

María Iñigo Clavo

Traces, Signs, and Symptoms of the Untranslatable

01/14

e-flux journal #108 — april 2020 [María Iñigo Clavo](#)
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1. Art-K'uh

There is no word in the Mayan languages to signify “art.”¹ When contemporary indigenous artists, educated in Western metropolitan art schools, started to look for a term for art in their languages, many different ideas were proposed. *Naoj* in Kaqchikel refers, in a general sense, to “knowledge-wisdom-understanding”; *X’ajaan* in Tz’utujil connotes sacred feelings and respect²; and *K’uh* in Q’eqchi refers to something that is imbued with “a sacred state of thinking-feeling.”³ This equivalence of the sacred in Mayan spiritual practices with Western conceptions of art symptomatizes how the latter still reserves a sacred sense for art, even if inexplicitly. Art is preserved and displayed in museological temples, where paradigmatic artworks are exhibited as altars to be worshipped. When indigenous artists translate the meaning of art with “sacred” connotations (*X’ajaan* or *K’uh*), the process reveals the latent cultish devotion to objects that remains in the Western art circuit. Throughout Western history, questions regarding the role of art and its sacred status, whether conferred through religion or so-called secular means, have formed battlegrounds.

The idea of the “sacred” or “transcendental” in art in Western culture has most clearly manifested itself in the expropriation of objects from non-Western communities. This occurred most explicitly during the colonial era, when “foreign” objects were plundered and then placed in museum collections as demonstrations of national power – a practice that became especially commonplace in the nineteenth century. Yet, even though it is less pronounced now, this process of designating something other than Western art as “sacred” in order to exercise power continues today in various other forms. For example, in her recent book *Potential History: Unlearning Imperialism* (2019), filmmaker and theorist Ariella Azoulay remarks that turning an ethnographic artifact into a (transcendental) piece of art necessarily involves a process of salvaging, classifying, preserving, authenticating, evaluating, and handling it. She notes that there is an implicit expertise and claim of scientific “neutrality” when non-Western artifacts are turned into transcendental, elevated, and universal artworks in the Western sense. This process of conversion also legitimizes the historic theft of these objects and their isolation from the communities and cultural contexts in which they were produced. This is “constitutive of the various scholarly, curatorial and professional procedures (in which collecting is but one example) which have transformed world-destroying violence into a decent and acceptable occupation.”⁴



Antonio Pichilla, *Abuelo (grandfather)*, 2015. Courtesy of the artist. Photo: Rene De Carufel.

For this reason, Azoulay proposes a different potential art historical narrative that can account for the history of plunder, in which the act of creating (art historical) knowledge has itself been a medium of colonization. This narrative has been the subject of several artistic and curatorial practices since the end of 1980s that fostered complex debates on the complicities between colonization, museums, and academia. For two instances, the artwork of artist Fred Wilson and exhibitions by curator Susan Vogel – who have both experimented with the display of ethnographic artifacts in different kinds of exhibition rooms (white cubes, ethnographic suitcases, nineteenth-century-style exhibition salons) – demonstrate the colonial violence of reducing artifacts to objects of study, consumption, or contemplation as “transcendental art.”⁵ However, the art historical canon has not always been inclined to question its methodologies and discipline along the lines that Azoulay so brilliantly outlines.

2. Translation as Method

Following from the translation of art as *K’uh*, and its allusions to the “sacred,” this text is a modest record of encounters between Western and non-Western apparatuses of knowledge as places of untranslatability and instigation. I intend to question whether translation is an appropriate tool of communication when it comes to making other epistemologies comprehensible and visible. Spirituality will be my indicator – the measure and thermometer – for identifying the limits of translation as a method not only for knowing, but also for communication between Western and non-Western contexts. The senses of culture and politics may be so different between different cosmologies that they cannot ever be fully translated.⁶

For a generation of postcolonial artists and theorists since the 1980s, translation is knowledge and knowledge is translation. Scholars like Homi K. Bhabha, Boaventura de Sousa Santos, Walter D. Mignolo, Gloria Alzandúa, Haroldo de Campos, Édouard Glissant, and many others are interested in the process of translation as a site of negotiation. For them, translation is a means to challenge obsessive modern European purity, changing the paradigm to allow for hybrid cultural identities.

For Glissant, for example, translation is a tool for re-negotiating places of utterance that could “barbarize” or “creolize” European intellectual production. Alzandúa speaks from personal experience, describing how she inhabits two languages and cultures simultaneously and lives on the borderline between them. Bhabha sees translation as a place of dissidence and negotiation. His classic

text “Signs Taken for Wonders: Questions of Ambivalence and Authority under a Tree Outside Delhi, May 1817” parodies nineteenth-century colonizers’ panic about the mistranslations of the “European book” (the Bible) by the colonized. Mistranslating the book, writes Bhabha, was a method of caricaturing Western culture: Indian spiritual leaders may have used the translated bibles distributed to them, but clarified to missionaries: “To all the other customs of Christians we are willing to conform, but not to the Sacrament, because Europeans eat cow’s flesh, and this will never do for us.”⁷ For Bhabha, as with most of the authors mentioned, translation is a metaphor for the “in-between” postcolonial condition, but in order to translate their findings, such authors often had no choice but to present them in the language of metropolitan intellectuals in order to validate their condition within Western academia, which was itself in the process of “multiculturalization.” This “hegemonic postcolonial theory” was made by intellectual elites from postcolonial countries, educated in Western universities. Even though they engaged with non-Western epistemological frameworks, they could not put these “other ways to know” into practice.⁸

In the 2000s, concepts such as Boaventura de Sousa Santos’s “ecologies of knowledges” began to signal a shift in approach. De Sousa Santos and others suggested that each epistemology had its own wisdom to share, making evident the weaknesses of translation that uses just one specific epistemological frame. Today, a new generation of thinkers are taking up the question of translation as a reliable space of negotiation. Scholars such as Métis Zoe Todd and Anishinaabe Vanessa Watts have written on how non-Western epistemologies have been misappropriated or abstracted. For example, Watts takes up Bruno Latour’s actor-network theory – which popularized the notion of the interconnection between humans and nonhumans – to argue that Latour nonetheless maintains a hierarchy of beings with humans at the top. According to Watts, this misunderstands the Amerindian sense of nonhierarchical confluence between humans and the “natural”/nonhuman world.⁹ José Carvalho calls this attempt to adopt or assimilate non-western cosmologies in an hegemonic frame the creation of an “epistemological counterpoint,” in which new concepts are only allowed to be part of the “score” as long as they follow a principal (Western) melody.¹⁰ This critique of textual and conceptual translation is equally applicable when it comes to the visual arts and their modes of display.

3. Gestures of Subordination

Guatemalan writer Javier Payeras describes a photograph taken in the 1970s, in which painter Francisco Tún, one of the most prestigious indigenous artists of Guatemala, poses with two collectors of his work:

[T]he painter is motionless looking towards the ground, with his hands joined in a gesture of innocence, dressed in a suit and tie. For some reason, this image reminded me of the vast documentation that exists of peasants portrayed, for a fleeting moment, alongside their bosses. My assessment may be extreme, but it is necessary that the reader judge for himself.¹¹

What Payeras describes is the sense that indigenous art and artists are continually subordinated in the Western art circuit, even or especially when the work is included and attempted to be translated for Western audiences. This subordination shows up not only in the framing and treatment of such work, but in many works of contemporary art themselves. This is evident in two recent installations by Brazilian artists: Ernesto Neto's 2017 work for the Venice Biennale work and Bené Fonteles's

2016 work at the São Paulo Biennale.

After its exhibition, Neto's *Um Sagrado Lugar (Sacred Place, 2017)* provoked strong criticism by a delegation of thirty-two emerging and established indigenous curators from Australia, New Zealand, Norway, and Canada. For the work, Neto invited six Huni Kuin shamans, indigenous people originating in the Amazonian state of Acre, to participate in different activities and public talks inside an installation Neto built for the event. The installation took the shape of a tent, which the artist described as "a place of sociality, political meetings and spiritual ceremonies of the Huni Kuin,"¹² and which he further explained can bring a magic ontology that is absent in our sick Western society, allowing us to hear the voice of nature.¹³ The Huni Kuins' words, translated from Portuguese to English by Neto, speak to the urgency and responsibility we have toward the natural world. In conversation, the Huni Kuin people spoke of Boa tea, or *ayahuasca*, the plant-derived psychedelic that they described as their DNA or God. Neto presented these and other ideas as motifs in the installation, which took the shape of DNA helixes—seemingly attempting to bridge Western rationality and non-Western spirituality. Neto had already worked with Huni Kuin people years

04/14



Portrait of José Francisco Tún and collector Edith Recourat-Chorot, Esso Art Salon. Date unknown, c. 1971.

05/14



Antonio Pichilla, *Envoltorio (Wrapper)*, 2007. Courtesy of the artist.

06/14



Edgar Calel & Rosario Sotelo, *Abuelos (Grandparents)*, 2014. Courtesy of the artists.

before, asking them to guide private ayahuasca ceremonies for selected guests in art installations he had built.¹⁴

According to indigenous curator Ryan Rice, Neto's work – located in what the Biennale curators called the "Pavilion of Shamans" – was a colonialist, appropriative gesture lacking in any deep collaborative work with the Huni Kuin people,¹⁵ who, per Neto, would receive just 20 percent of the sale price if the work were sold. During debates about the installation, curator Candice Hopkins expressed her concerns that the exhibition was reminiscent of nineteenth-century European universal exhibitions, which also put indigenous people on display. She pointed out the importance of departing from a recognition of the agency of the invited indigenous groups, rather than reducing their presence purely to audience consumption.¹⁶ The presence of the Huni Kuin in this contemporary art exhibition amounted to a fair example of Slavoj Žižek's criticism of multiculturalism's tenuous acceptance of the Other – an acceptance that only occurs when the Other provides a service or becomes an object of consumption, only when rendered a source of "benign Otherness."¹⁷

Similarly, Bené Fonteles's work for the main pavilion of the 2016 São Paulo Biennale brought non-Western imagery into the museum. For *Oca Tapera Terreiro*, he reproduced an *oca*, a type of Brazilian indigenous housing. The word *terreiro* in the title refers to a space of celebration common in certain Afro-Brazilian groups. Among other activities in the *oca*, Fonteles organized events with music and rituals to be observed by spectators. In his description, Fonteles remarks that he was looking for a modernist representation of Brazilian nationality as a universal entity as enunciated by poet Mاريو de Andrade in the 1920s.¹⁸ The structure also housed Fonteles's collection of indigenous and popular cultural artifacts, including photos of indigenous leaders, musicians, and important personalities from Brazilian intellectual history. Thus, he gave the indigenous architectural frame the functions of a Western museum: classification, exhibition, and display. He invited a great number of (male) intellectuals to share the space and speak or perform, some of them indigenous activists who denounced the Brazilian political sphere.¹⁹ For Fonteles, the aim of these meetings was to celebrate the Brazilian national soul that, in his words, needed to be "healed." *Oca Tapera Terreiro* provides a good document of how Brazilian intellectuals deal with indigenous elements and defend nationalist discourses, given that the nation is one of the main accomplices of the (post)colonial project that homogenizes difference in the name of a

national (*mestizo*) identity.

Both Fonteles and Neto share the goal of challenging Western categories of science and erudition by pointing out their supposed separation from popular and indigenous knowledges. They implicate themselves, according to their own desires, in indigenous spirituality and cultural practices, referring to their works as potential tools for a process of healing Western society.²⁰ They think of their artworks as contexts for fostering public debates and supporting indigenous people politically. But, both are in fact examples of how the intellectual classes of Brazil turn themselves into mediators of Otherness and translate the Other into a subordinate position: either using them as objects of consumption (Neto) or as an element in a national paradigm (Fonteles). They position themselves as mediators of indigenous wisdom and healing, while maintaining power relations, evidenced by statements like: "Now we are within Neto's art," from an unidentified Huni Kuin participant in Venice. These two cases are symptomatic of how the Western epistemological apparatus attempts to translate non-Western cosmologies without upending the hierarchies that make translation necessary in the first place.²¹

I agree with the above critics that these artworks create spectacles out of non-Western cultural practices, and that there are dangers in bringing rituals into the art space. Yet I am also concerned with how this criticism reflects the limitations of translation, as these limitations will always mislead us into interpreting these artworks as exercises of spectacularization or performance, corrupting the essence of the ceremonies. In using translation as a tool to understand the unknown, what potentialities are we missing? Even though I don't agree with their ways of doing it, I agree with Neto and Fonteles that by locating "healing" ceremonies within Western museums and exhibition rooms, frictions are created between two approaches to understanding the world: the spiritual and the scientific. The scientific approach has difficulties in dealing with what cannot be translated, while spirituality is a great channel for the untranslatable. To introduce a healing ritual into a museum is to suggest that something in the museum needs to be repaired, and that non-Western knowledge could be in charge of this process. If spirituality has always been present in Western art, as evidenced by the term's translation into indigenous languages, perhaps this spirituality could be repurposed toward transforming the institution itself.²²

4. Knowledge-Spirituality

Since 2012, the revolutionary Brazilian project

07/14

e-flux journal #108 — april 2020 | Maria Inigo Clavo
Traces, Signs, and Symptoms of the Untranslatable

“The Meeting of Knowledges” has brought indigenous teachers, craft-makers, and Afro-Quilombo activists to teach in different Brazilian university contexts. The project intends to challenge the Western scientific way of understanding Otherness as an “object of study” and instead invites the Other to join as interlocutor to create a pluri-epistemic University. The group quickly reached the conclusion that for these guests it was not possible to separate spirituality from knowledge production. The invited teachers, or *sabedores* (those who know), include spiritual practices in their lectures on medicine and curative plans, turning the classroom into a spiritual space.²³ “Spirituality is the base of knowledge,” and politics are initiated and rooted in the spiritual collective, as expressed in the First Indigenous Women Summit of Americas, held in 2002.²⁴ At the summit, speakers clarified that spirituality is not confined to any particular religion or culture but allows a cosmic vision of life and provides a survival tool for indigenous people. Following from the “Meeting of Knowledges,” one of the participating universities, the Federal University of Minas Gerais, introduced a series of courses led by spiritual leaders of African matrix religions in 2016.²⁵

But can – or should – spirituality be taught? Is it possible for an institution such as a university to accept or acknowledge precisely what science has dismissed and disavowed? How could this be made possible if this exclusion is not merely incidental but part of the very constitution of the sciences themselves?²⁶ What frictions emerge from the coexistence of different epistemological frameworks in the context of the university, the temple of Western universalism?²⁷ For one example, Kwakwaka’wakw geographer Sara Hunt describes how knowledge in the West is inherently connected to *fixing* and specifically contradicts worldviews based on *becoming*. Unlike Western rationality, worldviews based on *becoming* posit a constant process of interlocution and inter-relation that cannot be apprehended:

The heterogeneity of indigenous voices and worldviews can easily become lost in efforts to understand Indigeneity in ways that fix Indigenous knowledge, suppressing its dynamic nature ... One starting place might be accepting the partiality of knowledge. Its relational, alive, emergent nature means that as we come to know something, as we attempt to fix its meaning, we are always at risk of just missing something ... In brief, we must be cautious that “Indigenous” does not come

to signify engagement with “the other” without an actual shift in disciplinary ontologies and epistemologies.²⁸

If fixing and objectifying are our “ways of knowing” in the West, we need to create other ways to relate to non-Western knowledges and learn to liberate ourselves of the compulsion to fix. Nonetheless, I am concerned with whether Western epistemology has the conditions to accept other epistemological frames, or in fact, to create joint methodologies to achieve what Hunt proposes, and how this would be possible. How can one recover the potential for confrontation between two epistemologies without attempting to reconcile them? Is this possible in the exhibition spaces of Western institutions?

Denise Ferreira da Silva defines three terms (derived from Hegel) that reveal how Western epistemology learns and knows the world: separability, determinacy, and sequentiality.²⁹ The first relates to defining things, considering them within a space and time of reference, through their specific qualities. The second refers to the possibility of determining what something is by producing “formal constructs” as a consequence of the classification and evaluation of a thing’s qualities. Finally, sequentiality relates to the evolution and self-development of Spirit in history, dependent upon its teleological destiny through repetition.³⁰

Anishnaabe scholar Vanessa Watts explains it as such: “The epistemological-ontological removes the *how* and *why* from the *what*. The *what* is left empty, ready for inscription. [...] These distinctive domains provide evidence that humans are assumed to be separate from the world they live in, in order to have a perception of it.”³¹ So, Western epistemological frames construct definitions or delimit meanings to try to translate epistemologies with inherently process-based ways of thinking. Can Western methods of *fixing* and *determining* that in turn isolate the *what* from the how be compatible with non-Western relationality based on processes and connections between the what, when, where, and why?

5. Confessional Ontology

In a video by the Kaqchikel artist Fernando Poyón, *Contra la Pared* (Against the wall, 2006), a group of indigenous women are lined up as soldiers in formation and beat their chests. One can read their lips as they repeat the well-known mantra: “It’s my fault, it’s my fault, it’s my most grievous fault.” While watching stifling close-up shots of their faces, we hear ecclesiastic music instead of their voices. The title “Against the wall” refers to the state of being immobilized by

08/14

e-flux journal #108 — april 2020 | María Inígo Clayo
Traces, Signs, and Symptoms of the Untranslatable



Edgar Calel, *B'atz constelación de conocimientos (B'atz constellation of knowledges)*, 2015. Courtesy of the artist.

religious colonization and patriarchy, without any possibility to act. Like science, religion was a historical tool of control in Western society, and one of its main technologies was the imperative to confess one's sins.³² Liberation is promised only when the sinners profess their own guilt. In his writing, Glissant analyzed the link between knowledge, possession, and control, observing that the etymology of the word *comprendre* (to understand) derives from *prendre*, meaning to grab hold of or to grasp something.³³ The ongoing Western colonial desire for transparency, despite the impossibilities of clarification, is what I term a confessional ontology, where *to know* also involves a certain ownership of things, nature, and other humans – the Western fantasy for control. In this ontology, extracting secrets is an important part of maintaining power – and spirituality contains many secrets. However, to decode spirituality is to undermine its potential and – worse still – to risk destroying that potential once and for all.³⁴

In response to this drive toward knowledge as possession, Glissant posed the right to opacity, arguing that only by insisting on the importance of opacity can we vindicate that which we cannot understand grasp (*comprendre*). One of the questions that arises is how to communicate with that which should remain unknown.³⁵ In 2006, De Sousa Santos wrote: “I am looking for an appropriate epistemology to understand the World Social Forum, an alternative globalization, knowledges that come together, and I am not just thinking of translation between cultures but also, for example, between sciences and poetry.”³⁶ And poetry, in fact, is one of the few places where opacity is validated in Western culture.³⁷

Tz'utujil artist Antonio Pichilla's 2007 sculpture *Envoltorio* (Wrapper) is an unknown object wrapped in red fabric. In Mayan cultures, there is a tradition of wrapping things for various purposes. Food, personal belongings, and objects with special spiritual energy such as bones, the objects of ancestors, or stones, might be wrapped in textiles that serve as protectors of the object's magical energy. Each community has its own traditional textiles of different colors, and knowledge about them is ancestrally passed through generations. The textiles operate as the connectors between two worlds: the magic/spiritual/unknown and the material human realms. Wrapping is an act of secrecy, and this privacy and opacity carries a sacred sense.³⁸

Wrappers pose a dilemma for a Western researcher. On the one hand, respecting the opacity of another culture requires admitting the limitations of Western epistemology in dealing with the untranslatable and the unknown. On the other hand, in order to heal the violence wrought

by exactly these epistemologies, it is important to name and acknowledge the colonial wound. For many indigenous Mayan artists, art-making is part of a process of healing colonial memories communally. Given the importance of healing, could the wounds and the traumas remain unnamed in the confessional terms of Western psychoanalysis, but named in different, opaque ways? Could we overcome the Western imperative to name, fix, reduce? Or it is necessary to name trauma and violence to heal and repair? Without naming, what would reparation look like?³⁹

6. *Winaq*

Between 2013 and 2014, Kaqchikel artist Edgar Cael and U.S. artist Rosario Sotelo presented the artwork *Abuelos* (Grandparents) in an art space in Comalapa, Guatemala – Cael's hometown. After the exhibition opened, Cael organized a ceremony in which their installation turned into an altar for their ancestors and other members of the indigenous community. Fruit was laid upon stones – a common practice with pre-Hispanic roots in Mayan ceremonies – to symbolize the presence of their ancestors. For the Maya, ceremonies are one of the most important moments of interchange, during which the process of personification and communication takes place. The sense of time contained in past, present, and future temporalities is personified through the figure of the grandparent – spiritual references and the analogy between grandparents and saints are recurring, for example.⁴⁰ The artists used the exhibition space as a sacred site for celebration; it was not a large public spectacle, and only a few regular practitioners and neighbors were involved.

In Mayan cosmologies, humans are not necessarily given the status of person, and personhood – achieved through a relational process – carries a superior status to humanity. Persons are recognized as such through a process of interlocution. In Mayan languages, *winaq* means “person” or “complete being,” and the term has no gender. In their 2011 book *Winaq: Fundamentos del pensamiento maya*, Mayan translators Ajb'ee Jiménez and Héctor Aj Xol Ch'ok write that *winaq* “refers to processes of giving and acquiring life in parallel, of transforming into life or transforming life, of making life and forming collectivity.”⁴¹ The authors call this process *winaquisition*.⁴² When Pichilla wraps a stone with traditional textiles in his work *Granfather* (2015), for example, he performs the process of personification or *winaquisition* that takes place in ceremonies during which interaction with stones connects people with their ancestors. Before they were

displayed as artworks, the stones were used in private ceremonies in sacred places. Placed into a different context, they impart the energy of that private place into the public art sphere.⁴³

In his photograph *B'atz Constellation of Knowledges* (2015), Calel stands in the middle of a corn plantation and stares at the viewer. He is wearing a jumper on which he has embroidered the names of the 22 Mayan languages. On one hand, these names speak to the knowledges of Mayan peoples; each language serves as the expression of a certain culture and cosmology. The process of planting and harvesting corn marks the seasons; the activity has a sacred quality in Mayan communities and is one of the fundamental sources of knowledge and cosmology. In ancient Mayan iconography, a common image shows humans turning into corn and vice versa. The expression *Hal Winaq* means the exchangeability of the corn and the human. The Mayan word for “mother corn,” *Qtxu' Axi'n*, expresses the renewal of life.⁴⁴ Thus, it's evident that the personification of nonhuman beings is key for the decentralization of the human, and the possibility of being able to “feel among equals” with all other beings.⁴⁵ We can see in Calel's artwork the importance of the “place-thought” described by Vanesa Watts, “based upon the premise that the land is alive and thinking, and humans and non-human agency comes from the extensions of the land.”⁴⁶

What is crucial for Calel's *B'atz constellation of knowledges* is the fact that he directly confronts the viewer with his gaze.⁴⁷ Unlike the photograph by Francisco Tún referenced above, by turning his own gaze to the viewer, Calel asserts his personhood and status as an artist.⁴⁸ His presence addresses what collectors do not want to see when they buy indigenous art or artifacts: the indigenous person who created them.⁴⁹ Decolonial theorists have pointed to the potential embedded in the confrontation, linguistic and visual, to overcome Western colonial exploitation – to overcome being made an object of study. Following from this thinking, one can question whether it is possible to separate Western approaches to Amerindian thinking from Amerindian thinking itself. In other words, for instance, can we consider Mayan cosmology as a philosophy in its own right rather than mediating or translating it to fit into Western philosophy? To find out, we must interrogate how Western academies function as mediators when translating other schools of thought into poststructuralist frames.⁵⁰

In their translations of art referenced throughout this text – as “knowledge-wisdom-understanding” or a sacred sense of feeling and respect – it becomes evident that different cultures locate their experience of spirituality

within the artwork itself. The works are not necessarily spiritual, but operate from a spiritual place. In discussing the terms, I have used my own frame of knowledge to offer an interpretation of the untranslatable elements of other epistemologies. The fact that we can only use our own frames of knowledge is the same predicament that the indigenous artists discussed here expose in the exhibition space, mediated by poetry (one of the few Western tools in which opacity is considered legitimate), making evident the limitations of our epistemological tools and the aporias of theory. My words and interpretations of the experience of spirituality will never be able to translate experience itself, and will always risk suffocating it.⁵¹

Translation is a faulty tool for subordinating epistemological frames, but can there be any coexistence without an attempt at translation? Does any language have the resources to communicate without translating? Is translation – the need to transfer knowledge from one framework to another – really necessary? Might communication, affection, and healing be possible in other ways, without fixation, nominalism, or transparency?⁵² As Glissant claims, we can instead learn ways of coexistence that accept the untranslatable, the uncertain, and the unknowable. We can learn ways of interlocution that maintain two or more different epistemological frameworks in the same conversation, learning from each other. As Marisol de la Cadena and Mario Blaser show, a cultural frame creates the conditions for the thinkable and the unthinkable – thus, a fundamental question in inventing political resistance must be to widen the space of the unthinkable.⁵³ In de la Cadena's view, this interlocution with the frameworks of spirituality-place-thought could be a starting point for “the political” beyond current modern macropolitical models.⁵⁴ And, from that place where neither knowledge is subordinated in any epistemological counterpoint, perhaps we can re-invent new hybridities, contaminations, influences, mutual inspirations, appropriations, and impurities.

x

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María Inigo Clavo is a FAPESP postdoctoral research fellow at the University of São Paulo. She cofounded the research group *Península: Colonial Processes and Artistic and Curatorial Practices* at the Reina Sofia Museum. She has curated exhibitions, events, and conferences at Jaqueline Martins Gallery (São Paulo), Le Cube (Rabat), and Matadero Madrid.

12/14

e-flux journal #108 — april 2020 María Inigo Clavo
Traces, Signs, and Symptoms of the Untranslatable

1

I am not an anthropologist and am not attempting to write as an expert on indigenous cultures or cosmologies. I would like to state that I do not believe that non-indigenous people cannot address indigenous spirituality, or research or make art about it. Rather, I think that an utterance from any place can contribute to the processes of collective healing and learning from each other, and thus, I assume that the place from which my utterance (as any place) comes involves its own blind spots.

2

Antonio Pichilla, in conversation with the author, 2020.

3

Sandra Monterroso, "Del arte político a la opción Decolonial en el arte Contemporáneo Guatemalteco," *Iberoamericana social* <https://iberoamericasocial.com/del-arte-politico-a-la-opcion-decolonial-en-el-arte-contemporaneo-guatemalteco/>.

4

Ariella Aïsha Azoulay, *Potential History: Unearthing Imperialism* (Verso, 2019), 64.

5

Some examples are Fred Wilson's *Rooms with a View: The struggle between culture, content and the context of art* (Longwood Arts Projects, 1987), and the exhibitions *We The People* (Artists Space, 1987) and *Art/Artifact* (The Center for African Art, 1988). See Olga Fenández, "The Uncertain In-Between: Exhibition In-Between Ethnography and Modernism," in *The Ruined Archive*, eds. Iain Chambers, Giulia Grechi and Mark Nash (Mela Books, 2014), 145–162.

6

See Manuela Carneiro da Cunha, *Cultura com aspás* (Cosac Naify, 2010).

7

Homi K. Bhabha, *The Location of Culture* (Routledge, 1994).

8

As Mayan anthropologist Aura Cumes points out, this meant that they neglected historical, local, indigenous struggles and the epistemologies beyond their national discourses of *mestizaje* that devalue the indigenous difference. So, translation has always been a process that they addressed within Western frames and without questioning its epistemological frames.

9

She also references Donna Haraway, remarking that "Haraway's *Situated Knowledges* (1988) also contributes a valuable discussion of how the localized knowledges ... provide a space where the dominant boundaries of this heteropatriarchy can be imploded. However, Haraway resists essentialist notions of

the earth as mother or matter and chooses instead to utilize products of localized knowledges (i.e. Coyote or the Trickster) as a process of boundary implosion." Vanessa Watts, "Indigenous Place-Thought and Agency amongst Humans and Non-humans (First Woman and Sky Woman go on a European Tour!)," *Decolonization: Indigeneity, Education & Society* 2, no. 1 (2013), 28.

10

See José Carvalho, Juliana Flórez, and Mancel Martínez, "Encuentro de Saberes, hacia una Universidad pluriépistémica," in *Saeres nómadas: Derivas del pensamiento propio*, eds. Nina Cabrá and Camila Aschner (Bogotá: Universidad Central-lesco, 2016).

11

Javier Payeras, "After Tún," *20 Bienal de Arte Paiz*, exh. cat. (Bienal de Arte Paiz, 2012, 66).

12

From the artwork's caption, which references the tent or *Cupixawa* he constructed <https://universes.art/en/venice-biennale/2017/viva-arte-viva/photos-arsenale-2/ernes-to-neto-huni-kuin>.

13

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XTPauQb0IKI>.

14

This installation was called *Em Busca do Sagrado Gibóia Nixi Pae*, (In the search of sacred *Gibóia Nixi Pae*, 2014) and was installed at the macro exhibition "Histórias Mestizas" at the Tomie Otake Contemporary Art Institute. The artist had his first contact with this Huni Kuin community in 2013.

15

"The Huni Kuins' translated words spoke to the urgency and responsibility we have to the natural world. Neto, whose presence evoked the cult leader of the mission in the 2015 film *Embrace of the Serpent*, rambled between art speak, capitalist patter and hobby ethnography." Ryan Rice, "Trouble Me Venice: An Indigenous Curator's View of the Biennale," *Canadian Art Magazine*, May 30, 2017 <https://canadianart.ca/revIEWS/ryan-rice-venice-biennale/>.

16

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XTPauQb0IKI>.

17

Slavoj Žižek, "Multiculturalism, or the Cultural Logic of Multinational Capitalism," *New Left Review* 225 (September–October 1997): 28–51.

18

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-f9gxXxCJbQ>.

19

For one example, Indigenous activist Ailton Krenak painted a column of the Modernist Niemayer building as an act of cultural *anthropophagy* intervening in Western frames.

20
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=X60snHMi80A>.

21
Manuela Carneiro da Cunha and Marisol de la Cadena show how the sense of culture for indigenous people is very different from the Western sense. Da Cunha speaks about “culture” (with quotations marks) to indicate that the term is not translated by some Indigenous people in their languages. The authors use the Portuguese term instead of attempting to translate it, to maintain the Western meaning and to be able to inhabit this hegemonic frame in which they survive. This “culture” is related to International Platforms (like Biennales) that would allow them to create international networks, visibility, funding, and tools for their survival and the survival of the planet facing the ecological crisis. For example, Marisol de la Cadena writes about how the Quechua people in Peru have to negotiate these different senses of culture—nature, politics—spirituality—respect in conjunction with literate modern politics in order to maintain a conversation with Western frames.

22
Marisol de la Cadena, “Política indígena: un análisis más allá de ‘la política.’” *WAN journal*, no. 4 (January 2009).

23
See Carvalho, Flórez, and Martínez, “Encuentro de Saberes, hacia una Universidad pluriepistémica.”

24
Primera cumbre de mujeres indígenas de América, México, Fundación Rigoberta Menchú, 2003. A cosmology has been defined by Mexican anthropologist Alicia Barabas as a sum of collective discourses of a sacred nature that possess an important emotional and normative knowledge. See Alicia Barabas, “Cosmovisiones, mitologías y rituales de los pueblos indígenas,” in *Cosmovisión mesoamericana*, eds. A. Gámez and A. López (El Colegio de México, Fondo de cultura económica (FCE)-Benemérita Universidad Autónoma de Puebla, 2015).

25
See Carvalho, Flórez, and Martínez, “Encuentro de Saberes, hacia una Universidad pluriepistémica.”

26
As Michel de Certeau writes: “Theoretical questioning ... does not forget, cannot forget that in addition to the relationships of these scientific discourses to

one another, there is also their common relation with what they have taken care to exclude from their field in order to constitute it.” Michel De Certeau, *The practice of everyday life* (University of California Press, 1988), 61.

27
Bonaventura de Sousa Santos, *Descolonizar el Saber, Reinventar el Poder* (Ediciones Trilce-Extensión Universitaria, 2010), 22.

28
Sarah Hunt, “Ontologies of Indigeneity: The Politics of Embodying a Concept,” *Cultural Geographies* 21, no. 1 (2014): 5.

29
The three terms as enunciated by Da Silva: “(a) separability, that is, the view that all that can be known about the things of the world is what is gathered by the forms (space and time) of the intuition and the categories of the Understanding (quantity, quality, relation, modality – everything else about them remains inaccessible and irrelevant to knowledge); and consequently, (b) determinacy, the view that knowledge results from the Understanding’s ability to produce formal constructs, which it can use to determine (i.e. decide) the true nature of the sense impressions gathered by the forms of intuition; and finally (c) sequentiality, which describes Spirit as movement in time, a process of self-development, and describes History as the trajectory of Spirit.” Denise Ferreira da Silva, “On Difference without Separability,” in *Incerteza Viva: 32ª Biennial of São Paulo*, eds. Jochen Voz and Julia Rebouças, exh. cat. (MAMBO, 2017), 57–65.

30
Denise Ferreira Da Silva, “On Difference without Separability.” In his seminal work, *The Location of Culture* in 1994, Bhabha speaks of the indeterminacy of the colonial encounter. He describes how the Hegelian tools of separability and determinacy cannot truly “fix” anything during a colonial encounter with the colonized. It’s for this reason that Bhabha dedicated so much time to thinking about the compulsive use of stereotypes in the colonial context, which act to dismiss the colonized through by fixing their identities into discreet categories. See Bhabha, “The Other Question: The Stereotype and Colonial Discourse,” in *The Location of Culture* (Routledge, 1994).

31
Watts, “Indigenous Place-Thought and Agency amongst Humans and Non-humans (First Woman and Sky Woman go on a European Tour!),” 210.

32
Enrique Dussel, “Eurocentrism and Modernity,” *boundary 2* 20, no. 3 (Autumn, 1993): 65–76.

13/14

e-flux journal #108 — april 2020 María Inígo Clavo
Traces, Signs, and Symptoms of the Untranslatable

33
Édouard Glissant, *Poetics of Relation*, trans. Betsy Wing (University of Michigan Press, 2010), 189. Azoulay’s proposal of reparation is to cease the “movement that fuels the world of (transcendental) art and its insatiable quest to discover what is not yet known, discovered, named, shown, or created, in the form of the new, the extravagant, and the spectacular.” Azoulay, *Potential History: Unearning Imperialism*, 154.

34
Nuto Chavajay, in conversation with the author, 2015.

35
As Glissant wrote: “Opacities must be preserved; an appetite for opportune obscurity in translation must be created; and falsely convenient vehicular sabirs must be relentlessly refuted. The framework is not made of transparency; and it is not enough to assert one’s right at linguistic difference or, conversely, to intertextuality, to be sure of realizing them.” Glissant, *Poetics of Relation*, 120.

36
Boaventura de Sousa Santos, *Renovar la teoría crítica y reinventar la emancipación social* (CLACSO, 2006), 39. In the original: “Yo estoy buscando una epistemología adecuada para entender al FSM, una globalización alternativa, los conocimientos que se juntan, y no estoy pensando solamente en traducción entre diferentes culturas, sino por ejemplo entre poesía y ciencia.”

37
I wish to add that poetry is present in art, but also in philosophy. Furthermore, when I address “Western culture” in this text I refer mainly to Western academia’s “ways of knowing” that are linked with Modernity – still latent today in its “cultures of rigor” and their permeation into everyday life. Nevertheless, I am aware that within academia and Western Philosophy there are important attempts to challenge this (mono)culture of rigor and demands for transparency, often undertaken with the help of poetry. See Sousa Santos, *Descolonizar el Saber, Reinventar el Poder* (Trilce-Extensión Universitaria, 2010), 22.

38
As noted to me by Antonio Pichilla, humans are also wrappers that contain the unknown and the opaque. Pichilla, in conversation with the author, 2020.

39
This has been an important problem faced by psychotherapists working in post-war Guatemala. They realized that healing, for

example, was not a private experience, as thought in Western culture, but rather a collective one. For example, the word that the Kumool Asociación of Ixil and k’iche women use for “trauma,” *Txitzi’n*, literally meaning “deep pain,” is the same word used to refer to an internal mystic experience in which healing takes place.

40
María José Pérez Sián, “Nosotras. Ancestras descoloniales,” in *Miradas en torno al problema colonial: pensamiento anti-colonial y feminismos descoloniales en los sures globales*, ed. Karina Ochoa Muñoz (Akal, Inter Pares, 2019), 139.

41
In the original: “Específicamente, se refiere a procesos de dar y paralelamente adquirir vida, transformarse en vida o transformar la vida, hacer vida y formar colectividad” Ajb’ee Jiménez and Héctor Aj Xol Ch’ok, *Winaq: Fundamentos del pensamiento maya* (Iximulew, 2011), 41.

42
Carlos Lenkersdorf called *winaquisition* this intersubjectivity that happens where *tojolabal* sentences such as “I speak” are not unidirectional but bidirectional and require a response to be complete: “I spoke and you responded.” Bidirectional sentences involve two subjects and not a passive object of the action or passive indirect complement, in grammatical terms. The sentence includes a plurality of subjects with different functions in a unique action/verb in horizontal positions (coordinated and not subordinated) to express the event of communication between two subjects. Having several subjects means there are no indirect or direct objects and no passive positions, as both parties share the authorship of the action. Carlos Lenkersdorf, *Filosofar en clave tojolabal* (Pórrua, 2005), 113–117.

43
Pichilla has also worked with stones bearing candle marks that suggest that they had been previously used in Mayan ceremonies in which the artist had participated. The marks are the trails of ceremonies. *Glifos de Kukulkan* (2011) seeks to show these marks as a kind of spiritual writing.

44
Jiménez and Aj Xol Ch’ok, *Winaq: Fundamentos del pensamiento maya*, 44.

45
Jiménez and Aj Xol Ch’ok, *Winaq: Fundamentos del pensamiento maya*, 43.

46
Watts, “Indigenous Place-Thought and Agency amongst

Humans and Non-humans (First Woman and Sky Woman go on a European Tour!),” 210. For example, national colonial policies in Canada have resulted in a disembodied sacredness in which ceremonies are dislocated from original places, dismissing the importance of the relationships with the place.

47

According to Calel, *B'otz* is a *nawal*, a person with magical powers that can transform into the shape of an animal.

48

This is precisely the argument made by Javier Payeras about a new generation of indigenous artists from Guatemala such as Nuto Chavajay, Fernando and Ángel Poyon, Manuel Chavajay, Sandra Monterroso, Edgar Calel, Antonio Pichilla, and others that don't have their gazes in a subordinating position as Tún's was in the past. See Javier Payeras, “After Tún,” *20 Bienal de Arte Paiz*, exh. cat. (Bienal de Arte Paiz, 2012, 66.

49

Antonio Pichilla, in conversation with the author, 2015.

50

Jiménez and Aj Xol Ch'ok explore the foundations of Amerindian cosmologies to vindicate their philosophical status. They reach similar conclusions with regards to ways of knowing to those expressed by Eduardo Viveiros de Castro in his writing on “Amerindian perspectivism.” But it seems to me that he was more interested with defending his discipline, anthropology, rather than in the Indigenous thinkers he references or in questioning the colonial structures of Western knowledge. Eduardo Viveiros De Castro, *Metáforas Caníbales* (Katz, 2010).

51

Most of these artists think in their original languages, and in the process of making their artwork public have to negotiate how to interpret their epistemologies in the Spanish language. In my case I am taking a two further steps, into English, and then, into academic language. Antonio Pichilla and Manuel Chavajay, in conversation with the author, 2015.

52

Two authors interested in untranslatability, Franco Moretti and Barbara Cassin (2004-2005), have proposed that mistranslations are centrally characteristic to a global world. They opted for collaborative laboratories of translation and academic displacement in order to experience untranslatability as a symptom of the limits of our cartographies. See also Emily Apter, “Untranslatables: A World System,” *New Literary History* 39, no. 3. (Summer 2008): 581-598.

53

Marisol De la Cadena and Mario Blaser, “Introduction,” *WAN journal*, no. 4 (January 2009).

54

Marisol de la Cadena speaks about two epistemological frames for politics in Peru, where indigenous people have vernacular politics that are invisibilized by modern literate politics. When both coexist, indigenous people are forced to renounce their own understanding of politics as the framework for political conversations in favor of the Western one; when the indigenous epistemological framework (and its understanding of politics) begins to be included is where she locates the beginning of “the political.” See Marisol de la Cadena, “Política indígena: un análisis más allá de ‘la política.’”

14/14

e-flux journal #108 — april 2020 María Inigo Clevo
Traces, Signs, and Symptoms of the Untranslatable