social changes followed closely upon the 2011 uprising. The resistance of the P'urhépecha people of Cherán not only stopped the relentless depredation of their natural resources, but also spurred a revaluation of their cultural identity and established an alternative model for public administration and control. This new model saw the intertwining of conservationism with traditional P'urhépecha governance, in clear opposition to the current political models prevailing in Mexico. Thus, an Indigenous collectivity decided to reclaim political autonomy from the compromised state power, forming instead an autonomous government that articulates P'urhépecha knowledge and ethnic identity as its foundation and functions as the leading protector of the territory, the community, and the forest.

Violence in Michoacán is not a new phenomenon but a material manifestation of decades of economic punishment and social exclusion. The 2011 P'urhépecha uprising in Cherán not only exposed how environmental extraction in Michoacán is bound to a longstanding history of colonial violence against the P'urhépecha people, but also positioned the latter in the midst of a global conversation about the relationship between

colonial forms of governance, state-sponsored violence, and various forms of extractivism.

Cherán is an Indigenous town with over 14,000 inhabitants located in the heart of the Meseta P'urhépecha, a mountainous area in the state of Michoacán mostly covered by coniferous forests. The Meseta P'urhépecha is a socially constructed geography with roots in distinctive regional traditions and Indigenous cultural practices. The P'urhépecha language is spoken by more than 100,000 people across Michoacán, making it one of the most spoken Indigenous languages in the country. P'urhépecha is usually identified as an isolated language, without an established genealogical relationship to any other language. Attempts have been made to link P'urhépecha with the Chibchan language family from lower Central America, as well with Quechua and Zuñi from the American Southwest, but so far these efforts remain in the realm of conjecture. Michoacán serves as the distinct homeland of the P'urhépecha, and of their language and culture. However, local changes and the geopolitical economic reforms of the last few decades have shifted the circulation of people, products, capital, images, and ideas, profoundly modifying everyday P'urhépecha life.

The 2011 uprising in Cherán had the protection of the forest as its primary goal. One of the main causes of the uprising was excessive deforestation by illegal loggers linked to organized crime. According to data collected by INEGI, the federal agency for statistics and geography, urban areas comprise only 1.4 percent of Chéran’s total territory of

about 21,170 hectares, compared to 46.7 percent for agricultural and pastoral lands, and 51.86 percent for coniferous forest.

Traditionally, agriculture, timber, and other resources have represented the most important economic activities in the Meseta P'urhépecha. For many decades, the P'urhépecha people have experienced various iterations of colonial violence, including murders, kidnappings, extortion, and illegal logging. Illegal loggers operated freely in the community, securing the protection of politicians associated with organized crime, particularly drug cartels such as *Cartel de los Caballeros Templarios* and *La Familia Michoacana*. Aggressive forest exploitation of the sort recently opposed by the P'urhépecha uprising is not a novelty. Over the last five decades, approximately fifty percent of the forest has been lost to such practices (2). For the P'urhépecha of Cherán, as such, their relationship with nature places them in clear opposition to the extractivist economic models of the Western powers. The struggle for the protection of the forest on P'urhépecha land is deeply intertwined with notions of identity, culture, and society. As Garner states: "Trees and their products are intimately woven into the material and social fabric of most societies [being] central to the daily realities of existence and fundamental in structuring language, identity, beliefs and rituals" (3). As such, the 2011 P'urhépecha uprising is an assemblage of distinctive material, social, legal, and symbolic elements developed in a specific geographical context and articulated, historically and politically, by the community. This cultural assemblage is chiefly configured in three specific dimensions: the material (resources, management, the forest in everyday life); the symbolic (configuration of the territory, sacred places,

entities, and ritual); and, finally, the legal (access to land, practices and legality surrounding P'urhépecha identity). Not all Indigenous communities in Mexico share this kind of cultural configuration, articulated through geography and territory. Together, the above three dimensions of their culture have consolidated a renewal of the Indigenous identity of the P'urhépecha people, resulting from the intersection between local forms of resistance and global activist movements against ecocide, subjugation, and social erasure.

Environmental crises are not accidental or unintentional side-effects of modernity. Such environmental upheavals have never simply been collateral damage but are indeed materializations of colonial violence in their own right, and are woven together with disparities of race, class, and geography. The Indigenous P'urhépecha people are ancestral victims of state power and colonial forms of governance, with their territory being at the centre of a historical struggle for power and dominance. Because their homeland is located in forested areas, the Indigenous P'urhépecha people participate in extractive processes, both as captives and as accomplices; and they are, as such, situated at the centre of an extractive capitalist project aimed at the violent dispossession and exploitation of both natural and human resources. Their situation is complex due to uncertain delimitations between what is legal and illegal, and the blurry political forces that control and carry out the violent extraction of the forest's riches. They live amidst a situation where violence and threat prevail, hindering legal means of defence. Various forms of ecocide within the Indigenous P'urhépecha communities are

the product of intensified structural violence associated with new regimes of capital accumulation and their incessant voracity for temporal and geographical expansion.

To denote and acknowledge the histories of ecocide and extractivism in the P'urhépecha landscape is to expose the coloniality of history writing and policy making, and to press for an intersectional analysis between critical race theory, environmental violence, and extractivism. The Eurocentric frameworks that have been used to enslave and colonize Indigenous Peoples in Mexico have not disappeared; they have simply evolved into much more complex forms of violence, such as environmental violence and the drug war. The Mexican drug war is simply a more recent iteration of colonial violence and systemic racism, one which subjects disenfranchised communities to violence-induced trauma and the loss of land, culture, and language. We need to recognize that Mexico's current hyper-violent situation is the result of historical processes predicated upon a particular system of values. To dismantle systemic racism in Mexico is one of the most important social challenges, because this racism does not resemble anything else in the world. For most onlookers, it is very difficult even to see it, because it is engrained in everyday life through both formal and informal policies and practices.

Methodology

Our geographies are important. They shape who we are and the disparate and deeply personal ways in which we perceive the world. Despite this, we pay them little attention. Many years passed before I understood the importance of my personal geographies in terms of how I engage with the world. Why am I doing research in a rural Indigenous community in central Mexico? Why am I investing so much in these landscapes? The simplest answer to this question is: because these landscapes made me who I am. What we know today as P'urhépecha territory is a remanent of the Tarascan state, the history of which reaches back to early Pre-Columbian Mexico, and which covered, approximately, the present-day states of Michoacán, Jalisco, and Guanajuato. I come from a long lineage of campesinos and rancheros engaged in business and politics, and scattered across centuries in these three states. In Mexico, my family has lived in and walked upon P'urhépecha territory as far back as the eighteenth century. My fourth great-grandparents were born in El Ancón, Ixtlahuacán del Río, Jalisco, in 1775. The rural landscape, the forest, el rancho — these are the geographies of my childhood in Mexico. They made me who I am. To position my thinking in this way has permitted me to reconfigure how I perceive myself and the world around me. Who am I? My name is Victor Arroyo and I am from central Mexico, a deeply unequal and violent geography implicated in contemporary struggles over meaning, power relations, and racial performances. After many years, I have come to embrace the idea that central Mexico, and the municipalities in which I grew up, shaped many things about me, including my approaches to art, research, and writing. Central Mexico is a territory that I cross and that crosses me.

As the P'urhépecha uprising in Cherán was unfolding throughout 2011, I followed the news closely from Canada. However, this Indigenous conflict eventually lost prominence in the news media, as it became mingled with and overtaken by other, no less important national events. For Mexico, 2011 was a turbulent time. The country was celebrating what was officially called the Mexico Bicentennial Celebrations, commemorating two hundred years of political independence from the Spanish colonial empire, a bloody and violent regime that had lasted for three hundred years. The Mexican government exalted and glorified the nation's social and political achievements, with no small irony, against a backdrop of extreme poverty, Indigenous subjugation, and mass violence and murder as a result of the drug war, initiated barely four years earlier. As hundreds of bodies continued to be found in mass graves all across the country, the nation joined in massive celebrations in preparation for hosting the 2011 FIFA U-17 World Cup. All the while, an Indigenous insurrection was quietly taking place in the small town of Cherán.

Indigenous conflicts in Michoacán are not a new phenomenon. As such, Mexico's society and media tend not to accord them their due importance. As a child, I grew up witnessing road blockades and continual, massive mobilizations of Indigenous people in Michoacán. That this new mobilization in Cherán was not deemed relevant was to be expected. Little did we know, however, that a small Indigenous emancipation protest was about to shift the nation's political gears. Initial accounts of the uprising in Cherán were tinted with uneasy and contradictory narratives. When describing Indigenous emancipation struggles and challenges to colonial legacies, institutional language tends to be limited, short-sighted, and clumsy, lacking foresight or urgency.

After following the uprising at a distance, from Canada, for several years, I decided to carry out my PhD research on P'urhépecha territory in Michoacán. My motives for embarking upon this research are both personal and political, as memories of the pastoral landscapes of my childhood clashed against images of extreme political violence and social upheaval. The findings of my PhD research are based on multi-sited ethnographic fieldwork that I conducted in the forest of Cherán and across diverse P'urhépecha areas in the state of Michoacán. I visited the community on four occasions, beginning in the year 2015 and returning in 2016, 2017, and 2018. Each year, I stayed in Michoacán for three months, completing, in total, an entire year of fieldwork by the time my intervention concluded. Throughout this time, I worked as an artist-researcher in residence at El Colegio de Michoacán. Through my collaborations with several Indigenous scholars from this university, I was introduced to key members of the community who had participated in the 2011 uprising in Cherán.

With the Globalink Research Award that I received from the Canadian organization Mitacs (4), I was able to secure additional funding from Quebec's research, science, and technology ministry (Ministère de l'Enseignement supérieur, Recherche, Science et Technologie, or MERST) and education ministry (Ministère de l'Éducation et de l'Enseignement Supérieur, or MEES). I also arranged for an institutional partnership between Concordia University and El Colegio de Michoacán, which lent me legitimacy in the eyes of the P'urhépecha community. Consequently, my research began to take on a communal form. This kind of inquiry — broadly categorized as community research —

murky and ambiguous as it is, can have various connotations and consequences, depending on the research context and the researcher's institutional affiliations.

My research community was comprised of researchers, academics, activists, local people from the community, cultural workers, administrative personnel, and bureaucrats from various institutions, sometimes with competing and even conflicting affiliations. The P'urhépecha uprising is not a smoothly functioning machine so much as a group of clusters with different subcultures that embrace differing, sometimes even contradictory notions of resistance, community, and emancipation. I found multi-sited ethnography to be the ideal method of inquiry, as it offered a multi-vocal, multi-perspectival timbre, allowing for the articulation, amidst a conflicted location, of different voices and points of view.

The impulse behind my ethnographic research was to design a methodology that could account for the location, embodiment, and power differentials shaping the P'urhépecha uprising. As I describe above, the uprising is a reaction, taking place in the present, against complex cultural processes linked with the past, such as environmental violence, state power, and colonial legacies. My ethnographical research necessitated moving between present and past, and across different locations. As such, multi-sited ethnography seemed an ideal approach, as its essence is to follow people, connections, and relationships across space. George Marcus describes it as a mode of ethnographic research that "moves out from single sites and local situations of conventional ethnographic research designs to examine the circulation of cultural meanings, objects

and identities in diffuse time space…. This mobile ethnography takes unexpected trajectories in tracing a cultural formation across and within multiple sites of activity" (5). In following people and ideas across diverse geographies, the idea of site emerges as the key component of ethnographic research.

As multi-sited ethnography moves across locations, consequently time becomes an essential element of the research. This epistemological operation necessarily entails identifying multiple time spectra, implicating site and location as longitudinal research. As such, I placed the idea of the single site under a critical lens — central to ethnographical methodology — what Marcus identifies as the discipline's "research imaginary" (6). In engaging ourselves against an established methodology demands a new approach and a new system of aesthetics that takes ecologies and politics into account, alongside critical theory. My aim was to work through epistemological frameworks that deconstruct claims of truth and objectivity in established and largely unquestioned modes of academic writing and knowledge production. I used multi-sited ethnography in order to engage with alternative forms of knowledge production and circulation, while emphasizing scholar activism, lived experience, and intersectionality.

Methodological questions are always concerned with political and ethical choices and strategies. Accordingly, I aimed to frame my research in such a way as to circumvent dominant neoliberal approaches such as capture and instrumentality. By decentring my perspective, I learned how to be attuned to my various social, cultural, geopolitical, and ecological realities. My research responds to the relationship between creative practices

and resistance. As such, this thesis explores the links between racial capitalism, coloniality, environmental violence, and extractivism in the P'urhépecha landscape, opening up possible new alliances between Indigenous knowledge, critical theory, and art through a reconsideration of the politics of place.

Art production at the intersection of anthropology, ethnography, and other social research methodologies has been the focus of much critique, but this has in turn strengthened and bolstered what has come to be known as socially engaged art practices. This category, as the term suggests, encompasses a wide set of artistic practices rooted in social relations. Direct and simple though the term may seem, in practice socially engaged practices are typically based upon extensive empirical research and experience. The complexity of these foundational aspects arises out of the multidisciplinary nature of the practice. Performance, sociology, ethnography, pedagogy, social work, and public art practices — to name just a few — are some of the tools from which artists construct their vocabularies, depending on their interests, needs, and purposes. As artists, we walk blindly into different situations, instigating — consciously or not — a variety of actions and experiences. To make informed decisions about how to engage and construct meaningful exchanges and experiences does not demand traditional artistic skills; such skills as knowing how to moderate a conversation, to negotiate different and sometimes contradictory interests within a particular group, or to assess the complexities of a social situation are rarely if ever taught as part of the artist's training. To move closer toward a language through which we may understand

the particularities of socially engaged art and discuss its impact, I have identified the basic components of the practice:

- The type of participation or collaboration.
- The role of location.
- The instigator of the action.
- The documentation process.

Pablo Helguera, in his seminal book about socially engaged art practices (7), provides an extensive discussion of methods and approaches to the practice. The four components I have just mentioned are based upon and inspired by his methodological research, helping me to illuminate various aspects of the practice that may at first seem unintelligible or opaque. My research on Cherán presents a series of stories of solidarity across geographies in relation to emergencies connected to ecocide, capitalism, colonial power, and genocide — stories that emphasize the centrality of artist-led empathy and personal connection with the community, while according the central place to P'urhépecha perspectives. Rather than propose a system, I reveal the conditions necessary to make situations of solidarity possible and resonant. I witnessed the power of communality in action as a way to connect each community member to the greater collective — in sharp contrast to the forms of domination created by narco-capitalism and state-sponsored violence. Communality is, in all matters, social and cultural. We should not think about the autonomy of the P'urhépecha community in Cherán only in terms of their oppositional political relationship to the state. It is necessary to reflect

upon autonomy as a process in which a community is reversing the complex set of social relationships produced by the colonial experience. As Chatterton remarks, “autonomous geographies are part of a vocabulary of urgency, hope and inspiration, a call to action that we can dismantle wage labour, the oil economy, or representative democracy, and that thousands of capable and workable micro-examples exist” (8). The 2011 uprising in Cherán created a mode of social organization different from and quite beyond the colonial experience and the kinds of spaces it occasioned.

It is important to underline that, in my work, the social processes in which I engage — such as politics and friendships — do not serve to influence or orchestrate desired outcomes, but operate, instead, as a component of radical action toward resistance, resurgence, and renewal. While visiting P'urhépecha communities, I was able to examine how Indigenous forms of resistance disrupted colonial legacies and global extractive processes. By manifesting a vitalist account of community participation and social action through first-person documentary practice, we gain a better understanding of how the community organizes itself, through collective assemblies, against global extractive processes, and exercises power in the maintenance, organization, and control of the material infrastructure of the forest.

To clarify further the first point, on methodology — the type of participation or collaboration that took place — my research in the P'urhépecha forest was not an institutional gesture that equates artistic knowledge production with normative university research practices, but rather one that invites us to ask how we understand the labour

of research and its ramifications. In this context, artistic research is understood as an embedded entanglement that reconfigures all participants in unexpected ways. Documenting through the first person — I am seeing — represents an invitation to rethink the stakes of the political as well as the social. This approach to documentary attends to non-extractive models of engagement, which, in turn, influence models of participation and collaboration in the arts, fuelling pedagogical and disciplinary debates within the humanities.

Methodological introspection — a critical examination of a particular tool, how it operates, its aesthetics — demands a new approach and a new system of aesthetics. Who speaks? What methods do we use? To what institutional, structural, and discursive influences are we subjected? Such questions, raised more than thirty years ago during the Writing Culture debate (Clifford and Marcus 1986), aim to shed light on the makers and methods behind ethnographies. Reframing dominant epistemologies — such as exploitation and extraction — through creative interventions promotes arts-based methodologies as sites for creative resistance and resurgence. We need a new visual language that pulls together these various threads: a language that explains but does not lecture, a language that contextualizes but does not absolve.

The limits of ethnography and the ideological assumptions underpinning artistic practices are described by Hal Foster in his seminal essay *The Artist as Ethnographer?* (9). Foster establishes three ideological assumptions behind ethnographic work. First, it is assumed that the site of artistic transformation is the site of political transformation,

and that this site is always located elsewhere, in the field of the other. The second assumption is that this other is always situated externally, and that this alterity is the primary point of subversion of the dominant culture. Third, it is assumed that if the artist is not perceived as socially and or culturally other, they enjoy but limited access to this transformative alterity. My art practice and research traces these ideological assumptions through a specific history of contemporary contact and encounter, responding critically to certain ethnographic constructs and gesturing at their shortcomings: the power differentials enacted when one group depicts another, the intrusion of the lens, and so on.

Foster's writing sheds light on current principles and ideological assumptions found in socially engaged art practices — principles and assumptions within which we work but which are rarely questioned: that the site of artistic transformation is also the site of political transformation, that this site is always located elsewhere and externally, and that we have limited access to this transformative alterity. But as we break down these principles, we may apprehend their tremendous similarity to the postulates of anthropological fieldwork — the very ideological backbone, no less, of nineteenth-century anthropology, which invested the foundation of ethnography: the other, the outside, the access. In many ways, socially engaged art practices tend to reproduce these ideological foundations and principles, and perpetuate the legacy of their colonial histories.

All these terms — alterity, dominance, power — loaded as they are with ideological baggage, may get in the way of illuminating the essence of things. Behaviours and attitudes that have begun to calcify into long-term habits of working, thinking, and viewing — how do they function? How can we examine socially engaged art practices that raise questions about how human action affects the ecologies in which it is implicated? However, these calcified habits may also act, instead, as deep-rooted centres of knowledge and guide us toward more engaged, more spiritually anchored futures. By exposing these ingrained habits through art, we may seek out and discover ecologies otherwise lost to the dominant imaginaries of rationalized Western society. If (and only if) questioned, alterity, dominance, and power may serve as our foundations, from which we may move onward. In this regard, socially engaged art practices may serve as a cultural mode of documentation and knowledge transmission, as potential sites for artistic strategies of decolonial intervention and disruption.

Unlike a historian or a journalist, who generally hews to the factual and the historical, my intention as an artist doing fieldwork in Cherán is to present a series of cinematic descriptions of what it means to live in Mexico in this precise moment. I am interested in depicting how these violent disparities of race, class, and geography unfold in the P'urhépecha landscape as they intersect with the legacies of colonial violence and various forms of extraction. My artistic research highlights Western visual culture both as the by-product and the beneficiary of colonizing forces. With this approach, I aim to illuminate how forms of visual representation, such as documentary film and painting, perpetuate settler perspectives of history. By challenging the colonial legacies

encountered in these visual forms, we may perturb the institutions that produce them and induce these institutions to acknowledge their participation in the system of colonialism. To understand ethical visual representation as an act of reparation is to correct the tendency to misread colonialism as merely a wrongdoing of the past when it is in fact a system operating actively in the present.

Decolonial theory has gained traction in the fields of art theory and research in recent years. The key figures in cultural production and circulation — artists, curators, and scholars — influence which narratives and histories are told, and how. The decolonial turn in art practice and research is an ongoing epistemic project aimed at unsettling Eurocentric frames of reference while rearticulating marginalized experiences and silenced histories. Decolonial aesthetics, theory, and methods challenge normative artistic practices by promoting a relationality that builds an understanding among geopolitical locations and colonial differentials, against the political and epistemic violence of modernity.

In the 1990s, Aníbal Quijano spoke of the coloniality of power as a matrix of processes of domination and dispossession, beginning with the devastation of the Americas in 1492 and continuing to this day. It designates the structures of power, control, and hegemony that emerged during the era of colonialism and have persisted to the present day through territorial, environmental, cultural, linguistic, and educational dispossession. One of the fundamental principles of coloniality identified by Quijano was the idea of race as a fundamental instrument for control, exploitation, and extermination. As

Quijano states: “Coloniality of power was conceived together with America and Western Europe, and with the social category of race as the key element of the social classification of colonized and colonizers…. So, coloniality of power is based upon racial social classification of the world population under Eurocentered world power” (10). This classification materializes into a systematic, environmental racial division of space undeniably associated with histories of inequality, capitalism, colonial power, conflict, and erasure.

What does a decolonial artistic practice entail? What are the contexts and parameters of such a practice? To scratch the surface, barely, of such questions, an examination of how epistemically and symbolically rich sites of contestation, such as Cherán, are commonly examined is required. Echoing these concerns, Gómez-Barris invites us to “address the importance of epistemological autonomy and embodied knowledge as necessary to pushing away from a paradigm of mere resistance into the more layered terrain of potential, moving within and beyond the extractive zone” (11).

Epistemological autonomy and embodied knowledge, as Gómez-Barris suggests, comprise less a series of affirmations and arrival points so much as a process of questioning: the opening up of a space in which the questioning of power is normalized rather than undermined or put out of sight. My fieldwork intervention in the P'urhépecha landscape brought together an ecosystem of community members, funding agencies, community-based organizations, and non-profit entities, in a unique exploration of story and power. As Erin Manning has stated, “research-creation proposes new forms of

knowledge, many of which are not intelligible within current understandings of what knowledge might look like" (12). This sense of intelligibility necessarily relates to the unique ways in which I interrogate racial identity and power. My interrogation is primarily an exploration into how new documentary forms might expand our capacity to discuss and confront hegemonic notions of race and sovereignty, state power and colonial forms of governance. Currently, there is no established methodology to achieve this. Manning adds: "Research-creation is not about objects. It is a mode of activity that is at its most interesting when it is constitutive of new processes" (13). During my fieldwork in Cherán, the traditional tropes of the fieldwork encounter — immersion and distance — gave way to a narrative of intervention wherein the aesthetics of collaboration took the place of conventional documentary approaches. In this sense, ethnography occurred through processes of material and social interventions, turning the field into a site for epistemic collaboration rather than simply a pedagogic encounter. The landscapes that we document are never neutral, but are inherently bound up in the social and political specificities of the environment, as well as the political nature of the documentation itself.

Over the course of my long-term ethnographic interventions in Cherán and across the P'urhépecha landscape, I came to understand that people and things do not simply sit or move about; in their actions, rather, they create worlds, routes, and spaces, even as they are themselves shaped by the worlds in which they circulate. The P'urhépecha uprising is the result of a diverse ecology of ideological clusters, geopolitical locations, and colonial differentials circulating through and among numerous interpretive

communities. This relationality, which seeks to be pluriversal, contains multiple epistemologies that unsettle the singular authoritativeness of the site. The conservative ethnographic demand for engagement with a single site is rooted, not surprisingly, in the coloniality of power, and its totalizing claims should be contested and opposed. The possibilities for hybrid forms of response and interpretation in ethnographic interventions represent fundamental epistemic rights. As Marcus states: “Multi-sited fieldwork is thus always conducted with a keen awareness of being within the landscape, and as the landscape changes across sites, the identity of the ethnographer requires renegotiation” (14). For the individual artist, these cultural renegotiations necessarily involve confronting all kinds of contradictory personal and professional commitments, sometimes working with them, sometimes against. To overcome this bifurcation involves rethinking circulation as a cultural phenomenon and reassessing the protocols for interpreting disparate forms, recognizing practices, and demarcating boundaries based on their own internal dynamics. Lee and LiPuma note that circulation is a “cultural process with its own forms of abstraction, evaluation, and constraint, which are created by the interactions between specific types of circulating forms and the interpretive communities built around them” (15). An expanded notion of performativity, then, is crucial for developing a cultural account of such processes.

Geographies of investigations are necessarily embedded with a specific kind of performativity, as they often bring their own extractive infrastructures along with them. Coercion and interrogation are affective elements of the sort of conflicts, geographically determined, that may occur between subjects, and that prevail when intensively

investigating cultural meanings across multiple sites and various historical periods. This kind of antagonism not only reflects irreconcilable differences between people, disciplines, and practices, but insists, furthermore, that such power differentials form part of the relational structure. I propose the idea of friction as a means of thinking across and within difference. For Tsing, friction refers to a "zone of awkward engagement and champions the unequal, unstable, and creative qualities of interconnection across difference" (16). Tsing's formulation, in this regard, is not only poetic but also quite useful when thinking about socially engaged art practices carried out with a research-led approach.

In weaving together making-thinking practices with a willingness to engage across a diversified sociopolitical spectrum of ideological clusters, geopolitical locations, and colonial differentials, we permit ourselves to become entangled in relations of togetherness and communality. To be open to friction is the will to be held accountable. This accountability emerges not only at the level of disciplinary liability but also between the realms of the personal and the political, wherever that might be. Relational friction fundamentally exposes disciplinary factions, political ideologies, and colonial differentials as reified forms of knowledge production and circulation. My research is aimed at inciting new economies of discernment in an effort to deconstruct claims to identity, presence, and authenticity so often witnessed in academic research, socially engaged art practices, and documentary filmmaking.

Chapter Outline

Each chapter of this doctoral dissertation explores different notions of evidence and modes of aesthetics in order to articulate a distinct form of artistic research that portrays and reveals complex social ecologies and environments. The chapters are organized according to particular research practices and methodologies at the intersection of aesthetics, knowledge production, and community-based research. I intertwine the results of my artistic research in the P'urhépecha communities with reflections and explorations on different logics of extraction in the community of Cherán, Mexico. In three moving image pieces — a feature-length film, a short film, and a video installation — and by using multidisciplinary research within the fields of studio art, art history, cultural geography, and documentary filmmaking, I reflect upon specific aspects of extractive logic. Each chapter examines unexplored relationships between environmental violence, territorial control, enforced disappearance, unevenly distributed visual rights, and race, in the P'urhépecha landscape.

In the first chapter of this dissertation, I explore the idea of the Mexican campesino as the fundamental principle for the formation of Indigenous identity in the country today. To elaborate on the specifics of the 2011 P'urhépecha uprising, I describe the conditions in which Indigenous identity came to be shaped as a national phenomenon. I identify the importance, for the P'urhépecha uprising, of the acquisition, distribution, and consumption of wood from the forest. Further, I illustrate how the entanglement between academic research, militant activism, and active participation by the community made the uprising in Cherán possible.

In this chapter, I unearth some of the epistemological foundations of the P'urhépecha decolonial project by articulating the significance and influence of the *Epistemologies of the South* proposed by Boaventura de Sousa Santos, and the *Antropología Jurídica Militante* (militant legal anthropology) developed by lawyer, historian, and anthropologist Dr. Orlando Aragón Andrade. I aimed to reflect upon these multiple types of knowledge and diverse modes of being, thinking, and feeling through my feature-length film *Cherán* (2021, 70 min.). Following the cinema vérité tradition, my film responds to the rhythms and textures of the lived experiences of Indigenous activists in Cherán. Through careful observation of everyday P'urhépecha life in Cherán, this cinematic study weaves together various geographies and rural environments, which commonly evade efforts at ethnographic representation.

In Chapter 2, I describe various kinds of territorial conflicts in the P'urhépecha communities and how these conflicts have been used by local and federal authorities as a means of domination and control. Later on, I identify how geographical and territorial domination has been inevitably manifested through racial oppression, resulting in a certain racialized discipline. I situate this racialized discipline as pigmentocracy, a key instrument for exploiting and oppressing Indigenous communities. Pigmentocracy, I argue, is reproduced across many different sectors, setting in place protocols for territorial dispossession and the physical invasion and occupation of lands. I establish that environmental violence, territorial domination, and ecocide in the P'urhépecha landscape are the direct products of intensified structural violence associated with exploitation, colonial abuse, and social discrimination.

These realities of inequality and violence I address through notions such as *Pigmentocracy*, especially as theorized by Susana Vargas Cervantes, and *Extractive Capitalism*, as conceived by Macarena Gómez-Barris. Further, I expand on how violence has materialized in the P'urhépecha regions, using a methodological approach that Setha Low calls *Spatializing Culture* — a powerful tool for uncovering material manifestations of social exclusion and inequality. I also examine particular ways of asserting power — military rule, political occupation, territorial control, etc. — in my short film *Time Is out of Joint* (2018, 25 min.), which I filmed in the P'urhépecha regions. By blending performance with observational approaches and ethnography, this documentary short film provides a glimpse into the P'urhépecha landscape as a site of ecocide, narco-labour, and enforced disappearance.

In Chapter 3, I assert that the genocide against Indigenous communities in Mexico is not merely material but also cultural, a process that is carried out as a feature of Mexico's national visual culture. I argue that nationalism produces meanings and principles, which are represented through iconography, symbolism, allegory, and myth. Nationalistic painting traditions, for instance, have played a key role in the formation of national identity. As such, Indigenous identities have been subjected to repressive identity politics imposed by way of pictorial traditions. I maintain that particular eighteenth- and nineteenth-century artistic practices such as casta painting and landscape painting contributed actively to the consolidation of a Mexican national identity based on representations of rurality, Indigeneity, and ethnicity. In particular, I identify Miguel Cabrera's casta paintings and José María Velasco's landscape paintings

as mechanisms for colonial subjugation and the perpetuation of Eurocentric artistic and historical values. I contend that the visual regime instituted by eighteenth- and nineteenth-century casta paintings and landscape paintings contributed to the formation of contemporary regimes of racial domination manifested, past and present, through territorial dispossession, environmental violence, and state power. I address these forms of racial domination using Monica Moreno Figueroa's notion of *Distributed Intensity*. Moreno Figueroa argues that patterns of contemporary racism circulate in the country as normalized forms of conviviality, generating a stratified pigmentocratic regime. In my video installation *Portrait of a Nation* (2019, 22 min.), I examine visual mechanisms for colonial subjugation in the tradition of Mexican landscape painting through the paintings of José María Velasco. By re-photographing Velasco's landscapes with a surveillance camera and re-staging them with the collaboration of Indigenous P'urhépecha participants, my installation addresses the complexities of Mexico's political geography of race, and situates landscape painting and video technologies as surveillance assemblages. In the conclusion of this dissertation, I revisit the diverse methodologies and artistic practices that I put in play as I examined and sought to understand the 2011 P'urhépecha uprising in Cherán and its political and social significance. I also summarize the distinctive articulations of colonial violence in the P'urhépecha community in Cherán, and describe how the uprising challenged colonial power through the production of alternative forms of knowledge, identity, and culture. By examining these colonial legacies, I was able to delineate the interconnections between pigmentocracy, racialized violence, and Indigenous genocide, together with contemporary strategies for state-sponsored violence and control.

CHAPTER 1

Geographies of Collective Action

Campesinos and the Forest

I decided to go into the woods because it confounds and illuminates at the same time, disorients and clarifies, endangers and protects. To go into the woods is to enter both nightmare and wonderment, chaos and serenity. The woods are the threatening realm of wolves and witches, yet also a space of peace and introspection. To go into the woods is a metaphor for a dangerous, challenging quest where one has no idea of the outcome or if one will even survive the journey. At the intersection between wilderness and myth, the forest embraces contradiction, destruction, and serenity. We can trace the power of the forest and how it organizes our relationship with the world by excavating the immaterial and tangential implications of its historicity. The forest as a witness to, and as a dynamic agent in, history connects tradition to modernity across various geographies, histories, and knowledge systems.

I went to the woods to explore the forest as an epistemically and symbolically rich site at the intersection of colonial legacies and extractive global processes. The forest is not merely a natural space but a composite of political processes, cultural practices, and material infrastructures, where hegemonic notions of race and sovereignty, state power, and colonial forms of governance are constantly negotiated. The attitudes and perceptions that produce and are produced by these landscapes are in constant fluctuation. The rural space and the forest are not anonymous — they are not just there. Rather, they are the result of multiple negotiations between colonial legacies and extractive global processes.

The findings of my PhD research are based on multi-sited ethnographic fieldwork conducted in the forest of Cherán and across diverse P'urhépecha areas in the state of Michoacán, in Mexico. I visited the community on four occasions, beginning in 2015 and returning in 2016, 2017, and 2018. I completed a year of fieldwork in total, staying three months each year. As researchers, we encounter the forest both as an obstacle and as a territory to be preserved and cultivated. Through a long-term process of ethnographic exegesis, I came to understand the importance of wood and the forest in the P'urhépecha community. Building on ethnographic observations on acquisition, distribution, and consumption of wood, I understood the role it played in establishing relations of ownership and mutuality, and as a basis for kinship formation and political action. The forest is a vitally important component in the P'urhépecha culture. The use of wood is a primal practice, not only in almost every aspect of people's everyday lives but throughout their social organization.

I outline the P'urhépecha forest both as a space of crisis and critique, challenging common assumptions about wood as a mere resource. The materiality of the P'urhépecha forest, even in its precarious status as habitat and resource, activates a negotiation between global capitalism and Indigenous forms of resistance. The P'urhépecha forest demands a geographic cultural history, one that not only weaves in our responses to natural and cultural surroundings, but also traces histories of inequality, capitalism, colonial power, struggle, and erasure. What should such a history look like? Which narratives ought it seek? What kinds of materials and practices should be prioritized, defined, and assembled?

Cherán slowly transitioned from a traditional Indigenous campesino community, at the beginning of the twentieth century, to a community experiencing global neoliberal politics, which manifest locally in the forms of mandatory school-based literacy in Spanish, farming crises, resource extraction, land appropriation, and massive migration to the United States. There are no official records to account for how many Cherán families presently work in the fields or, particularly, in the forest; however, it would seem to be a rather low percentage. The vast majority of Cherán families remain either landless or mired in the midst of long-term disputes over land. According to members of the community, excessive exploitation of the forests began in 2008, with illegal logging conducted by members of neighbouring communities accompanied by armed people. Although decades of illegal logging by residents of Carpan and Huecato, two neighbouring communities, has caused numerous problems in the P'urhépecha region, in 2008 the situation became even more critical. The community of Cherán was then living under a self-imposed curfew beginning at 7:00 p.m., as logging trucks carrying armed people began to freely circulate in the streets. As Doña Imelda Campos told me in a conversation in her troje (home) in May 2015: “Bajaban unos cien camiones al día, cargados de madera, primero solo de noche pero ya después no les importaba la hora, a plena luz del día lo hacían. Pasaban en nuestras narices al frente de la plaza … esa es gente mala” (About one hundred trucks a day, loaded with wood—first only at night, but later they didn’t care what time it was. They did it in broad daylight. They passed right in front of our noses, in front of the square. … Those are bad people) (17). This marked the birth of a new, predatory elite engaged in organized crime, which began to

take control of P'urhépecha territory and extorting, kidnapping, and murdering P'urhépecha people.

The P'urhépecha territory is located in a region affected by important economic interests and, as such, has experienced a significant decline in farming and agriculture due to emigration as well as U.S.-facilitated speculation and accumulation of land by foreign corporations from various resource extraction sectors. Over time, this situation evolved into a conflict for territorial control and the extraction, both legal and illegal, of natural resources in the context of collusive political structures between national security forces, criminal drug cartels, and corporations. The powerful drug cartels that emerged in Michoacán during the 2000s (such as *La Familia Michoacana* and *Los Caballeros Templarios*) rapidly increased their production of chemical drugs, but also expanded their economic control and power well beyond the drug trade. Capitalizing on adverse social conditions, such as a lack of opportunity in farming and agriculture, in order to generate social mobility, the cartels' diversified activities in Michoacán came to include the illegal extraction of natural resources and control over territory (18).

This interweaving of illegal economic activities, such as drug trafficking, with activities — sometimes legal, sometimes not — such as logging and territorial dispossession for agricultural purposes, was made possible by the porous nature of Mexico's corrupt political system, in which links may be clearly traced between criminals and the power and violence of the state. The atmosphere of extreme violence in Cherán is owed to the fact that organized crime, illegal control of territory, extraction of natural resources, and

collusion by local and federal government agencies are so closely linked. Understanding Cherán's particular social reality is thus only possible by analyzing the conflict through a multidimensional and intersectional framework.

By mapping Indigenous activism, community rights, and environmentalist resistance within the wider, progressive process of the destruction of the P'urhépecha forest, we may gain a deeper understanding of revolutionary historical processes and how these have shaped notions of race, sovereignty, and possession. Extractive capitalism or, as stated by Harvey, *Accumulation by Dispossession*, established a new condition of Mexican colonialism predicated on exoticism and the myth of the mestizo identity. Environmental phenomena in the P'urhépecha forest, including pollution, desertification, climate change, privatization of agricultural crops, and unequal redistribution of land, are inevitably linked to the emergence and growth of new forms of poverty and the birth of new predatory elites. The rural, campesino lands, the elsewhere — that is, the geographically diffuse, peripheral areas — are, paradoxically, emblematic places in which profound connections emerge between sovereignty and political and legal rights of return.

The formation of the Mexican campesino, both as a political category and a cultural identity, is one of the most enduring legacies of the revolutionary upheavals that began in 1910 and continue to this day. The common perception of class unity conveyed by the term campesino originated as a result of post-revolutionary ideologies interacting with agrarian militancy during the 1920s and '30s. Rural communities entered the political

imaginary neither as Indigenous people nor as rural proletarians, but as campesinos. Grassroots militancy, political mobilization, and agrarismo in the state of Michoacán unfortunately resulted in the idea of the campesino as a reviled underclass with subordinate social status. Histories of violence, resistance, and exodus are fatefully inscribed within the conception of the campesino.

The origin of the campesino idea may be found in Mexico's past, when imperialism and colonialism came to represent the core values of the Mexican national identity. This identity has its foundations in Spanishness and colonization, and is built upon a disavowal of Indigenous sovereignty. Indigena and campesino identities are two faces of the same coin, and are marked by multiple exclusions. Indigena and campesino thus form pieces of a vocabulary of exclusion that has been formed through language as well as embodied and discursive practices originating in the past but enacted in the present. By displacing Indigenous and campesino sovereignties and rendering them invisible, the colonial paradigm transacts, even if invisibly so, with affective archetypal figures such as the insider and the outsider, the guest and the stranger. Macarena Gómez-Barris calls this the *Extractive Zone*, which she describes as "the colonial paradigm, worldview, and technologies that mark out regions of 'high biodiversity' in order to reduce life to capitalist resource conversion" (19).

What are the epistemic challenges and potentials within Indigeneity? How have land dispossession and natural resource extraction created power structures and affected cultural behaviour? These questions began to emerge during my residency in Cherán,

as personal accounts for location, embodiment, and power differentials, came to shape my experience of landscape, community, and identity. Quite quickly, everything I knew began to fall apart. Theories, methods, knowledge, and even behaviours and localisms that I had learned as a child growing up in Mexico, emerged as personal shortcomings. My interventions were clumsy and my so-called knowledge was fractured and dispersed at best.

I came to understand my positionality, my implication in these epistemologies, and the power differentials embedded in my physical interventions in the landscape and with the people. My research navigates these disjunctures and seeks to unwind theory from within, to deconstruct the architecture of thought in relationship to various outsides. As Gómez-Barris puts it, I was studying and, at the same time, perpetuating "the complexity of social ecologies and material alternatives proposed and proliferated by artists, activists, movements, submerged theorists, and cultural producers" (20). My fieldwork was initially designed to be performed in the town of Cherán, where the P'urhépecha uprising took place in 2011, and then gradually expanded toward other latitudes and temporalities. Investigating territory and extraction inevitably evolved into awareness of the ways in which site, narrative, memory, and history converge. Who iterates, and how, the narratives of history, memory, and site, and what possibilities exist for counter-narratives to be part of socially engaged practices in relation to power and accountability? To unfold different interpretations of P'urhépecha history, questioning the established, official versions produced by the nation-state, is to render a disordered version of events fanning out in multiple directions, from resource exploitation to

histories of inequality, capitalism, colonial power, struggle, and erasure. Through multi-sited ethnography, I was able to engage with large-scale political and conceptual entities—e.g., disavowal of Indigenous sovereignty, state power, and colonial forms of governance — without jeopardizing an intimate portrayal of P'urhépecha lives. By broadening the site of my research beyond a mere geographical location, I was able to examine how Indigenous forms of resistance disrupt the forms of domination created by narco-capitalism and state-sponsored violence.

The P'urhépecha Decolonial Project

The P'urhépecha community's leaders came together, just after the beginning of the uprising in April 2011, to contemplate possible ways forward for the community, that might put an end to the colonial legacies and extractive processes that have reigned in the region for so long. Their motto was: "Por la seguridad, la justicia y la reconstitución de nuestros bosques" (For security, justice, and the reconstitution of our forest). It is worthwhile to emphasize that one of the many peculiarities of Cherán's emancipation is the movement's operational and political configuration. This comprises two dimensions: a communal part, in which the P'urhépecha evoked their past and their Indigenous roots, and a legal part, which entailed the use of counter-hegemonic laws and legal practices. In my early conversations with Comuneros (community members) in Cherán, they spoke about the important role played by lawyer, historian, and anthropologist Dr. Orlando Aragón Andrade in the process of community emancipation from territorial dispossession and government complicity.

The use of counter-hegemonic legal law, and its application in courts and tribunals, was made possible through long-term activist engagement by Dr. Aragón and the Colectivo Emancipaciones (Emancipations Collective) (21). In the context of counter-hegemonic law, P'urhépecha identity is treated as a politically enabling construct for resisting ongoing colonialisms, expropriations, and associated epistemic violence. How does counter-hegemonic law produce, visibilize, or invisibilize these relational figures; and what would it mean to foreground, through legal means, these figures and the conceptual universes they inhabit, at a time when the need for resistance against settler colonialism and land dispossession could not be greater?

One of the P'urhépecha uprising's many successes was how it increased the visibility of Indigenous people in the legal and juridical fields, not only locally but nationally. The legal and juridical organizations that have been directly involved in the emancipation process in Cherán include: the United Nations Assembly, the Electoral Tribunal of the Federal Judiciary, the Supreme Court of Justice of the Nation, and the Inter-American Court of Human Rights. Over the years, Dr. Orlando Aragón Andrade has given accounts of these processes in various publications and from different points of view, both of his direct involvement with the movement as well as reflections of an academic nature (22).

No one could have foretold that one brave action carried out by a group of P'urhépecha women during the early hours of April 15, 2011, against a convoy of trucks coming down from the forest with a load of stolen timber, would not only renew Indigenous

emancipation in Michoacán but would also profoundly modify its nature, social fabric, and goals. The political decision made by the community in 2011, in order to ensure political autonomy, came together out of a series of fortuitous events and resulted in one of the most emblematic experiences of Indigenous emancipation and resistance in Mexico of the twenty-first century. The 2011 P'urhépecha uprising in Cherán not only laid the foundations for a revival of Indigenous cultural memory and historical struggle, but also provided a legal template for political autonomy that continues to expand throughout many other P'urhépecha communities in Michoacán.

Over the course of my first visit to Cherán, in 2015, I came to realize that even if postcolonial discourse is scarcely present in the Mexican consciousness, the 2011 P'urhépecha uprising was, for Mexico, a definite and decisive political moment. During the summer of 2015, the community was extremely busy, trying to figure out rules and communal procedures for the formation of and transfer of political power to the Concejo Mayor de Gobierno Comunal de Cherán K'eri 2015–2018 (Higher Council of Communal Government of Cherán K'eri). It is well worth remembering that the Concejo Mayor de Gobierno Comunal de Cherán K'eri 2012–2015 was the first case of Indigenous self-government in Mexico to be officially recognized by the Mexican state. Tensions were high, as there were suspicions of possible military and police interventions against the movement. As such, the community paid me little attention during my first stay that summer. However, the tremendous political importance of Cherán's movement immediately became clear to me. This was a rare opportunity to observe, in real time, the messy, contentious, and uncertain processes of state formation. During informal

talks at meals and meetings, I suggested to the participants that Cherán's emancipatory movement would certainly expand all throughout Michoacán. They didn't think so. No one — not even those initiating it — could imagine that they were changing the means of doing politics in Mexico, possibly forever. In this way, the rural environment came to be intimately linked to the wider exercise of counterinsurgency within the shifting geopolitical framework of Mexico at the time. Eventually, the 2011 P'urhépecha uprising became not only an emancipatory movement but a cultural and spiritual revolution, in which formerly colonized peoples came together with multiple entanglements and aspirations, co-imagining a settlement within the colonial global order.

As mentioned earlier, the application of counter-hegemonic law in courts and tribunals to ignite processes of Indigenous emancipation and political autonomy in Cherán was made possible through the early intervention of Dr. Aragón and the Colectivo Emancipaciones (28). That is how he himself tells it: "Fortuitously, I attended early meetings and took the case to the courts, along with another lawyer from Cherán who had been my student while pursing a master's degree in law, and who was also involved in the movement. A few hours later, we added another lawyer to the team, also a student of mine in the legal master's program, in order to form the team that made the legal appeal and followed up on the successful execution of the sentence" (23). From the efforts of the Colectivo Emancipaciones have sprung two new research organizations — the CALEIDOSCOPIO research project and the Laboratorio de Antropología Jurídica y del Estado (Laboratory of Legal and State Anthropology) — and a new militant Indigenous movement, the Frente por la Autonomia de Consejos y

Comunidades Indigenas (Front for the Autonomy of Indigenous Councils and Communities) (24).

This entanglement between academic research, militant activism, and active participation by Indigenous communities form the essential components of the P'urhépecha emancipatory project in Michoacán. Dr. Orlando Aragón Andrade has coined the term A*ntropología Jurídica Militante* (militant legal anthropology) not only to describe what is now already a decade of Indigenous activism, but also to encompass various counter-hegemonic legal practices and procedures, as well as the theoretical foundation associated with the *Epistemologies of the South* proposed by Boaventura de Sousa Santos.

The term *Epistemologies of the South* represents a methodology encompassing a certain set of concepts, approaches, and research techniques. Epistemologies of the South are a call — a militant call — for new processes of production and valorization of knowledges, scientific and non-scientific, outside of occidental thought, denouncing political conflicts from the Global North historically located in the Global South. As Santos explains: “It is rather a metaphor for the human suffering caused by capitalism and colonialism on a global level and the resistance to overcome or minimize it” (24). As the term indicates, the fundamental root is geographical: the South opposing the North. However, the Global South is a non-geographic South; rather, it is, as Santos suggests, a metaphor for systemic inequality. This symbolic South also exists in the North, throughout Europe and North America, among oppressed and marginalized groups

produced by global capitalism and colonialism. There is also a North in the South, formed by elites who benefit from systemic inequality.

These small voices from the South — to borrow from Ranajit Guha — have been swallowed up by other, louder voices. Small voices, in resistance, seek to shout louder, thereby acquiring legibility in the public sphere as they marshal their efforts in a search for equity and seek a better attunement of social justice between those who hold power and those who lack it. Where the smaller voices have been suffocated, compromised, or even silenced, the only viable political option is to raise our voices and make those earlier voices our own. If these small voices from the South lack a place of articulation, it is because their memory has been erased or rebranded through colonial domination (25).

To inquire into the meaning of the P'urhépecha decolonial project is to attempt to dismantle the obtuse optics of colonial domination. Ideas and institutions born of neoliberal capitalism — such as economic development, exploitation of the environment, and cultural genocide — continue to dominate across multiple P'urhépecha territories. The P'urhépecha decolonial project is a call for building new relationships between diverse types of knowledge and diverse modes of being, thinking, and feeling. This diversity encompasses disparate ways of conceiving of time; ways of facing the past and the future; the relations between, and among, humans and non-humans; and the collective organization of life and the production of goods and services. To situate the P'urhépecha struggle within and against the larger historical

structures of power dominant in Latin America is to explore and interrogate languages of exclusion and structures of erasure that have flourished in the region for several centuries. The use of counter-hegemonic law and militant legal anthropology thus makes visible the colonial fabric of law and legality in Mexico.

If the P'urhépecha decolonial project calls for racial equality, gender emancipation, ecological balance, and genuine democratic citizenship, then a great deal needs to be said about the conditions for achieving such goals. Certainly these political commitments, in and of themselves, do not settle crucial questions about modalities of struggle; and certainly they do not settle the question of nationwide Indigenous oppression in Mexico. In particular, if our starting point is Indigenous emancipation, then we need to know exactly what kind of starting point this is. What limits are imposed, and what possibilities created, by the P'urhépecha decolonial project, given its material order and configuration of social power?

Emancipatory Spaces

On November 2, 2011, the Sala Superior del Tribunal Electoral del Poder Judicial de la Federación (Superior Chamber of the Electoral Tribunal of the Federal Judiciary) issued a resolution in favour of the Indigenous municipality of Cherán in which, for the first time in the history of the Mexican state, the right of an Indigenous municipality to elect its own political authorities was recognized. Accordingly, on February 5, 2012, the P'urhépecha municipality of Cherán took possession of a new structure of municipal

authority integrated in a manner quite different from the one established by Article 115 of the federal constitution (26). This new form of self-government thus has been established as one of the main legal mechanisms through which the Indigenous emancipatory struggle and its advocates may press for the transformation of the monocultural Mexican state. This federal ruling is paradigmatic in terms of the human rights of Indigenous peoples — inasmuch as it is in alignment with Indigenous cultural, political, and social practices — and has created disruption on the political scene, both in Michoacán and the rest of the country.

The Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR) has hailed this case as one of the most important events for the human rights of Indigenous peoples in Mexico, and as an example of best practices for the application of Indigenous international human rights (27). The local government of the municipality of Cherán was elected in conformity with international legal standards on the rights to self-determination and political autonomy. Autonomy, in this context, operates as a proposition for imagining a future governed by local forms of knowledge and motivated by the desire to reassume control of collective powers that had been subtracted from the P'urhépecha people by capitalism.

However, we should not think of the political autonomy of Indigenous peoples only in terms of their oppositional relationship with the state but, rather, also reflect on autonomy as a process in which a community reverses the complex set of social relationships produced by the colonial experience, including those that surround

resource extraction, property relations, state-making, and race. As Chatterton eloquently puts it, “autonomous geographies are those spaces where people desire to constitute non-capitalist, egalitarian, and solidaristic forms of political, social, and economic organization through a combination of resistance and creation” (28). The notion of creation and creativity has taken on a major role, both in the early resistance strategies of the P'urhépecha people and, later, in the consolidation of their new form of government. P'urhépecha traditional knowledge and cultural history came together, through many episodes of resistance and reflection, into the making of the P'urhépecha uprising and the consolidation of a communal form of self-government. Over a long-term process of ethnographic exegesis, I came to realize that the community — through a creative process of historical reinterpretation — had turned to their traditional kinship with wood (the forest) and recontextualized it as a part of contemporary processes of political resistance. Building on ethnographic observations on acquisition, distribution, and consumption of wood, I understood the important role it played in the making of the P'urhépecha uprising. The leña, the Fogata, and the Parangua (firewood, the bonfire, and the base for preparing a fireplace) represent features central to almost every aspect of everyday P'urhépecha life, but they also played a significant role during and after the uprising. I argue that it is through the use of the Parangua and the Fogata, both as practices and sites of resistance, that the Cherán community was able to organize the uprising and set it in motion.

In the P'urhépecha context, autonomy and self-determination are thus directly intertwined with material practices: the forest as a territory to be preserved and protected, and wood as an instrument for political organization and resistance. Trees and wood played an important role in establishing relations of ownership and mutuality, and undergirding kinship formation and political action. By exploring the links between race, violence, and power through notions of capital and property in the P'urhépecha uprising, we can discern the histories of violence and resistance inscribed upon this seemingly unremarkable landscape. Any history of material transformation is also a history of inequality, injustice, and struggle. In the context of Michoacán's always-shifting political landscape, the history of the P'urhépecha forest is now irrevocably intertwined not only with national democratic processes but also with Indigenous autonomy and self-government.

The Comunero (community member) first begins his or her political participation in the Fogata (neighbourhood meetings), and then may later participate in the Asamblea de Barrio (neighbourhood assembly) and, ultimately, in the Asamblea General del Concejo Mayor (the general assembly, coordinated by the Mayor Council). The decision-making that takes place in the Asamblea General is not exclusive to Barrio leaders (neighbourhood assembly); indeed, everyone has the opportunity to participate directly. Comuneros are actively encouraged to participate and to be engaged in what is happening in Cherán, promoting horizontality and communality. The individual is only understood in the collective context. This political organization of Cherán was produced

through a collective and mutual understanding, and was registered in the first development plan for the Municipality of Cherán (29).

I had many conversations on these subjects with various members of the community. One of these was with Doña Imelda Campos and her husband, Don Fidel Cucue, who explained to me what it means to be a Comunero:

Un Comunero se distingue por haber nacido en la comunidad. El ser Comunero le da derecho a disfrutar todo lo que existe dentro de nuestro territorio y alrededor de la comunidad de Cherán. Entonces, eso es ser un Comunero. Que tienes los mismos derechos de disfrutar del agua, del bosque, de las tierras, de todo lo que en sí encierra nuestra comunidad. Aquí se determina por el tiempo de residencia. Por ejemplo, si tienes un solar o un terreno por más de 10-15 años en adelante, eso te da derecho y tienes el derecho a tener posesión de ese lote, de ese terreno. De igual forma si una persona no es de la comunidad y se llega a casar aquí, ya con el hecho de vivir más de 15 años aquí se hace Comunero porque ya está ejerciendo los derechos y la responsabilidad desde cuando vive aquí en Cherán. Un Comunero reconocido es el que está registrado y ya somos mas de 2,000 Comuneros los que estámos registrados, reconocidos. Pero de esos ya prácticamente más de la mitad ya no existe, ya falleció.

In English: A Comunero is distinguished by having been born in the community. Being a community member gives you the right to enjoy everything that exists within our territory and around the community of Cherán. That's what it is: a communal being. That you

have the same rights to enjoy the water, the forest, the land, everything that our community contains. It is mainly determined by the residence period. For example, if you have land for more than ten to fifteen years, that gives you the right to have possession of that land. In the same way, if a person is not originally from the community and gets married here, by living here for more than fifteen years they become a community member, because they are exercising their rights and responsibilities, as they lived here in Cherán for a while now. A recognized community member is one who is registered—and we are already about two thousand community members who are registered, recognized. But of those, possibly more than half are no longer with us, they have already passed away (30).

The Comunero self — to be recognized as one and to accept others as such — is one of the fundamental principles of the P'urhépecha decolonial project. It is the foundation upon which principles of political autonomy and self-determination are realized. The idea of the Comunero, simple though it may seem, bears a significant loaded in terms of meaning and agency. Communality is not an abstract political notion but something near and dear to the languages and practices that exist within the P'urhépecha territory. As a member of the community with an unquestionable seat at the table, a Comunero becomes someone who actively and affectively recognizes that community and interdependence — not the individual — are at the heart of life. Territory and property are synonymous with community and collectivity such that P'urhépecha people see no limitation in social entanglement; quite the contrary, they see rewarding activity. Territorial formation and communality have shaped many aspects of P'urhépecha social

life, which has evolved from an inharmonious communalism to the creation of collective assemblies constituted by communal ways of being.

The exercise of democratic political participation in Cherán is consolidated through four modes of representation and decision-making (31):

1. **Iretikuarhuuératini**
Membership and Comunero (communal citizenship).

2. **Irénŋarhikuarhuuératini**
Political affiliation of the Barrio (neighbourhood).

3. **K'erijáŋaskatichanijingoni**
Concejo Mayor de Gobierno Comunal (Higher Council of Communal Government).

4. **K'eritángurikuarhuuératini**
Asamblea de la Comunidad (Community Council).

Social and political belonging, in the P'urhépecha community, begins domestically — **Iretikuarhuuératini** — in which context, traditionally, a house should have leña, a fogata, and a Parangua (firewood, a bonfire, and a base for preparing a fireplace). In the P'urhépecha cultural praxis, the symbolic centre around which all domestic activities are organized is the Parangua, the traditional cooking fire (32). This is a traditional fireplace-bonfire around which the family gathers, not only to cook but also for social activities of bonding and sharing. This bonfire holds an important symbolic role within

the community, as a Parangua is one of the first gifts given to a newly married couple, together with the Troje (house) in which they will consolidate their family. The new family is now charged with keeping the fire running, forever, as the Parangua is never completely allowed to go out. It must be kept running until the last member of the old family passes away and the house is inherited by younger family members. Then the cycle renews, with the beginning of a new family.

The Barrio (neighbourhood) connects the Comuneros with their community based on the principle of residence — **Irénŋarhikuarhuuératini** — unlike the domestic unit, which links its members through the principle of kinship. The Cherán community is made up of four Barrios. In each of these, the highest authority is the Asamblea de Barrios (neighbourhood assembly). It is through this Asamblea — the second instance of political participation — that the Comunero assumes civil rights and social obligations (33). In the Asamblea de Barrios, Comuneros put forward ideas, propose actions, and recommend people to be in charge of various civil responsibilities. Political advocacy and communality are exercised and practiced through the Asamblea de Barrios. These gatherings can be quite large and sometimes even involve hundreds of Comuneros, who discuss and eventually vote on matters of shared concern.

The Asamblea de Barrios was consolidated, with Fogatas installed in every street in the community, during the uprising and self-imposed curfew, which was put in place back in 2011, as a defence against intrusions by armed men in illegal logging trucks. Some 189 Fogatas throughout the community served as instruments of communal protection and

communication — as reflexive-affective spaces linking together the community to create a foundation for a new, communal form of self-government and decision-making. The Parangua, which functions in the private, domestic space, became the Fogata, operating in the public space. During the self-imposed curfew, various traditional institutions of the past emerged as new models for political organization. The Fogatas and, later, the Asamblea de Barrios displaced economic interests from the centre of social life, reclaiming a communal way of being and encouraging radical pluralism in a push toward direct democracy.

The first Concejo Mayor de Gobierno Comunal de Cherán K'eri 2012–2015 (Higher Council of Communal Government) was officially installed in February 2012. From the 2011 uprising until the installation, in 2012, of the new municipal government for Usos y Costumbres (uses and customs), the P'urhépecha of Cherán worked on a new political model based on traditional Indigenous organizational forms (34). The Concejo Mayor de Gobierno Comunal is based on a model from ancient Chichimeca tradition and on the councils of the Irecha or Cazonci (the rulers of the pre-Columbian P'urhépecha Empire) (35). These key Indigenous leaders were advised by community leaders and wise counsellors. The council of wise men, in the P'urhépecha tradition, was based on the figure of the K'eri, a term that simply means “old.” Today, the K'eri constitute the Concejo Mayor de Gobierno Comunal de Cherán, a council that consists of twelve members (i.e., three representatives from each of the four Barrios). The K'eri represent the voice of the Comuneros of their respective Barrios, expressing their particular interests and needs.

This council assesses issues from each Barrio, raising and resolving them according to agreed-upon communal criteria. The **K'erijáŋaskatichanijingoni** political mode entails the political representation and decision-making behind the Concejo Mayor de Gobierno Comunal, which has the power to discuss and ratify the decisions of the neighbourhood assemblies (Asamblea de Barrios). The four Barrios of Cherán, each within its own Fogata assembly and without mediation on the part of political parties or the state, elects three representatives who hold a mandate for the next three years. These representatives — the K'eri — serve as the moral authority and direct representatives of the highest form of community governance: the Asamblea de la Comunidad (community council).

The Asamblea de la Comunidad — **K'eritángurikuarhuuératini** — is the fourth mode of participation and decision-making in the community. It is made up of all the Comuneros from every Barrio, who enjoy direct political representation, with rights to speak and vote (36). The Asamblea de la Comunidad is, in essence, an assembly of the whole town — at once a political and social imaginary, but one with very real consequences. It is through this collectivity that various matters, either from the Asamblea de Barrios or the Concejo Mayor de Gobierno Comunal, are reported and evaluated. Among its functions are the appointment and removal of members of the Concejo Mayor de Gobierno Comunal, as well the evaluation and approval of every principle and norm within the communal government. Within this collectivity, however, any issue concerning the entire community may be proposed, even if it does not come from the other representative bodies. The Asamblea de la Comunidad meets in the

main square of the town. Here the notion of territoriality becomes particularly important. As territory is basically lived space, the Asamblea de la Comunidad is a space that is experienced from the inside. Even as it is dedicated to public discussion and ratification of ideas, suggestions for action, agreements and proposals issued and agreed upon, and so forth, the Asamblea de la Comunidad is also the manifestation of territoriality. Where the outsider simply sees a gathering of people, the P'urhépecha comunero sees a unity of the people and the environment, a collectivity radically opposed to the false dichotomy between man and nature.

Historical disputes over the ownership, use, and administration of land in Mexico have been the stage not only for the establishment of racialized discipline and colonial rule, but also for democratic reforms and Indigenous emancipation. The historical disputes between Indigenous peoples and the colonial power can be characterized as a struggle over race, sovereignty, and possession. Events that have undergone processes of historicization come to form an ideology, a manifestation of political power. As such, the P'urhépecha uprising has unfolded various interpretations of history, questioning the established and official versions produced by the nation-state. To situate P'urhépecha identity within larger historical structures of political power is to demonstrate how the colonial appropriation of P'urhépecha territories has relied upon ideologies of European racial superiority. Colonial rules regarding property have legitimated settler practices while racializing those deemed unfit to own property.

The 2011 P'urhépecha uprising demonstrated that a solution to these enduring racial and economic inequities required the development of a new political imaginary with regard to property, one in which territory and communality are connected to shared practices of use, labour, and ownership. New possibilities for geographies of protest — such as the P'urhépecha uprising — to shift national narratives in relation to power and accountability signal an evolving awareness of how intricately colonial history is intertwined with the present. Geographies of protest are the spatial expressions of expanded political imaginaries in which site, narrative, memory, and history converge. They contest power — even if sometimes only temporary — at diverse sites, between different social actors. The 2011 P'urhépecha uprising has successfully rewritten the colonial experience and the spaces produced by it.

Documenting Communality

Although often positioned as a leading form of advocacy for promoting cultural diversity and intercultural dialogue, traditional documentary filmmaking in fact often undermines the potential for other cinematic forms to engage with and reflect intangible cultural complexities across multiple sites and historical periods. In contrast, experimental cinema and ethnographic film have historically been considered marginal practices at the fringes of documentary filmmaking; these experimental approaches are increasingly gaining cultural relevance due to their ongoing critical engagement with notions of capital, labour, and power. As experimental approaches to ethnography and documentary, on the one hand, interweave poetry with politics and critically explore

architectures of power, traditional documentary filmmaking, on the other, appears rather to rather perpetuate existing power relations.

Documentary filmmaking and ethnographic practices are bodies of thought that emerged during European colonial rule during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, and have had long-lasting political and aesthetic consequences, often well beyond those specific fields. Documentary and ethnographic filmmaking have long been criticized for their inability to address power. As such, rather than investigate the movements and connections between people, stories, and conflicts, they tend to flatten lived reality and attenuate the ethical and political relationships between those who depict, those who are depicted, and those who witness the depiction. Ethnography — both as a method and as the outcome of fieldwork — and documentary filmmaking, as praxes of producing image and sound based on reality, reside at the very core of coloniality.

Documentary is a site of power. Who gets to document is inevitably a by-product of power — who has it, who does not, and why. Such is the contradictory nature of documentary: to be bound to community, yet unable to separate itself from neoliberal tendencies such as capture and instrumentality. As Erika Balsom has recently written: “Documentary, then, has never ceased to be marked by multiple uncertainties, whether in its relation to reality, its criteria of value, or even in the very parameters of its self-constitution” (37). An examination of documentary settings in their entirety — spaces, institutional contexts, objects, and materiality — is therefore crucial, as is a

simultaneous accounting for the filmmaker's positionality: abilities, disciplinary backgrounds, interests, behaviour, and research practices. To instrumentalize documentary practices as mere tools for the examination of culture radically dilutes the politics of the encounter between filmmaker and community.

New modes of reflexivity in contemporary documentary practices are gradually emerging, albeit with the lingering remains of the combative, politicized legacies of militant documentary cinema. Experimental and contemporary documentary practices have become increasingly personal, subjective, and reflexive, though perhaps no less political. As Balsom observes: "Documentary reflects on its relationship to truth. And unlike the written word, it partakes of an indexical bond to the real, offering a mediated encounter with physical reality in which a heightened attunement to the actuality of our shared world becomes possible. But precisely for these same reasons, documentary is simultaneously a battleground, a terrain upon which commitments to reality are challenged and interrogated" (38).

One of the leading foundational myths in Mexico is that the campesino (the Indigenous) belongs to the rural realm, as opposed to the mestizo, most commonly associated with the urban. The idea of the campesino, and its association with the rural landscape, underlines the particular conditions of seeing through a lens of coloniality. The derogatory idea of the campesino, normalized by the replication of institutionally administered cultural orthodoxies, weaves a tapestry of interdependencies and reciprocal influences. These dialectical walls — rural and urban — form the default

architectures that describe nationhood and belonging in Mexico. Nationhood and belonging in Mexico have never been constituted as a singular edifice, reducible to a single institution of power or construction of identity. The nation is structured upon lost entitlements born of estrangement, dispossession, denial, and erasure: nationhood and belonging that were somehow violated or interrupted, denied or deferred. The lived experience of nationhood and belonging speaks to plural, complex, and intimate, fortified acts of inclusion and exclusion. Paradoxes of belonging as an aggregate of rights, responsibilities, and attachments reliant upon dispossessions, denials, and exclusions.

A similar paradox may be found at the heart of the relationship between documentary, truth, and reality. To commit to reality, to reflect upon its relationship to truth, is also, as Balsom suggests, to engage in an analysis of codified viewing habits and viewers' material expectations with regard to documentary practices. Institutional critique aims at dismantling such paradoxical forms. To dismantle and deconstruct the power structures at play in documentary practices is to strive to undermine distinctions as well as the system that enables documentary practices to function.

I spent one year in the forest documenting the social, economic, and political values linked to the P'urhépecha landscape. I began to recognize various motifs that persisted across time — incomplete histories, distorted local specificities — and their colonial ramifications. Addressing such ramifications, Samia Henni argues that, "these comportments are structural and they obey the commandment of the dominant race,

class, religion, ethnicity, or gender. They dictate and influence the intellectual sustenance and the financial support of what should be researched, archived, and historicized, and what should not" (39). Such ramifications have transformed the documentary imagination and its affinity for realistic impulses, authoritative utterance, and intellectual fragmentation. The continual depiction of Indigeneity in Mexico as a source of national pride and identity builds upon the romanticized notion of an untouched landscape, a depiction at odds with the growth of a narco-capitalism intertwined with illegal logging and land appropriation.

In order to deconstruct the compromised innocence of documentary practice — to undo ethnographic codings and their realistic impulses — my art practice in the P'urhépecha landscape evolved across extensive periods of site-specific fieldwork. I used documentary as a tool to explore the social relations and tensions unfolding on site. The condition of seeing through a colonial lens inevitably makes opaque the forces shaping the power relations behind the formal facade of documentary practices. After closely examining the political power of the lens — in the course of specific fieldwork — I came to understand the camera as an object with social implications, an instrument mediating aesthetic thought.

Visuality holds the key to moving from emancipation to disenfranchisement, from stereotype to self-determination. A powerful instrument for social change, visual culture in many ways not only facilitates but even amplifies current discussions on race, identity, and the exercise of power. To examine the political power of the lens, it is

essential to acknowledge the colonial reverberations of lens-based knowledge. The reproduction of colonial violence is optically discursive. Its reproduction becomes apparent once a particular a set of practices are made visible: audience, visual grammar, projector, camera, screen, and lens. As such, documentary emerges as the index of an assemblage formed from an interweaving of habits, practices, instruments, and histories of technical development.

Documentary practices have developed a certain visual grammar of power. Thus, to produce a counter-model of documentary practice, a political and aesthetic optical inquiry becomes all the more important. Lenses are living environments responsive to technological, social, and political shifts — ecosystems situated in complex media environments. Lenses are carriers of beliefs and ideologies, and form part of an assemblage producing resonance and alignment. The point of view of the lens is not just a matter of aesthetics. The resolution of questions about whom we sympathize with, whom we judge — the core emotional appeal of a scene — often relates to how and what kind of lenses are used. An alignment between audience and lens is at the heart of the politics of representation, as every image is based on a specific and intentional way of understanding and interpreting the world. Zoom and prime lenses, for example, express very different affective, aesthetic, and ethical positions toward characters and worlds.

If lenses and optical devices are treated as manifestations of particular social and cultural environments — as traits of political and economic periods — then they may

also be interrogated, challenged, and rewritten in relation to these moments, rather than in isolation from them. The long-privileged use of the zoom lens as a professional standard in documentary practices is ideological and an assumption — one of many that we must confront. Zoom lenses are not merely a technical invention but an important pinnacle of modernity, located at the intersection of technology and culture. Zoom lenses form a vital part of a set of productive sites in the colonial system — a complex system of social relationships inextricable from power dynamics and the spectatorial gaze. A complete rethinking of the zoom lens, and its complicity in colonial violence, is required.

I argue against the abject refusal of documentary to grapple seriously with its own power. Indeed, the documentary form obscures its own relationship with the reproduction of power and colonialism. Documentary practices are often characterized by rhetorics of positivity and potentiality, and, as such, are often premised upon the optimistic celebration of the potential of artistic research as an emerging space for knowledge production. Indeed, potentiality and intellectual dynamism are at the core of artistic research. Lenses and optical devices, however, are better understood when closely examined at work in the field. Ethnographic insights, then, offer a refreshing perspective on the material, affective, and institutional aspects of our artistic and optical devices, which influence and define our art practices: for example, the epistemic fantasy that the zoom lens moves through worlds and the characters inhabiting them.

Documentation is a conscious reflection on, and in, action: knowing through making. There is no making in the use of a zoom lens. Spatial exploration — an integral part of the creative process — does not happen when using zoom lenses. The zoom lenses create a closer, tighter image — but a tighter image does not necessarily translate into a closer, more intimate relationship with a community. Documentary must be understood not as a result but as a process. It is an aesthetic expression, mediated by the encounter between the artist and the community. We — artists — need to see ourselves as embedded within situations and entangled in an assemblage of cultural, environmental, and social systems. We must learn to be better attuned to interpersonal relationships, our settings, and our histories — and to how we are in constant exchange with these things.

In contrast to the zoom lens, a prime lens enables the generation of new subjectivities as dialogical means of collectively thinking about, and with, the world. Using a prime lens consists of a process of making and doing: moving, changing positions, pausing, observing, and reframing. As such, the use of prime lenses allows us to address the relationship between the world and the stories we tell about it. Framing in action — to choose and change the prime lens in the field — is a process wherein institutional settings and spatial arrangements are in a state of constant negotiation. Pausing, turning off the equipment, observing the space, choosing and changing the lens, engaging with the people being filmed — all of these activities encourage alignment, attunement, and synchrony. The frame is the central organizing idea, a powerful

rhetorical entity that renders certain aspects of our multidimensional reality more salient than others.

Aesthetic, material, and research logics collide in the frame. Who is in the frame, who is not, and why? Why are we seeing this person? What can we understand about them from how they are portrayed? And, most importantly, how do we see ourselves in relation to them? To answer these questions is to engage with the politics of lens-based knowledge. My feature-length documentary, titled *Cherán* (2021, 70 min.), which I filmed with the P'urhépecha community, seeks to answer these questions. My methodological strategies were informed by various modes of listening and seeing, which emerged in the course of long periods of observation and documentation. I used prime lenses because they enabled communal relationality: indeed, opportunities to engage with the community emerged each time I paused to change the lens. The use of prime lenses created an intersection between aesthetics and community-based research, as the words spoken between people as I switched lenses helped to define relational positions — of people, places, and things — and effectively constituted experimentation in the field. Empathy, solidarity, and togetherness formed parts of that vocabulary. My study of fieldwork, therefore, is an examination of the encounters and tensions between lived experiences, regimes of knowledge, and the politics of display.

There is a dominant tendency in documentary practices to treat subjects in broad strokes, particularly when engaging with issues of inequality, race, and poverty. A documentary, for instance, might bluntly ask: “Who are the poor?” However, once we

begin to document and reflect upon these issues through lenses such as class and race, suddenly everything comes into focus. We realize, then, that class and race are the story, and that we need to keep them in focus. In so doing, we may consider all the different social constructs that bind us, and which created the particular paths along which we currently find ourselves walking.

In the making of my film *Cherán* together with the P'urhépecha community, I emphasized the decolonial imperative as an epistemic endeavour by which we might unwind ourselves from the coloniality of power. As Aníbal Quijano expresses, “it is necessary to extricate oneself from the linkages between rationality/modernity and coloniality, first of all, and definitely from all power which is not constituted by free decisions made by free people” (40). Mechanisms of surveillance, control, and scrutiny are deeply embedded in the colonial fabric of the documentary. As such, a central imperative in the making of my film was that the community feel seen but not scrutinized. This meant listening, and positioning myself neither as an observer nor as a member of the community, but as a fellow campesino coming back from a place of estrangement and distance — an equivocal homophony composed by inclusion and exclusion. To articulate the contours of the community’s experience was thus also to address possibilities for delinking from the colonial fabric of documentary.

The dialectical architecture of nationhood and belonging in Mexico — rural and urban — is a process shaped by various colonial legacies. For me, addressing the multiple forms and structures of coexistence juxtaposed with aspects of inequality and poverty meant

interrogating the nature of this dialectical architecture. I aimed to reflect upon the existence of those multiple realities and distributed selves, while interrogating life-recording technologies and their optical devices. As such, I produced an ethnographic study that examines P'urhépecha emancipatory strategies and their geographical specificity to site, while critically addressing various strategies for accessing the realms of memory and identity, which commonly evade efforts at ethnographic representation.

Audra Simpson has written that, “to speak of Indigeneity is to speak of colonialism and anthropology, as these are the means through which indigenous people have been known” (41). Her reflection acknowledges the role of systems of knowledge — anthropology and ethnography — in perpetuating ongoing violence against Indigenous peoples living under settler-colonial occupation. This ongoing violence is not only physical and social but also epistemological. However, an epistemological shift is currently taking place, due in large part to recent advocacy on the part of Indigenous artists and scholars, comprising an understanding that no documentary should be made without acknowledging the visual practice’s intrinsic relationship to colonialism, capitalism, and exploitation. As such, I let my artistic and research interventions in Cherán be led by the P'urhépecha themselves. My study of fieldwork was primarily, but not exclusively, an epistemological inquiry into lens-based practices, outlining their historical, geopolitical, and artistic contexts. Ultimately, a closer and more critical examination of the fraught aesthetic impulses of ethnographic and documentary— realism and naturalism — and their compulsion toward legitimacy and approval is needed. Such anxieties over legitimacy and approval merely manifest, in fact, the

documentary practice's complicity in colonial violence. This is the place where artistic research as a mode of inquiry and knowledge production comes into being. A work of art is ultimately an object, but it is also something else: it is a field of forces in which certain tools, language, actors, aspirations, and aesthetic priorities come together. Every piece of art has its postulates — what we think about even before making it, what we do not explicitly expose. Nonetheless, all such thoughts remain active and operate in the piece. That is the place of ideology.

CHAPTER 2

Racialized Violence, Territorial Control and Extraction

Rurality and Territorial Conflict

Rural geographies in Mexico play a dual role, both as actors and witnesses. They are dynamic agents that contribute to the construction of national identity and history. Commonly known in Mexico by terms such as *Pueblo* or *Rancho*, rurality is an inadvertent monument and agent of transmission that bears silent witness to historical events. Mexico's rural landscape attests to the very modus operandi of colonization itself, whereby the charting of territory, the classification and extraction of its natural resources, and the appropriation of land possess have both concrete and symbolic consequences. Historical disputes over land ownership, and its administration of and usage, have been the stage not only for the establishment of racialized discipline and colonial rule, but also for democratic reforms and Indigenous emancipation.

Cherán offers many insights into the inextricable linkages between nation building and colonialism in Mexico, and the nation's need to conceal the functions of its racialized subjects. Racialized discipline has been fundamental to maintaining colonial rule throughout the centuries, particularly in the state of Michoacán. Racialized discipline in the P'urhépecha region has peculiar nuances, and one of these concerns territorial conflicts between neighbouring communities. As noted by Ventura, "after 1990 and up to the present, it is estimated that practically every agrarian centre within the Sierra P'urhépecha currently experiences at least one border problem, with 57 cases in 49 communities within a conflicted area of 22,576 hectares" (42).

Indeed, territorial conflicts between P'urhépecha campesinos are well known throughout Mexico, and these conflicts have been used by local and federal authorities as an opportunity to exert domination and control. In 1976, for example, a territorial conflict in one community resulted in six people being killed, prompting intervention by the army. In an official report by a Ministry of Agrarian Reform representative to the minister, updating him on the situation, he described the affected community in demeaning and derogatory terms: “fanaticism, ignorance, misery, revenge, quarrels, and personal hatred prevail for generations. They are not aware of the support and solidarity that should exist between them; therefore, there is permanent division” (43).

Colonization manifests itself in the P'urhépecha landscape in different forms, such as through mechanisms of accumulation by dispossession, and the physical invasion and occupation of lands. It is also manifest in the forces of material extraction, human-made transformations of the environment, and ecological interventions. It manifests through the maintenance of power and domination, and the forced erasure of tradition, religion, and culture. And it manifests through profound social and economic inequities and subjugation imposed through the use of military operations. Although racialized discipline has not culminated in the material disappearance of particular sectors of the population, it is nonetheless continued and prolonged through the radical transformation of identities and social relations brought about by some of the material changes described above. I am interested in exploring the links between ecocide, territorial control, and racial capitalism, and in opening new connections between Indigenous knowledge, critical theory, and art through a reconsideration of the politics of place.

Place is bound to location as a materialization of social practices, forms, and lived experiences. Geographical places are grounded reference points with distinctive qualities that provide the foundation for the social, political, cultural, and economic infrastructures that make us who we are. To reconsider the politics of place will help us to understand the relationships between people and their environment, and the active roles played by individuals, groups, and social structures in creating such environments. To understand the politics of place is to engage with practices and policies of land use, economic growth, territorial control, climate change, sustainability and, most importantly, regimes of power. Such regimes are informed by the contemporary conditions in the present, and are interwoven with perception, values, and ways of seeing. In the 1930s, the Italian Marxist Antonio Gramsci developed his concept of hegemony in order to understand how power functioned through the beliefs, perceptions, and values imposed by a ruling class that manipulated the culture of a particular society. In Marxist philosophy, cultural hegemony is a form of dominance by the ruling class whereby the ruling-class worldview becomes the accepted cultural norm, the dominant ideology. Such dominant ideologies may establish a social, political, and economic status quo as seemingly natural and inevitable. Raymond Williams describes hegemony as such: “In its simplest use it extends the notion of political predominance from relations between states to relations between social classes…. That is to say, it is not limited to matters of direct political control but seeks to describe a more general predominance which includes, as one of its key features, a particular way of seeing the world and human nature and relationships” (44). Such particular ways of seeing are then maintained

through assertions of power, either through military rule, political occupation, or territorial control.

Territorial control and occupation may be better understood once their forms are spatialized. To study culture through the lens of space and place help us to identify and reveal systems of power at play. My approach coincides with that of Setha Low, who notes that “spatializing culture — i.e., studying culture and political economy through the lens of space and place — provides a powerful tool for uncovering material and representational injustice and forms of social exclusion” (45). Place and territory are not just there; they represent the materialization of the diverse ways in which communities socialize. Low insightfully adds: “The study of space can direct attention to social and spatial arrangements that are presumed to be given and fixed, and therefore considered ‘natural’ and ‘simply’ the way things should be” (46).

The P'urhépecha territory has been in constant transformation via different processes of appropriation, negotiation, or dispute. Despite its apparently small scale and local contexts, in which the balancing act between the P'urhépecha communities and the hegemonic power of the state and narco-industries plays out, the P'urhépecha uprising in Cherán made vividly apparent the colonial legacies bound up in forms of territorial control. Rural geographies sometimes conceal underlying realities of inequality and violence. As such, by addressing the relationships among the social groups that have formed and transformed the P'urhépecha territory, and the activities they carry out, we may better understand how such landscapes are affected by inequality, social violence,

and exclusion. My emphasis is on the ways in which diverse colonial manifestations of violence and the social production of territory are linked inextricably to the formation of social subjects, imaginaries, and practices.

Pigmentocracy and Racialized Discipline

It is critical to acknowledge the role of race in the Mexican drug war. The fact that the drug war began within and spread throughout the rural P'urhépecha landscape is not a coincidence; indeed, it was purposely designed in that way by the highest levels of government and the ruling class. Darker skin tends to be associated with g*ente de pueblo* (rural communities) similarly to how Mexico's lower economic class is linked to *morenito* (Brown and Mestizo persons). The ease and impunity with which so many darker-skinned Mexicans are murdered, kidnapped, and disappeared points to the fact that the rights to life and basic human rights are not distributed equally among Mexican citizens.

Pigmentocracy was one of the key instruments used to exploit and oppress Indigenous populations during the conquest and colonization of Mexico, serving to relegate Indigenous and Mestizo people to the bottom of society. To question the doctrine of the pigmentocracy and assert the rights and rhetoric of the Brown against the supremacy of whiteness allows us to pose uncomfortable questions about cultural annihilation and the deliberate disappearance of indigeneity in Mexico. The supremacy of whiteness in Mexico has determined the ways in which racialized subjects are constituted today. In

2017, the INEGI (Instituto Nacional de Geografía y Estadística) released its *Módulo de Movilidad Social Intergeneracional* (Intergenerational Social Mobility Study), the results of a survey carried out throughout the country, which examined current social and economic conditions as well as the variables that influence the situations in which people live—including, notably, skin colour (47). In a unique case for Mexico, for the first time people were asked to answer a question related to the colour of their skin. Survey respondents were asked to identify their skin tone from a chromatic scale of eleven different skin tones. The results were more than revealing. In an entirely unique study on whiteness and Brown identity, the INEGI survey established that skin colour was related directly to a person's level of education, employment, and social mobility. With lighter skin tones, levels of both education and employment increased. Among the lighter skin tones, too, was found a higher percentage of people working in administrative jobs and managerial positions, while jobs related to customer service and agriculture were found among respondents with darker skin. The INEGI study revealed that the pigmentocracy established several centuries ago by European monarchies still prevails in Mexico. Skin colour, then, not only defines patterns of aesthetic value but, moreover, these values continue to function as powerful mechanisms of social, political, and economic control.

Recently, interest in the study of pigmentocracy in Mexico has increased among scholars and journalists. A notable scholar in this regard is Susana Vargas Cervantes, who coined the phrase *Mexico: La Pigmentocracia Perfecta* (Mexico: The Perfect Pigmentocracy), echoing author Mario Vargas Llosa when, back in the 1990s, in an

episode of the now classic television documentary series *Encuentro Vuelta*, he controversially referred to Mexico's political system as *La Dictadura Perfecta* (The Perfect Dictatorship). Vargas Cervantes investigates the connections between gender, sexuality, class, and skin tone to reconceptualize pigmentocracy, which she describes as "the establishment of a relationship between power and skin color, among other traits, in order to legitimate the dominance of White-skinned people over darker-skinned people" (48). Pigmentocracy, then, is chiefly, although not only, a class system in which skin tones are linked to particular socioeconomic levels. In Mexico, pigmentocracy is reproduced across many different sectors, from sustainable urban design (49) to the distribution of government positions among high-ranking politicians (50). It is true that racism extends well beyond the reaches of merely epidermal differences; nonetheless, it is by epidermal differentiation that social discrimination and racialized fear are reinforced. The reigning national pigmentocracy, and the understanding of Brown, Mestizo, and Indigenous persons as disposable agents, encompass a diverse set of significations regarding nationhood, race, identity, and belonging.

Why is it that acts of state and narco-violence, ecocide, and extractivism manifest as racialized practices? And why do these peculiar manifestations of structural violence occur mainly in rural areas? Racial, economic, and ethnic differences are not only deeply interconnected with Mexico's geography but also extend toward legal rights regarding life and death. Author Federico Navarrete refers to the *Necropolítica de la Desigualdad* (Necropolitics of Inequality) to designate the ways in which state power determines which kinds of bodies have the right to live or die, and how such rights

relate, intrinsically, to class, gender, race, ethnicity, and place of origin (51). With this concept, Navarrete builds upon the work of Achille Mbembe, who describes necropolitics as “the notion to account for the various ways in which, in our contemporary world, weapons are deployed in the interest of maximum destruction of persons and the creation of death-worlds” (52). The social exclusion and discrimination practiced against the P’urhépecha people results in what economic geographer David Harvey calls *Accumulation by Dispossession*, whereby neoliberal capitalist policies dispossess people of their wealth or land, resulting in the centralization of wealth and power in the hands of a few (53). Complementing Harvey’s notion, Saskia Sassen associates mass consumption and the circulation of goods not merely with modern productivity but, further, conceives of neoliberalism as a new form of capitalism comprising a gigantic mechanism for the extraction not only of natural resources but all kinds of human resources as well. Sassen calls this Extractive *Capitalism* (54): a form of capitalism based on the extraction of profit from human beings and nature, leaving behind dead land and dead water.

A common feature of most recent revolutions and revolts in Mexico, including the 2011 P'urhépecha uprising in Cherán, is something that is not only political but spatial: all of them erupted in rural landscapes. Rural spaces and the forest are not anonymous features; they are not just there but are the result of multiple negotiations and fluctuations between labour, capital, and power. The attitudes and perceptions that produce and are produced by these landscapes are in constant flux. We typically think of the forest as an entity that, once classified and catalogued, remains a stable,

regulated space. However, such perceptions are simply reflections of our contingent cultural values. We can to trace the power of the forest and how it calibrates our relationship with the world by excavating the immaterial and tangential implications of its historicity.

The 2011 P'urhépecha uprising in the forest of Cherán not only exposed how environmental extraction is bound to structural racism, narco-capital, state-sponsored violence, and colonial power, but also instituted a process of Indigenous emancipation that continues to expand throughout Michoacán. This exposed geography has successfully challenged national notions of sovereignty, possession, the built environment, property, and ecology. The violent terrain of occupation enters the frame as the P'urhépecha forest has been weaponized and militarized in the interests of national and global capital, positioning forest systems within an increasingly catastrophic landscape of deforestation and erasure. In a time of kidnappings and extermination, the occupied forest is a space of conflict, disappearance, and bereavement—conditions that currently characterize the P'urhépecha forest in Michoacán under the pivotal era of neoliberal structural transformation in Mexico.

Indigeneity and rurality in Mexico are intrinsically linked; both are part of a certain political imaginary that illustrates clearly the geographical transit of colonial power. Rural landscape and Indigenous identity are neither fixed nor innate categories; they have been produced and maintained via hegemonic mechanisms of power and control. Once we spatialize Indigenous identity, we can see how diverse colonial manifestations of

power, such as environmental violence and extractivism, are deeply linked to the formation of inequality through spatial dynamics of power. Such spatial manifestations of power do not end with the social production of territory; rather, they expand toward the formation of social subjects, imaginaries, and practices. The everyday realities of inequality, capitalism, colonial power, struggle, and erasure are enacted through the political production of rurality. As geographer David Harvey put it: “Class struggle all too easily dissolves into a whole series of geographically fragmented communitarian interests, easily co-opted by bourgeois powers or exploited by the mechanisms of neo-liberal market penetration” (55). To think about rurality and Indigeneity is to identify the tensions between distance and proximity, presence and erasure. Mexican colonial forms of governance and state power have inevitably manifested through geographical domination and racial oppression. Such racial oppression — imposed since the colonial empire — demarcated boundaries based on erasure and exclusion, and thus set in place protocols for dispossession and the physical invasion and occupation of lands. Colonial domination within the P'urhépecha landscape led directly to a certain racialized discipline, a myriad of social processes that coalesced in the construction of inequality and the formation of Indigenous-racial subjects.

Racialized discipline is comprised of sets of intertwined conditions and norms embedded in culture, custom, and local economies, all ineluctably complicit in histories of inequality, colonial power, and hegemonic notions of race and sovereignty. The experience of race and corporealized racism — based on erasure and exclusion — expand within and across languages and national cultures, “collapsing, giving way to an

epidermal racial schema," as Franz Fanon states (56). In their seminal work *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, Deleuze and Guattari address the relationship between the "faciality machine," racism, and racial difference: "Racism operates by the determination of degrees of deviance in relation to the White-Man face" (57). They suggest that faciality and racism are not just oppositions marked by binary values — brown versus white — but assemblages of power aimed at specific social formations.

Notions of race and place are integrally connected, woven into hegemonic notions of sovereignty and nationhood. However, these complex entanglements are rarely explored in relation to spatial politics of difference. How do race and place function as terrains of power? To chart the traffic between race and place across sites such as rural geographies and forests, is to investigate habits of facialization and epidermalized difference, both of which are integral to nation-state formation. Facialization and epidermalized difference extend well beyond an epidermal schema; yet, it is through this configuration that racialized discipline is established. Such discipline is constituted through partialities, racialized anxieties, and national habits, including the exercise of symbolic power through representational practices.

To conceive of facialization as a habit that associates epidermalized difference with identity is to tackle geographical and political processes of monolithic nation-state formation, imbued with assemblages of colonial power. As Deleuze and Guattari point out, "this machine is called the faciality machine because it is the social production of

face, because it performs the facialization of the entire body and all its surroundings and objects, and the landscapification of all worlds and milieus" (58). *The facialization of the body in all its surroundings and the landscapification of all worlds* — these phrases articulate, enigmatically yet insightfully, the relationship between geographical formations and racialized arrangements. Such geographical formations — with racialized arrangements — are made manifest through Indigenous land dispossession, environmental extraction, profound economic inequity, and social subjugation.

Indigenous geographies in the state of Michoacán are formed according to a dialectic of competing discourses — emancipation and erasure — in the midst of struggles over environmental justice, political control, and land and resource rights. Such struggles are inherently linked to racialized discipline. Aspects such as inequality, segregation, erasure, and violence delineate the vocabulary of the disciplinary language. It is important to emphasize the role played by state power and government administrations in codifying race within the spatial politics of colonial rule in the state of Michoacán. The materialization of race in the P'urhépecha landscape developed not only through interpersonal relationships but also grew out of the physical separation between peoples and distinctive geographies. These racialized geographies cultivated, institutionalized, and consolidated forms of racial identity, which today form the remnants of colonial governance and control.

Racialized discipline is a form of political domination practiced across history and geography. Its capacity to perform, deform, and transform is often tied to ecocide,

enforced disappearance, and environmental violence. In the P'urhépecha landscape, processes of racialization are rooted in the naturalization of segregation and supported through the deployment of diverse iterations of structural violence. The geographic concentration of Indigenous bodies laid an enduring material groundwork for these practices — one that is linked intimately to politics of race. Race is commonly associated with people; however, its political ramifications become visible — and, indeed, explicit — only when it is contemplated in territorial terms. Race is always about the racialization of space. As Daniel Nemser notes, “space is the grid of intelligibility that gives race its form and makes it legible, even thinkable” (59). By focusing on the relationship between race and physical space in the P'urhépecha landscape, we can trace the echoes of structural violence all across the territory, naturalizing the emergence of a spatial politics of colonial rule. To address the P'urhépecha landscape through the relationships and activities undertaken by the social groups that form it may allow us to understand these groups’ social imaginaries and practices. The maintenance of economic power, social domination, and material extraction in Cherán is the product — not the foundation — of colonial and extractivist Euro-Western modalities. The colonial infrastructures that constituted the material conditions for the exploitation and extermination of people and environments are readily manifest once we understand the interconnections between Indigenous genocide and environmental violence. Environmental violence, when examined as a technique of colonial power, reveals the diverse forms of control and erasure that were, and are, used in the construction of a subjugated social and spatial order.

Environmental Violence

The story of the people and the community of Cherán is not confined to the past but, rather, points to still-existing shortcomings with regard to human rights involving exploitation, colonial abuses, and social discrimination. Different forms of ecocide taking place all across the Indigenous P'urhépecha communities are the product of an intensified structural violence associated with new regimes of capital accumulation, with its incessant, and increasing, voracity for temporal and geographical expansion. Ecologically devastating extractivist regimes must be associated and understood through their association with colonialism; however, the contemporary and quite ambiguous political ecology of modernity continues to be largely overlooked. This political ecology addresses the critical study of the natural world as it is produced by economic, political, social, and cultural structures. As Greenberg and Park have stated: "It is not enough to focus on local cultural dynamics or international exchange relations, and that the past and present relationship between policy, politics or political economy in general and the environment needs to be explicitly addressed" (60).

In the P'urhépecha landscape, ecocide and extraction echo the structural violence that is imposed all across the territory. Structural violence is connected intrinsically not only to the landscapes in which it is perpetrated but also to the geographies through which it is mediated. Such power asymmetries have catastrophic environmental consequences, as highly concentrated forms of domination engender colonial ecologies. Colonial ecologies make way for capitalist expansion over Indigenous geographies, erasing Indigenous peoples' own conceptions of environment, history, and time.

In the P'urhépecha region, the forest has been at the centre of interventions, tensions, and conflicts. A refuge for resistance throughout history, the forest is not only a source of Indigenous identity and a constitutive part of everyday life, but also an affective space of elision and disappearance. It has been noted that during the last decade, the P'urhépecha forest was on the verge of extinction because, “of the total communal forest area in Cherán, 61 percent was devastated by illegal logging between 2008 and 2011 (11,434 hectares of predominantly pine and oak). In three years, the extraction and dispossession of the main communal heritage was intense” (61). Rather than an intact ecological wonderland, the increasingly occupied P'urhépecha forest transformed into a violent geography at odds with corporate and state encroachment. Anthropologist Claudio Lomnitz explains its historical extractive trajectories: The forest has had a use value since colonial times, in such a way that the figure of small agricultural property was transferred to the forest and it was subdivided and parcelled for its exploitation. Between 1973 and 1988, two factions formed, which struggled for control of the forest through the election of the representative in charge of communal property and the manager of the resin factory. The dispute reached such a degree that the state, with the intervention of the army, had to act as an intermediary, on more than one occasion. From that moment on, several measures were taken in the region of the P'urhépecha plateau. Organizations were formed to promote a union of the communities of the four P'urhépecha regions, despite their historical differences (which included years of agrarian conflicts over land boundaries), attesting to a common territory and forming a whole series of communication frameworks or emblems for ethnic identification, such as a Purhépecha flag or the very idea of nationhood. (62).

Colonial ecologies and environmental extraction are maintained by new predatory and corporate elites, which expand and develop alongside new forms of poverty. Such ecologies are thus revealed as sets of social relationships, geographies, and state institutions, all intertwined within a complex system that is inextricable from property relations, capital, politics, and identity. With the advance of neoliberalism, natural resources hold both political and economic value. To emphasize the economic dimension of nature is to plot extraction at an unprecedented scale and with an unprecedented degree of ambition and precision. Gómez-Barris describes extractive capitalism as “an economic system that engages in thefts, borrowings, and forced removals, violently reorganizing social life as well as the land by thieving resources from Indigenous and Afro-descendent territories” (63).

Building upon an ethnographic exegesis of the acquisition, distribution, and consumption of wood in the P'urhépecha forest, I realized that the central theme uniting them all is property: owning property, being property, and becoming property-less. Extraction — and its capitalist fundamental logic of withdrawal — has its roots in political decisions about territorial control and is often closely intertwined with conflict and bereavement. Ecocide and extraction are not only ecological but social, and remain sources of violence on a broad scale against P'urhépecha communities, a development that has resulted, in turn, in unequally distributed and racialized geographies. Gómez-Barris elaborates further on the relationship between extraction and territory, noting that “extractive capitalism, then, violently reorganizes territories as well as continually

perpetuates dramatic social and economic inequalities that delimit Indigenous sovereignty and national autonomy" (64).

Documenting Erasure

In 2006, when President Vicente Fox Quesada was about to finish his presidential term — ending seventy years of government under the regime of a single political party, the PRI — a newly formed drug cartel, *La Familia Michoacana*, went public in the state of Michoacán. The next presidential administration, of Felipe Calderón Hinojosa (2006–12), launched a war against drug cartels, criminal groups, and local guerrillas, initiating an unprecedented regime of violence in Mexico, significantly in the state of Michoacán. Michoacán is the birthplace of Mexico's war on drug trafficking and a strategic place for criminal transactions, including the ongoing fragmentation of Mexico's drug cartels as they fought, and sometimes then merged, with federal and state police, other criminal groups, and local guerrillas. Calderón's crusade against organized crime led to reciprocal violence between criminal organizations and federal police, significantly increasing the vulnerability of the population. In 2013, in a small town in Michoacán, several landowners, community members, and a local doctor took up arms to fight directly against the drug cartels and criminal groups that dominated the area. Thus, a new form of local guerrilla was born: *Grupos de Autodefensa Comunitaria*. These vigilante self-defence groups originated as a result of frustration with Mexico's federal government, which failed to provide social security and welfare in the mist of its war against drug cartels and police corruption. Self-defence groups, however, began to

engage in the same criminal activities and extreme violence they were fighting against, merging with corrupted police force and drug cartels — kidnapping and extorting either by contract or to capitalize themselves.

We all are familiar with images of extreme violence in Mexico. Such images are not a new phenomenon but the manifestation of decades of social punishment and erasure. Images of extreme brutality began to circulate at around the same time that mass graves were discovered in several rural landscapes in Michoacán. Forests and other rural spaces were transformed into massive graveyards, the sites of enforced disappearance, modifying and politicizing what might otherwise remain as simply a natural site. Reading into these landscapes is a complex effort. Landscapes of extermination have the ability to conceal realities of inequality and violence, and thereby normalize a politically complex reality. What is visible in such landscapes is often only a small part of their true formation. This poses a problem when considering visual media, which, by definition, are limited to representing what is visible. How, I came to ask myself, might I make things like state-sponsored crime, corrupt state police, kidnapping, and extortion visible? And how do such violent practices haunt places and individuals, as time moves on?

Disappearance is a term which has possibly never been more political. The instrumental purpose of social and physical punishment is shaped by a combination of forces and institutions, which determine such measures in pursuit of their objectives. Tortured and mutilated bodies have become commodities to be used and traded for profit in the new

landscapes of war in central Mexico. Enforced disappearance, punishment, and kidnapping have transformed rural landscapes into depopulated, ghostly territories dominated by organized crime and institutional corruption. These are the new geographies of conflict in rural central Mexico. I am interested in depicting how these violent processes unfold in the landscape and how past atrocities continue to haunt the present.

Ethnography and documentary are largely concerned with the observable and the tangible: what is present and palpable. However, as soon as we begin to question the material manifestations of absence and presence, such dialectics unravel with a disturbing power. What is required to be absent and what is permitted to be present? Power defines and materializes what is present and what must be erased. The simultaneity of absence and presence is not paradoxical as both coexist as something that comes into being and that lacks presence. I am interested in what is not present — as in the geographies of absence described by scholar Lars Frer — because, paradoxically, absence produces lived spaces and regulated territories. As Frers puts it, “absence also has a political dimension, it is negotiated and contested” (65).

Ethnographic documentaries are an expression of power, capital, and agency intertwined. Such productions are carriers of beliefs and ideologies, and determine how stories and themes are framed. The stories that are told, and the point of views from which they result, form parts of a dialectical process of alignment and friction — relations of forgetting and oblivion. Ethnographic documentaries are powerful rhetorical

entities that persist across time, manufacturing perceptions and emotional infrastructures in the present. The recurrent manipulation of the ethnographic present exemplifies the complex relation between absence and presence, and the affective power implicit in these processes. The politics and strategies of ethnographic presence are deeply tangled up with spectacle, power differentials, and exploitation; nonetheless, they also exist as an engaged expression of kinship and endearment. To be seen — in the context of an ethnographic documentary — is to be rooted in a processual corporality deeply embedded with empathy, intimacy, and affect.

I have filmed and conducted ethnographic fieldwork in the state of Michoacán for more than two years, thereby becoming familiar not only with the people involved in these violent events but also with the landscape. The P'urhépecha forest in Michoacán is a landscape of extermination and enforced disappearance — a composite site of hidden dynamics, drug cartel crimes, and state-sponsored violence. Although these conditions may leave behind no apparent material evidence, they continue to affect, nonetheless, the social production of territory. Violence, nationalism, and politics are inextricably linked to these landscapes of extermination, permeating, shaping, and defining unequal materialities. Violence is synonymous with inequality. Even as landscapes such as the P'urhépecha forest figure prominently in official accounts of Mexican nationhood and sovereignty, my critical inquiry offers a fresh insight into such geographies of conflict — their historicity, politics, and the resurgent investment of narco-industries into these territories.

My short documentary *Time is out of Joint* (2018, 25 min.), which I filmed within the P'urhépecha landscape, examines different narratives and geographies of the narco-war, providing a glimpse into Indigenous rural Mexico. Narco-industries have significantly modified the rural environment of contemporary Mexico. More than 40,000 acres of the P'urhépecha forest have been appropriated and destroyed by illegal logging powered by narco-capital. My documentary supplies visual evidence of a complex assemblage of infrastructures, ecologies, and interconnected environments, mapping out geographical and historical traces of state-sponsored violence and narco-industries. Abandoned forest, houses, and roads have all become important distinguishing features of the narco-labour infrastructure.

The capacity of a documentary to be defined and to circulate as a documentary always concerns power and capital. A subtle network of power dynamics and relationships unfolds before, during, and after filming. Capitalism frames our relationships as a set of transactional dynamics. Capital — as a means of facilitating action — creates incentives to act in ways in which we may otherwise have no interest in doing. The same goes for cinema and specifically for documentary, because it represents a very particular kind of capital, one which validates and imposes certain kinds of aesthetics and formal approaches: e.g., voiceover narration, well lit sit-up interviews, or perfectly composed insert shots. The power of this capital is a normative framework against which all documentaries have come to be measured. The expansion of this normative framework and its aesthetic or technical components not only reproduces certain attitudes but also normalizes and enlarges the ideological fabric of documentaries. There are ways of

decentering this power, of course; however, such attempts result, more often than not, in separate and damaging hierarchies linked to notions of authenticity, veracity, and credibility.

To inquire into the linkage between acts of looking and acts of power not only underlines the unstable power dynamics of visibility but, furthermore, acknowledges the latent potential within documentaries for disruption, renewal, and departure. In their documentary manifesto, Alexandra Juhasz and Alisa Lebow state: “Documentaries are built through countless structures that have reached beyond or bypass story, each bound to diverse imperatives…. We need forms of documentary that seek to rupture the self-satisfied logics that normalize the current state of affairs; we need forms that do not feed upon and into the colossal denial that allows this state of affairs to continue” (66).

My critical inquiry into the language, aesthetics, and formal approaches of documentary — such as voiceover narration, well lit sit-up interviews, and perfectly composed insert shots — attempts to disrupt and make visible the social construction of documentary norms and their exercise of power. This ongoing exercise of power has not only shaped and structured lived experiences but also fuelled an economy based on a utopian vision of profit without exploitation. The reification of lived experiences through consumption — the commercialization of such experiences through the leisure industries — fuels fantasies of authenticity and real experiences. How, I wondered, might I articulate lived experiences — exploring their social and political dimensions, beliefs, and norms — without using normative, normalized documentary language, but instead position

documentary as a response to confusion and spectacle, and as a critique of the leisure industry, its conditions of production, and politics of representation? Juhasz and Lebow ably summarize this problem: “Ethical and political considerations for this attentive, mechanical gaze often become paramount, taking account of filmmakers’ power and that of the cinematic apparatus much more so than any commitment to story” (67).

Visual representation and iconographic strategies should make us reflect as much upon the form of the testimonial encounter as the testimony itself. As we all know, media — in the context of a very crowded media landscape — is never a transparent delivery system for testimony. Rather, a constellation of factors contributes to the efficacy of a testimony. The greater leverage in documentary is the power to affect — but what to do with this power, this affect? The political potential of documentary relies upon making visible the otherwise invisible film frame — a political gesture, a blow against confusion and spectacle.

I do not do interviews. The myth of interview objectivity lingers, in part, because of its apparent transparency. Interviews are extractive methods used to collect data and to address particular research questions. The term research, in this context, is inextricably related to alterity, dominance, and power. The mechanisms of research — particularly the use of the interview — situate the community merely as a category within larger frameworks of knowledge, diminishing its political dimension and potentiality. Dominant norms of documentary language, such as the interview, are far from neutral. To the contrary, they form part of an industry practice and a normalized view of the world that

have, over the years, begun to calcify into long-term habits — habits of viewing and thinking that reinforce inequality. The experience of being in the world cannot be contained within a story, much less conveyed through an interview. Lived experiences do not offer themselves as stories. Turning lived experiences into stories — with a beginning, an end, and a purpose — not only strays near to banality but, furthermore, reveals the power of the storyteller, as narrativity is inevitably bound to authority and power.

I had several concerns in mind while filming and doing fieldwork throughout the P'urhépecha landscape in Cherán: Who is this film for? In what ways is power present within it? And who benefits from its making? These concerns were not merely a series of affirmations and arrival points, but were integral to my process of questioning — of opening up a space in which the questioning of power is normalized instead of made invisible. Strict observational approaches tend to lead to a more truthful portrayal of reality. I opted for a conceptual approach to observation: by letting participants in the film be embedded in the landscape, I invite the viewer to find meaning in a context that might otherwise seem ordinary or banal.

This is what Jacques Rancière termed a pensive image: it is a literate image that is so because it is engaged with signs and meanings. The pensive image is not a mere assemblage of images reproducing a particular reality but, rather, a set of images bundled through artistic interventions. Rancière spoke of the indeterminacy, or gap, between these two ideas about the image — the image as the duplicate of a thing and

the image conceived as an artistic operation. He arrived at the conclusion, furthermore, that the pensive image is precisely that image that is replete with indeterminate meaning, such that “to speak of the pensive image is to signal the existence of a zone of indeterminacy between these two types of image. It is to speak of a zone of indeterminacy between thought and non-thought, activity and passivity, but also between art and non-art” (68).

From the first time I met various members of the P'urhépecha community, I listened to their words and noted the body language they used. As I listened, I sought to understand what I was being told. I asked myself: What is significant here, to this specific person? What are their circumstances and what do they think — about themselves? About me? My camera was turned toward their faces and bodies, exploring their relationship with the landscape. As such, my ethnographic interventions came about through material and social interventions, which turned the research field into a site for epistemic collaboration. In these situations, the traditional tropes of the fieldwork encounter — immersion and distance — fold and collapse, giving way to a narrative of engagement wherein the aesthetics of collaboration intermingle with participant observation. These experimental collaborations and creative interventions were created according to a distinctive ethnographic modality aimed at expanding our capacity for interrogating racial identity and power.

Socially engaged art practices such as my documentary work bring together not only a unique ecosystem of participants and community members, but also processes and

practices. Together with the P'urhépecha people in Cherán, I enacted several experimental collaborations and creative interventions in an attempt to rewrite the script of Mexico's national colonial history. I entangled re-enactment and performance with autobiography and ethnography, bringing them together in a visual exploration of story and power. Presented, more often than not, in a disjointed fashion, these interventions and collaborations made visible the unifying thread, otherwise obscured, running through all these practices. Erin Manning reminds us that "what the conjunction between research and creation does is make apparent how modes of knowledge are always at crosscurrents with one another, actively reorienting themselves in transversal operations of difference" (69).

Documentary re-enactment defamiliarizes our world, revealing the cracks and fissures in history and memory. Such practices rupture time and history, and open up a space in which we may rethink the ideological power of history and memory. Re-enactment encourages us to question the common documentary ambition of creating a seamless illusion of the present. By bringing the past into the present, we may discern the ideological tools and effects that create forgetting, erasure, and suppression. Documentary re-enactment with the P'urhépecha people in Cherán was primarily an exploration of story and power. What does it mean for the P'urhépecha people to re-enact their own, personal experiences, or those of their community? I invited them to perform and to scrutinize themselves — from within their own circumstances and institutions — in order to write a new vocabulary of national colonial history, and to tear apart the coloniality of history and memory making.

To live within and experience a geography of conflict, not as a researcher but in one's everyday life, is to be permanently haunted by invisible, external agents which continuously shape conditions in the present. To be confronted by the conditions in our lives, in a manner very different from how we normally conceive of them, is to acknowledge nuanced and challenging aspects of history and memory that lead us to reconsider our own position in the world; or, as Erica Lehrer and Cynthia E. Milton put it: "difficult knowledge is knowledge that does not fit" (70). To bear witness to such difficult knowledge necessarily requires a distinctive approach, in order to avoid perpetuating its own logic of violence. As such, I explored, through the use of documentary re-enactment, how these geographies of conflict have not only shaped large-scale social and economic processes and infrastructures, but also lived experiences. The dominant norms of documentary language tend to produce and to normalize conditions in which violent practices can be instrumentalized. When people agree to participate in documentaries, their bodies and voices then belong to the filmmaker. An implicit agreement places image, sound, and expression — and, by extension, the body — under the filmmaker's ownership. Lehrer and Milton echo my own concerns in regard to the challenging ethical considerations and political encounters with difficult knowledge: "sometimes the key issue is how knowledge is packaged and instrumentalized—politically, commercially, or otherwise" (71). Images that make violence visible must always consider the intricate ethical and political linkages between those who are depicted, those who depict, and those who witness the depiction. For that violence to remain unseen — to have violence without an image — would be a tragic failing. In

making my documentary, I sought alternative ways of seeing violence, in order to make visible the unspeakable and the inaccessible.

To make visible the inaccessible or errant aspects and features that often characterize geographies of conflict, I used multi-sited ethnography. I moved and travelled extensively through the P'urhépecha landscape, tracking its physical occupation by narco-industries and its use as the site of state-sponsored violence. Marcus states that "multi-sited research is designed around chains, paths, threads, conjunctions, or juxtapositions of locations in which the ethnographer establishes some form of literal, physical presence, with an explicit, posited logic of association or connection among sites" (72). I engaged with several sites and scenes in the P'urhépecha landscape, in the purpose of interrogating the politics and material manifestations of environmental violence, racialized discipline, narco-labour, and enforced disappearance. Marcus reminds us that, "in practice, multi-sited fieldwork is thus always conducted with a keen awareness of being within the landscape, as the landscape changes across sites" (73).

Spaces of disappearance are perceived as unseen spaces — as fluid and responsive environments — affecting landscapes in ways we may not always see, despite the fact that they occupy a pervasive presence in everyday life. Disappearance is not merely a composite of illegal activities; rather, it is implicated in all these relationships and spaces, crafting violent relations between the P'urhépecha people and the nation. In order to decipher the peculiar triad formed between the narco-industries, state-sponsored violence, and the P'urhépecha uprising, I chose to follow a pertinent and

potent metaphor. As described by Marcus, “this mode of constructing multi-sited research is thus especially potent for suturing locations of cultural production that had not been obviously connected and, consequently, for creating empirically argued new envisionings of social landscapes” (74).

In a context in which disappearance is not a voluntary act but one of the bloodiest aspects of Mexico’s political present, the metaphor is violence. I traced this metaphor — seeking to discern its idiosyncratic grounding — all across the P'urhépecha territory, from sites of narco-industrial activities and state-sponsored violence to environmental violence. The emergence of *Grupos de Autodefensa Comunitaria* (self-defence groups) revealed not only the violence and territorial domination within the P'urhépecha territory, but also the predatory order that governs the space. As expressed before, “community defense organizes against a predatory order generated not only by organized crime groups but also by state agents involved with the criminal element—an exploitative order in which legal and illegal actors share in criminal benefits. This lack of distinction has created a social environment characterized by the coexistence of legal and illegal, formal and informal, institutional and noninstitutional” (75).

The escalation of neocolonial forms of extraction has accelerated these processes of spatial exploitation. As such, my documentary practice responds — politically, discursively, and aesthetically — to these transformations in spatial violence. My documentary work is structured around radical interrogation of the spatial, treating site and terrain as essential formal elements. By working in multiple geographic registers, I

have been able to think expansively about place-based filmmaking and reconsider convoluted questions surrounding territory, borders, and the history of the travelogue genre. I have examined established documentary practices with regard to travel, such as ethnography and site-specific research, through economic, social, and racialized lenses, and used spatial exploration in order to create narratives that reach across seemingly disparate geographies.

CHAPTER 3

From Aesthetic to Epistemic Power

Visuality, Race, and Power

The genocide against Indigenous communities in Mexico did not culminate with their material disappearance but, rather, was expanded and realized in the transformation of their visual identities and social relations. As such, the history of Indigenous emancipation in Mexico may be characterized as a struggle over images as much as it has also been a struggle for their rights and equal access to them. Visuality transacts — even if subtly so — with affective figures such as the insider and the outsider, the guest and the stranger, the oppressed and the oppressor. How does visuality produce, make visible, or erase these relational figures? The notion of visuality, with its disjunctured temporality, demands and reveals a complex intellectual genealogy. In his seminal book *Vision and Visuality*, published nearly four decades ago, Hal Foster first referred to visuality as a "social fact" (76). Visuality contains, at its root, not so much a contradiction, but rather a double nature. It is a term that refers both to modes of representation by a dominant culture, and also as a means of resisting it. At the most basic level, as Nicholas Mirzoeff observes, "visuality implies an engagement with the politics of representation in transnational and transcultural form" (77). As he pushes forward his investigation of the term, Mirzoeff reveals one a central component of visuality: time. Once the notion of time is made intelligible, it becomes a critical entry point to visuality and its complex, shifting, interdependent histories and hegemonic codes. Mirzoeff asserts that "visuality is in this sense, to use current terminology, a time-based medium. This series of connected and dispersed lines, crossing time and space, is a network" (78).

Visuality does not happen in a vacuum — it is situated and contextualized in a moment of telling. It embraces a family of semiotic processes with different logics and implications for movement, and touches upon various subfields and registers. The term has often been used to imply modes of depiction, seamless transfers of understanding. In contrast, I argue that visuality is generative, producing new subjects, practices, and knowledge. It constitutes neither unmediated nor transparent representation but, to the contrary, a set of asymmetrical, power-drenched practices that generate subjectivities and world-views. Visuality mobilizes asymmetries of power — culturally loaded sets of assumptions and persistent oppositions — creating social connections over time and space. Audiences and context play distinctive roles in the shaping of visuality. Even when the same depictions are used in the telling of a story, each form of viewing and interpretation is irreducibly particular. Visuality is fluid, formative, and intersubjective, irredeemably connecting the past with the present and the future.

Visuality participates in the idea of a nation as represented in its iconography, symbolism, allegories, and myths. A nation is not merely a political entity but something larger, which produces meanings and principles: a system of cultural representation. As a site of political power, visuality exposes the contingency of seeing and thereby raises questions about what may be known in relation to what is seen. Visuality accounts for its own power to represent. As Stuart Hall states: “power, it seems, has to be understood here, not only in terms of economic exploitation and physical coercion, but also in broader cultural or symbolic terms, including the power to represent someone or something in a certain way — within a certain regime of representation” (79).

During the last three hundred years in Mexico, pictorial representations have influenced and been influenced by how we understand ourselves as Mexicans. Eighteenth- and nineteenth-century portrait and landscape painting has actively contributed to the process of consolidating Mexico's national identity based on representations of rurality, Indigenity, and ethnicity. To advance the process of nation building, differences of race and class had to be promoted and enacted, as it was the state itself that acted as the promoter of such discriminatory practices. The essence of the Mexican identity, newly elucidated, depended upon its own transformation in order to survive and thrive in a new world of industry and progress. Art — as a medium and mediator of the state's incessant project of racializing Indigenous peoples — overshadowed social discrimination and colonial violence quite intentionally, as a key component of the state's political and visual strategies.

Contemporary racialized violence in Mexico can be traced back to the national tradition of eighteenth- and nineteenth-century portrait and landscape painting. These pictorial traditions demoted the Indigenous citizen, instead promoting the mestizo identity as the preferred instrument for hegemonic sovereignty and nationhood. Eighteenth- and nineteenth-century portrait and landscape painting did not situate Indigenous communities as unique and distinctive social groups but, rather, as minor ethnic identities, assimilated and subsumed within the mestizo identity. In this context, the Mexican Indian became the preferred subject of representation in the arts; such depictions, however, were manifestations of denial and dispossession, inseparable from economic violence and subjected to repressive identity politics.

The abundant tensions between the colonial Spanish and Indigenous Mexican visual cultures actively materialized the struggles of various bodies — human, natural, technological — to occupy certain spaces and temporalities. These tensions poignantly resurfaced through portrait and landscape painting in Mexico during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, thereby spatializing exoticism, colonialism, and race. Miguel Cabrera's casta paintings and José María Velasco's landscapes often acted as mechanisms for colonial subjugation, perpetuating Eurocentric artistic and historical values. In these two artists' works, race is manifested as a visual discourse consisting of depictions of identity, class, and territory — magnificent codifications of colonial fantasies. Cabrera's casta paintings and Velasco's landscapes mirror the racial anxieties of the new colony and can serve as prisms delineating the latent geopolitical, social, and ecological concerns of the newly colonialized territory. By interrogating the nationalist cultural practices of the past — such as these painting traditions of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries — we may better understand the role of racialized discipline and colonial violence in the process of creating and shaping a nation.

By depicting the colony in states of prosperity and peaceable order while obscuring its violence and genocide against Indigenous peoples, Casta painting and landscape portraiture in colonial Mexico (1700–1800) have served as fundamental instruments for establishing racial and class difference. Little is known as to who commissioned Cabrera's casta paintings and why. Velasco's landscape paintings, on the other hand, were hugely popular, attracting international recognition and marking him as one of the most important Mexican artists of his day.

At the time of the Spanish Conquest — mid-sixteenth century — the P'urhépecha Empire was a significant political entity, the second-largest state in Mesoamerica. As anthropologist Julie Adkins observes, however, “with the distribution of the encomiendas in Michoacán the Spaniards had achieved what the Aztecs had failed to do: they had made Tenochtitlán-México the capital and had reduced the kingdom of Michoacán to a tributary province” (80). No evidence or historical trace remains to explain whether the P'urhépecha Empire simply surrendered to the Spanish crown or if there was a major conflict. What is known, however, is that several Franciscan friars established themselves in Michoacán and documented the oral history of the P'urhépecha people in what became known as *La Relación de Michoacan* (81). In 1533, Cherán was incorporated as an official part of the Spanish colony by royal title of Carlos V (82).

Colonial Aesthetics and Visual Domination

The consolidation and settlement of the Spanish colony (1700–1800), not only in the P'urhépecha territory but all throughout Mexico, coincides — and not by chance — with the emergence of casta and landscape painting. These painting traditions delineated certain perceptual regimes that confined the colonized to liminal thresholds of visibility, allowing Indigenous peoples neither to appear or disappear entirely but rendering them, rather, as perpetually disappeared. Shaped by colonial politics and aesthetics, these perceptual regimes were designed to evoke particular emotional and intellectual responses to the ongoing colonial oppression which they portrayed. Mexican-ness is not a racial identity; neither is Latin American-ness nor even Indigeneity. These are colonial

constructions and cartographies: warped visions of increasingly chaotic environments dominated by identities that are both violent and fully provisional.

The Sistema de Castas (caste system) refers to the structuring of lineage and race based on social hierarchies determined by place of origin, skin colour, class, and gender. This system came into use during the sixteenth century, following the conquest of the Americas, as a collective category for identifying mixed-race individuals resulting from intermarriage. Intermarriage and sexual relationships occurred frequently in Mexico between Indigenous Peoples, Spanish citizens, and Black slaves from Europe. Even though the practice of racial intermarriage was legalized, and even encouraged in some conquered areas, language, gestures, distinctive postures, skin colour, clothing, ornamentation, and occupation nonetheless came to function as hierarchical social markers. Purity of blood and nobility — notions exported from Europe via its colonial empires' conquest of the Americas — entailed their own set of social and economic privileges in the colony, later developing into perceived racial classifications determined predominantly by origin, class, and capital. Scholar Maria Elena Martinez reports that, "by the middle of the sixteenth century, the ideology of purity of blood had produced a Spanish society obsessed with genealogy" (83). Racial groupings, determined largely by lineage, purity, and social status and supported by coercive power, came to dominate the new economies of colonial America. A plethora of terms were used to designate people with mixed Indigenous, Spanish, and African ancestry, based on their ethnic makeup and appearance. The casta system approximately describes sixteen different categories, such as: *Mestizo*, the offspring of a Spaniard and an Indigenous person; or

Mulato, the offspring of a Spaniard and a Black person. Further, a Spaniard and a mestizo would produce a *Castizo*, while a male mestizo and a female Indigenous person would produce a *Coyote*, and so on.

The casta system relied upon a strict system of labels which not only designated ethnicity and bloodline but, precisely by so doing, created race and class hierarchies in the newly colonized Mexican territory. The designation to a person of a casta constituted an official record and resulted from a process of negotiation between an officer, who created the documentation — a marriage certificate, birth certificate, a court deposition — and the individual to be classified; that is to say, the designation of ethnic categories actively contributed to the formation of racial subjects in settler colonies. In this way, casta law legitimated and institutionalized settler-colonial practices while racializing those deemed unfit to enjoy economic and social mobility. Such legal narratives depended upon ideologies of European racial superiority, which had been developed to establish dominant categories for purposes of world division and partition, colonial appropriation of Indigenous lands, and epistemological power.

Structural relations of power, authority, and legitimacy, as established by the casta system, determined the contexts of everyday life, individual opportunity, social mobility, and the enforcement and administration of criminal justice. Marginalization and criminalization associated with race and class are social forces central to the application of state power and authority. Indigenous experience and the structures of colonial domination go hand in hand. As such, casta logics of racialization, discrimination, and

subjugation became normalized features of everyday life in the Spanish colony in what is now Mexico. With the formation and consolidation of the casta system, local institutions — such as government, law, or real estate — came to be permeated with the logics of racial genocide, institutionalized knowledge, and social discrimination.

Many famous artists of the day produced casta paintings, including Miguel Cabrera, Juan Rodríguez Juárez, José Joaquín Magón, and Juan Patricio Morlete Ruiz. Such renowned artists were mostly educated in the latest European techniques and trends at the newly established Real Academia de San Carlos de las Nobles Artes de la Nueva España (Royal Academy of the Noble Arts of New Spain), in Mexico City. This official art school was founded in 1785, under the direction of Spanish engraver Jerónimo Antonio Gil — most faculty members were of Spanish descent — and was modelled after the Real Academia de Bellas Artes de San Fernando (Royal Academy of Fine Arts of San Fernando), in Madrid. Noteworthy students (either for their technical excellence or social status) trained at the Academia de San Carlos became cosmopolitan artists aligned with European art traditions, aesthetics, and political ideologies. From neoclassicism to history painting, Mexican artists were well indoctrinated aesthetically and politically; more than that, they were frequently summoned to work for the society's elites in comfortable official or private commissions. Miguel Cabrera, for example, a mestizo painter from Oaxaca, enjoyed great critical and commercial success working for wealthy patrons as well as for the Catholic Church, in particular the archbishop and the Jesuits.

Even though but little is known about the motives or purposes of individual patrons who commissioned casta paintings, the paintings themselves shine a revealing light on the racial dynamics of eighteenth-century Mexico — in particular, the construction of racial identity and self-representation in the colonial world. As Ilona Katzew explains, "casta paintings fit within European concepts of the exotic and follow the trend to classify in the eighteenth century … and should be analyzed in terms of how identity was formed within the colonial arena" (84).

Casta paintings represent a crucial component for the formation of racial categories and how they were registered in colonial Mexico. Often, the paintings are organized as sets of consecutive vignettes on a single canvas, numbered from one to sixteen. Within these vignettes, colonial power was manifested through the systematic, compelling visualization of racial categories, not only as racialized fictions but also as forms of representation with particular tonalities and resonances. Each of the sixteen vignettes present a nuclear family with a mother, father, and child, clearly modelled on depictions of the Holy Family: the Virgin Mary, Saint Joseph, and the child Christ. As mentioned above, each vignette also received a number, together with a textual inscription detailing the ethnic mixing that has occurred between the individuals in the frame — a racial taxonomy in full alignment with the most (then) current scientific or philosophical concerns of the Enlightenment of the eighteenth century. Depictions of costume, activities, settings, flora and fauna, and even culinary traditions served an important purpose in the exoticization of Indigeneity, as women were often depicted making tortillas, tamales, and mole. The visual order as presented upon the canvas conveys the

sense that white Europeans are situated atop the social and racial hierarchies. The first vignette of a casta painting displays a “conventional” nuclear family: a Spanish man, an elite Indigenous woman, and their child. The Indigenous mother is dressed in a *Huipil* (a traditional garment worn by Indigenous women in central Mexico) and wears luxurious jewelry. Her Spaniard husband sports European clothing in the French style, with a wig. The family appears calm, loving, and harmonious. As the vignettes progress and the ethnic mixes become increasingly complex, discord erupts within the families, who are portrayed in unglamorous, tatty surroundings, possess ever darker tones of skin, and are tagged with pejorative labels such as *No te Entiendo* (I don’t understand you).

Out of the interplay between the modern nation-state and the European traditions of art and science, there emerged certain affective, aesthetical, and discursive colonial formations; in Mexico, these appeared and were consolidated during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Like casta painting, landscape painting also sought to document and categorize these shifting colonial politics of a newly dominated Mexico. Landscape painter José María Velasco was considered one of the most influential Mexican artists at the time and his legacy endures to this day. Velasco’s nineteenth-century pastoral landscapes positioned Mexico’s rural geography as a symbol of national identity. His paintings exhibited widely, both within Mexico and overseas, gaining international repute through his participation in the Exposition Universelle of 1889, in Paris (85), and Chicago’s 1893 World’s Fair (86). Velasco’s pastoral aesthetics inaugurated the creation of the Mexican pictorial space, achieving at once its sublimation and separation from history. His pastoral landscapes depict subjugation and territorial dispossession as

normalized yet scarcely visible instruments of colonial violence, while applauding the magnificence and opulence of the elites. Velasco's paintings traced the shifting economies of colonial Mexico, upholding ethnic harmony while concealing Indigenous genocide and colonial violence. The Indigenous characters in his paintings inhabit racial genocide under the steady eye of a colonial gaze. Produced in and around the Indigenous regions of central Mexico, Velasco's landscapes addressed notions of royal presence, authority, and obedience, depicting an explicit subjugation and allegiance to the crown. In asserting the social inequalities of race, class, and gender, the eighteenth- and nineteenth-century visual and material culture of Mexico instituted an unprecedented institutionalization of power and knowledge, while shaping an emerging tradition of colonial aesthetics.

The notion of colonial aesthetics refers to a myriad of attitudes, comportments, discourses, and representations that hew to the commands of the dominant race, enforcing systematic marginality and inequality through calcified habits of working, viewing, and thinking. Not only do such habits dictate and influence what ought to be historicized, researched, and archived, but — precisely by so doing — they assign value and worth. The range of effects that this has engendered — erasure, obliteration, dispossession — reveals the long-term imprint of historical processes that are informed, formed, and performed through power differentials in regard to race, class, and gender. Via their visual and aesthetic regimes, colonial domination and systematic marginality permeate and determine the contexts of everyday life, manifesting through temporal and spatial deficiencies, dysfunctions, and absences.

As the dominance and intellectual sustenance of colonial aesthetics inaugurated by eighteenth- and nineteenth-century casta and landscape painting in Mexico was reproduced and deepened over time, it simultaneously gave birth to the dominant ideologies and public institutions that today shape our understanding of history, knowledge, and the world order. As the depictions, in these traditions, of race and class as national visual idioms remain in circulation today, such forms of colonialism continue to leave their imprints on the destinies of the inhabitants of the rural and unprivileged areas of Mexico. Such national visual idioms permeate the economies of race and violence, and thus also inform and populate the stories of the people of these regions, who contend daily with forms of violence underwritten by state power, colonial governance, and histories of inequality.

Pigmentocratic Regimes

Geographies of conflict shape all aspects of life, but in particular the asymmetrical power relations that permeate race and belonging. Such geographies do not arise in a vacuum but are the result of long-term historical processes of alignment with particular economic and social contexts. Such zones of unsettlement reproduce violence across regions and temporalities forged through territorial dispossession, state power, and colonial forms of governance. Oppression, discrimination and, ultimately, genocide form the pieces of an assemblage of colonial violence, manifested through instances, many and varied, of social domination. Historical, social, and aesthetical understandings of

conflict as a cultural field allow us to understand the profound ramifications of the racism and social inequality that are latent in violent ecologies.

Contemporary racial forms of violence enacted upon P'urhépecha communities in Michoacán — manifested through territorial dispossession, environmental violence, state power, and colonial forms of governance — coexist within visual forms of domination. The visual regime instituted by the casta system in colonial Mexico, imposed via pictorial depictions of race and geography, has led to unprecedented forms of domination at the intersection of ecocide, colonial power, and state-sponsored violence. Complex dialectics of appropriation, dispossession and domination call attention to the fact that we have inherited distinct — and often limited — modes of seeing race and epidermal differences. As Stuart Hall observes, “every regime of representation is a regime of power” (87).

The entangled relationship between race, skin colour, class, and belonging has defined and dominated all aspects of social life from the Spanish colonization to present-day Mexico. These relations have been present and active at every important moment in the country’s political history, from the emergence of the Independence movement (1810) through the Mexican Revolution (1910–20) to the war against drug trafficking (Operativo Conjunto Michoacán, 2006) and the current populist government headed by Andrés Manuel López Obrador (2018–present). Although these relations with regard to race, skin colour, and class have had such enduring effects, current conversations about racism and racial discourses have somehow, if they have not faded away entirely, then

been somehow been masked. These racial ramifications have particular tonalities: they are not seen but are certainly felt, not acknowledged but, rather, assimilated. This is precisely what lends structural racism in Mexico its peculiarity. As Goldberg argues, it "is what mark the racial imaginary of Latin America … as largely unique" (88).

The performances, complicities, collusions, and evasions that characterize what might be called Mexico's pigmentocracy is reinforced by the tensions between the assertion of state power, Indigeneous emancipation, local realities, and national policies. Such tensions between local communities and the national and global levels of power and knowledge coexist with unacknowledged rules of social stratification — complex social forms and structures that simultaneously obscure and normalize various forms of racism. Moreno Figueroa characterizes these social forms of thinking and acting as *Racelessness*. She argues that racelessness is "a process of racial and racist normalization that acts in such a way that allows Mexican people to express and be convinced by the commonly spread idea that in Mexico there is no racism because we are all 'mixed'" (89).

Moreno Figueroa refers to the logics of Mexican racism that organize everyday social life as *Distributed Intensities* — patterns and logics that have detached from their specific contexts, circulating and disseminating themselves as normalized forms of conviviality. She argues that "such difficulty in discerning what racism is allows people to experience it as commonplace throughout society and in their own lives, lowering the perceived gravity of its effects" (90). The distributed intensity of Mexican racism enables

it to be felt as a normalized and complex lived experience of national identity — an ambiguous assertion of power attached to no body in particular. Moreno Figueroa adds that, "in this way, the racist logic distributes the intensity of racism to become bearable and quotidian. When operating through such logic, racism loses its name and its referents, racism is distributed in everyday life becoming 'just how things are' "(91).

The incomprehensible excesses perpetrated in the course of Mexico's ongoing, normalized history of violence materialize in the context of a visually and socially stratified pigmentocratic regime, arising out of the lived experience of mestizaje (miscegenation) and its historical deployment as a political ideology. Contemporary histories of inequality and Mexican racism emanate directly from colonial legacies dating back to the establishment of Spain's colonial empire in the sixteenth century. Mexican racism as a distributed intensity — not only in P'urhépecha territory but throughout all Indigenous communities — has effectively replaced the direct violence of previous colonial epochs with impersonal, abstract, and mediated forms of social power. Brown, mestizo, or Indigenous identities are experienced as sites of collusion, evasion, and erasure. Nonetheless, this current iteration of social power remains entrenched in violent dynamics between state power, colonial forms of governance, and histories of inequality.

Casta and landscape painting in colonial Mexico (1700–1800) not only served as fundamental instruments for visual domination — establishing asymmetrical power relations between race and class — but also, with the passage of time, helped to

generate a stratified pigmentocratic regime. The excavation of such colonial legacies is one way to hold a mirror to the present, to re-examine the epistemological cartographies of domination, privilege, and power. The colonial forms of power, violence, and domination imposed upon P'urhépecha communities have been extremely successful precisely because of their anonymousness. As Moreno Figueroa explains, “the distributed intensity of racism is expressed ‘at times’ and its visibility is only a glimpse that recedes into ordinariness and normality” (92). This anonymous power, operating in amidst what is perceived as ordinary, as normality, has created intense asymmetrical power relations that yield enormous disparities in terms of both social and cultural capital. In this context, then, visuality and visual domination take on a political meaning. Indeed, they are the result of the imbrication of multiple material and symbolic relations of power. Such power relations — implemented aesthetically — have instituted particular ways of being and of becoming, subject to the greater forces of history, culture, and power.

Documenting Power

The legacies of Mexico’s colonial past, such as racial segregation and oppression, coexist with ideologies of modernization, neoliberalism, and economic progress. This history, of ideologies of economic progress performing against a conflicted and racialized fractured state, can be traced back to the period of the second French intervention of 1861 and its creation of the Second Mexican Empire (1861–67) as a client state of France. The country began experiencing great political and social

instability soon after the Mexican-French monarchy set up its administration in Mexico City in 1862. With the end of this period of monarchy in 1867 and the restoration of the Mexican republic, the new Mexican state faced the issue of how to rebuild the nation. A newly created elite of urban Mexicans, in conjunction with the Mexican authorities, began negotiating as to how cultural differences might be marketed within the new colonial relationship and what sorts of social markers would be needed to create a new national identity. The challenge of creating a modern nation by means of industrialization and scientific modernization, combined with a passion for French culture, performed against mulato disavowal and a rejection by Indigenous cultures. National identity was widely seen as a vital goal. As such, Mexican nationalism was formulated by the ruling class as a cultural project, with the intention of providing a set of idioms for cultural identity, economic dynamism, and social harmony. By examining the ways in which colonial violence was enacted through the cultural and artistic nationalistic projects that resulted, we may gain a better understanding of the function of Mexican colonialism.

The painter José María Velasco (1840–1912) shaped the idea of Mexico as a nation more than any other artist of his time. The premise underpinning Velasco's pastoral painting is a narrative of magnificence and opulence, highlighting the splendours of the imperial court and conditions of ethnic harmony in the newly established colonial state. His paintings depict the Indigenous rural landscape as a marginal zone, quite apart from the scientific progress and knowledge that marked the imperialist aspirations of the newly established bourgeois ruling class. Increased national interest provided an

unrestricted space for associating these faraway regions with the tradition of en plein air Romantic landscape painting, as well as exoticism. Even though colonization was already in place, Velasco was among the very few artists to journey, on several occasions, to Indigenous territories that had been colonized by the Spanish Empire, places which, at that time, remained still largely unexplored by Europeans. José María Velasco's oeuvre anticipated certain aspects of the modern era: painting en plein air, exoticism, exploration of distant lands, and travel as a means of expanding an individual's perspective and experience (an effort often linked to escapism and a critical attitude toward civilization). Velasco was one of the outstanding painters of his time, exhibiting his works internationally with great success, and consequently became the leading interpreter of Mexican rural life. His sketches of Indigenous landscapes and depictions of everyday life, which later served as references for the monumental paintings he produced in his studio, illuminate not only Mexico's colonial history but also the intertwined intellectual relationships and mechanisms existing between society, politics, science, and art.

José María Velasco remains the most important Mexican painter of his day, who, through his landscapes, transformed Mexico's geography into a symbol of national identity. As such, I investigated Mexican settler colonialism by considering the relationship between the construction of national narratives and cultural trauma through the use of visual instruments. My hope is that doing so may help to establish a discursive groundwork that sets the design of coloniality into relief and which seeks to make visible the invisible and to visualize social hierarchies enacted geographically in

contemporary colonial relationships. By considering the legacy of landscape painting in Mexico, I was able to reflect on the intersection between postcolonial thinking, historical imagination, and critical aesthetics, making a research-based video installation to intervene directly upon the Mexican Indigenous landscape. In so doing, I delved into Mexico's colonial archive and colonial imaginaries, imbued as they are with an epistemic and aesthetic power that helped articulate the nation's image. My video installation, titled *Portrait of a Nation*, examines Velasco's pastoral landscapes as instruments of surveillance and colonial violence. By re-photographing Velasco's landscape paintings with a surveillance camera and juxtaposing them against ethnographic documentation, I situate video technology and landscape painting as technologies of violence, producing depictions of landscape ordinarily inaccessible to the gaze. My installation addresses the complexities of the political geography of race in Mexico, situating landscape painting and video technologies as surveillance assemblages that normalize and thus provide a basis for colonial violence.

My artistic aim for this long-term project was to expand the possibilities of artistic interdisciplinary research by combining community-based research with site-specific practices and documentary filmmaking. As noted by Janneke Wesseling, "the exceptional thing about research in and through art is that practical action (the making) and theoretical reflection (the thinking) go hand in hand" (93). My purpose was to investigate the relationships between human beings and the land through the lenses of extraction, exploitation, and colonization. The Indigenous P'urhépecha of Michoacán are ancestral victims of state power and colonial forms of governance woven through with

violent disparities rooted in race, class, and geography. This context of dispossession and violence across state divisions did not occur in a vacuum; if anything, it emerged, rather, as the materialization of slow processes and practices that perpetuate structural inequalities and power imbalances in contemporary rural Mexico. These processes and practices tend to originate in catastrophic environments, but most of the time are prolonged and distributed in more gradual exchanges of knowledge and power between political institutions and privileged sites of power and wealth. Although they are often materialized violently in the landscape, such processes of land dispossession, social erasure, and colonial power have also long been exercised more subtly, through visual culture. Racialized violence in the articulation of the nation's image becomes more visible as we interrogate visual representations of Indigeneity and the physical spaces they occupy or come from. By considering the colonial legacy of nineteenth-century landscape painting in Mexico through the paintings of José María Velasco, we can understand the circulation of such colonial visual power and the material infrastructure that supports it.

After the 1821 war of independence from Spain and the subsequent establishment of the French monarchy in the country, Mexico's ruling class sought to establish a national identity by means of art. General and dictator López de Santa Anna favoured European art traditions when he reopened the Academia de San Carlos (mentioned earlier in this chapter) in 1843, in an effort to consolidate the art academy after decades of neglect following Mexico's formation as an independent nation. Modelled on the Real Academia de Bellas Artes de San Fernando in Madrid, it opened up a new chapter in Mexican art

history. The academic painting style of the nineteenth century — sometimes known as *Academic Realism* — was strongly realistic, with an emphasis on detail. Preferred subjects included historical depictions of military and political events that led to the formation of new nations. But another art school developed at the same time, known as the *Costumbristas*, or "people who document local customs." Although not strictly Romantic, this new school shared the Romantics' interest in the perceived exoticism of Latin American cultures and landscapes. The Costumbristas examined the unique qualities of their home countries with the intention to provide a sense of national identity following the post-independence period. In this regard, Velasco's compositions united pre-Hispanic symbols and contemporary national sentiments, in contrast to the severe neoclassicism of the early nineteenth century, which idealized and simplified its subjects. In Velasco's work, the combination of academic realism with Costumbrismo resulted in a new, unparalleled official style, which favoured national landscape painting as a romanticized depiction of colonial and racial domination.

The history of Mexican art of the second half of the nineteenth century seems inconceivable without the pristine, classical figure of José María Velasco. It is impossible to understand Mexican national history, with its dominant narratives represented in historic scenes, heroes, and mythologies, without considering the tradition of landscape painting. I conducted extensive research in the Velasco archive, which is hosted at the Museo Nacional de Arte (the National Museum of Art, or MUNAL) and contains information on most of his work (as well as almost three hundred paintings). Even though this archive is quite exhaustive, there are certain major gaps.

For example, it is known that not only did Velasco conduct a thorough visual documentation of the Valley of Mexico, but he also ventured through central Mexico and into the south of the country, including Oaxaca. Extensive documentation exists regarding his work in the Valley of Mexico, yet far less is known about his paintings depicting south and central Mexico. I focused on some twenty paintings from his work in central Mexico, that fairly resemble the P'urhépecha landscape in Michoacán. The goal of this archival research, however, was not only to identify potential pictorial depictions of the P'urhépecha landscape but also to scrutinize thematic drifts, latencies, and tendencies that might be further explored and highlighted. This research aimed at assessing the implications, aesthetic and political, of the ways by which practices of colonial and racial domination have been visually maintained. By excavating the colonial archive and the colonial imaginaries manifested by Velasco's paintings, and placing them in dialogue, I was able to examine and assess the epistemic and aesthetic power that contributed to articulating Mexico's image as a nation.

In Velasco's paintings, Indigenous people are introduced as mere staffage or accessories, their only purpose being to serve as visual components supporting the artist's poetical composition of pure landscape. There is no dialogue between the artist and the portrayed. The staging is not negotiated but imposed. In his landscapes, Velasco often imposes a spatial ordering of the elements, variously depicted as characters and via situations, poses, and costumes. However, the Indigenous subjects remain anonymous. No information is evident regarding their lives, hopes, or desires. They are depicted as inhabitants of a pastoral idyll, absent of colonial violence, land

dispossession, and racial annihilation. The grandiosity of these idylls in Velasco's works lends a sense of poetic harmony to images in which national pride, Romantic poetry, and daily life blend together within a Romantic landscape. To depict central Mexico as a Romantic landscape is to erase many years of systemic oppression and colonial violence, exercised outside the boundaries of artistic depiction. Even the Indigenous subjects' garments are little more than markers of national iconography, aimed at evoking exoticism while enhancing the effect of the art. The visual ordering of Velasco's painted compositions adheres to colonial hierarchies of gender, race, and class, which ought not to be read separately but as a set of interconnected hierarchies of visual power. In these paintings, each and every visual element refers to structures of power, to violent orderings of race, gender, and class. Here, visual representation is a tool of power linked to knowledge and imagination but also to violence and exclusion, all impossibly entangled, yet with the power to define who or what may exist and remain — where, when, and how.

After spending several months in Cherán, and through close collaboration with the community, I was able to identify certain landscapes which, although we could not be fully certain they were those portrayed by Velasco, nonetheless had some distinctive topographic elements in common with his scenes. By understanding the P'urhépecha landscape as existing in a close relationship with Velasco's paintings, and then juxtaposing them side by side, I was able to trace a trajectory of the movement of Mexican imperialism through colonial visual power and its domination of the geography. Indigeneity, then, in this context, is not a new political imagining but rather becomes a

cartography upon which may be mapped the transit of empire. Various members of the P'urhépecha community of Cherán collaborated alongside me, not only in the research process but also by participating directly in filming the video piece. Following careful analysis of a selection of Velasco's paintings, we resolved to carry out a visual, performative experiment wherein we would restage four of his landscapes directly in the P'urhépecha landscape of Cherán. By doing this, we aimed not only to expose the colonial visual power exercised in Velasco's paintings but also, hopefully, to lay a discursive groundwork that would place into relief the very design of coloniality. Addressing the physical landscape on the basis of the relationships and activities undertaken by the social groups that form and transform it may permit us also to understand social landscapes as environments characterized by inequality, social violence, and exclusion. In carrying out this experiment, my emphasis was on making visible the inextricable linkages between violence and the social production of space, in turn affecting social imaginaries, memories, and practices.

As my research engages with site-specificity, I decided that ethnography would be an ideal methodology for exploring relationships of site and history as they intersect with everyday life. Ethnography understands site as the container of a particular set of social relations, and these relations may be untangled by researching the field for long periods of time. In the field of ethnography, it is acknowledged that reality is a co-construction of researcher and subject, and that we — the ethnographers — are tasked with analyzing structural relationships and producing a thick description of the events that unfold around us. As space becomes temporal, history becomes a landscape of events — a

landscape of time, in which past and present collapse in simultaneity. A site where nothing follows from anything else — and yet, in which nothing ever ends. The term “landscape” is ambiguous, as it not only designates the environment around us but also relates intrinsically to pictorial tradition and the act of contemplation. The classic pictorial conception of landscape understands reality as a stable, permanent, and harmonious site, surveyed with a distanced gaze in the assumption of impartial contemplation. In contrast, however, contemporary art practices evoke landscape as a place inhabited by significant political, economic, and social forces. It is time to rethink landscape, in view of the heuristic experience of site acting against the hegemony of vision. Indeed, landscape is subject to and the result of multiple filtrations — the traces, readings, versions, and constructions of coexisting realities and selves. In preparing for this research, I wanted to think carefully through the material conditions for my intervention. In the classical ethnographic tradition, interviews and participant observation often occur in a carefully negotiated space, in order to create the conditions for an ideal response from the subject.

Whether this is achieved by positioning oneself in a familiar, comfortable context or by creating conditions of comfort in an artificial space, ethnographers have recognized that material conditions affect the responses of subjects. In classic ethnography, a successful intervention is one in which the interlocutor is at ease and expressive, because the framework of the intervention no longer calls attention to itself and is experienced, instead, as an ordinary exchange. However, as my research concerns extraction, exploitation, and colonial visual regimes, I wanted to move in the opposite

direction, by drawing attention, dramatically, to the act of being documented as well as to the technological apparatus by which this is accomplished. Since the very act of recording creates a drama, a sense of heightened importance, around the act of documentation, I sought to potentialize this act using a large and bulky surveillance camera, and thereby challenge both the classical conception of ethnography and two key attributes of surveillance: invisibility and the absence of subject consent. While recording, I challenged this invisibility, this absence of subject consent, by continually drawing attention both to the unwieldy camera and the fact of being documented. My incursion into the territory of cultural representation is informed by experimental approaches to ethnography such as that of Russell, who states “that experimental ethnography is intended not as a new category of film practice but as a methodological incursion of aesthetics on cultural representation, a collision of social theory and formal experimentation” (94). Of course, members of the P'urhépecha community were always acutely aware of the surveillance apparatus at work. The camera, it was understood, is an instrument that mediates aesthetic thought, and thus an object with powerful social implications.

Material is never neutral, nor are race or visual culture. Art practices, such as that of José María Velasco, may serve as forms, overt or covert, of violence and exclusion. They control what forms of knowledge matter, who is heard and seen, and in which locations and under what conditions. Through documentation, recollection, and performance, my video installation *Portrait of a Nation* presents images as forms of historical knowledge, deploying them as acts of resistance and remembrance. I sought

to use video surveillance to challenge institutional power asymmetries in visual culture, at the intersection of site, history, and memory. Instead of scrutiny, control, and supervision, here a surveillance camera becomes a tool for retaliation and self-representation. In carrying out my artistic research into P'urhépecha social structures, communities, and events, I was mainly interested in reflecting on notions of state violence and colonial visual regimes. In so doing, the machinations of colonialism and resource extraction were revealed as a set of social relationships, spaces of production, and governmental structures intimately intertwined within a complex system of property relations, capital, politics, and identity. As Coulthard postulates, “any strategy geared toward authentic decolonization must directly confront more than mere economic relations; it has to account for the multifarious ways in which capitalism, patriarchy, white supremacy, and the totalizing character of state power interact with one another to form the constellation of power relations that sustain colonial patterns of behavior, structures, and relationships” (95).

Resistance, in this context, is the will to navigate the complexities of settler colonialism as an ongoing practice. Visual art does little to question the historical inequalities between settlers and Indigenous peoples. It is necessary to unveil and illuminate how systems of visual distribution, such as museums and art galleries, continue to perpetuate settler perspectives of history. By displaying artwork — even radical artwork — in colonial institutions such as museums and galleries, we adopt the colonial gaze that we seek to work against. By displaying artwork functioning in harmony with — rather than in contradiction to — a colonial institution, we continue to pander to

whiteness instead of challenging coloniality. As such, I found myself wondering whom my work is being shared with: who is the intended spectator of my work? Who is the audience for these works? And whose stories are they telling? I realized that, in fact, my practice is not concerned with creating spectators, having audiences, and communicating a message. My work is meant to be an act of resistance by removing spectatorship and focusing instead on relationships and communality. My video installation is meant to reverse art history's colonial gaze precisely by not offering a gaze. The artwork is merely a stage in the process, not a by-product of it nor its ultimate endpoint. My video installation addresses this complexity precisely, using portraiture as a tool, as an instrument of postcolonial retaliation. By entangling landscape painting with political history, *Portrait of a Nation* enacts a nuanced study of memory and explores the political dimensions of space, making visible the invisible and visualizing social hierarchies that are enacted geographically within contemporary colonial relationships.

CONCLUSION
Circulating Discipline and Knowledge
Economies of Attuned Extraction

I have long believed that our way of thinking about geography is highly horizontal. It makes sense that geographical concepts such as production, uneven development, territory, scale, and geopolitics would be theorized on the basis of an assumed horizontal plane of human existence. The great majority of human activities conform to the narrow horizontal surface along which human life happens. However, human infrastructures and activities also inhabit a vertical axis, from deep-sea mining and undersea Internet cabling to outer and even interstellar space. Varied and alternative topologies of territory, scale, politics, and the production of space begin to emerge when we consider the vertical dimensions of human world-making. My reflections upon what such a vertical geography might entail came to the forefront in the course of my artistic and research intervention in the P'urhépecha communities. P'urhépecha ecologies in the state of Michoacán suffer from two types of inequality: horizontal and vertical. The horizontal type of inequality comes into clear focus when we compare wealth differentials from one region to another — for example, the average income or poverty threshold in Guanajuato as compared to Michoacán. Vertical inequalities, on the other hand, tend to be subtler, almost imperceptible, as the vertical axis of existence pertains to time. Notions of land, territory, and ownership are shaped socially, over the course of geological time, informed by the contemporary conditions of the present in constant interaction with the conditions of the past: verticality. The undeniably uneven social, geographical, and economic development in the P'urhépecha territory has created a

situation wherein underprivileged groups and communities living well below poverty line: horizontality.

For purposes of thinking about geography horizontally or vertically, there is no theoretical basis or methodological framework. It is more of a sketch that belongs to the realm of artistic and intellectual intuition. It refers to a particular way of understanding the human condition, the effort to extend the limits of human geography beyond the field of the visible and the sensorial. Human geography, understood as the critical study of space as it is produced and as it has produced us, responds to the relationships between practices, processes, and infrastructures. This vision of geography promotes a relationality that spans geopolitical differences and distances, contesting the totalizing claims produced by the political-epistemic violence of modernity. Our understanding of colonial power, as it is enacted upon the P'urhépecha communities in the state of Michoacán, will be too narrow if we consider uneven development as a condition resulting only from economic circumstances.

To better understand our world, it is essential to achieve a balance between standing so close to the object of study that our vision is warped by familiarity, or so far from it that the distance yields distortion. As such, my research particularly interrogates the prevailing relations of power — specific histories that are invoked, revoked, or erased — and the ideological chains of signification that are activated by particular geographies, discourses, and practices. In terms of methodology, my research draws attention to three fundamental epistemic pillars: power, history, and ideology. It examines the ways

in which hegemonic notions of race, sovereignty, and state power are inscribed within the prevailing colonial forms of governance. Many disciplines fail to address race adequately as a fact and often accept its assumptions as given. Racism is learned and taught not only across generations but also through disciplines like the humanities, the social sciences, and the arts. As such, these disciplines come to represent a tradition of violence.

Pigmentocracy in Mexico — and specifically among the P'urhépecha communities in Michoacán — comprises a set of relationships that actively create and reproduce inequality. Racial, state-sponsored, and environmental violence have always been enacted on material space. As Daniel Nemser states, “the racialization processes that began with the Spanish colonial project were routed through a politics of space…. Racialization took place in part through physical interventions in the landscape. These colonial infrastructures constituted the material conditions of possibility for colonial rule, but they also, I argue, enabled the emergence and consolidation of racial categories through both ascription and subjectification” (96). Logics of racial genocide in the P'urhépecha communities have been and continue to be enacted through practices with strong material and spatial components, such as environmental violence, land disputes, and territorial control by narco-industries, to name a few of the most recurrent.

In the P'urhépecha territory, racialization, racial genocide, and enforced disappearance are closely linked. Although they are materialized in space, these practices have also been constituted through time. It is here that my thinking on vertical geography helped

me to make visible the processes of racial genocide, enacted in the past and ramifying to the present. From colonial casta and landscape painting to the extraction of natural resources, from environmental violence to narco-industries — rather than abate over time, these multiple logics of racialization against the P'urhépecha communities continue to reproduce, again and again, in different modalities. How has the state reacted against this violence and what are the characteristics of this discourse? What is the link between landscape and state violence?

State-sponsored violence has almost become an ideology in itself, a manifestation of political power intricately intertwined with the present. Giovanna Gasparello states that instances of such intensified violence "occur in confrontations between cartels and between cartels and the army, the navy, or the police or take the form of executions and forced disappearances perpetrated by both 'law enforcement' and criminal groups, which often collude in illegal trafficking. That said, the increase in the homicide rate is only one of the many manifestations of violence that affect Mexican society: gender, domestic, environmental, racial, and generational, among others … they have become more acute with the increasing neoliberalism of policy and the economy, in which the state is losing its legitimacy and its regulatory power" (97). Historical traces in this landscape of state-sponsored violence can be further identified and examined by unfolding its intersection with ecocide and environmental violence — colonial tools deployed to discipline and further subjugate P'urhépecha territories. As Nemer Narchi explains, environmental violence "occurs when historically structured asymmetrical power relations are reproduced or maintained by individual capitals and politically

powerful groups, normally aided by the state's economic, strategic, and constabulary capacities. These power relations enable the state to plan, develop, and implement a specific construct of nature with the goal of accelerating the rate of accumulation either by direct infrastructural development or by commodifying natural resources previously unavailable to the cycles of capitalism. These power asymmetries have profound deleterious social and environmental consequences that directly and indirectly constrain human action both locally and globally" (98).

By employing an intersectional framework of ethnographic exegesis in the P'urhépecha community of Cherán, in the state of Michoacán — highlighting issues of relationality, praxis, and power — I examined how hegemonic notions of race, sovereignty, and state power have come to delineate and shape the Indigenous way of being in central Mexico. I sought to unfold an alternative understanding of the 2011 P'urhépecha uprising through the use of multisided ethnography. In so doing, I was able to examine the intersection of ecocide, colonialism, and state-sponsored violence, questioning the established and official versions circulated throughout the country by the hegemonic state power. I followed such official narratives and metaphors all across the P'urhépecha territory, aiming at revealing the shadow cast by these long-term historical processes. George Marcus describes this form of intellectual inquiry: "mobile ethnography takes unexpected trajectories in tracing a cultural formation across and within multiple sites of activity that destabilize the distinction, for example, between lifeworld and system, by which much ethnography has been conceived. Just as this mode investigates and ethnographically constructs the lifeworlds of variously situated

subjects, it also ethnographically constructs aspects of the system itself through the associations and connections it suggests among sites" (99). By revealing the connections between the protection of the forest and the everyday use of wood, and the kindred relationship between P'urhépecha resistance practices and their communal notions of territory, I ethnographically constructed aspects of the system (as Marcus suggests) that otherwise would have remained unseen or veiled. By making visible the P'urhépecha uprising from the perspective of lived experience, I was able to develop a deeper understanding about Indigenous autonomy and self-government.

Such perspectives of lived experience necessarily demanded that I address the extractive machine of colonialism. Extraction designates capitalism's fundamental logic of withdrawal — of resources, labour, identity, territory, and time — unequally distributed across racialized geographies. As Macarena Gómez-Barris explains, "colonial capitalism has been the main catastrophic event that has gobbled up the planet's resources, discursively constructing racialized bodies within geographies of difference, systematically destroying through dispossession, enslavement, and then producing the planet as a corporate bio-territory" (100). In the P'urhépecha territory, dispossession and enslavement are entangled with regimes of representation — methods of collecting, ordering, and exhibiting people and objects — that have been in operation for a long time and continue to do so today. Reading into these regimes is a complex effort, because that which is visible is often only a small part of the whole configuration. Casta painting and colonial landscape painting — fundamental instruments for visual domination — promoted and buttressed asymmetrical power relations between race

and class. Such assertions of power may be found at the roots of inequality, capitalism, colonial power, struggle, and erasure — because, as Stuart Hall remarks, “every regime of representation is a regime of power” (101): the power to represent, to define, and to extract. Such withdrawals are achieved through planned trauma and dispossession — manifestations of political power. The lived experience of colonialism in the P'urhépecha territories indicates that unseen dynamics — forces and practices ever ready to inspect, to examine — always come from somewhere and always have histories. By investigating territory and extraction, we can make visible such deployments of hegemonic power as well as the unchecked visual regimes which they have inscribed across racialized geographies.

Artistic research is a form of political mediation, as it links practices of thinking, writing, and making with a situated geography. It implies a politics of location — a locale characterized by relations, translations, and displacements. A politics of location does not view locality as the ground for foundational knowledge but, rather, understands location as the site for lived encounters, connections, and multiple intersections. Location takes place as an itinerary that enables the movement of thinking and being — a progression of encounters, contacts, and conflicts. The possibilities contained within artistic research open up ways whereby we today — at the intersection of contemporary political, technological, and economic conditions — may glimpse at something new as it is brought into the world. The dialogue between art research and politics has led to a fundamental interrogation into the nature of both. What are the limits and the agency of artistic research? What is the political in art? How are these terms articulated and what

is possible by this interaction? Artistic research contains myriad possibilities, as there has been massive growth in the range and depth of issues arising within different art practices — subjects and debates as diverse as the relationship between art and activism, institutional critiques, interrogations of the ecological crisis, and many more, ranging across postcolonial and decolonial approaches, from micro to macro scales. One of the fundamental characteristics of artistic research is its stand against method and institutionalization. As Erin Manning reminds us, to be "against method is not simply an academic stance. Much more is at stake here. How you get where you are is an operative question. What models model you? What else can be created, sympathetically, in the encounter? What kind of modelling is possible, in the event?" (102).

Artistic research is a distinctive practice in the field of studio arts. It is both an epistemological inquiry into the methods of art practice as well as an interrogation of how such practices instigate processes of knowledge creation. It is a self-reflective methodology wherein art is both the object and the medium of research. Such research methodologies tend to be grounded in personal experience, self-scrutiny, and introspection, and aim to unsettle existing relations of knowledge and power. Artistic research implicates a certain positionality — a position of enunciation. The places from which we speak and enunciate are situated not only in a particular space and time, but also in specific histories and cultures — unstable points of suture within history and culture, characterized by processes of rupture, fragmentation, and partiality. Artistic

research has no single, central principle of articulation or organizing, but is constituted, rather, by a plurality of centres.

My artistic research seeks to promote a relationality across geopolitical locations and colonial differences in order to contest the violent, totalizing epistemic claims of modernity. The immaterial rifts of coloniality are constituted by hierarchical relations, disciplinary methods, and power regimes across geographies and latitudes. In the aftermath of colonization, inequality, and capitalism that we experience about us today, we are all implicated. As such, my artistic inquiry emphasizes scholar activism, lived experience, and intersectionality as means for resisting coloniality and its immaterial rifts. Resistance, in my artistic research, refers to an engagement against entrenched power using the tools of interruption, refusal, and deflection. To resist is to rebuild the broken links that separate difference and togetherness.

My artistic research in the P'urhépecha territory of Cherán, in the state of Michoacán, emphasized the importance of collective action and political mobilization in the struggle against colonial violence and its legacies. Coloniality is neither a discrete event nor a historic arrangement fixed in time and space. It is a totalizing architecture that demands a close examination of our geopolitical intimacies and complicities. To achieve decolonization, it is not enough to value other cultures and knowledges, or to promote multiculturalism, diversity, equity, and inclusion. Decolonization is about the praxis of dismantling material and symbolic structures. The historical entanglements of racism, capitalism, and colonialism correspond to the enduring asymmetries of power, both

geopolitical and economic, between the Global North and the Global South. The geopolitics of knowledge and the coloniality of power are intimately intertwined. It is the means by which the Global North manufactures poverty.

Decolonization is not a metaphor; rather, it seeks to challenge and subvert the very foundations of modernity, together with its epistemological, ontological, and economical assumptions. For the decolonial approach, resistance is not enough to bring about the radical changes necessary to achieve social justice and equality. The suppression or dismissal of the views and perspectives of the Global South, as well as Indigenous ways of thinking and being, is a colonizing, universalizing force aimed at subordinating and dominating other cultures and ways of living. Postcolonial theory and research represent a critical engagement with the legacies of Western modernity, disentangling the ways in which it is implicated in colonialism and imperialism. This involves not only the unearthing of what the colonial experience has buried but, rather, the use of decolonial thought to untangle its various strands: material domination, exploitation, racial classification, and dispossession.

One of the goals of my doctoral research was to expand the possibilities of artistic research by blending community-based research with methods of observational research. I therefore intersected various methodologies and approaches: multisited ethnography, sound recording, cinema vérité, and visual anthropology. My aim was not only to offer an original contribution to socially engaged art practices and methodologies, but also to revisit their genealogies, critique their limitations, and reclaim

them. To this end, I critically examined the history, specificity, and geopolitics of place by weaving together observant participation, witness testimony, and ethnography. I used this interdisciplinary methodological approach to understand various geographically dispersed phenomena, such as inequality, capitalism, colonial power, and extractive practices. I also tracked the P'urhépecha people's movement, and the connections between the people, their stories, various objects, and cultural meanings, across multiple territories and historical periods.

The 2011 P'urhépecha uprising in Cherán created a new model of government moved by the desire to take back control of political power, which had been subtracted from them by capitalism. Encompassing the production of alternative forms of knowledge, identity, and culture, the uprising resisted and challenged colonial power and its legacies. What kinds of knowledge were gained from this uprising? What possibilities and limitations have emerged? The autonomous political government in Cherán is a distinct mode of social organization, one which moves beyond the colonial experience and the spaces produced by it. Guided by intersectionality, self-organizing, pluralism, and horizontal self-governance, the uprising and the new political structure have in effect rewritten, for the P'urhépecha, a history of living and, concomitantly, a means of living today.

Coda

Currently, I am in the midst of one of the profoundest intellectual experiences of my life. It has led me to think about the isolated, competitive, scarcity-based, defensive kinds of work that we, as scholars, normally do; that, in fact, we do not need to work this way; and that we may choose, instead, to be generous, generative, and collaborative. Working in this way produces more and better scholarship, and builds interpersonal and research networks that can make the scholar's job a joy rather than a misery. There are catches, however: it can be quite expensive and sometimes it runs against how we have been taught to imagine success and how to achieve it.

As we apply for grant support, we may understand the near impossibility of justifying the practice of fieldwork that has no goal other than to meet people and create social bonds with them. A request to fly people to a small town in Mexico and pay all their expenses, simply so that we can create community and empathy — all of this is impossible to include in a grant application. There is Skype, email, Facebook — no need to travel, the less so where there is no clear intent of making films, or any clear intent at all. We like to think we can cheat time and cut expenses, that an email may take the place of an in-person meeting, that a Skype call can replace a face-to-face conversation. Our digital tools excel at pushing streams of information into our heads — but, in so many ways, these media are of little use for purposes of collaboration. We like to think that we can devote ourselves fully to a Skype call, even as we hide from the world in our kitchen.

We like to think that we can find a five-hour block of time to read all those papers and send careful feedback, without striking anything from the schedule.

All this multitasking is nonsense. Getting together in one place to do a shared task — often this is the most efficient way to get these tasks done. We attempt to do far too many things at the same time, and the more we do this, the worse we do at it. Behind all our multitasking and corner-cutting are structural imperatives, which are often framed as advantageous even though they are not. Our institutions and our funders (of course) would prefer that we do not leave the university campus. Better not to pay us to travel and do fieldwork in far-flung places, when instead we may simply read journals and evaluate their claims. When instead we might simply use Google Docs, Skype calls, email, and Facebook. No air flights. No overnight stays, of course.

Right?

No.

There is magic and intensity in the act of being and living together with others, over multiple days or weeks: walking, eating, and talking. There is something to looking people in the eye. It is an intensely embodied process — a form of communication, across textual, gestural, and oral channels simultaneously, which occurs in ways that no technology can offer. It is an incredibly rich environment. We need to get together in small groups and in suitable settings. We need to combine structured and unstructured time, formal and informal interactions. We need to attend, to be there, to appreciate the

specificities of the place in which we are and of the people whom we are with. We need to make time and to make space, to produce and nurture a collective experience, which is always greater than the simple sum of its parts.

Toward the end of my fourth year of field research, there was much hugging. I met some incredible people, whom today I have the honour to call friends. All these interactions and friendships seemed profoundly, well, human to me: being there with a person — a whole person — in an intellectual, corporeal, social, and emotional circumstance. In my life, I have never ingested so many new ideas as during those years of doing fieldwork. My research is a testimony to the fact that this particular magic — undervalued, expensive, and available in diminishing quantities — is nonetheless well worth fighting for.

Documentary filmmaking resists speed-up.

The materialities of documentary filmmaking.

This really matters.

This is what my research is about.

References

(1) Guillén, A. Guardianes del territorio: Seguridad y Justicia Comunitaria en Cherán, Nurío y Ostula. Grietas Editores, 2016, P. 20.

(2) Martínez, Ernesto 2008 “La deforestación en Michoacán, grave; 3 mil aserraderos ilegales,” La Jornada, November 27. Consulted May/23/2022 https://www.jornada.com.mx/2008/11/27/index.php?section=estados&article=035n1est

(3) Garner, Andrew. Living History: Trees and Metaphors of Identity in an English Forest. Journal of Material Culture, Vol 9 (1), 2004. P 87.

(4) MITACS. Landscapes of Erasure: Geographies of Absence in Michoacan. Consulted Jan/15/2023 https://www.mitacs.ca/en/projects/landscapes-erasure-geographies-absence-michoacan

(5) Marcus, George. Ethnography in/of the World System: The Emergence of Multi-Sited Ethnography. Annual Review of Anthropology, Vol. 24, 1995, P: 96.

(6) Marcus, George. What is At Stake–And Is Not–In The Idea And Practice Of Multi-Sited Ethnography. Canberra Anthropology. Volume 22, 1999, Issue 2, P: 10.

(7) Helguera, Pablo. Education for Socially Engaged Art: A Materials and Techniques Handbook. Jorge Pinto Books, New York. 2011.

(8) Pickerill, J., & Chatterton, P. Notes Towards Autonomous Geographies: Creation, Resistance and Self-Management as Survival Tactics. Progress in Human Geography, 2006. 30 (6), P: 2.

(9) George E. Marcus, Fred R. Myers (Eds.). Hal Foster 'The Artist as Ethnographer?' in The Traffic in Culture: Refiguring Art and Anthropology. University Of California Press, 1995.

(10) Quijano, Aníbal. Coloniality and Modernity/ Rationality. Cultural Studies. Volume 21, 2007 - Issue 2-3. P: 171.

(11) Gómez-Barris, Macarena. The Extractive Zone: Social Ecologies and Decolonial Perspectives. Duke University Press, 2017. P: 14.

(12) Vannini, P. (Ed.). Erin Manning 'Against Method' in Non-Representational Methodologies: Re-Envisioning Research'. Routledge, 2015. P: 53.

(13). Ibid at P 54.

(14) Marcus, George. Ethnography in/of the World System: The Emergence of Multi-Sited Ethnography. Annual Review of Anthropology, Vol. 24, 1995, P: 112.

(15) Benjamin Lee, Edward Lipuma. Cultures of Circulation: The Imaginations of Modernity. Public Culture. Duke University Press. Volume 14, Issue 1, Winter 2002. P: 192.

(16) Lowenhaupt Tsing, Anna. Friction: An Ethnography of Global Connection. Princeton University Press. 2005. P: 4.

(17) These are the names of the Comuneros that offered their testimony all throughout 2015, 2016, 2017, 2018 in Cherán: Doña Imelda Campos Sebastian, Don Fidel Cucue Turja, Don Jose Merced Velazquez Pañeda, Jesús Ángel Pedroza, Heriberto Campos AKA 'Diablo', Salvador Torres Tomás. Conversations were held in Spanish. English translation is mine.

(18) Maldonado, Salvador. Los Márgenes del Estado Mexicano. Territorios Ilegales, Desarrollo y Violencia en Michoacán. El Colegio de Michoacán. 2010.

(19) Gómez-Barris, Macarena. The Extractive Zone: Social Ecologies and Decolonial Perspectives. Duke University Press, 2017. P: 16.

(20). Ibid at P 14.

(21) Colectivo Emancipaciones.
https://colectivoemancipaciones.wordpress.com

(22) Aragón Andrade, Orlando. El Derecho en Insurrección. Hacia una Antropología Jurídica Militante desde la Experiencia de Cherán, México. Escuela Nacional de Estudios Superiores, Unidad Morelia. 2019.

Aragón Andrade, Orlando. El Derecho en Insurrección. El Uso Contra-Hegemónico del Derecho en el Movimiento Purépecha de Cherán. Revista de Estudos & Pesquisas sobre as Américas. Vol. 7, Número 2, 2013.

(23) Aragón Andrade, Orlando. El Derecho en Insurrección. El Uso Contra-Hegemónico del Derecho en el Movimiento Purépecha de Cherán. Revista de Estudos & Pesquisas sobre as Américas. Vol. 7, Número 2, 2013. P 49.

(24) **CALEIDOSCOPIO.**

Research project funded by Consejo Nacional de Ciencia y Tecnología (CONACYT) and coordinated by Dr. Orlando Aragón Andrade of the Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México (UNAM).
https://caleidoscopiomexico.com

Laboratorio de Antropología Jurídica y del Estado.
Research laboratory hosted at Escuela Nacional de Estudios Superiores Campus Morelia (ENES) UNAM Morelia.

Frente por la Autonomia de Consejos y Comunidades Indigenas.
Composed by thirteen P'urhépecha and Mazahua Communal Councils officially formed on April 7, 2019 in the community of San Francisco Pichátaro with the original participation of the Communal Councils of Pichátaro, San Felipe de los Herreros and Arantepacua, authorities of Santa Fe de la Laguna and the Colectivo Emancipaciones.

(24) Santos, Boaventura de Sousa. Epistemologías del Sur. Revista Internacional de Filosofía Iberoamericana y Teoría Social. Utopía y Praxis Latinoamericana. Año 16, No. 54, 2011. P: 35.

(25) Guha, Ranajit. The Small Voice of History: Collected Essays. Permanent Black, India, 2009.

(26) Article 115 of the Political Constitution Of The United Mexican States. Consulted April/18/2021
http://www.ordenjuridico.gob.mx/Constitucion/articulos/115.pdf

(27) Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR). United Nations General Assembly. 2011 Executive Report. P: 37. Consulted January/07/2022 https://www2.ohchr.org/english/ohchrreport2011/web_version/ohchr_report2011_web/allegati/downloads/0_Whole_OHCHR_Report_2011.pdf

(28) Pickerill, J., & Chatterton, P. Notes Towards Autonomous Geographies: Creation, Resistance and Self-Management as Survival Tactics. Progress in Human Geography, 2006, 30(6), P: 1.

(29) Plan de Desarrollo del Municipio de Cheran. *Sesi Juramukua Ka Irekua Karakata*. 2012-2015. P: 172.

(30) Conversation held with Doña Imelda Campos and her husband Don Fidel Cucue in July 24, 2016. My own translation.

(31) Plan de Desarrollo del Municipio de Cheran. *Sesi Juramukua Ka Irekua Karakata*. 2012-2015. P: 173.

(32) Dietz, Gunther. La Comunidad Purhépecha es Nuestra Fuerza: Etnicidad, Cultura y Región en un Movimiento Indígena en Michoacán, México. Ediciones Abya-Yala, Ecuador. 1999. P: 118.

(33) Plan de Desarrollo del Municipio de Cheran. Sesi Juramukua Ka Irekua Karakata. 2012-2015. P: 174.

(34) Aragón Andrade, Orlando. El Derecho en Insurrección. Hacia una Antropología Jurídica Militante desde la Experiencia de Cherán, México. Escuela Nacional de Estudios Superiores, Unidad Morelia. 2019. P: 112.

(35) Plan de Desarrollo del Municipio de Cheran. Sesi Juramukua Ka Irekua Karakata. 2012-2015. P: 174.

(36) Ibid., at P 175.

(37) Erika Balsom, Hila Peleg (Eds.). Balsom and Peleg 'Introduction: The Documentary Attitude' in Documentary Across Disciplines.MIT Press. 2016. P: 13.

(38) Balsom, Erika. The Reality-Based Community. e-flux Journal. Issue 83, 2017. P: 4.

(39) Henni, Samia. Colonial Ramifications. e-flux Architecture. History/Theory. October 2018. Consulted June/18/2021
https://www.e-flux.com/architecture/history-theory/225180/colonial-ramifications/

(40) Quijano, Aníbal. Coloniality and Modernity/ Rationality. Cultural Studies. Volume 21, 2007 - Issue 2-3. P: 177.

(41) Simpson, Audra. Ethnographic Refusal: Indigeneity, 'Voice' and Colonial Citizenship. Junctures: The Journal for Thematic Dialogue, Issue 9, 2007. P: 67.

(42) Ventura, Carmen. Volver a la Comunidad. Derechos Indígenas y Procesos Autonómicos en Michoacán. El Colegio de Michoacán, 2010. P: 43.

(43) Ojeda, Lorena. Cherán: El Poder del Consenso y las Políticas Comunitarias. Política Común. Universidad Michoacana De San Nicolás De Hidalgo. Volume 7, 2015, P: 1.

(44) Williams, Raymond. Keywords: A Vocabulary of Culture and Society. Oxford University Press. 1985. P: 145.

(45) Jen J. Gieseking, Cindi Katz, Setha Low, William Mangold, Susan Saegert (Eds.). Setha Low 'Spatializing Culture: An Engaged Anthropological Approach to Space and Place' in The People, Place, and Space Reader. Routledge. 2014. P: 34.

(46). Ibid at P 34.

(47) Patiño Daniela, Velásquez Melissa, Toro Mariana 2020 "Pigmentocracia o cómo el color de piel de los mexicanos determina las oportunidades que tienen", CNN en Español, June 26. Consulted Fed/12/2021
https://cnnespanol.cnn.com/2020/06/26/pigmentocracia-o-como-el-color-de-piel-de-los-mexicanos-determina-las-oportunidades-que-tienen/

(48) Vargas Cervantes, Susana. Pigmentocracy and the Performance of Whiteness in Contemporary Photography: Yvonne Venegas's San Pedro Garza and Dana Lixenberg's United States, Feminist Media Studies, 2022.

(49) Robledo, Héctor 2018 "Pigmentocracia y Blanqueamiento por Despojo", Revista MAGIS Edición 465. Instituto Tecnológico y de Estudios Superiores de Occidente (ITESO). Consulted June/26/2020
https://magis.iteso.mx/nota/pigmentocracia-y-blanqueamiento-por-despojo/

(50) Santuario, Adrián 2017 "Cromatocracia: El Pantone® de los Partidos Políticos en México", Medium Jun 20. Consulted July/27/2020
https://medium.com/@AdrianSantuario/cromatocracia-el-pantone-de-los-partidos-pol%C3%ADticos-en-méxico-cf9798dbc1d6

(51) Navarrete, Federico. México Racista: Una denuncia. Editorial Grijalbo, Mexico, 2016, P 36.

(52) J.-A. Mbembé, Libby Meintjes. Necropolitics. Public Culture. Duke University Press. Volume 15, Number 1, Winter 2003. P 40.

(53) Harvey, David. The New Imperialism: Accumulation by Dispossession. Socialist Register 40, 2004, 63–87.

(54) Sassen, Saskia. Expulsions: Brutality and complexity in the global economy. Belknap Press: Harvard University Press, 2014.

(55) Harvey, David. Spaces of Capital: Towards a Critical Geography. Routledge, 2001. P: 384.

(56) Fanon, Franz. Black Skin, White Masks. New York, Grove Press, 1952. P: 91.

(57) Deleuze, Gilles and Guattari, Félix. A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia. Translation by Brian Massumi. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press. 1987. P: 178.

(58). Ibid at P 181.

(59) Nemser, Daniel. Infrastructures of Race: Concentration and Biopolitics in Colonial Mexico. University of Texas Press, 2017. P: 3.

(60) Greenberg, J. B. & Park, T. K. Political Ecology. Journal of Political Ecology. Volume 1, 1994. P: 8.

(61) Martínez Aparicio, Jorge. San Francisco Cherán: Revuelta Comunitaria por la Autonomía, la Reapropiación Territorial y la Identidad. Economía y Sociedad, Vol. XXI, núm. 36. Universidad Michoacana de San Nicolás de Hidalgo. 2017. Consulted June/29/2020
https://www.redalyc.org/journal/510/51052064009/html/

(62) Lomnitz, Claudio. Las Salidas del Laberinto. Cultura e Ideología en el Espacio Nacional Mexicano. Editorial Planeta, México. 1995. P: 47.

(63) Gómez-Barris, Macarena. The Extractive Zone: Social Ecologies and Decolonial Perspectives. Duke University Press, 2017. P: 17.

(64). Ibid at P 18.

(65) Meier et al. The Importance of Absence in the Present: Practices of Remembrance and the Contestation of Absences. Cultural Geographies 20 (4). P:426.

(66) Juhasz, Alexandra and Lebow, Alisa. Beyond Story: an Online, Community-Based Manifesto. World Records Journal. Volume 2 . Article 3, 2018. P: 3.

(67). Ibid at P 3.

(68) Rancière, Jacques. The Emancipated Spectator. translated by Gregory Elliott. London and Brooklyn. Verso, 2009. P: 107.

(69) Vannini, P. (Ed.). Erin Manning 'Against Method' in Non-Representational Methodologies: Re-Envisioning Research'. Routledge, 2015. P: 65.

(70) Cynthia E. Milton, Monica Eileen Patterson, Erica Lehrer (Eds.). Erica Lehrer and Cynthia E. Milton 'Introduction: Witnesses to Witnessing' in Curating Difficult Knowledge: Violent Pasts in Public Places. Palgrave Macmillan, 2011. P: 8.

(71). Ibid at P 11.

(72) E. Marcus, George. Ethnography through Thick and Thin. Princeton University Press, 1998. P: 90.

(73). Ibid at P 97.

(74). Ibid at P 93.

(75) Daniele Fini, Antonio Fuentes Díaz. Neoliberalism in the Grey Area: Community Defense, the State, and Organized Crime in Guerrero and Michoacán. Latin American Perspectives. Issue 236, Volume 48, Number 1. January 2021. P: 88.

(76) Foster, Hal (Ed.). Foster 'Preface' in Vision and Visuality. Seattle, WA: Bay Press. 1988. P: 9.

(77) Mirzoeff, Nicholas. On Visuality. Journal of Visual Culture, 5 (1), 2006. P: 76.

(78). Ibid at P 76.

(79) Hall, Stuart. 'The Spectacle of the 'Other' in Hall, Stuart (ed.) Representation: Cultural Representations and Signifying Practices. SAGE Publications Ltd. 2003. P: 259.

(80) Adkins, Julie Adkins. "Mesoamerican Anomaly? The Pre-Conquest Tarascan State". Consulted June/17/2021
https://web.archive.org/web/20091219132626/http://faculty.smu.edu/rkemper/anth_3311/anth_3311_adkins_tarascan_paper.htm

(81) Fray Jerónimo de Alcalá. La Relación de Michoacán. 1540.
Consulted Sept/16/2019
http://etzakutarakua.colmich.edu.mx/proyectos/relaciondemichoacan/default.asp

(82) Martínez Aparicio, Jorge. San Francisco Cherán: Revuelta Comunitaria por la Autonomía, la Reapropiación Territorial y la Identidad. Economía y Sociedad, Vol. XXI, núm. 36. Universidad Michoacana de San Nicolás de Hidalgo. 2017.
Consulted June/24/2021
https://www.redalyc.org/journal/510/51052064009/html/

(83) Martinez, Maria Elena. Genealogical Fictions: Limpieza de Sangre, Religion, and Gender in Colonial Mexico. Stanford University Press, 2008. P:1.

(84) Katzew, Ilona. Casta Painting: Images of Race in Eighteenth-Century Mexico. Yale University Press, 2005. P: 1.

(85) "Velasco's Valleys and Volcanos: Paintings of Mexico at the 1893 World's Fair". Consulted Sept/23/2021
https://worldsfairchicago1893.com/2018/07/14/velasco/

(86) Museo Nacional De Arte (MUNAL). "Placer y Orden: Exposiciones Universales". Consulted June/22/2018
https://www.munal.mx/micrositios/placeryorden/descargables/ExposUniversales.pdf

(87) Hall, Stuart. 'Cultural Identity and Diaspora' in J. Rutherford (ed.) Identity: Community, Culture, Difference. London: Lawrence and Wishart. 1990. P. 225.

(88) Goldberg, David Theo. The Threat of Race: Reflections on Racial Neoliberalism. Malden, MA, Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2009. P: 216.

(89) Moreno Figueroa, Monica. Distributed Intensities: Whiteness, Mestizaje and the Logics of Mexican Racism. Ethnicities, 10(3), 2010. P: 391.

(90). Ibid at P 394.

(91). Ibid at P 395.

(92). Ibid at P 396.

(93) Wesseling, Janneke. See It Again, Say It Again: The Artist as Researcher. Valiz/ Antennae Series, 2011. P: 2.

(94) Russell, Catherine. Experimental Ethnography. The Work of Film in the Age of Video. Duke University Press, 1999. P: 11.

(95) Sean Coulthard, Glen. Red Skin, White Masks: Rejecting the Colonial Politics of Recognition. University of Minnesota Press, 2014. P: 14.

(96) Nemser, Daniel. Infrastructures of Race: Concentration and Biopolitics in Colonial Mexico. University of Texas Press, 2017. P: 4.

(97) Gasparello, Giovanna. Communal Responses to Structural Violence and Dispossession in Cherán, Mexico. Latin American Perspectives, Issue 236, Vol. 48 No. 1. January 2021. P: 43.

(98) Narchi, Nemer. Environmental Violence in Mexico: A Conceptual Introduction. Latin American Perspectives, Vol. 42, No. 5. 2015. P: 2.

(99) E. Marcus, George. Ethnography through Thick and Thin. Princeton University Press, 1998. P: 80.

(100) Gómez-Barris, Macarena. The Extractive Zone: Social Ecologies and Decolonial Perspectives. Duke University Press, 2017. P: 4.

(101) Jonathan Rutherford (Ed). Stuart Hall 'Cultural Identity and Diaspora' in Identity: Community, Culture, Difference. London: Lawrence and Wishart, 1990. P: 225.

(102) Vannini, P. (Ed.). Erin Manning 'Against Method' in Non-Representational Methodologies: Re-Envisioning Research'. Routledge, 2015. P: 68.

Appendix
List of Artworks

Time is out of Joint
Short Film.
25 mins, 2018.
https://victor-arroyo.com/film/time-is-out-of-joint/

Sheffield Doc/Fest.
DOXA 2019 Winner Short Documentary Award.
RIDM Rencontres Internationales du Documentaire de Montréal.

Portrait of a Nation
Video Installation.
22 mins, 2019.
https://victor-arroyo.com/film/portrait-of-a-nation/

Kasseler Dokfest.
Leonard & Bina Ellen Art Gallery.
Festival International du Film sur l'Art.

Cherán
Feature Length Film.
70 mins, 2021.
https://victor-arroyo.com/film/cheran/

SBC Gallery of Contemporary Art.
Museo Chileno de Arte Precolombino.
BIENALSUR Bienal Internacional de Arte Contemporáneo de América del Sur.