Danzando hacia la Guelaguetza
Reciprocity, Participation and Performance in Oaxaca

by

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WITH GRATITUDE

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Glossary of Spanish and Oaxacan Words

abastos ............the market district
asamblea ............assembly or board
atole..................thin grain porridge
ayuda mutua...........mutual aid
banda..................musical group or band
barbacoa.............barbeque esp. goat
cargo...................working group in rotating responsibility?
cerro....................hill
cochinilla............cochineal, the bug and the dye
compadrazgo...........practice of godparenting, relation of kin between parent and godparent
compas...............friends, homies
convite...............a gathering
cooperación.........cash donation to a project
corona..................crown
coyote..................one who smuggles people and goods across the U.S.-Mexico border
danza...............folk dance
danzante............folk dancer
derecho................straight, as a direction
encuentro.............an encounter or meeting
güerx..................white/European looking person
idioma.............language or dialect
indigenismo.........ideology professing allegiance bet. indigenous groups and the State
Lunes del Cerro...........Mondays on the Hill, another name for Guelaguetza Oficial
pluma..................plume or feather
magisterio............teachers and teaching profession
memela..................thick corn tortilla with lard and beans
mes......................month
mestizaje..............mixing of indigenous with colonizing culture and genetics
nieve....................ice cream or sorbet
padrinxs............godparents
palomitas.........popcorn, literally “little doves”
pan dulce..........sweet bread made from wheat
penacho............indigenous headdress
plátano............banana or plantain
pueblo.............1. a town; 2. the people
rebozo.............shawl
regalo.............gift
servicio..........a donation of labor for a project
tapete.............woven mat to sit on
Teotecos..........people from Teotitlán del Valle
tequio...............a workshop, an event where people come together to make something
templo.............temple building
tlayuda............large corn tortilla cooked on a wood fired skillet
zócalo.............a town’s central square, especially in Spanish colonial cities.
blanquita..........diminutive nickname for a girl with pale skin

ABREVIATIONS

APPO.............Asamblea Popular del Pueblo de Oaxaca
                      Popular Assembly of the People of Oaxaca
CNTE...............Coordinadora Nacional de Trabajadores de la Educación
                      National Organization of Education Workers
ORO.................Organización Regional de Oaxaca
                      Regional Organization of Oaxaca
Sección 22........Education Worker’s Union, Chapter 22

SNTE.............Sindicato Nacional de Trabajadores de la Educación
                      National Education Workers’ Union
STyDE.............Secretaría de Turismo y Desarrollo Económico
                      Department of Tourism and Economic Development
UABJO.............Universidad Autónoma de Benito Juárez Oaxaca
                      Benito Juarez Autonomous University of Oaxaca
EZLN.............Ejército Zapatista de Liberación Nacional
                      Zapatista Army of National Liberation
LOOKING TO GUELAGUETZA

AN INTRODUCTION

Details are not deployed ...to flesh out spotty timelines that require their erasure, but to reveal how their noise anticipates and disrupts those timelines.

—Alexandra T. Vazquez, Listening in Detail

“Guelaguetza”—a term that derives from the Zapotec word “guendelizaa”—is an offering to someone in the community, which only takes shape as part of a collection of offerings towards the same cause. In Teotitlán de Valle, a pueblo forty minutes east of Oaxaca de Juarez, a wedding, a birthday party, the patron saint festival, or building a home, is enabled by the practice of guelaguetza. Guelaguetza refers to the offering, which might be a donation of labor, materials, or cash in pesos, and also to the practice of distributing and collecting resources toward a common goal. The practice relies on the recipient’s commitment to contribute guelaguetza to the donor, or someone else in the future for the realization of another project or celebration. In this way, the exchange of guelaguetza creates a network of mutual support within the community.

In 2006, the word guelaguetza was used to name a dance festival that was staged in El Llano, the main park in downtown Oaxaca. The organizers called it “Guelaguetza Popular y Magisterial,” which translates to the “People’s and Teachers’ Guelaguetza.” The festival was first staged by a group of teachers, students, public intellectuals and working people, who had named themselves la Asamblea Popular del Pueblo de Oaxaca (APPO). In
July of 2006, they organized in direct opposition to a series of education reforms that would eliminate indigenous dialects from public school curricula and standardize education throughout the state. The organization grew out of an annual strike staged by members of Sección 22 of the National Education Workers’ Union (SNTE) since 1979. The striking members named themselves Coordinadora Nacional de Trabajadores de la Educación, whose acronym CNTE, is a perfect homophone with the teachers’ union that they oppose. In June of 2006, the strike became particularly violent as police were deployed to break up the 40,000 teachers who had been occupying Oaxaca city’s zócalo in political protest (Costa 2015). Members of APPO continue to occupy the central square in 2017. In response to this conflict, the strikers organized themselves into APPO and CNTE demanding the resignation of Governor Ulises Ruiz who, through the “Pact of Oaxaca,” had criminalized all forms of public protest two years before (Poole 2007)\(^1\). The protests against Ruiz were an extension of the annual strike to demand higher wages and an increased education budget.\(^2\) The Guelaguetza Popular, as I will refer to it throughout the thesis, first staged at El Llano in 2006, was a performative protest to a longstanding indigenous dance festival that the Department of Tourism and Economic Development (STyDE) has been staging in Oaxaca since 1932.

\(^1\) By 2006 there were 36 political assassinations and 600 people arrested for opposing government agendas (Poole, 2007).

\(^2\) Gustavo Esteva and members of APPO, after a round of negotiations between the Oaxacan government and SNTE, remarked upon the complexity of these concurrent demands: simultaneously requesting improved resources from the government while soliciting increased autonomy and decreased government intervention, the first requiring engagement and the second implying disassociation (Weekly conversation with Esteva at Unitierra, July 2016).
Guelaguetza Oficial, as I will refer to this state-endorsed and state-funded festival\textsuperscript{3}, has for over eighty years been the center around which the Oaxacan tourism economy spins.

My research process for this thesis initially focused neither on the practice of guelaguetza as mutual aid nor on Guelaguetza Popular but on the government production, for which the word guendelizaa was first refigured as Guelaguetza.\textsuperscript{4} The festival is composed of different dances from eight distinct ethnic regions in Oaxaca, as imagined and constructed by state officials in the 1930s. The dances are performed by groups from various pueblos around the state, and also by people from Oaxaca city who learn them in urban elementary schools and high schools. The steps, music, scripts and costumes have been codified gradually and dialogically. Oaxacan criollo intellectuals in the 1930s spent time in rural villages, (as part of an indigenous education program that I will discuss in chapter two), and built a preliminary repertoire of dances which were taught in Oaxaca de Juarez. The dances they studied were already syncretic, often telling stories of colonial encounter and conquest, and performed to the tune of European brass bands. As part of the education programs, these intellectuals would bring groups of “indios” to the city and ask them to perform at Lunes del Cerro, as Guelaguetza Oficial is often called (Poole, 2014). Today’s Guelaguetza Oficial harks back directly to

\textsuperscript{3} I have chosen “Guelaguetza Oficial” for the sake of clarity although most people, including those who are politically opposed to it, simply call it Guelaguetza.

\textsuperscript{4} The term “guendelizaa” has many different variants from pueblo to pueblo. In some cases, such as Teotitlán de Valle, people have adopted the government’s pronunciation so guelaguetza refers both to Guelaguetza Oficial and to their practice of mutual aid. For this thesis, I have chosen to use the homophonic version.
these *indigenista* efforts, promoted by the state and executed by Oaxaca’s criollo and urban intelligentsia.

The Google search results for Guelaguetza include a dictionary definition of guelaguetza as cooperation but, reflecting the efforts which the STyDE makes to publicize their festival for the global leisure class, the following pages of results refer almost exclusively to the government festival. Neither the dictionary reference nor the articles advertising Guelaguetza Oficial offer an explanation about the relationship between the indigenous cooperative practice and the structure of the government festival. It seems the only linkage between the show of dances and the title Guelaguetza is that both are reconfigurations of cultural practices that the Oaxacan government has identified as autochthonous and uniquely Oaxacan.

**THREE GUELAGUETZAS**

In this thesis, I am moving in the constellations of ethnography and performance theory as a place from which to look to the complex relationship between the practice of guelaguetza as mutual aid, Guelaguetza Oficial and Guelaguetza Popular. As such, my project is neither definitional nor linear. On the world stage, Guelaguetza Oficial is well known as a show of indigenous Oaxaca. In fact, the association between the two is so strong that indigenous Oaxaca is often understood to be synonymous with Guelaguetza. This thesis aims to complicate that equation. Here, I conceptualize Guelaguetza Oficial as a drawn-out commercial hiccough between guelaguetza and Guelaguetza
Popular. While the government festival placed itself in conversation with guelaguetza by adopting its name, it never incorporated or developed a network of cooperation into its process of production. On the other hand, the first Guelaguetza Popular y Magisterial in 2006, which deliberately appropriated the name and structure of the government festival, was in fact nothing new. It was modeled after and, in a significant way, was a continuation of dance events that have been performed in pueblos for centuries, brought to the scene of performative political conflict by way of cooperative organizing in opposition to the corrupt distribution of state resources. In other words, while the Oaxacan government makes every effort to promote Guelaguetza Oficial as a festival that preserves and celebrates indigenous culture, indigenous people have always already been doing this for themselves. Where the government seeks recognition and admiration for their embrace of diversity, APPO and CNTE annually expose the violence which this festival masks.

Guelaguetza as a structure of mutual aid and Guelaguetza Popular are two continuous sites where people come together today to share resources and have collective pleasure. In this thesis, I suggest that Guelaguetza Oficial is but a blip on the screen that grew out of governmental efforts to link “culture” to the local and national economy and to profit from the indigenous tropes that the government itself constructs and disseminates. As such, Guelaguetza Oficial does not interrupt the sites of collective celebration that people in Oaxaca have been enacting before and alongside the government festival. The
story that I tell is not just one of tragedy and defeat. We are not here to mourn the loss of an “authentic” tradition that was subject to appropriation and pollution by the Oaxacan government. Rather, by beginning with guelaguetza as mutual aid, and following the meaning and history through Guelaguetza Oficial and Guelaguetza Popular, I offer a thick description of these three sites as they overlap, depart from, and inform each other. While these three iterations of guelaguetza sometimes stand in stark opposition to one another, the life of one has never required the erasure or dissolution of the other two.

To that tune, this thesis is an encuentro with each manifestation of guelaguetza. It is not a complete description or analysis of any of them. There are few texts, and even fewer in English, that have tried to describe or theorize guelaguetza. Most of them, furthermore, are news articles, tourist brochures and encyclopedia entries. The lack of printed material and scholarly research on this topic has been a blessing of sorts, as the live versions of guelaguetza, Guelaguetza Oficial and Guelaguetza Popular are their own best sources. I begin in Teotitlán del Valle where I spent three weeks during the summer of 2016. In this pueblo, a group of dancers performs La Danza de La Pluma each July as part of a holiday dedicated to La Preciosa Sangre de Cristo—the precious blood of Christ, which is the town’s patron saint. I focus on the particularities of this dance with special attention because it is one of a few dances that are performed at all three of my field sites. I am studying La

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5 Danza, more specific than baile, refers to folk dance or indigenous dance. A danzante is one who performs dances that are popularly understood as original to Mexico, although each danza is a syncretic form that has always developed and continues to develop in relation to external and global influences.
Pluma in particular because it is a re-staging of colonial encounter and conquest, which will become relevant to the ways in which I complicate notions of authenticity. In Teotitlán, at Guelaguetza Oficial and at Guelaguetza Popular, I look to what people are doing with each other and with their bodies in relation to the practice of guelaguetza.

AUTHENTICITY

The commercial success of Guelaguetza Oficial depends on its status and global acceptance as an “authentic” representation of indigenous Oaxaca. In this introduction, I hope to complicate the notion of authenticity, in order to then let go of it for the rest of the thesis. Some APPO sympathizers who I spoke to were committed to critiquing Guelaguetza Oficial on the grounds that it is constructed by the state and therefore, “not authentic.” The question follows, what does authenticity look and sound like in a post-colonial country like Mexico and a region like Oaxaca? Whether we celebrate the Oaxacan government for preserving authentic indigenous culture, as it claims to do, or ridicule it for altering authentic dances for profit, we are dealing with the same problem: how do we identify the perimeter and the content of an authentic practice? This very question is predicated on a notion that culture and social practices are fixable and more specifically, that certain things indigenous people do remain constant as the rest of the world changes around them. It also implies that the origin or the original form of a practice can be identified. The notion of authenticity, although sometimes claimed proudly by
indigenous people, is central to a colonizing rhetoric which defines colonized people as “other” and draws boundaries around their existence in order to profit off their land, their labor, and their art. It is also central to the “modern condition” against which “tradition” was pitted in early twentieth century Latin America. A feeling of loss and of nostalgia for its recovery is, in fact, a hallmark of the modern identity.

 Authentication is a claim that focuses on the aesthetic details of a practice and tries to link them with the “essence” of a culture or a people. When the Oaxacan government divided its land into eight indigenous regions, the name of each became equated with the clothes they wear and the dances they perform, as if these clear regional distinctions always existed. The assumption that indigenous practices are any less syncretic than colonial culture is just as fantastic as the one that assumes there are indigenous communities in Oaxaca that were not affected by conquest, not raped, enslaved and subjected to forced conversion to Catholicism. Certainly, many practices in Oaxacan pueblos are inherited from pre-conquest ways of living, but even so, they have always been transforming; shifting in relation to practices imported from or imposed by other indigenous people, environmental conditions, colonizing forces, governmental intrusion, and the globalizing economy.

 What is ironic about Guelaguetza Oficial and the STyDE’s attachment to authenticity is that they try to fix an image of indigenous life by way of an annual live performance. However codified, made homogenous, and
standardized, I argue that the festival is, nevertheless, a living document, which is constantly being reinterpreted by the dancers. In this way, the dancers are able to respond to commodification differently than, for example, the people who weave tapetes, which are being sold in the tourist-shopping district. I engage Diana Taylor’s *The Archive and the Repertoire* in my effort to examine the complexities of the Oaxacan Government’s desire to package and display indigenous culture. Taylor posits what she calls “the archive” as that which makes a definition of authentic culture possible. Her archive is composed of cultural elements that are necessarily fixable and in the past. She stresses that “domination by culture, by ‘definition,’ by claims to originality and authenticity, have functioned in tandem with military and economic supremacy” (Taylor 2003, 12). In studying art, and performance in particular, she suggests that we shift our focus to something like a repertoire, which is, in contrast to the archive, alive and always necessarily in conversation with those who came before, and those who are receiving and experiencing a particular cultural practice now.

At Guelaguetza Popular y Magisterial, the performers make no claims to authenticity. Their protest is not grounded in a critique of Guelaguetza Oficial as inauthentic. Rather, they claim autonomy over the performance of their dances to reassert them as always changeable and in conversation with the political moment. Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett’s *Destination Culture: Tourism, Museums, Heritage* has informed my approach to Guelaguetza Popular deeply. Kirshenblatt-Gimblet takes up the commodification of “folk”
practices around the world, reappropriating the notion of authenticity to refer to a “quality of encounter” rather than to a group of aesthetic elements. For Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, “the most authentic moment occurs when an audience confronts what it does not understand” (1998, 239). In this way, an authentic performance does not pretend to circumscribe or mimetically summarize part of a culture. While I am choosing in this thesis not to carry the baggage attached to the word authenticity, I do hold on to Kirshenblatt-Gimblett’s interest in celebrating the social and artistic aspects of a performance that are open-ended; made not to be understood, but experienced. Her work will be particularly useful in thinking about the ways in which Guelaguetza Oficial, in contrast, forecloses conversation, exchange and cooperation.

At Guelaguetza Oficial, the success and quality of the dance show is determined in relation to a fixed image of ethnicity. I turn to Rey Chow’s work *The Protestant Ethnic and the Spirit of Capitalism*, where she writes that ethnicity in late-capitalist Western culture is treated “as if it were an essence beyond exchange and circulation” (Chow 2002, 124). Chow teases apart a multicultural politics that relies on ethnicities as distinct and definable. While ethnicity is often written as separate from social exchange, it is readily available as a commodity for capitalist exchange. In order to trade in ethnicity, the image of ethnicity must first be extracted from the people who are labeled “authentically ethnic.” However, if we consider a group of living people—of “ethnics”—we already cannot imagine who would be included in this group, and who would not. If ever we look closely at the practices, clothing, even
within a group of people who might self-identify as part of the same ethnic group, it is impossible to arrive at a single definition of what they do, much less who they are. Given the impossibility of this task, a government that is invested in profiting from indigenous culture would do better to look to the past, specifically to an archive of written histories where anthropologists, historians, and people in government have already been imagining that ethnicities can be defined. In Chow’s cynical conceit, those “ethnics” who are dead, “are more safe in their ethnicity than those who are alive” and more earnestly, “the more distant in time they are, the more authentic they are considered to be” (Chow 2002, 124). This connection to a fixed past is critical; it is why people who are labeled as ethnic subjects are often criticized when they stray from this image, when their practices transform. In this way, the discourse of ethnic authenticity also erases indigenous futurity. Through Guelaguetza Oficial, the STyDE is always trying to turn a collection of indigenous dances into something unchanging, fashioning an image of Oaxacan peoples that moves easily through the tourist market.

With Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, Chow, Taylor and Vazquez, I take the notion of authenticity to be that which tries to render indigenous practices as outside modernity, ready for excavation, and beyond exchange and circulation: the more dead they are, the more authentic they are able to be. Authenticity is a concept that the Oaxacan Government relies upon to bolster military and economic supremacy. But Guelaguetza Oficial is, importantly, an imperfect performance of authenticity because it is a live event. So in this
thesis I abandon the premise of authenticity and begin observing and listening to what people in Oaxaca themselves think they are doing when they participate in networks of mutual aid, when they dance in a government show or when they make a festival as political protest.

LOOKING IN DETAIL

In this thesis, I deliberately take time to describe and detail certain practices I observed in Oaxaca. But in this work I do not move linearly towards a definition of these actions or an interpretation of what they mean in the communities that practice them. Although my research includes both interviews and informal conversations, my mode of observation and study is primarily a visual one. Interrupting a history in anthropology and travel writing to indulge a prescriptive colonial gaze, I frame this project as a looking to rather than looking at. I choose this phrase in conversation with a book called Listening in Detail: Performances of Cuban Music by Alexandra Vazquez. In the introduction, Vazquez listens to the sonic textures of Cuban singer Bolo de Nieve as they address their audience in a preamble to a song. The time Vazquez takes in approaching these details requires patience and stands in contrast to the easy fanaticism that surrounds Cuban artifacts such as the Buena Vista Social club recordings. Through thoughtful description, Vazquez lays bare the consumer history of Cuban music, which capitalizes on its representation as an “authentic entry point” into Cuban culture (Vazquez 2014). In Oaxaca, Guelaguetza Oficial—or the dancers who perform in it—is
tasked with the same neocolonial goal. I am looking to the ways in which the dancers are actually doing something else, at the same time, and on their own terms. My intention is to let the particularities of the dancers’ movements and actions outshine the government’s for-profit cultural regime. With Vazquez, I understand my object of study as that which produces this writing rather than as a passive object about which I write. The dancers in Teotitlán and at each guelaguetza are making this writing through their performances.

I have struggled with finding a way to articulate the intention behind “listening in detail” as I transfer it into a visual register. In relation to Cuban music, Vazquez asks, “but what do the musicians actually sound like?” (Vazquez, 2014, 12). Since it is movements and actions, that is, the visual and performative qualities of guelaguetza, that are my central focus, I might ask, “What do the performers look like?” The translation from Vazquez’s question to this one is imperfect at best. Where listening suggests an invitation—letting something into your ears—looking easily falls into the realm of projection.

Specifically, the Oaxacan Government has been quite attached to an idea of what indigenous people “look like” in terms of phenotype and clothing. Indeed, the primary activity at the largest government-sponsored event in Oaxaca is looking at dancers who have been asked to perform as indigenous people, whether or not they would describe themselves in this way. I am interested in developing a way of reading these performances that makes it impossible to put costumes, music, movement, and testimony, in Vazquez’s words, “at the service of instant allegory, sweeping historical truths, or as a
point of departure for more legible discourses about race and nation” (Vazquez 2014, 4). Looking in detail takes time. In fact, more time than I have. Nonetheless, I am making space within this writing for looking closely, a process whose intention is to pay tribute. To look to guelaguetza in earnest would mean a lifetime, a living.
Guelaguetza como Ayuda Mutua

Chapter 1

Neither the crushing powers of the central State, nor the teachings of mutual hatred and pitiless struggle which came, adorned with the attributes of science, from obliging philosophers and sociologists, could weed out the feelings of human solidarity...the need of mutual aid in the circle of the family...in the village.

—Peter Kropotkin, Mutual Aid

With the people in I spoke with in Teotitlán del Valle, I carry a conversation about resource sharing out of a hyper-capitalist framing, as they do through the practice of guelaguetza. Teotecos embed Oaxacan, Mexican, and international economic systems of trade into a rhizomatic social web, which circulates material things through the community. As I elaborate the practice of guelaguetza in Teotitlán, I am thinking with Grubacic and O’Hearn’s description of “material life” as that “lowest stratum of the non-economy, the soil onto which capitalism thrusts its roots but which it can never really penetrate” (2016, 2). Likewise, the STyDE will dip its fingers into the aesthetic worlds of each pueblo and pluck some things for profit, but when they take, they do not take away. The Oaxacan government is dependent on the life, the lives, the living of rural and indigenous people, but the reverse is not true. In this chapter I look to guelaguetza and La Danza de la Pluma as two autonomous practices on which the state relies. Later, I will build on this to describe and analyze the ways in which the government leans on these
practices to build its image and economy, with constant interruptions and rearticulations by the Asamblea Popular del Pueblo de Oaxaca.

As I walk with you through my encounters in Teotitlán del Valle, I am thinking with Vazquez who describes a “temporary version of [music] that resists an overdetermination of its whole” (2014, 7); I will be working towards the same for guelaguetza. The Wikipedia ES definition of guelaguetza translates as something like this: “In the broadest sense, guelaguetza represents not only cooperation but also an inherent attitude or quality; neighborly love, from each Zapotec citizen towards their siblings, an attitude of sharing nature and sharing life.” My research is not interested in making claims about inherent attitudes or similarities among any of the people and pueblos I study. Rather, I look to specific sites where people are practicing guelaguetza, which is never to say that “each Zapotec” does the same.

Guelaguetza as a practice of mutual aid, which could also be described as a gift economy or a sharing economy, is the namesake for the Oaxacan government’s dance festival. However, the connections between the indigenous structure of mutual and the government event are cursory at best. Having named this statist celebration “Guelaguetza,” every commercial or radio announcement for the festival leaves echoes of the practice of communal resource sharing. It would follow then that they intend to consider everyone at the festival as part of a temporary or imagined community. In the pattern of guelaguetza, audience, security guards, government employees and performers alike might be expected to show up early to set the stage, to come
with something in hand, or to contribute to a post-performance meal. But in 2016, each audience member brings only a ticket, paper proof of their extra cash. These resources will not be passed sideways, like the bottles of mezcal at Teotitlán’s celebration of La Preciosa Sangre de Cristo. They are funneled straight into the government’s coffers. The performers will be the last to see—in fact they will never see—the money that tourists pay to watch them perform.

I am thinking about the practice of guelaguetza as mutual aid in terms of levels of participation. This chapter moves between two practices in Teotitlán: guelaguetza as mutual aid and La Danza de la Pluma. The main stage is set in Javier’s courtyard as he was the rehearsal leader for La Pluma at the time of my research. I offer a thick description of the La Danza de la Pluma in this setting because it is the site where the two associations of the word guelaguetza most nearly converge. Here, during the first of a few performances of La Pluma, the danzantes are practicing guelaguetza. Everyone in the courtyard, (with the exception of myself and a handful of reporters) is engaged in the sharing practice. Everyone in the courtyard is actively contributing, or has already offered their guelaguetza labor. As guelaguetza and La Danza de la Pluma migrate in this thesis from Javier’s courtyard, to the tourist-friendly church plaza, to the Guelaguetza auditorium, and the field at Guelaguetza Popular, these participatory practices encounter different kinds of audiences, who have variably closer and more distant relationships with the people performing. Different levels of viewership and
participation alter and complicate the relationship between danza and guelaguetza. Guelaguetza is a practice that, through full participation, enables communal autonomy in rural Oaxaca as well as within the city limits (at Guelaguetza Popular) and even in the town center (at Guelaguetza Oficial).

Laying the ground for this conversation, I begin with a description of guelaguetza and the structures of mutual aid in Teotitlán del Valle without immediately relating them to the dance festivals, which claim their title. The tradition of guelaguetza in Teotitlán is more deeply embedded than a trend of pot lucking in the United States or the idea of wedding registries, both of which are often cited to describe guelaguetza to güeros. While the government writes it as an autochthonous tradition, “inherent” and “unique” to indigenous Oaxaca, it is a practice that is constantly being reworked and actively mediated by municipal governing bodies. People in different pueblos in Oaxaca have been strategically developing local networks over time that enable the practice of guelaguetza.

~ ⋅ ⋅ ~

I spend a week with Petrona and Juan, making meals and going on slow walks. Petrona’s vision is fading so she and Juan walk arm in arm. The streets are mostly cobblestone and just wide enough for the two-seater mototaxis. Juan always walks down the middle of the street. When he hears a car coming, he lets it adjust to his speed and does not look over his shoulder.
On one of these walks I mention that my family is coming to Oaxaca. Petrona says she would like to meet them, that they can all come stay in her home.

Juan is giving a tour of the rugs he weaves. He brings out pigments and yarn and begins to explain about *cochinilla*. Cochineal dye is harvested from tiny bugs that make cobweb-like homes on cacti. Their blood is the red pigment in strawberry milk, in Red Coat uniforms of the revolutionary war, in Juan’s and Petrona’s rugs. Mixed with egg or bay leaf or peppercorn or boiled it can turn a dye bath in countless directions. Both woodworkers, my parents are always turned on by a discussion of how things are made. Predictably, my dad starts to ask about the construction of Juan’s and Petrona’s house. My ears perk as Petrona and Juan begin to describe, one-word-story style,

Juan: Uno trae la piedra

Petrona: Uno trae el material—

Juan: La madera—

Petrona: —veinte personas—y luego contratamos a alguien para construirlo.

Juan: Y entonces, cuando alguien está construyendo su casa, me pide la piedra

Petrona: Y luego otra persona me pide la madera, pues así todo no me caiga a la vez.

Juan: one person brings the stone

Petrona: one person brings the concrete

Juan: the wood—

Petrona: —twenty people—and then we pay someone to do the building.

Juan: so when other people are building houses, someone will ask me to bring the stone.

Petrona: and then another person later will ask me to bring the wood, but this way everything doesn’t fall on me at once.
Juan: No ahorramos dinero pues tenemos un poquito para comprar la fruta para la fiesta, un regalo para la boda y yá.

Petrona: El gobierno nos pregunta cuántas horas trabajamos, cuánto vale aquél o aquella, cómo calculamos nuestro trabajo, y de veras, no sabemos.

Juan: We don’t really hoard money. We have enough around to buy the fruit for one party or the gift for a wedding.

Petrona: The government will ask us how many hours we work, how much this or that is worth, what’s the value of our labor, but we don’t really know.

**Webs of Cooperation**

The local government in Teotitlán is a patchwork of cooperative systems and positions: cargos, asambleas, tequios, guelaguetza, cooperación, servicio and compadrazgo (Cohen 1999, 14). The following outline of cooperative structures is based on my conversations and observations in July 2016, as well as Jeffery Cohen’s book *Cooperation and Community*, which is an ethnography that he wrote after years of research in a town across the river from Teotitlán. With Cohen, I emphasize that guelaguetza is constantly being renegotiated within a given community, sourcing and manipulating capitalist goods and distributing them through structures that have been shape-shifting since pre-Columbian years in Oaxaca. He understands cooperation as a set of ideals as well as real social relationships. With him, I emphasize that guelaguetza has never been an accidental or automatic practice, and especially that people in rural Oaxaca are not “naturally” inclined toward cooperation. As Kropotkin notes, simply “belonging to a political body” such as the municipality of Teotitlán, “cannot be taken as a manifestation of the mutual-
aid tendency” (1989, 270). Over the centuries, Guelaguetza has been worked and reworked through myriad forms of self-governance. Indigenous people continued to practice guelaguetza during Spanish colonization, in the midst of nationalist encroachment in the late nineteenth century, and again and still as rural communities become more intertwined with global labor markets as consumers, laborers and vendors. Today, local governments are fighting to keep their interdependent networks alive as neighbors and family members migrate to seek employment in the capitalist workforce up north.

Cargos are committees organized around different necessities that a pueblo has for communal labor. One cargo is responsible for organizing religious activities and maintaining the church, another facilitates community justice and settles disputes, a third takes care of municipal infrastructure, and a fourth organizes town celebrations during holidays. In a given year, the cargo designations shift, sometimes eliminating a certain group, or adding another to meet the needs of the pueblo. Each community member is expected to participate in cargos for terms of three years.

The asamblea is a sitting governing body that organizes all forms of collective governance and resource sharing, and is itself a cargo. Much of the work done by cargos is organized into tequios, or work projects. A tequio might entail building a public restroom or repainting the church. Always public in nature, work accomplished through tequio creates and maintains resources for the pueblo.
Guelaguetza follows a similar cooperative structure to a tequio but can include private projects—projects for one person or one family, such as building a house or celebrating a child’s graduation from primary school. Often, a happening that comes together through guelaguetza is organized word-of-mouth, through conversation at the daily market or behind the counter at the corner store. But when a festival is approaching, such as La Preciosa Sangre in July, the asamblea takes responsibility for coordinating community-wide guelaguetza. In Teotitlán, there are two principal ways that people contribute: cooperación and servicio. Cooperación is the contribution of labor; dedicating time to help something come together. Servicio is money donated to a communal fund that will help buy things like soda, fabric for dresses, or balloons. Cooperación and servicio are sometimes used interchangeably with guelaguetza because the term refers to the specific thing that some one offers, as well as the general practice of exchange.

The final component of mutual aid in Teotitlán is compadrazgo, which describes a web of padrinos who contribute money, social support, mentorship and care for their godchild. The godparents become part of the family structure and are regarded with deep respect at gatherings. They play a key role in the practice of guelaguetza on a more personal scale. While padrinx is the only named role that defines someone’s position in relation to mutual aid, anyone who practices guelaguetza is expected to commit to a related mode of interdependence and accountability. I move now to the first day of La Preciosa Sangre and a ceremony called La Levantada de la Corona, or the
raising of the crown, where danzantes and other community members participate in guelaguetza through and around La Danza de la Pluma. This July, Javier’s group has decided to perform La Danza de la Pluma in their own town, rather than travel to the government festival or Guelaguetza Popular. Close readings of this dance will continue throughout each chapter as a performative anchor to my discussion.

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I walk up the cobble stone street—encuadrado—with directions to walk derechito, past the church, past the market, two, maybe three doors beyond the corner, on the right. On the right is a huge barn door, rolled wide open. I keep walking. All of the doors ahead are closed. It is almost noon. Brass tunes from the celebration I am trying to find float up the hill and reach my ears. A pair is coming down the road, and I ask them how to get to the music. Right here, they say and start walking me back from where I had come. It was the barn door. I walk towards the crowd, excited, but retrace my steps to explain to the man at the door who this güera is, waltzing in. I’m looking for Javier, I say, which seems to be sufficient justification.

Just inside, more than twenty women are seated at one long table, eating. The banquet spread is flawlessly symmetrical. Each person sits directly across from another. Towers of tlayuda are evenly spaced on the table, their crooked edges letting light in between the layers. Chattering in Zapotec, they dip the huge tortillas in dark bean soup. I follow the doorman across an
uncovered courtyard, and he asks someone if Javier is upstairs. He isn’t. Eventually he comes to meet me, understandably impatient, and tells me that I can watch and take pictures or whatever. I stand in the doorway of a dining room turned costume shop and watch the twenty-piece brass band tune. There are two girls, about seven years old, running around inside the room. Outside in the central courtyard, twelve men walk around in red polo shirts. Only when they hoist their headdresses to dance do I realize that they are los danzantes de La Pluma.

**LA DANZA DE LA PLUMA**

La Pluma is a syncretic ritual dance that performs the Spanish conquest. The twelve dancers represent Hernán Cortés’s and Moctezuma’s armies. The story goes that the indigenous army won the first battle, and the conquistadors the second. The steps send two lines of dancers crisscrossing, circling in a short moment of encounter as they pass. In between the moments of ensemble, Cortés parades down the center. As he shows off, two women (played by the seven-year-old girls from the costume shop) stand regally at the helm.

Every person I spoke to at the three field sites had a different thing to say about the characters that the girls perform, but each referred to some relative of La Malinche.\(^6\) La Malinche is a historical figure, a Nahua woman, across different historical accounts, La Malinche is varyingly referred to as Malintzin, Doña Marina, and sometimes, María. I use Malinche here in accordance with the dancers I spoke to from Zaachila and Teotitlán.

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who was sold as a slave to the Maya people and then gifted to Cortés. Cortés and La Malinche’s child is fabled as the first mestiza to have been born and so embodies the Europeanization of indigenous Mexico. Some people I spoke to think of the two roles as separate women, one indigenous and one Spanish. Others consider both girls to be the same historical Malinche, before and after Spanish conquest. Still others see the girls as allegorical embodiments of indigeneity and colonization, unattached to specific historical figures.

A STORY OF LAS MALINCHES

I pause here to describe La Malinche as an historical figure, in order to think about the specific moment of encounter that La Pluma performs. The source I have chosen for this discussion is a close reading of The Lienzo de Tlaxcala written by Jeanne Lou Gillespie. It is a story The lienzo is a colonial-era pictorial depiction of pre-Hispanic conquest recorded by the Maya people in Teotihuacan. It was painted on cotton cloth in 1552. It reads as a grid, two meters wide and five meters long displaying dozens of scenes (Hamann 2014, 519). Saints and Warriors compares the original cloth to reproductions, centrally the Chavero edition, the Texas Manuscript and the Manuscript of Glasgow. Gillespie tell us that the original account was as important to the military power of the Mayan empire as the acts of conquest themselves. In other words, Maya people already depended on creative depictions of historical events to write and rewrite history in their favor. Gillespie traces the

7 In 1521 when Hernán Cortés arrived in Mexico, the Aztec empire held the most land and power in the region, and had conscripted Maya and Toltec people to continue the consolidation of power and the conquest of smaller indigenous cultures.
aesthetic transformation that the lienzo underwent during and after the
colonial encounter with the Spanish. The scenes near the top of the lienzo pay
close attention to the representation of cultural difference through the women
depicted: the clothing they wore, how they did their hair, and how they
interacted with pre-Hispanic conquests. Post-conquest depictions of the same
women become more general, with less attention to cultural specificity.
Likewise, representations of the role the women play in pre-Hispanic
conquests change in later lienzos. I am interested in this move towards
generalization because it is analogous to the ways in which the contemporary
Oaxacan government has reshaped the aesthetics and narratives that they
present about each of the eight regions of Oaxaca. In relation to the lienzo,
Gillespie explains that "as structures for organizing a particular cultural reality
cease to contribute to that culture's narrative, they are eliminated and replaced
with structures that can better represent new realities" (1994, 141). Something
similar can be said to have happened with guelaguetza. In the context of the
lienzo, the "new realities" are of course the colonial realities of Spanish
conquest. For Guelaguetza, the new reality is a reconstructed image of
indigeneity that publicizes harmony in diversity among different indigenous
communities as well as harmony between the government and Oaxaca’s
indigenous communities. It is important to understand the contemporary
version of Guelaguetza Oficial as one of the structures that replaced other
ways of celebrating local history or rather, as a continuation of a process of
erasure in which the Oaxacan government repeatedly rewrites history to make it increasingly appealing to the global tourist market.

In the Lienzo de Tlaxcala, La Malinche first appears standing between Cortés and a member of the Otomí people,\(^8\) acting as a translator between Nahuatl, Mayan and Spanish. She rides on horseback, wearing European shoes and indigenous clothing. In a later tabloid, La Malinche is depicted as a military officer and in another, specifically directing a battle between Cortés’s and Moctezuma’s armies. La Malinche’s military authority is very much present in contemporary versions of La Danza de la Pluma. She proceeds down the center of two rows of soldiers and pauses at one end, waving a silk scarf through the air in front of her. As soon as she stops dancing, the male dancers move toward each other, crisscrossing in a pattern like the one her scarf made in the air. In both the dance and the lienzo, Cortés and La Malinche’s military might is represented not through graphic depictions of battle and wounded casualties, but through their proud spatial positioning: always at the head of the soldiers, standing above them or seated on a throne.

In interviewing dancers about La Pluma, they unwaveringly recounted that it is the story of the struggle between Moctezuma and Cortés, but the swooping jumps and kneeling spins of the dance hardly invoke the violence of colonial encounter. In regards to the lienzo, Gillespie tells us that these Tlaxcalan depictions of conquest are graphically much less violent than concurrent Spanish accounts. While there is some representation of battle between Cortés and Moctezuma,\(^8\) the Otomí are an indigenous group from central Mexico who were conquered by the Aztecs as they teamed up with Toltecs and Mayas and whom, with Moctezuma, helped enable the conquer of Indigenous Mexico. [Rewrite this FN for clarity]
and Moctezuma, the lienzo emphasizes the generosity of Indigenous people. They are presented in great detail sharing tortillas, feathers and flowers with Spanish forces. From the depictions in the Lienzo de Tlaxcala to the gifts given out at the end of La Danza de La Pluma, La Malinche is figured as commanding from a military point of view but also as the embodiment of generosity and hospitality. As both Mexican and Spanish records tell her story, she welcomed conquistadors to invade her native soil, she welcomed Cortés to sleep with her, and today at Guelaguetza she welcomes foreign tourists to watch her dance and catch the local treats she brought for them. For centuries, La Malinche’s story has been pulled and twisted to paint an image of alliance and cooperation between colonizing forces and smaller indigenous communities.

There is a compelling parallel between the way in which the lienzo plays down the violence of the conquest and the absence of physical aggression in La Danza de la Pluma, as the Oaxacan government assertively aims to depict the encounter with indigenous people as benevolent. Although the Lienzo the Tlaxcala depicts La Malinche being sold like property and then gifted as a slave to Cortés, these violations of her humanity are pushed aside so that the government can house the notion of cultural cooperation in her image. I want to acknowledge that in some historical and contemporary versions of La Danza de La Pluma, only Cortés and the two armies are present. Guelaguetza Oficial, for example, altogether cut the two women from the performance, obscuring the visual representation of enslavement and
assimilation. Despite so many conflicting narratives and representations, however, sources consistently suggest that La Malinche’s translations enabled Cortés to involve indigenous people in his plan to conquer.

In a series of interviews by anthropologist Demetrio E. Brisset Martín, danzantes from six different towns describe the significance of the two girls in La Pluma. One remarks that they are both Cortés’s mistresses, that that was part of the way he exercised his power. Another tells that they are symbolic representations of indigenous Mexico and Europe. And a third calls both of them Malinche, where one is a Spanish lady and the other an indigenous woman who translates for Cortés, as in Gillespie’s historical reading of Malinche. The ambiguity of these two women who dance La Pluma is reflective of the complex role that La Malinche played during conquest. It is impossible to judge from historical records where her affinities lay precisely. She might have loved Cortés as she kept him company and bore his child. She might have been happy to leave her Nahuatl community. She might have gotten great pleasure from her military power, and it is also understood that she was raped and abused. Her joy or suffering is not discussed in historical accounts. That she was forcibly moved from a Nahuatl community, put in the hands of enemy Aztec conquerors, and then given to a Spanish conquistador entails violence. Indeed, the person who we refer to as La Malinche is just as ambiguous as the characters of the girls who dance in La Pluma.
CAN WE HAVE A CONVERSATION?

Of course, the practice of mutual aid is not unique to Oaxaca. Kropotkin’s work focuses on mutual aid in rural Europe, citing gatherings to shell walnuts, sewing dowry for a wedding, coming together to build a house. He suggests that “development” or “evolution” of society into bigger “modern” or “civilized” institutions can be understood as a folding out from more local forms of mutual aid (1989, ix.) Arguing that mutual aid has always been a part of social functioning, he describes historical moments when civilizations fell or were destroyed, while smaller communities found ways to survive, continuing to support each other through networks of mutual aid. This he says, has enabled communities “to repair the havoc done by civilized filibusters” (1989, 214). In context, Teotecos speak about guelaguetza as a practice that existed before Mayan conquest and throughout Catholic inquisition. As these empires and enterprises first rose to power and then fell or transformed, mutual aid networks continued to support the pueblo.

Kropotkin writes, it seems “hopeless to look for mutual-aid institutions and practices in modern society...and yet, as soon as we try to ascertain how the millions of human beings live, and begin to study their everyday relations, we are struck with the immense part which the mutual-aid and mutual support principles play even in now-a-days human life” (1989, 229). Here, Kropotkin distinguishes between laws pronounced by the state and people’s daily practices in rural villages. “Having not been interfered with by the State (in its informal manifestations), [mutual aid] has fully survived until now, and takes
the greatest variety of forms in accordance with the requirements of modern industry and commerce” (1989, 274). In the context of European village communities, he asserts that people who practice mutual aid are not wholesale adverse to the industrial revolution. To illustrate, Kropotkin takes up the plow, which was imported to village communities where workers made adjustments to the tools to suit their own needs. The factories observed their collaborative upgrades and then incorporated them into further editions of the manufactured product. I mention this example as a materially concrete description of the aesthetic and performative conversations between danzantes and the Oaxacan government that are always shaping the form and movement of La Danza de La Pluma. With Kropotkin, I emphasize that capitalist development is dependent upon these conversations.

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The one who plays La Indígena (as the pre-conquest Malinche is sometimes called) is younger and wilier than her counterpart, and wears a plastic crown with tall feathers. The older one sports a top hat with a plume; a costume of conquest. She is running the show, cracking jokes with the grown-up danzantes, and always dancing with a focused, furrowed brow.

There is no audience seating area, nor an audience to fill it. While most non-dancers mill around, chatting or making food, I stand still, watching closely and writing in my notebook. Four photo journalists walk and squat, walk and squat, looking for things to shoot. The musicians look to their
conductor under the awning and the conductor watches Javier for queues. Two other dance teachers work the edges of the patio. One looks worried that the dancers will mess up, or maybe the sun is in his eyes.

For the ceremony, most dancers wear jeans and woven black sandals. On the final day of La Preciosa Sangre de Cristo, they will change into white linen—tiers of tassels and embroidery around their ankles. They wrap bandanas around their heads at midday and hoist their headdresses—*penachos*. The penachos weigh three kilos, (some say two and a half, others boast five), perfect circles, half a meter in diameter with cosmic patterns made of plant-dyed chicken feathers. Each village that dances La Pluma has one person who builds the penachos. It takes a month to make them and they cost roughly $3500 pesos in labor and materials. In the center of each is a circular mirror, “representing the kings of the universe,” tells me. Smaller mirrors are nestled around in the feathers. When the men jump and turn, the mirrors cast light on the dusty ground. Each feathered circle is mounted on a plastic crown and tied down with a cloth chin-strap woven by someone—a mom, an uncle—in the community. In between dances, one man unties his chin-strap, and all three kilos balance effortlessly while he catches a breath.

**A PARTICIPATORY PRACTICE**

I linger at La Levantada de La Corona to illustrate the practice of guelaguetza as an ongoing event—it is always generating and reshaping a network of accountability and cooperation. In relation to material life,
Kropotkin, and Marcel Mauss after him, wrote that the ethical significance of shared property, and the communal exchange of resources were of greater significance than the economic value of the particular objects. The practice of guelaguetza does not generate surplus or capital, and in many cases, all of the resources that are brought together are also imbibed collectively and completely, over the course of the celebration.\(^9\) Already, we can see how guelaguetza de-emphasizes the object gifted.

In *The Gift*, Marcel Mauss studies systems of gift exchange. He asks, what keeps the system going? What compels the receiver to give back? Is it something preserved in the object given? To answer this question, Mauss brings up the *hau* of gifts, a Maori word that, loosely described, means “the spirit of the gift.” The hau runs through and overflows from objects that the Maori people give to one another. The gift and its hau carry the expectation that the offer will eventually be returned. Mauss writes, “the thing received is not inactive. Even when it has been abandoned by the giver, it still possesses something of him” (1954, 12). He goes on to explain that an object collects hau each time a person receives and gives it. The ties that occur between things, between haus, are ties between souls—not just between the soul of the person who gives and the soul of the person who receives, but also of everyone they have each given to or received from, and on and on. The exchange systems that Mauss draws upon in *The Gift* are distinct from the practice of guelaguetza because they are not centrally about resource sharing.

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\(^9\) There are some exceptions to this, such as when the guelaguetza offering is a piece of furniture for a newlywed couple, or some material for building a house.
Mauss discusses a kind of obligation that lives within specific material objects. That is, the expectation that the specific gift will be reciprocated. Guelaguetza forms something more like a network of credits and debts. Still, the spirit of the gift is a useful framework to engage in describing the extra-material life of the objects which are exchanged.

In the context of guelaguetza, that which over flows from a gift—the communal ties which it creates—have more to do with the moment of exchange than the object itself. Not only is the celebration in Javier’s courtyard provided for by offerings of guelaguetza, it is also a day of dancing and eating that enacts a continuous practice of guelaguetza. The dancers have been rehearsing (one form of communal labor), and their dancing during the celebration is part and parcel of their enactment of guelaguetza. Some have supplied the beans and tortillas that will be offered as guelaguetza to everyone at the celebration. Many women have been awake since dusk to prepare the food, and as the dancers dance, they receive each other’s labor, eating together at a long table in the shade. By eating this food, one does not then have an obligation to return the same meal or the same labor to the cooks. Rather, as they eat, they are reinterpellated into the guelaguetza cycle of which they were already a part. For this exchange, they may have sewn the penacho that one danzantes wears, or they might return to Javier’s house the following year, having rehearsed La Danza de La Pluma each Saturday for a year. As such, the people who practice guelaguetza during La Preciosa Sangre are not invested in one-to-one calculations of giving and receiving.
The customs of mutual aid, writes Cohen, act before and against individualistic notions of progress. I have chosen to center on guelaguetza because it leaves room for conversation about the interpersonal/domestic/familial as well as political/public/financial conceptions of resource sharing. The notion of the individual is de-emphasized in the practice of guelaguetza because reciprocity does not operate one-to-one. The contribution aspect of guelaguetza places trust in the pueblo, broadly, and accountability is to this whole, rather than a specific person who is giving or receiving.

I am thinking about the notion of the individual in relation to levels of participation that are available at La Levantada de La Corona. Here, almost everyone in the courtyard has contributed and benefitted from their participation in guelaguetza. When the dance moves into context with audience members who have not contributed guelaguetza to the dance, the practice of collective trust opens out. In the church courtyard, this expansion includes other residents of Teotitlán who are part of the broader network of mutual aid, even though they have not specifically offered guelaguetza for this year’s performance of La Pluma. In a year when the danzantes participate in Guelaguetza Popular, they offer themselves to a hodge-podge of individuals who are not part of their guelaguetza network. Although many of the other performers and attendees at Guelaguetza Popular practice guelaguetza in their own pueblos. I will continue this conversation about participation, exchange and individuality in chapter two at Guelaguetza Oficial, as people pay for a
ticket to watch a show of danzas, and compete to catch fruit gifts, which are tossed from the stage.

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On either side of the doorway is a chair for the little girls. One wears all blue, a satin party dress and a sequined top hat with a long plume. The other is dressed in pinks, whites, and reds to match her feather headdress, which she clearly would rather not wear. Both wear French braids and scarves around their forearms that dangle in the dirt when they walk. They are in and out of the dressing room, up and down in their seats. La Indígena calls for her parents. La Conquista asks for water. Someone brings her a cup full and takes it away when she is done. She pinches her dad when he walks by. Another dance starts. There are four men in the middle this time. The steps are wide and loose. One foot is always in the air—two on the spiraling jumps. They land on the downbeat.

“Yo quiero dormir,” calls the little girl to no one in particular. All the women have been up since dawn and before, preparing for the ceremony. Her parents come to the rescue and this cry reveals itself as a clever excuse not to wear the headdress. They remove the crown and lie her across a bench of chairs until it is her moment to perform. To make sure she doesn’t get any rest, La Indígena’s little sister riots around with castanets. Other children wander around between the care of parents and aunts and uncles. In Teotitlán, babies are not given a name until they are three years old, at which point they
enter the community in full, as participants, workers, and partiers like everyone else.

EXILE AND AUTONOMY

The celebration that I have walked into plays fugitive from the tourist industry in Teotitlán. The girls take advantage of the intracommunal nature of the celebration in Javier’s courtyard. When their costumes get uncomfortable, they do not pretend to care about façade of a seamless dance. They need not to perform for anyone. The following week, when they dance in the church courtyard, swarms of anthropology students from the D.F. will have braved the rain with their notepads to see them dance. The same danzantes and the same guelaguetza labor will enable this iteration of the dance, but the landscape of participation will shift. Some people around the church live in Teotitlán and practice guelaguetza, but have not worked specifically towards this performance. Others are tourists stopping through who will never be part of Teotitlán’s network of mutual aid. This will be a great sales day for the town’s weavers of tapetes.

But today is different. Having processed from a service at dawn, the town practices guelaguetza in Javier’s backyard—it is a gathering, not a show. Whether social or material, guelaguetza exchange is always standing in opposition, or rather, in apposition to state power and a monolithic market. In Cohen’s words, “reciprocal ties and their historical development become structures through which the community is defended against the impact of
global capitalism” (1999, 9). Through their commentary on Kropotkin’s work on mutual aid, Grubacic and O’Hearn help us think about the kinds of labor—and related pleasure—that people in Oaxaca engage in autonomously from the capitalist government. In Living at the Edges, the authors reference Kropotkin to bring attention to the interdependent networks of creative labor that happen even within communities as blatantly entangled with capitalism as, for example, the line workers in a maquiladora. In other words, no capitalist institution thrives solely on logics of competition and scarcity. Rather, each is dependent on the networks of cooperation and care that working people develop in different settings. Just as in a maquiladora workers’ wellbeing is dependent on these networks of creative labor and mutual support, the government festival of guelaguetza is absolutely dependent on the labor of these indigenous communities as well as on the affective power and aesthetic beauty of their performative traditions. In an era when economic and social theorists were obsessed with Darwinian notions of progress, Kropotkin asserted that capitalism is dependent upon forms of labor and joy that find their strength in reciprocal interdependent networks, as opposed to individualistic drives for progress which are predicated on scarcity.

In Living at the Edges. Grubacic and O’Hearn explore three case studies of communities who have chosen to escape from state regulation and capitalism accumulation. They refer to these as “exilic communities.” I engage their work in order to complicate a critique of Guelaguetza Oficial (and neoliberal tourism more generally), which accuses the government of
exploiting indigenous practices, labor, and aesthetics. This accusation is important and warranted, as the STyDE is trading in unpaid labor, but in harboring only on the exploitative dimension of the institution we risk reducing the dancers and their communities to discursive victimhood. To that tune, my critique of the Oaxacan government will emerge from descriptions of what dancers and their communities are doing and choosing. Some of them choose to perform at Guelaguetza Oficial unpaid, some decide to stay in their hometown and perform the dances within their community, and still others travel to Oaxaca city to join the anti-reform movement at Guelaguetza Popular.

O’Hearn and Grubacic define “exilic spaces” as those where “groups of people gather in escape or forced exile from state control.” First, they posit the Zapatistas as people who chose to escape a government that does not serve them. In contrast, they study a group of people in solitary confinement in the United States that has been forced into exile. In this thesis, I emphasize that it is not a question of either or; escape and forced exile are concurrent conditions. Capitalism has failed to meet the needs of the majority of people who live in Oaxaca, and the majority of the people who live in the world, for that matter. We can talk about this on the level at which the capitalist system pushed them out, as in, did not welcome them and does not have room for them to build a pleasurable way of living. But we can also talk about it on the level of personal desire and agency. I want to try and hold each of these in balance. The government forces people into conditions of financial lack, and
at the same time, people escape with each other to make abundance. As the global market economy stretches deeper into and pulls more people away from anti-capitalist communities, mutual support becomes all the more urgent. The Oaxacan and Mexican governments fund a performative event, that generates discourse in which the wealth gap goes unquestioned. This effectively steers people away from critiques of the state or demands for change. In Teotitlán, and many other pueblos in Oaxaca, people are devising their own ways of thriving that do not emerge solely in opposition to the state. At the edges of capitalism, these networks of mutual aid assert intracommunal autonomy.

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A drum roll initiates the dance and two men start with a slow skip between the others who stand in two parallel lines. The steps are spacious and light—cyclical. A soft toe tap behind, a skip, a jump with a turn. Every so often, they kneel all the way to the floor, one knee and then the other and a smooth hop returns them balanced on one foot. Each dancer shakes a maraca on the downbeat. The space around the beat is full of sound from a dancer who shook a moment too early, a second too late. Through hours of dance, there is not a beat without a shake. La Malinche runs out into the middle of the patio, remembers that she forgot her castanets and darts back into the room. The dancers in the middle twist around each other. They make eye contact and mouth words at one another as they orbit in step. Their feathers
and tassels have rhythmic buoyancy—a visual echo of the maraca’s sound. One dancer’s penacho has come loose so he grasps the crown with one hand, still shaking the maraca with the other and misses a few steps. La Indígena makes her dad remove and remount her headdress, on and off, on and off. “It’s too deep!” she says when it digs into her forehead. She doesn’t mind the bandana, but the crown is unbearable.

After a pause, Javier walks over with a laurel switch and whips the legs of a performer while accosting him in Spanish. The dancer wears a green polo, not red like the others. He retorts in Zapotec dialect, performing Moctezuma. The band begins to play the same melody in a minor key. Cortés’s army has won. Moctezuma does not dance this portion. He is watching as the two armies duel, as if relearning the steps in the key of conquest. Off script, he turns around to scold La Indígena with his maraca. The dance and the band take a break between movements. Javier coaches Moctezuma and he practices the steps without music in the middle of the stage. While the dancers move, two women emerge from their shady dining nook, crossing the sunny stage to scoop pitchers full of atole and frijoles from kettles as big around as a penacho. On one side of the stage is this kitchen, on the other, a basketball hoop hangs from the balcony.

**APPROPRIATING THE COLONIZER**

Through waves of globalization, migration and government interference, the municipal structures that enable Guelaguetza have sometimes
faded, while their rhizomatic life extends to the adjacent town. Here, I am thinking of the rhizome in a Deleuzian and Guattarian sense, as a network or series of relations that “may be broken, shattered at a given spot, but…will start up again on one of its old lines” or, indeed on new lines (1987, 9). Guelaguetza has historically faded out of practice in one town, only to resurface across the river, revitalizing the autonomy of a different pueblo when it becomes apparent that capitalist incorporation does not satisfy the needs of the community. The rhizomatic network of pueblos that practice guelaguetza is not immune to capitalist encroachment, but it is adaptable (Cohen 1999, 13).

Specifically, during the Spanish Inquisition in Teotitlán, colonial missionaries coopted the cooperative structures that were already in place and employed the sixteenth century iteration of tequio as slave labor. In 1581 colonizers forced indigenous people to raze their temple and initiate the construction of La Preciosa Sangre de Cristo inaugurating La Preciosa Sangre as the patron saint (Ayuntamiento, 2016). The church still stands, the main market lives just outside its courtyard, and the community museum lies down the hill. What originated as colonial exploitation has been reincorporated into the autonomous governance of Teotitlán. To illustrate, the cargo that is regarded with the highest honor is the cargo del templo. This group of elders takes care of the catholic temple, caring for the religious life of the village. The ceremonies and events that they organize in 2016 have been developing as a complex conversation between local indigenous traditions, Mayan beliefs,
and Spanish Catholicism, to name a few. I highlight the Spanish cooptation of indigenous labor here and governance because, even though Teotitlán has reclaimed their autonomy, the structure of Guelaguetza Oficial is hauntingly similar to the forms of coercive labor used by conquistadors in the sixteenth century. I will further attend to the complex relationship between autonomy and coercion at Guelaguetza Oficial in chapter two.

With Grubacic, O’Hearn and Kropotkin, I am particularly interested in the ways in which these resource-sharing economies overlap with, take advantage of and are foundational to the functioning of the global market economy. This is not to say that I take interest in these systems of mutual aid because of their proximity to capitalism. Rather, I would like to suggest that structures which the Oaxacan government might consider in purely economic terms always already overflow with and are enabled by collective interdependence, cooperative cultural production, and domestic labor. Indeed, the global proliferation of capitalism, in all of its violence, has not successfully thrown mutual aid networks into the past. The complex modes of sociality alive in guelaguetza manifest as rhizomatic sparks that resist complete cooptation.

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The dancers come to a breaking point. They pass around glasses of water and dismount their headdresses, then wander into the dining room to join the women. In the patio, the penachos are left standing, casually
populating the stage. The group migrates to a green space down the road to continue the dance. Here there is even less of an audience, but chairs are set in the shade in anticipation of the band. A bug flies into my nose and the dancers start going over their steps without music. In the final dance, each performer is in constant motion. Rows of bodies weave and split in patterns that I can’t pin down.

Javier is unhappy with part of the dance and calls for an unneeded water break. He sends the dancers back out to the dirt road, to reset the entire outdoor sequence. When the music begins, they start up the road again and process back onto the grassy stage. The movements are similar to those in the patio, but their bodies spread wide to fill the green space, which is nearly ten times as large as Javier’s courtyard. Each line peels down the center, crossing at the end and returning to the top like a line dance. La Indígena got her way and is rocking the bandana-without-headdress look. Both girls walk down the isle with Moctezuma. Papa swoops in to plant the headdress on La Indígena before the tempo picks up. The neighbors watch from their front doors across the way. The lines of dancers disperse throughout the field, and the two girls meander between the armies of men. Now they are all dancing together, and one man falls down. The music continues while three men come over to help him up. The dance continues on.
IN ANTICIPATION OF A SHOW

Looking to La Levantada de La Corona, I have tried to offer a constellation that leaves room for the myriad ways of practicing guelaguetza and dancing La Pluma. My attention to the movement of the people who are not dancing is a meandering response to a history of ethnography in the Western cannon, especially that which focuses on ritual and dance, which has historically assumed that “native life was inherently dramatic” (Kirshenblatt-Gimblett 1998, 45). This sense of the dramatic is tied up in a form of viewership that relies on an affective distance between the dancer and the observer; the kind of distance that one expects between a paying audience member and a ballerina. In this thesis I am writing along a spectrum of the dramatic—a spectrum of spectatorship. At La Levantada de La Corona, the number of spectators is less than five. A danzante here is not treated as “entertainment” for someone milling around the patio with a bowl of beans. Neither person is more a spectator than the other, and neither is giving a dramatic performance.

When the dancers perform by the church in fancier clothes and more members of the town come to watch, the spirit of the dance is still not dependent on the presence of an audience. Indeed, as soon as it begins to drizzle, the danzantes cover their penachos in clear plastic bags, while everyone else goes home to stay dry (except the reporters who feel they have something to prove). However, when thinking about La Pluma, we do have to address this question of the dramatic even because the structure and aesthetic
of the dances in Javier’s courtyard have been influenced by the STyDE’s dramatic and theatrical conception of it. Importantly, when Teotecos chose to perform at Guelaguetza Oficial, they dance the same dance as they would at home, only shortened, with a self-deprecating joke attached—a government Guelaguetza signature. Returning to Kirshenblatt-Gimblett’s observation, there is nothing inherently dramatic about indigenous life, nor La Danza de La Pluma, but Teotecos and their dances enter into situations in which the people watching are precisely invested in the theatrical value, which is predicated on distance from and the novelty of these practices. I look North now, to Oaxaca City, up the hill at El Fortín, to consider the proximity and participation that is and is not possible there.
Guelaguetza Oficial

CHAPTER 2

Oaxacan elites\textsuperscript{10} had begun to typecast the capital and its surroundings as a timeless locale of precolonial delights, hypocritically celebrating the state’s “traditional” indigenous “past” while erasing its present existence.

—Mark Overmyer-Velasquez, Visions of the Emerald City

On the afternoon of July 25th, Andrea and I arrive at the top of so many steps, bellies full of memelita. We see a long line of people straightened by aluminum crowd control barricades, look at each other, and sigh in unison. It is more than an hour past showtime, and it looks like it will still be a long wait. We start towards a security guard and are not surprised to notice the rifle on his hip. Before I open my mouth, he tries to corral us into the line. It’s full, he says, no one’s getting in—and interrupts himself to apologize. He hadn’t seen our tickets. The line is for free admission hopefuls. Paying guests are treated most hospitably. All grace, the guard gestures toward one of his coworkers, setting off a chain reaction that seems to let every guard know we are to be treated well and seen to our seats. We walk away from the crowd of waiters through a wide empty path, shouldered always by metallic rails, marked every three meters by another gracious guard. The ramp to the stadium is gradual, unlike the steps that brought us up the hill, and more

\textsuperscript{10} The author refers here to the political elite at the turn of the twentieth century. Most were industrialists, champions of modern—to say western infrastructure. Their politics looked to Europe and the United States in efforts to bolster trade and tourism. When I invoke the contemporary Oaxacan elite in this chapter, these characteristics are still relevant.
wheelchair accessible than most structures in the city. At the main entrance, presumably due to our tardiness, the guard does not want to let us in. But another woman sees our young white faces through the gate and ushers us in. There is a bag check, and I am told to throw away my water bottle, which is one fifth full of mezcal. Andrea and I swig the clear not-water and leave the bottle on their folding table.

We walk over five pairs of knees to get to our seats, take a minute to set down our things and switch places to accommodate for the tall head in front of us. The rows behind do not forgive us for blocking their view.

“Estás tarde,” snaps the woman next to me.
“¿Cómo?”
I don’t quite believe that she just called me out for being late.
“Ya comenzó. Están tardes.”
“Sí.” I shrug. ¿Y qué?

In my two months in Oaxaca, I hadn’t heard a single complaint about punctuality. Was she really asking a stranger to justify her tardiness? I indulged her and said that we had come from the Guelaguetza Popular, which ran until six in the evening. In fact, it wasn’t even over when we left. “¿Y cuándo comenzó?” she asked, still more appalled. She couldn’t imagine a performance of indigenous dances lasting all day. Good thing she wasn’t in Teotitlán, where the danzantes moved through a single dance for eight hours. The STyDE is smart; they know that tourists from Mexico City and so many other places will not sit that long. They want the “authenticity” but in a familiar form, a ballet painted in cochinilla. There are stage lights when the
sun goes down. No one eats or drinks in the theater, and each patron is on time, or even early.

THE CONSTRUCTION OF GUELAGUETZA

Guelaguetza\textsuperscript{11} Oficial was founded as a nationalist project by the federal and state governments in 1932. The North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) was signed between Mexico, the United States, and Canada in 1994, further incorporating Mexico into the global capitalist economy. This is also the year that Oaxaca made its debut on the international tourist stage and the year the government started charging admission to Guelaguetza. I lead by mapping the political and economic contexts for these two moments in history.

I start at the end of the twentieth century to offer background for Guelaguetza 2016, turning first to the political climate that laid the ground for NAFTA in 1994. I read a handful of the United States State Department’s annual bilateral fact sheet—bilateral signifying the United States and Mexico. Since 1989, the Mexican constitution has given foreigners explicit permission to have majority ownership in Mexican companies. In 1991, the United States reported that education in Mexico was being decentralized and enhanced in rural areas. This is a direct allusion to the reform that APPO is resisting today: a move to import urban teachers into rural areas and replace indigenous dialects with Spanish-only curricula. This exercise of state hegemony is part

\textsuperscript{11} In this chapter, I will sometimes write Guelaguetza Oficial as simply, “Guelaguetza,” as the STyDE boldly does. When referring to the people’s festival, I will specify Guelaguetza Popular. In keeping with other chapters, guelaguetza as mutual aid will appear in lower case.
of the political context that led to the Zapatista uprising in 1994. The bilateral papers quietly refer to this rebellion as “unexpected and traumatic events in 1994,” leaving the event unnamed and claiming ambiguously that it led to serious political setbacks. In 1996, the bilateral papers featured a new section titled “national security.” This development follows a year (1995) in which Mexico purchased seventy three percent of its imports from the United States and sent eighty four percent of its exports in return. After the first year of NAFTA, Mexico had a fifteen billion dollar trade deficit and was in a state of domestic economic crisis (U.S. Department of State 1995).

Mexico’s embrace of a neoliberal agenda in the 1990s, and their subsequent crippling debt, produced an economic climate that compelled the Oaxacan government to refocus on the tourist industry and pull funding from public works and services. In 2015, Governor Cue’s cabinet decided to redistribute funding for health services in order to build the Guelaguetza auditorium, which, since it’s construction, is always being blown apart by high winds and earthquakes (Esteva 2015). The 1991 bilateral report reads, “central to cultural expression are Mexico’s history and quest for national identity. Contemporary artists, architects, writers, musicians, and dancers continue to draw inspirations from a rich history of Indian civilization, colonial influence, revolution, and the development of the modern Mexican state.” While the Oaxacan government was building a high-security Guelaguetza auditorium and putting a heavy price tag on tickets to the festival, the United States was commending President Zedillo for his
“ambition plan...reforming the justice system, strengthening the fight against narcotics trafficking, and furthering Mexico’s market-oriented economic policies” (U.S. Department of State 1995). Of course, reforming the justice system and clamping down on drug trafficking can be read as direct attacks on rural indigenous communities. Governor Ulises Ruiz championed the same agenda when he came into office in 2004. “Reform” and “clamping down” translate to increased state and federal surveillance in pueblos, (which through usos y costumbres legally have the right to govern themselves), and specific targeting of political protestors and teachers who advocate for autonomy and plurality in rural schools.

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Isabel grew up as the daughter of Oaxaca’s Secretary of Forestry and Agriculture. When her parents moved to Oaxaca to work for the government, they adopted the tradition of going to Guelaguetza Oficial. On the day of the show, they would come together for breakfast at nine. Friends and family climbed up the hill to El Fortín and there they stayed through the dance of La Pluma and Flor de Piña, the midday meal and Las Chinas Oaxaqueñas, and finally the fireworks that flew off the danzantes’ paper maché costumes.

The first time Isabel went to Guelaguetza she was seven. She ran around on top of the hill with the governor’s children. In the 1970s, the high walls of the amphitheatre were decades away from construction, so the stage gave way to a bare hill. As the sun weakened, the children gave Isabel a gift
to take home. She remembered this and many other guelaguetzas fondly as a beautiful coming together of her Oaxacan family. In high school she, like all of the children of the political elite, learned some of the danzas. Her teacher was a master teacher who championed and defended the authenticity of each dance he taught. Isabel’s sister went on to perform at Guelaguetza Oficial for a few years.

Now in 2016, when Isabel isn’t traveling, her home is full of foreign tourists. She encourages everyone to come during July or August so that they can experience Guelaguetza. Like Governor Cue, she describes it as “la máxima fiesta de Oaxaca y de América latina.” Indeed she says, it is “the singular authentic Oaxacan festival.” For her, the word guelaguetza means “Bienvenida” because the festival is a way of welcoming everyone into Oaxaca and offering “tiny bits of their culture, and beliefs, folklore and customs and tradition.” On this day, “each of the eight regions unite (unirse)” for a day that fills her, as a Oaxacan, with the pride of being part of the Guelaguetza (Isabel, April 2017). She remembers how her parents always said that they were Oaxacan—one hundred percent.

UNIFYING A NATIONAL IMAGE

In order to understand the contemporary relationship between indigenous performers and the Oaxacan Government, a brief history of nationalism in Oaxaca is necessary. In the 1920s and 30s, Mexico was part of a trend in which Latin American nations made efforts to identify their
“indian” or “native” cultural past and incorporate certain aspects of these into a national image which they could present to the global leisure class. This agenda was not only globally oriented, but was also a move to unify the plural experiences and discontentments of people who lived in the state.

Pascual Ortiz Rubio was president of Mexico in 1932, the year the government created Guelaguetza Oficial. From 1928 to 1934, three different men were put in place as heads of state, but Plutarco “El Jeffe Máximo” Calles effectively retained political power during those years. First as president and later behind the scenes, Calles broadened the reach of the Mexican state into rural communities, incorporating them into the national economy and education system. José Vasconcelos, the secretary of education at the time established more than 1,000 rural schools and 2,000 public libraries. He also commissioned Diego Rivera and other artists to generate images of the nation that included indigenous people.

These moves foreshadowed Mexico’s project to increase, in Lynn Stephen’s words, “the state’s presence in indigenous communities and in turn integrating such communities into the national polity,” a process that came into full swing in the 1940s (2005, 123). Government personnel taught Spanish in communities with the ethos of helping “the Indian by making them more like us” (O’Malley, 1986, 121). Paradoxically, while the government was at work trying to assimilate indigenous people, they also relied on indigenous difference as a key component of Mexican culture and the commodity par excellence on which to build their budding tourist market.
Thus Guelaguetza began on the eve of a contradictory nationalist moment in which the government attempted to “modernize” indigenous Mexico while simultaneously incorporating particular aspects of indigenous culture and the nation’s indigenous past in order to fabricate a unified image of the country. This contradictory move was common at the beginning of the twentieth century, especially in countries that had won independence from colonial rule the century before.

In 1934, Lázaro Cárdenas was elected president as the candidate for the PRN. He ran on a ticket that centered on agrarian reform, which successfully appealed to rural populations and allowed him to centralize his power. The year of 1934 marked the end of the Maximato, and Cárdenas had an agenda to implement secular “socialist” education, especially in indigenous pueblos. At the same time, it was the interface through which the government could collect pieces of indigenous Mexico to shape a unique, homogenous image of the nation. He developed a number of programs in different villages, for example the Yalalag Social Institute. In 1937, Policar Ponte Sánchez was the president of the program in the town of Hidalgo Yalalag. He wrote that their mission was to “deepen, consolidate, identify and homogenize the culture of the region.” In programs like this, a government-employed teacher, who had been educated in the city would be sent out to a region without any fluency in the local language or any local historical knowledge. As a compensatory gesture, the government recommended that teachers wear indigenous dress in order to “identify” with the students. Monzoy reports that
this teaching job was billed not as an assimilation project but indeed a process of teaching the “yalalag to be more yalalagish” (2014).

The construction of indigenous identity and the nationalization of the Indian happened concurrently. The state began to organize expositions and national competitions of indigenous folk art in 1940. The same year, a statement in the national census declared contradictory goals. They planned to promote the continuation of indigenous culture, and “integrate indigenous communities into modern society materially and ideologically” (Mexican Census Bureau, 1940). This promotion of indigenous culture required latching onto one sliver of time, geography, mode of artistic expression, etc. It assumes that all of indigenous Mexico has always looked exactly like this and, if untouched by “modern civilization,” will continue in the same way forever after. Discursively, this political agenda robs indigenous people of their ability (which is a reality) to continuously and autonomously transform the way they live their lives, particularly and collectively. The government tried to force indigenous people to preserve the aesthetic components of their tradition while assimilating as passive subjects and producers to the neoliberal market.

These political moves were integral to the sovereignty of the Mexican government in a post-revolutionary moment when indigenous people were organizing from all regions of the country to demand land redistribution. The Mexican revolution was lead by intellectuals who called for social reform that prioritized laborers. Revolutionaries championed the call, “the land is for those who work it.” The revolution ended in 1920 when Obregón was elected
to office as the first figurehead of the National Revolutionary Party (PNR). The post-revolutionary government, with Cárdenas in office, strategically created the National Peasant Confederation (CNC) in 1934—the same year as the first Guelaguetza. The CNC was framed as a liaison between the government and local indigenous communities, which had conflicting opinions about whether the CNC granted autonomy to the people or cemented institutional power. Guelaguetza was in part an appeal to pueblos, an attempt to convince indigenous people that the government was keeping them in mind. It was part of a project to quell popular rebellions.

The Oaxacan government was invested in nationalism as a means of self-aggrandizement, a process that was “psychological [and] cultural, as it both bore witness to and stimulated a symbolic casting off of the mental chains of colonialism” (O’Malley 1986, 119). Guelaguetza was born out of a need to inter lived awareness of colonial violence, which existed in Mexico on a continuum with state violence. In place of indigenous stories, lived and living, the government engaged in the “invention of traditions,” fabricating harmonious illusions that freeze bodies in time and demand replicable images of culture (Hobsbawm 1983 1). Kirshenblatt-Gimblett writes that government sponsored festivals often “project a utopian national whole that harmoniously integrates regional diversity. [These] wholes are not given, but constituted” (1998, 20). By the state’s construction, Oaxaca became fictionally devoid of conflict—Guelaguetza becoming the main avenue for the creation of an image of harmony between the state and the people, at least until APPO moved in.
Guelaguetza Oficial takes place on the edge of the city. From the town’s historic tourist center, the auditorium can be seen looming in the hills to the south. The neighborhood surrounding the auditorium has the highest murder rates in the city. Because of this the government is always constructing infrastructure to streamline and secure the paths of tourists. A tourist family from California, for example, gets to wander down the cobblestone streets and gaze up to the white canopy where their summer vacation will culminate. On the last Monday of July, they will be transported in a clean bus, flying past the neighborhood, and delivered unsoiled to their numbered front-row seats. After the two-hour show, they will walk down the steps and encounter the people that the government thought they could hide. The vendors of the “popular class” transgress upon the simulation of order that the government orchestrates in the Guelaguetza stadium. They are embodied realities of a neoliberal state, earning their private revenue, visibly in the public spaces around the stadium. In contrast, the dancers inside are made to embody a fiction of a pueblo, an ideal that exists outside of the country’s and the region’s economic reality. The state, it should be remarked, will not pay them for this labor. STyDE asks a lucky few dance groups to perform hospitality by showering a foreign audience with gifts for which they will not be reimbursed. Outside, the vendors profit personally from the state’s commodification of their culture. They assert the price of their labor, resisting
an idyllic notion of indigenous generosity. The vendors’ very presence is a statement that indigenous people do not exist outside of the global capitalist economy. They have enabled its birth and growth, and now they will profit from it. The government hopes you will take a taxi to the top of the stadium and bypass this unregulated use of space.

Each seat in the stadium is angled to face the stage. In the proscenium, there is only one right place to look. The audience members are exempt from each other’s viewership, and unified in this exemption. The dances will be performed facing one direction, with the band directly behind. There is a wide gap between audience and stage, policed by more event personnel. Their presence reminds those in the front row not to leap out of their seats to collect fallen regalitos. Theorizing nationalism at the turn of the century, Overmyer-Velásquez writes of events like Guelaguetza, “These events simultaneously helped to unite the capital’s elites into a cohesive social group and provided the means with which to display ostentatiously their notions of modern society while simultaneously positioning themselves apart from activities they deemed as uncivilized” (Overmyer-Velázquez, 32). Cordoned off to the left, the dancers sit waiting for their entrance. Their seats are colored coded by each group’s matching dresses. No one sits out of line, as they are diligently on display.
BUILDING ORDER AT EL FORTÍN

In the context of Guelaguetza, the Oaxacan State wields its power over indigenous culture by reforming the physical structures in which the dances are performed. Before the first official Guelaguetza, the urban elite in Oaxaca city brought indigenous people to el centro to entertain them. In the ordered space of the city, colonists and their descendants enjoyed the exotic traditions without leaving their “civilized” or “modern” comforts. Today, at Guelaguetza Oficial, the state boasts about indigenous diversity but, once again, they do so on their turf, on their terms. They host the festival on a hill called El Fortín. El Fortín looms south of the town center, on the margins of it.

In 1932, people from the pueblos were brought to dance on what was then a bare hill people referred to as “El Cerro.” Gradually, the state built a stage, terraced seating, and a bandstand. People who were young in 1970 remember trekking up with their families and having a picnic to watch the dances from somewhere in the grass. Rich people would pay for a hard seat close to the stage, but the open hill was fair game and free of charge. The state had never stopped building and rebuilding the stadium, and with NAFTA in full swing, the stadium walls climbed higher. They built a sun cover over the front third of the audience and charged double for these seats. Ushers were hired to guide ticket holders around the straight rows of chairs. Behind each of them stood a security guard, watching their high gate. Not the people selling palomitas or the working family wandering by could see the stage from outside the gates. STyDE fixed the number of free seats that would be
available at each show and started to keep track of capacity. People who couldn’t afford the tickets started lining up hours before the show, and only the first two hundred would be allowed in.

I understand the use of space at the people’s Guelaguetzas as a gentle but effective protest to the spectacularization that characterizes Guelaguetza Oficial. Patrons at El Fortín are forced to stay seated, facing the dancers. Their stillness stands in contrast to the sweeping movements of the dancers on the stage. The patrons are to rest and relax while the dancers perform their culture, which is decidedly separate from their own.

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As I sit in the audience at Guelaguetza 2016, I see it on the faces of the dancers. In the official proscenium, women wear plastered smiles even while seated off stage. While dancing a mourning ritual, their eyes gaze up, performing joy for the audience. The Guelaguetza stage is, indeed, built as a site for observation. The dancers are not doing their dance; they are performing it. The audience is not seeing their dance; they are observing it. When the audience looks at the stage, they see people moving around with each other. Years ago, the people coming to watch would also be free to wander around, sharing food with each other and enjoying the whole day. In Isabel’s memories of the festival in the 1970s, the audience and dancers are not having the same experience, but both groups are mobile and interacting amongst themselves. In 2016, the dances are mimetic representation of
celebration, rather than celebration itself. The viewers in the stadium can observe this symbolic celebration, but they are given little room to make a celebration with each other.

**RECONTEXTUALIZING LA DANZA**

It is important to understand Guelaguetza Oficial as a fabrication of the state rather than a reproduction of anything that happens in contemporary indigenous communities. Furthermore, the festival that is performed at El Fortín is not a capturing of some historical moment in which these dances and the culture existed in a “purer” form. Indeed, the culture that created them is syncretic and just as much colonial as it is autochthonous. Kirshenblatt-Gimblett writes, “Ethnographers create objects through detachment and contextualization” (1998, 18). The Oaxacan state, in conjunction with many ethnographers, visual artists in the Western canon, novelists, etc., have partaken in such fabrication of a national image of Mexico. I am theorizing Guelaguetza as an ethnographic object of this joint creation since its conception in 1932, and in specific ways since then. Spatially, the moment of detachment occurred before the first Guelaguetza. Pamphlets advertising the festival love to boast that people have been traveling to Oaxaca de Juárez since Moctezuma’s time to entertain people in power. The dances that are performed in 2016 are not separate from, but are precisely shaped by, their history of locational detachment. Kirshenblatt-Gimblett’s asserts that it is impossible to separate detachment from contextualization, or re-
contextualization. The danzas performed at Guelaguetza never existed in isolation, not even before the advent of the festival. Show that is staged in the auditorium has been colored and shaped by a constant process of detachment and re-contextualization. For the sake of specificity, I want to return to La Danza de la Pluma, to describe this act.

The ways in which La Pluma is re-contextualized allow the audience to affectively detach from the performers. Guelaguetza Popular is a call to remember political prisoners, victims of the state, and people suffering current oppressions. Conversely, the STyDE orchestrates Guelaguetza Oficial so that each dance can be extracted as an aesthetic object. The proscenium setting invites spectators to imagine the dancing as fictional, to see the dancers as characters, caricature and authentic ones, at that. Outside of these shows and other festivals in their pueblos, the performers neither tell the cliché jokes nor go around dancing these steps. The dances are fictional in the sense that the dancers have rehearsed their dance and their verbal interludes with an audience in mind, crafted them into mimetic and repeatable versions of the dances they were already doing. However, the performers, their connection to their places and their experiences of state power are extremely real. The carcelar quality of the stadium, its history as a military fort, the physical distance between dancers and spectators are not incidental. They are strategic moves by the state and the STyDE even though they are not aware of the affective qualities of the space they have constructed. The stadium allows and invites viewers to lock indigenous oaxaqueños in the dances they perform.
Much of the audience has no other interaction with people from pueblos, with the possible exception of meeting vendors at Abastos, the city’s market. By the state’s fabrication, Guelaguetza stands as a complete description of Oaxacan village life. The STyDE feeds what they find to be the most picturesque performance of indigeneity to visitors, in hopes that this will satisfy them, that they won’t feel the need to look more closely. Fronting indigenous craft and beauty, they obfuscate the reform and violence that they have historically inflicted and are today inflicting.

BREAKING THE POET’S GIFT

At Guelaguetza Oficial, indigenous memories are flattened into tropes. The vocal interludes are constrained to sexists jokes, with little variation from town to town. At the end of each, the seated audience erupts with predictable laughter. The testimonies at Guelaguetza Popular are not just affective tools to provoke a reaction from the audience. Each moment of speech is an embodiment of violent history—a re-membering. Anne Carson’s work in *Economy of the Unlost*, which chronicles the relationship between political economy and poetry, is helpful to think through such re-membering. Carson sets out to explore “the moral life of a user of money and something about the poetic life of an economy of loss” (1999, 10) through Simonides of Keos who was a Greek poet in fifth Century B.C. While this cultural context is thousands of years old and thousands of miles from contemporary Oaxaca, Carson’s work is relevant in that she speaks to the anarchic nature of Greek
economy as informed by art making and gift-giving. She writes, “A gift has both economic and spiritual content, is personal and reciprocal, and depends on a relationship that endures over time” (1999, 12). Spirituality, reciprocity and endurance are key components of guelaguetza as mutual aid, small town dance festivals, and Guelaguetza popular. Guelaguetza in its government iteration ignores these three qualities in favor of an abstract notion of culture and of the capitalist economy. On the hill at Guelaguetza Oficial, the audience pays US$100 in order to see these days condensed into a few hours. They don’t have the patience for the moments of quiet in the church, the pause to dress penachos in plastic when it rains, or the tuning and returning of the student band. The wide spirituality of this celebration has to be reconfigured to match the immediacy of the global tourist market. Anne Carson writes, “The poet does not just use memory, [she] embodies it (43, original emphasis). This distinction engages the dialectic of capitalism and gift economy. Memory can be employed as a performative tool to win over a paying audience. Or, it can be embodied as an experience that effects a similar experience in the viewer and creates a tie between their subjectivities. This distinction might be understood as the difference between material and corporeal. A performer’s body can be understood as material that has the utility of provoking emotion. Or, the body can be understood as the container of a soul, that remembers other souls, and in so doing, reminds the bodies who are watching of their own, of the bodies and souls before, and the ones around. The performers at Guelaguetza Oficial are dancing indigenous stories
tangled up with state violence. The audience is allowed to forget this, delighting in the tropes of the pueblos. The government renders embodied memory as a tool for economic development, flattening history into a consumable object with a very expensive price tag.

Each group of performers brings a gift to throw at the audience: mangoes, pan dulce, chocolate, plantains. The dancers collect hundreds of these gifts to share with the audience, joining forces like Teotecs do for La Pluma, but the recipients will not be in a position to reciprocate. As with many government sponsored dance shows, this relationship is mediated by cash. When the stage performs a hard line between native “other” and modern art patron, the dancers are acknowledged with a (menial) cash earning. At Guelaguetza Oficial the wealthy audience has paid the Oaxacan state, and the dancers will see none of it. The practice of guelaguetza is not even simulated by an exchange of performance (and gifts) for cash. There is no personal indebtedness to speak of: no sense of endurance. The dances and offerings are contorted out of the realm of gifting, and onto a stage of exploitation.

Carson’s work on the gift exchange between Simonides and Greek royalty describes the exchange of live performance for material goods. She describes the Greek economy as anarchic as it predated the prevalence of coins as currency. Thus, transactions were particular to the people trading and not mediated by a standardized institution. She cites Marx, who writes that the introduction of money into a human relationship serves to externalize human capacity, and consequently, alienates those in the interaction from each other.
(1999, 15). Conversely, in the gift economies about which Carson writes, “Objects in exchange form a kind of connective tissue between giver and receiver” (1999, 18). The mention of objects is relevant here. The term guelaguetza refers to both the object being exchanged and the practice of ongoing, reciprocal exchange. The endurance of the relationship is dependent on the materiality of the trade. In gifting, currency does not intervene to create an abstraction of the shared physical experience. In Carson’s words, the “object carries the history of the giver into the life of the receiver” (1999, 18). Guelaguetza Oficial cannot be a site of mutual exchange because it is predicated on a spectacularization of indigenous histories and present struggles that will not be allowed to affect the lives of the receivers. Put poetically, “Money replaces love in the interaction” (1999, 37). Carson gives the example of an exchange between poet and king. The poet offers a live moment of performance. He shares his forte for the pleasure of the table. In return, he is invited to dine with his audience and enjoy the king’s food (that his servants prepared). The exchange depends on a sustained period of time shared at the heterogeneous space of the dining table. Artists sit among royalty. The moment of exchange forms or enforces a physio-social relationship between one person with creative plenty and another with material wealth. In Simonides’s case, this gift exchange is a way of life and a source of earning. He is dependent on the endurance of the relationship. When money is understood as that which links a performer and their audience, there is no need to sustain a particular relationship.
And it is not that simple. Many dancers enjoy performing for Guelaguetza Oficial, others aspire to some day perform in it, and yet others have done it and don’t care to go again. Since the first show in 1932, the government has succeeded in developing it as a professional and prestigious spectacle. Many towns audition each year, hoping to perform their local history on the hill. As a national and international tourist attraction, there are local benefits. The month of Guelaguetza comes with a boost for hostel owners, artisan vendors, and food-makers in the formal and informal economies that comprise Oaxaca’s market. Indigenous or urban, farm workers, politicians, street vendors, and many other residents of the state from different backgrounds are affected by Guelaguetza Oficial.

Relationships and friendships between audience and performers are the exception, not the rule, yet both groups across the class spectrum name Guelaguetza Oficial as an event that defines their community. For wealthy urban Oaxacans in 2016, the tradition engages them for an afternoon once a year spent watching different indigenous groups perform their culture and history. The women dress in brand new jeans and heels, plenty of makeup, huge jewelry, and often a handmade blouse sewn by an indigenous woman somewhere outside the city. When the dancers throw “guelaguetza” at the audience, the botox grandmas stand on their chairs and elbow their neighbors to catch the treats. The granddaughters use the straw hat souvenirs as a mitt for catching mangoes. For dancers, it is an opportunity to assert their local identity on an (inter)national stage. Where spectators at El Fortín devote one
day (and tons of cash) to the festival, the performers rehearse their dances each weekend, year-round.

In 1932, Governor Anastacio García Toleda and his secretary were preparing for the first Homenaje Racial. Five years later, a child named Gustavo was born to the secretary. He sent him out of state to live with his grandmother when he was a child. His grandmother went in and out of the backdoor while her tall, lighter skinned nieto used the front entrance. When Gustavo returned to his natal city forty years later, he felt too old to learn the folk dances that many people had learned in school. By then, the Homenaje Racial had been renamed Guelaguetza to, in Gustavo’s words, “avoid the obvious racist content, which was still present in the festival” and in attempt to naturalize the festival as an always indigenous practice.

Of the festival which his father helped develop, Gustavo says, “both the government and private business want to commercialize our culture for their own purposes”—for the tourist elite. The political elite of his father’s generation offered Oaxacan culture to the world, presented as a public spectacle. Gustavo feels a kinship with the dances and the dancers who perform them. Once he told me, melancholicly, that the contemporary practices of danza “are betrayed and distorted when presented out of their context.” In references to Guelaguetza Oficial and the practice of guelaguetza
as mutual aid he says, “there is a connection of course: the dances themselves are rooted in our traditions” (Gustavo, April 2017).

**AFFECTIVE DISTANCE**

In the form of Guelaguetza Oficial, people know they are gathering because the dancers will be dancing. The Guelaguetza stage is built as a site for observation. Patrons are forced to stay seated, facing the dancers. They are to rest and relax while the dancers perform their culture, which is decidedly separate from their own and which they are there to passively enjoy. Their stillness stands in contrast to the sweeping movements of the dancers on the stage. I see it on the dancers’ faces. Women plaster on smiles even before they step onto the stage. During a piece that is danced in the pueblos as a mourning ritual, their eyes gaze up, performing joy for the audience. They are not doing this ritual; they are presenting it. Ritual takes place in a community where doers and watchers are indiscernible. The audience is not seeing their dance; they are observing it. When Teotecos practice La Levantada de la Corona, they dance La Danza de La Pluma as part of this ritual. Town residents see the dance as they pass through the town square. The women see their brothers and nephews dancing as they cross the courtyard to stir atole. They see each other as they are doing what they are doing. Guelaguetza Oficial has gradually converted La Danza de La Pluma, and many other ritual dances, into spectacles. These cultural sites where members of a community came to see each other have become transactions between performers and observers.
Kirshenblatt-Gimblett writes, “we have long known that what we observe is changed by virtue of being observed” (1998, 49). The Oaxacan state has transformed each dance by importing and encouraging western spectatorship over the years; the committee that selects which groups get to perform has become more and more selective. In response to the judgmental gazes of the committee, indigenous groups have adapted their aesthetics to fit tourist market expectations.

The construction of El Fortín effectively separates the moneyed modern world from indigenous Oaxaca, even as Oaxaca advertises itself by promoting indigeneity. Over nearly a century, the government has committed seemingly endless resources to the building and rebuilding of a stadium that can be universally recognized on the neoliberal tourist market as a site of civilized cultural production. Tourists and Oaxacan elite need to position themselves as voyeurs to indigenous culture to feel their own modernity affirmed. We (because I have bought the ticket, too) pay for an experience that reminds us of the rich culture that exists on the margins without being reminded of the government’s corruption or the colonization of these cultures, the vast inequality that defines Oaxaca, nor the fact that these performers are not getting paid (Manzanos 2012). More specifically, it is a site in which Oaxacan government officials can show off to the swarms of tourists. They curate the image of indigenous Oaxaca to look just like an evening at a European theater, with a hint of “authentic” Oaxacan flavor. The rigid choreography of security personnel and, seat numbers, capacity clickers,
perform this Oaxaca as a cultured, peaceful and democratic state. Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, puts this in global context, identifying a trend among nation states in which it is economically beneficial to tell tourists that there is one ideal way to experience a country. In this case, that ideal is Guelaguetza. It costs between US$50 and US$100, and you can only experience it at specific times of the year. The government leverages the idea that the last Monday of July is the “traditional” day to have this festival, fabricating a culture of scarcity around the celebration. Hypocritically, however, since the 1990s, they have slowly begun to add additional time slots: a second show on Monday, then two shows the Sunday before and, now, four additional shows the first Sunday and Monday of August.

GAMES OF APPROPRIATION

As the state recasts a reduced concept of indigeneity on to the pueblos, craftspeople and rural vendors appropriate the state’s capitalist project to support themselves, their family and their community. While Guelaguetza reigns from July through the first week of August, foreign revenue pours in from the pockets of national and international tourists. The most polished dance groups, as selected by the STyDE, gather inside the stadium and indigenous people from the same towns line the steps outside. They are not dressed in “authentic” garb. Their kids run around amidst floral oilcloths, just tall enough to make eye contact with the plastic bowls of salsa. The stands are unevenly spaced and the prices are negotiable. These cooks and craftspeople
have decided to use the state’s construction of authenticity to their advantage. They make souvenirs or buy them in bulk from someone who imported them from China. They are indigenous, entrepreneurial, and they market indigenous culture, just like the dancers who perform at the top of the steps. The Oaxacan government doesn’t want to advertise these families, living their daily lives, making do within a deeply stratified economic system. The image that the government presents has to be more easily digested. Patrons of Guelaguetza are encouraged to ignore their positionality as they enjoy the performative labor of indigenous Oaxacan people. The process is full of paradoxes. Through a synthesis of early twentieth century sources, Overmyer-Velásquez notes that elites “attempted to remove traces of the popular classes from the city’s center. Yet the arrival of wealthy tourists ironically attracted ‘vagrants’” (2006, 30). While the contemporary government might use a more politically correct term than “vagrants,” the attitude toward rural and urban poor remains violently intact. Meters away from a synthetic beacon of ethnic purity and rural simplicity that is Guelaguetza Oficial, Oaxacan people display their complex daily lives, upending the escapist comfort that tourists might have found inside the stadium.

The notion of authenticity, when wielded by the state and federal governments, relies on the ability to extract and reduce indigenous cultures in the form of handcrafts, rituals, and images. In order for the government to capitalize on authenticity, objects and practices are often removed from the contexts in which they are made and used. Guelaguetza is the most financially
lucrative example of cultural extraction in Oaxaca. Many of the dances performed on stage were practiced as rituals in different pueblos before 1932. Significantly, many of these rituals took shape during colonial missionary occupation. Here, the concept of ethnic or cultural purity has already fallen apart. The image that intellectuals and entrepreneurs hold on to as “authentic Oaxaca” is dependent upon its extraction from the geographic and material setting that gives it meaning. By way of example, once a dance has been removed from its pueblo, it begins to take on new meaning in the Guelaguetza stadium. The cultural context is fine art, proscenium spectacle, an “authentic” Oaxacan sampler. Each dance that comes to Guelaguetza is shaped by the conventions of Western performance. More importantly, the different indigenous dances become a cultural context for one another. In 2016, most of the dances performed at Guelaguetza Oficial followed the same format, were interspersed with the same racist jokes. This kind of homogeneity is constructed intentionally by the STyDE, and circuitously by the proximity of the distinct dances, as they have been performed on El Fortín for nearly a century. Further, the refigured images of regional and communal culture are not isolated to the stadium on the hill. On the second Monday of August when performers travel back to their pueblos, they carry a version of the dance that has transformed, if subliminally, through the moments of co-performance with other regions. The Oaxacan state molds indigenous identity through this series of hyper-visible performances.
I move now to Guelaugetza Popular y Magisterial, a festival of dances that aesthetically are no far cry from la oficial. The complexity lies in what people at la Popular are doing—are free to do—in the audience or off stage. I am listening in detail to the dances themselves, to the struggles that propelled this festival into being, and to the provocations that the dancers are making for a future of autonomía y dignidad para el pueblo de Oaxaca.
Guelaguetza Popular

Chapter 3

en memoria de los caídos, presos políticos y desaparecidos

On July 25th, Guelaguetza Popular is scheduled to start at nine in the morning. I arrive with a few friends around eleven thirty and the stadium seats are mostly empty. No one knows when the dancing actually started—la hora de la resistencia. The day is already hot. Behind a huddle of sweating heads, two sisters are selling wide straw hats and for the first few hours, the tlayudas and barbacoa have more of an audience than the dancers. We are walking on a high bridge that overlooks the field. Half of the walkway is occupied by people watching the dancers, interspersed with young honey vendors. From thirty meters up, the dancers look quite small. We continue with the ambling crowd and eventually make it in, descending until the dancers are in clear view. People start to gather in the stands—this guelaguetza is in the round, so

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12 This dedication appears on the posters that advertise Guelaguetza Popular y Magisterial. It translates to, “in memory of the fallen, the political prisoners, and the disappeared” “fallen” refers to those who have been killed, and disappeared to those who have been kidnapped and imprisoned by the government in the waves of police repression of people who are suspected to be involved with APPO. https://chiapas.quadratin.com.mx/sucesos/programa-magisterio-la-guelaguetza-popular-25-julio/

13 Guelaguetza Popular translates literally to “the people’s guelaguetza”

14 A joke among some radical intellectuals I stayed with who are always arriving late. The phrase “resistance time” or “activist time” is a gentle and persistent affront to corporate/government time. The phrase laughs in the face of the conceit that “time is money.”
the audience sits on all sides of the stage. As the sun gets stronger, everyone migrates to sit tightly on the shaded western face.

In the middle of the soccer field is a square stage, barely occupying one-fifth of the green. Plastic chairs are set on all four sides for the dancers who are about to perform—their “backstage” is completely visible to the general audience. In the tradition of Guelaguetza Oficial, dancers bring treats to throw after each dance. Here, the people in the stadium seats watch as the dancers on stage toss treats to the other dancers seated around them. One group of dancers waiting their turn in the sitting area catches mangos and pan dulce from the dancers performing. When they get on stage, they will toss plátanos at the dancers who perform after them in a sort of guelaguetza relay. Little siblings play chase on the green between the sitting performers and the public. Even the front-most bleacher seats are meters away from the seated performers. Each participating town has sent a dance group and their band. Many musicians and dancers are students, but most are teachers or parents. From mid-morning until late afternoon, the stage will be populated alternately by dance groups and members of APPO giving political testimony. The performers are as young as eight and as old as grandparents.

At Guelaguetza Oficial, each dance group is required to open their piece by telling a self-deprecating joke, always structured something like this “In our town the women are_____ and the men do ______,” ending with a sexist or culturally essentializing punch line. At Guelaguetza Popular, these spoken interludes are moments for the teachers to declare their personal and
communal manifestos, and to speak out against the government. Many performers riff on the sleazy joke format, flipping the script so the government bears the brunt. The interludes are present first in Spanish, and then always in the village’s *idioma*. In addition to the creative introductions, each gap between dances features a member of Sección 22 who addresses an aspect of the teachers’ struggle, from their own perspective. These interludes form a thread of re-membering the bodies and souls that have fallen under the violence of the state.

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In 2006, people who were opposed to the education reform and political repression gathered at El Fortín. They weren’t there to perform for the touristing elite. The auditorium was full of people from all regions of Oaxaca, as it had been in July since 1932, but these people were not gathered for a sugar-coated exchange between performers and spectators. No government official or rich vacationer was about to consume their indigeneity for leisure. They were there on their own accord as the nascent Popular Assembly of the Peoples of Oaxaca (APPO) to protest the government’s commodification of their culture and homogenization of their education systems. From the beginning, APPO has included members from roughly 350 different organizations and has always been a coming together of people from many different class positions with a breadth of discontentments with the Ruiz government. The specific goals that they initially articulated were to develop a new state constitution and system of government (Chibnik, 2007).
Members of the newly formed APPO took to the auditorium, filling the stands with their bodies—not dancing but, rather, occupying—to remind the city that these lands were stolen lands. They would not allow indigenous performers to dance the past of conquest while ignoring the present military occupation of Oaxaca City and the surrounding villages. Members of APPO tagged the stadium in red paint: “Fuera Ulises,”15 (“Get Ulises Out”). From the historic town center, these words written on the hill were visible to tourists who strolled around in anticipation of Lunes del Cerro. The teachers burned auditorium risers in the specific area where the governor would have sat on the following Monday to catch gifts from the unpaid performers. In response to the actions of APPO, and with concerns about the tourist economy and the Oaxacan elite, the head of the STyDE made a public statement to put everyone at ease: “A celebration for the people, by the people could never be at risk,” he said, as he assured the public that the official festival would proceed as usual.

But no matter how aggressively the government tried to disregard APPO’s demands, the reality was that the people, organized in the Popular Assembly, had taken control of the city. Ruiz called off Guelaguetza Oficial and the governor’s cultural staff planned to stage the annual performance in El Llano. The main park in downtown Oaxaca, El Llano is a space where vendors, young people, lovers, and people without homes, gather daily. It is truly a public space, and for the most part free from police surveillance. Since the STyDE’s property was in the hands of the pueblo, they tried to assert their

15 Ulises Ruiz Ortiz was the Governor of Oaxaca from 2004 to 2010.
ownership over this public place. Before the official dancing could begin however, APPO descended to reclaim the land. In place of the codified performance, a violent dance erupted between government pawns and indigenous teachers. The band did not play. An improvised orchestra of metal rods and wooden sticks filled the park. APPO forced the government into performing their conflict, which was present, not past, rather than staging a façade of sympathy between the government and indigenous people. Tourists who had followed Ruiz’s relocation of Guelaguetza heard cries of discontent, as people from hundreds of different pueblos stood and dances with dignity into the town center.

Many of the people who were tasked with asserting the government’s claim to El Llano—municipal and state troupes—were from the same pueblos as the members of APPO: family members of the people in the teachers’ struggle. Groups of students and teachers from all over the state came dressed in costumes indistinguishable from those of the government performers. In some cases, two groups from the same town danced the same dance, one having been conscripted by the government, the other coming to protest the Government’s conscription. Walking through the park, even someone who had attended Guelaguetza Oficial since childhood could not have separated the performers who had gathered as APPO from those who were brought there by the STyDE.
APPO AND THE FIRST GUELAGUETZA POPULAR

As I bring into conversation Guelaguetza Oficial and Guelaguetza Popular, or the Oaxacan government and APPO, or viewers and dancers, I emphasize that none of these entities can or should be put in binary opposition to one another. Rather, I am moving with a Foucauldian sense of the codependent nature of limits and transgression. Foucault challenges the binary opposition between social ordinances (limits) and the negation of them (transgression) by offering that limits and transgression only come into being and are only discernable in their moment of encounter. In fact their existence comes alive only if they come into direct conflict with each other (1977, 34). In this moment of conflict, the act of transgression and the limit are inseparable, and that moment brings with it everything that leads up to and comes after it. In Foucault’s words, the moment in which the limit and the act of transgression encounter each other is also “everything which overflows from it on all sides” (1977, 34). With this way of thinking about encounter, we can understand the 2006 events that gave “origin” to Guelaguetza Popular as the result of conditions created by centuries of colonial domination and indigenous struggle, in which the colonizing actors and the indigenous agents can never be entirely separated or discerned.

Part of that which overflows from this moment of encounter is the presence and aliveness of centuries of colonial violence. And to invoke colonial violence in Oaxaca is also always to refer to indigenous resistance. Teachers and students have been demonstrating and taking direct action
against the state since the middle of the twentieth century. In 1973, ten thousand students and residents of Oaxaca City mobilized to advocate for increased wages for municipal bus drivers. Six years later, the teachers vocalized their frustration with the SNTE, which had become a mask for centralized government control over public education. They successfully forced a reorganization of the union and created the CNTE.\(^\text{16}\) I offer this history to assert that the manifestation of people who showed up and successfully disabled Guelaguetza Oficial, is a transgression in a history of violent limits which Oaxacan government personnel, and Spanish colonizers before them, are always trying to impose and enforce.

I am theorizing Guelaguetza Oficial as a limit that the teachers strategically chose to transgress. The government festival, when it is allowed to operate as usual, performs a separation—a neutral relationship—between indigenous people and the government. Until the teachers occupied the stadium that July, that clean-cut limit through which the state staged indigenous “otherness” to be consumed by an audience was not visible. Festival-goers could partake in the Guelaguetza Oficial as if it stood on its own, as if the it transparently represented the performers’ life and culture, indeed as if they only existed to perform at this festival. When APPO made itself present in El Llano, anyone attending the festival was made immediately and viscerally aware of the historical and contemporary political context of the relationship between the communities who dance for Guelaguetza, and the

\(^\text{16}\) See Chapter 2 in We are the Face of Oaxaca by Lynn Stephen for a more comprehensive history of post-revolution indigenous struggles in Oaxaca.
state entities that produce the festival. In an unscripted call and response, one teacher shouted, “Fuera los capitalistas de Oaxaca,”\textsuperscript{17} and the APPO chorus roared “¡Fuera!” The call and response continued: get the rich people out, get the cowards out, etc. In the moment that the teachers were attacking the Government sympathizers with terms such as “capitalists,” “cowards,” and “rich,” these might have seemed like obvious identifiers (Stephen 2006). These accusations stood in stark contrast to the pleasant affect that dancers usually wear at El Fortín where the audience is not so explicitly made aware of their class privilege, or their complicity with government repression. Alongside the student performers, and tangled up with danzantes who were slated to perform for la Oficial, tourists and government personnel were confronted by a patchwork of oaxaqueños who were not done-up with “traditional” costumes for the sake of a show. Without these masks, everyone in El Llano was made to consider the violence that Guelaguetza Oficial is always perpetrating.

As past histories of violence overflowed into the moment of confrontation in El Llano, and as this moment of confrontation faded into the past, it was clear that the event foreshadowed a decade of similar clashes. From 2006 forward, the government would continue pretending that it always acted in the interests of the Oaxacan people, and the people would rise to challenge this notion. In 2016 they are constantly transgressing limits set up by the state to remind us of the specific ways in which this is untrue. As a result of these challenges, people have been “disappeared” and killed by the

\textsuperscript{17} Translates to “Get the capitalists out of Oaxaca.”
government, and the SNTE continues to pass laws which eliminate indigenous languages from the curriculum in rural schools, replace local teachers with urban transplants, and refuse to raise wages. The moment in El Llano poured out into the years that followed as the teachers were forced to restage the 2006 demonstration in different forms.

In 2007, the teachers decided to host their own Guelaguetza, which appropriated the form of the government production while making space for teachers to speak out about the violence being committed against them, their coworkers and their families. That year, they resisted Guelaguetza Oficial by offering a free version of a similar celebration, which flew in the face of the capitalistic original. While many pueblos have been performing these dances on their own terms for centuries, sometimes even referring to their celebrations as local Guelaguetzas, Guelaguetza Popular y Magisterial was the first time that many different pueblos decided to come together, appropriating the form of La Oficial, and asserting free and open admission. Since then, APPO and CNTE have staged Guelaguetza Popular in the soccer stadium at the Tech Institute of the Autonomous University of Benito Juarez (UABJO). Under federal law, autonomous universities have the “ability and the responsibility to govern themselves” (Herdández 2013). This autonomy was the result of student struggles across Mexico in the twentieth century. In theory, this means that municipal, state and federal police are not allowed on campus property. Of course, as has been the case in many other student struggles in Latin America and other parts of the world, the government has
violently occupied universities to “keep the peace” during student strikes and demonstrations and during periods of insurgency. Remarkably, no police or military forces have intruded on the people’s Guelaguetza since 2007. The teachers put on their festival as an eminently political event while, up on the government’s hill, the paying audience continues to embrace the eminently apolitical Guelaguetza Oficial, forgetting or ignoring the present realities of the performers as well as the centuries of indigenous struggle, which a dance like La Pluma is always performing.

In chapter two, with Anaya Muñoz, I spoke about Guelaguetza Oficial as a precursor to the politics of recognition which were enacted in the late twentieth century. I also understand the politics of recognition as central to the political climate out of which Guelaguetza Popular arose. The federal reforms of the 1980s, which aimed to recognize indigenous culture and ethnic diversity, did not inherently exclude or marginalize indigenous people. Within and against the state rhetoric of indigenous diversity, teachers found ways to reclaim the government’s projects, which seek to define their own culture for them. The teachers who organized the first Guelaguetza Popular identified Guelaguetza Oficial as an institution that presents and constructs ethnic identity (Anaya Muñoz 2004). They appropriated the performance structure to make an explicit commentary on the ways in which the state’s supposed celebration of ethnic diversity works to replace the voices and lives of real indigenous people in a self-serving way. In addition to Guelaguetza Popular, many autonomous artist and artisan collectives, indigenous agriculture and
medicine workshops, people’s museums and many other anti-statist, anti-neoliberal projects have sprung up in Oaxaca in spades.

Returning to La Danza de la Pluma, I focus on the ways in which people at the popular festival—dancers and non-dancers, teachers and non-teachers—take up space in a public university stadium, coming together to speak out about government violence and honor the loved ones they have lost in political struggle. I focus on the aesthetic and historical components of La Danza de la Pluma, as well as on the ways people use space in the audience and around the stadium in to shed light on the effects of state violence.

Eight dancers stand in parallel lines, and one parades down the center. The latter spins in the air with show-off-ish leaps. His step is buoyant and unburdened, punctuating with a cocky skip before bouncing back to his throne at one end of the stage. These nine grown men wear coordinated *penachos*. The headdresses weigh about two kilos, but the parents I talk to round the weight up to five, exaggerating the strength of their dancing sons.

In some pueblos, the person dancing Cortés wears a different color *penacho*, but Moctezuma’s army and Cortés’s costumes are strikingly similar. Cortés’s parades down the center are short, interrupted by the crisscross of the eight other dancers who play indigenous soldiers. The band drops out for a quiet drumroll and maraca shake as the dancers parade around each other. This arrhythmic procession happens often in the longer forms of La Pluma,
giving the dancers a moment to rest their leaping legs. On the loud speaker the voice of a festival volunteer calls: “A la doctora de la Sección 22, le pedimos hacerse presente aquí en este…por el sonido. La doctora, servicio médico.”

The danzantes synchronize this gesture of communal care with a lull in the music, not shouting over nor apologizing for the interruption. The two girls take the stage after this pause. They begin on opposite ends. One wears an “indigenous costume”—not what indigenous women wear in their pueblos, but a generic indigenous headdress of “native” feathers and dress of “earth tones,” much like the one at Guelaguetza Oficial. The other girl wears a colonial costume. A gaudy plume trails from her cowgirl hat. As they parade around the space between Moctezuma’s army and …, they keep their distance, not closing paths like the soldiers. When they reach a corner, they spin with pride and their skirts catch air. They pause to face each other and swing silk scarves rhythmically. It is patient and focussed, a sort of coy play, drawn out over eight bars. The flutes come in, faster, and the girls break the tense space they have opened between each other. They cross in each other’s paths with a slight shoulder shrug, bouncing on the downbeat. After two passes, La Indígena starts to follow the one in the colonial costume, egging her on. She backs off, and they face each other again, skipping backward and forward in a tease. Throughout this play, their footwork is articulate and perfectly in sync—with the music, with each other. They run back to Cortés, and stand loyally by. In a sudden moment of resolution, all eleven dancers step hop to mingle with each other and fill the stage.
Next to the story of La Pluma on stage, a man swoops one arm in a generous scooping gesture, part of a story he is telling a friend—not over, but alongside the *banda*. The dancing is one of many performances in the visual landscape of Guelaguetza Popular. Dozens of dancers gather in anticipation of their moment on stage. Rows of chairs on four sides of the stage serve as a sort of open-air green room. The dancers are on display to the people in the stands in an improvised performance of waiting. Their chairs face the stage platform head-on, but dancers and their families are leaning into a neighbor’s umbrella, having a conversation over one shoulder, glancing back at the show of people in the stands. Even as their gazes drift from the stage, their presence supports the *compas* who are dancing. Among dance groups, *la danza* is not a spectacle. The value of their movement does not depend upon the undivided attention of an audience. They are performing as part of a shared social landscape. Instead of looking for technique and artistic execution on stage, people glance around to each other’s mezcal cups, and jump at an opportunity to refill. Each dance group comes near the stage? long before and lingers for a while after, in support of another pueblo’s dance. Dancers, their families, teachers, and audience members have agreed upon a loose practice of trading shifts, as the teachers do when camping out at road blockades. The festival is eight hours, but most people come just for two or three. The chairs around the stage are always almost full. The teachers and their families are well practiced
in these non-verbal negotiations of space, having spent time together at road blockades, in improvised autonomous classrooms, and at community assemblies. When a family gathers their bags and scoots out, a little boy wanders in to fill a seat left empty.

The crowd’s umbrellas shift and bobble in polyrhythm with the maracas. Their overlapping fabrics mirror the twirling penachos on stage and mix with every variety of straw hat. A boy taps at the umbrella in front that is blocking his view. A girl in jeans and a pink long-sleeve stands on her plastic chair, not because her view is blocked, but for the fun of standing on a chair. An older woman lays a rebozo over her head and lets it fall gracefully over her shoulders. Next to her stands a man with a crumpled t-shirt in a pile on his head. Doing guelaguetza is not only a performance. To come to the festival is to enter a conversation, a movement. The audience of dancers, and the public in the stands, move through the festival unscripted and looking to each other for cues. Each person at Guelaguetza Popular participates in the dance of shifting folding chairs, beating sun, casual clothes, pristine costumes, western wind instruments and melting nieves, carving space for their particular histories of pain and pleasure.

The performers hold space at Guelaguetza Popular in a way that has been cultivated in resistance to and defiance of top-down definitions of their culture, which the government has tried to impose for the last century. In studying the people’s festival, I am interested specifically in the ways in which participants resist superimposed notions of culture.
In the space between dances, performers voice their stories, which the government makes no room for in their policies and events. At Guelaguetza Popular, there are long pauses in the middle of each dance, sometimes due to a technology glitch, but mostly to make room for oral testimony. There is a wide gap from one dance to the next. People refill each other’s plastic shot glasses with mescal. The entire band packs up and a similar landscape of different musicians takes their place. In this space, the performers chisel the air with shouted testimony. Orally, they re-write their history into Guelaguetza, where on the hill, the government has pushed it out. A woman calls out the name of her disappeared husband. Her dance partner starts, “El pueblo unido,” and the whole stadium joins him, “Jamás será vencido!” At Guelaguetza Oficial, there is no in-between. The dances blow straight through and after each, before one pueblo? has even left the stage, the next group walks on leaving no time to soak up the last piece. Squishing dozens of constructed traditions together leaves no space for them to breathe. If the Oaxacan state creates voids, places where the people don’t exist, performers at Guelaguetza Popular fill this void with the voices that were always already there. The dances they offer are guelaguetza to the community. Teachers in the stands receive their words and help them remember los caídos; the ones who have fallen; the ones who the state has made fall. Chanting together, the receivers return the gift with their political support.
I finally get up the guts to go talk to some dancers just before los danzantes de La Pluma perform. The festival is almost over. I loiter awkwardly in the vicinity of the performers stage entrance for ten minutes. Then, inching a little bit closer, looking at no one in particular, I clumsily announce, “Buenas tardes! Soy antropóloga.” Ana makes eye contact, “Ok, so….what do you want to know?” she asks. She is eighteen and has been dancing for six years. She greets me with such a warm smile. We are equally curious about what the other one is up to. She asks if I have learned any of the dances. I say I haven’t, sensing that this is a bit of a disappointment. “Why not?!” she says. “Would you like to?” Of course, I would! I hadn’t expected anyone to offer to teach me. A wave of sadness hits. This is my last day in Oaxaca. I learn that Ana has a dream to dance for Guelaguetza Oficial because to her, it is the real deal, but she likes performing for the people’s guelaguetza, too. Hearing this reminds me to stay awake to the particular experiences of each performer. While Guelaguetza Popular was founded in direct opposition to Guelaguetza Oficial, many dancers will perform for both festivals. Free admission, the ungated performance site, and the cooperative labor that enables the festival stand against the government festival, but individual dancers and groups run the gambit in terms of political allegiance. To my left on the sidewalk is an older guy who interrupts to introduce himself as Alejandro. He is an elementary school teacher, one of three in their dance group, and also a teacher of danza. We chat for a while, and I learn that he and Ana are sympathetic with the teacher’s movement. Ana’s alignment with
APPO, and her concurrent desire to perform on the “professional” stage is not uncommon. Indeed, Guelaguetza Popular is a political demonstration, but for many participants, the live experience of performing is more about the art of the dance. After a few minutes, the troupe is off to eat. Alejandro lingers and asks if I have been down to the playing field, where the dancers linger, getting ready to perform. Without waiting for an answer he chases after another dancer and returns with a participant’s badge. He bequeaths it to me and walks me inside. I feel like I just won a backstage pass to see my favorite band. As we walk onto the green, his eyes are scouting to make sure no one gives me a hard time. Once behind the band stage, he seems assured that I have made it in. “Cuídate,” he says, and I respond with too many thank-you’s.

I walk out onto the field, hyper-aware that I have just become part of the show. There is nothing I can do to make myself blend in—gigantic sun hat, Oaxacan blouse and high top trail runners. I walk self-consciously around one side of the stage, behind the audience of dancers. I decide to approach two guys sitting on a tapete (mat) in the grass. Marco is a real talker. The other man stands up and walks off after a minute of conversation. Marco is wearing linen trousers and a spotless short sleeve tunic—not a single sweat mark or grass stain. I start asking questions about the dance but soon find out that he is a musician. While some of the towns have adult ensembles, he has brought a band of young students to perform for their pueblo. He tells me that different villages take turns coming to Guelaguetza Popular, so he has lost track of how many festivals he was been to, some years off and some years
on. He has set himself up as an independent music teacher, so the education reform doesn’t affect him personally. However, he seems to have more to say about the struggle than even the most involved teachers I’ve spoken to. I want to take into consideration his positionality as a self-employed educator when thinking about how uninhibited he seemed in our conversation. Out of all of the teachers and performers I spoke to, he was the most forthcoming, and also the only teacher who did not, in some way, depend on the state for income. After the first minute, it is clear that I won’t be asking any more questions. He knows exactly what he wants me to know: “It’s not just the education reform, it’s a culture reform. The guelaguetza has been reformed, the dance has been reformed, all of it is part of a reform regime.”

Marco talks a mile a minute about the economic privatization of Guelaguetza Oficial and the education system. Guelaguetza popular, of course, has not been privatized. At its core, it is by the people, for the people, and free of charge. However, he feels that the regime of cultural homogenization has affected the experience of the public festival. Here, Marco is invoking the aesthetic resonance between Guelaguetza Oficial and Popular. Even though the main coordinators are explicitly opposed to government reform, the dances continue to be influenced by the images which the STyDE is always reproducing around the city. To an extent, he agrees that the two festivals aren’t that distinct. I ask him to recount the way in which Guelaguetza Oficial has changed over the years. He laughs, “I’m not very old!” He wasn’t around when tickets to the official guelaguetza were free.
On another side of the stage, the danzantes de La Pluma are seated, about to perform. One dancer stands near the front with his penacho at his feet. He is watching the other dancers, arms crossed, and has an air like he’s been there before. Until they go on stage, most dancers strip down to a white T-shirt for the heat. They wait until the last minute to mount their elaborate layers. When I initiate the conversation, he is curt, giving mostly one-word answers. His name is Victor. I want to know what he is thinking about while dancing. Matter-of-factly, he says, “I am wondering what time it is,” his eyes never drifting from the performance going on when he speaks, “or trying to ignore the heat.”

Victor then said that he feels that La Pluma is unique among the dances performed at Guelaguetza. It is a ritual first and a dance second. For many dances, the performers will dance from eighteen to twenty-two, and then the next generation will step in. Victor, only twenty-six, has been dancing La Pluma for eighteen years. He doesn’t exactly think of it as a spiritual practice, but when I ask if he enjoys it he restates, “Eighteen years. What does that tell you?”

His group is from Saachila, although there are many towns that dance La Pluma. A week ago, they performed for a village Guelaguetza, later the same day they will perform for another festival, and the next day they will be on their way to a convite, where twenty-five different towns will dance their version of La Danza de la Pluma. None of the dancers get paid. It is considered a cargo for the town, a community service. I ask Victor how he
understands the relationship between the teachers’ movement and Guelaguetza Popular. He answers quickly, “Well, they make it all happen!”

The dancers and teachers mutually support each other. Many dancers are teachers themselves, and many more are students. The dance festival couldn’t happen without the organizing power of CNTE. Conversely, the structure of town cargos has a strong influence on the way the teachers organize. They take turns teaching and camping at the blockades so that all of the educators participate in the different facets of the struggle. This sort of shared labor is also how local guelaguetzas and Guelaguetza Popular come together. None of the performers get paid to dance, none of the teachers get paid to hold down the blockade, but these roles rotate so that everyone also has time to live their lives and take care of their people and themselves.

**AUTONOMY AND PERFORMANCE**

The performative nature of Guelaguetza developed in conversation with Western notions of dance. In her book, *Destination Culture*, Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett writes at length about the global codification and westernization of indigenous life. In the first half of the twentieth century, many countries were constructing folk dance repertoires. They distilled some “indigenous details” of the culture and condensed them into performances that lasted a few hours on a proscenium stage with a Western orchestra (1998, 46). Essentially, these governments created folk ballets. Kirshenblatt-Gimblet notes, “left to their own devices, [indigenous rituals] are not subject to formal
viewing” (1998, 47). So, the Oaxacan government had to reorganize pieces of indigenous culture into a form that would be legible on a formal stage. At Guelaguetza Popular and the many smaller versions that happen in different pueblos, the audience ignores and resists Western conventions for performance-goers. No one in the soccer stadium is particularly concerned with watching the performance. It is as if the people’s use of space at the Guelaguetza Popular manifested a gentle protest to the spectacularization that characterizes Guelaguetza Oficial. Even though the form of Guelaguetza Popular was meant as a sort of reclaimed copy of the official festival, the audience walks a fine line between embracing and refusing such formalization, the impulse to spectacularize the dances in the same way and deploy them for the passive consumption of an audience. At Guelaguetza Popular, the attendees mill around as much as the dancers. When the audience looks at the stage, they see people moving around with each other, like they would at a party, on the street, or in the zócalo. They wander out towards the vendors for a snack, pass a bottle of mescal, and watch their kids running around on the grass. Without tickets or and admission fee, there is no need to control the movement of bodies in and out of the arena. The organizers chose the university’s soccer stadium because it can hold more people than would ever show up. The accessibility of the event alleviates the pressure to “get the most out of” something, which often accompanies entertainment with a big price tag. Free admission stands in opposition to Guelaguetza Oficial’s strategy, which creates market value by limiting the number of stadium seats.
Most people at the festival feel politically aligned with the teacher’s movement. In a loose sense, the audience and the dancers are part of the same political community. In the soccer stadium, no dancer pretends joy. When a couple introduces their piece with a political manifesto, anger doesn’t hide on their shouting lips and earnest eyes. The dances that happen on stage are familiar, rather than exotic, to most of the audience, and in that way can seem almost a nonevent. Where Guelaguetza Oficial strives always to be a more polished performance, designed to impress and meet the expectations of audience members as consumers, Guelaguetza Popular is more of a coming together around dance, where the sociality among audience members is just as important as the performance.

I watch closely as Victor’s group dances La Pluma. When they step off stage, I’m anxious to talk to La Malinche. Her dress is green with gilded embroidery. She wears a matching top hat with a plume, signifying her as the colonizing character. This is one of many versions of her costume because she never dances in a dirty dress. She is ten years old and this is her second year dancing at Guelaguetza Popular. When she turns twelve, she won’t dance this role anymore. Another Malinche will step in. The male dancers range from twelve to thirty, but if she wants to keep dancing, she will have to join a different tradition in her town—dance a different dance. She learned the role from one of the older male dancers named David, and he will likely teach the
next young dancer that comes along. Thinking of my conversation with Ana, I ask if she dreams of performing for Guelaguetza Oficial. “I’m doing this one!” she says. She is not concerned with where else she might be dancing. There is another group in Saachila that brings a dance to la oficial. She tells me that the dance group practices Saturday and Sunday, almost year-round. She loves performing, and it doesn’t even make her tired. Right next to us, three of the older dancers are lying on the ground, panting as the medical event staff comes over to tend to their strained ankles. As she moves on stage, she says she focusses on “being beautiful and doing the right steps.” She tells me that Victor is el presidente of the group, and I am not surprised. He was the one who chose her to play La Malinche. When we are about to leave she tugs on Victor’s shirt and whispers in his ear. He hands a tin maraca to her, one of the ones that each male dancer holds, and she passes it to me. I raise my eyebrows, shocked and grateful, and accept her gift.

I return to the stands and my compas confirm, “Te vi! Te vi debajo.” For a moment, I had been an incongruous player in the mise en scene. Still warm from my chat with La Malinche, I show off the tin maraca. As we walk back to the bus line, I replay my conversation with the young dancer. What did I do to deserve this maraca? Remembering what I had learned in Teotitlán about the meticulous process of sewing the penachos, I am now holding a sort of sample-size penacho. The hollow tin shaker is painted with syncretic patterns of indigenous-Catholic iconography. Colored feathers erupt from the top. This gift is the product of more thought and care than the mango that my
neighbor had just caught in the crowd. But the woman with the mango was a
dancer, minutes before she had gone on stage and tossed *pan dulce* to the
danzantes de La Pluma. She received the mango to complete the exchange of
guelaguetza. Next year, she will likely be back to perform and exchange
again. And here I am, walking away, about to get on a plane to fly thousands
of miles and spend a year writing a paper about this day. In my hand is a gift I
hadn’t planned to receive, a gift asking to be reciprocated. But how will I?
The exchange cannot be completed from overseas. Guelaguetza is a practice
that depends on real time sociality and develops within place-based
communities.
When I received that beautiful gift from La Malinche, I felt immediately indebted. As she handed me the maraca, she invited me to a festival of many different towns performing La Pluma the next day. I had to get on a plane in the morning and would not have a chance to accept the hospitality she offered or to reciprocate her gift. I had a sense of rupture; I felt at once connected to and estranged from La Malinche. This, however, could not have been simply about my departure back to the United States—my anticipated physical distance from the people I met at the festival. While guelaguetza was first described to as place-based network of giving, it is also not contained or containable. If, in one valence, the members of a community practice guelaguetza to provide things that one person or family needs, they are also placing trust in the members of that family. It is assumed that they will offer support when someone else in the community is in need. In this sense, guelaguetza is a closed system that operates in loose rotation, with the assumption that if someone is living in the same community, they will continue contributing to the reciprocal economy. Individuals and families in these Oaxacan communities have seen their worlds transform and adapt to the push-and-pull of migration and other globalizing forces. Today, the mutual trust that enables guelaguetza includes the knowledge that people are
constantly incorporating themselves into and leaving the system of exchange when they migrate, for economic and other reasons.

常然地将自己融入和离开交换系统，当他们迁移时，出于经济和其他原因。

I sit in a coffee shop in el centro with Noel, who I ran into the night before at a salsa club called Candela. Rarely have I felt so willing to follow someone’s lead on the dance floor—carried with rather than objectified. He grew up in the Sierra Norte where he danced variations of many of the dances that get corralled into Guelaguetza Oficial. Noel makes a living choreographing dances for quinceañeras. Our conversations about guelaguetza as mutual aid always flowed into and out of banter about Guelaguetza Oficial. He tells me about how the government uses blanquitas for their promotional videos and billboards, how some dancers at the government show are from the city—”models who learn the dances and dress up in indigenous clothing.” His favorite version of Guelaguetza is a small performance that happens at an historic church in the town of Huayapam. Like La Levantada in Teotitlán, most of the people present at Huayapam have participated in the making and practice of the dance. Guelaguetza as mutual aid is a condition of, and woven into the festival.

Throughout the conversation, Noel keeps saying, “You have to be there,” in reference to the small guelaguetza, which he loves. At the popular festivals, the practice of guelaguetza as mutual aid is felt. At the government festival, while many dances are internally organized through the practice of
guelaguetza, the audience is necessarily excluded from this sense of shared responsibility. Noel expressed his frustration about the ways that the government has twisted guelaguetza into an enterprise that does not require people to show up for each other—a reframing where the dance groups show up for prestige or regional pride and the government shows up because they can make the tourists pay. But when Noel tells me “You have to be there,” he is not echoing the tourist brochures from pueblos, which try to claim that visiting a pueblo offers a more authentic experience than going to Guelaguetza at El Fortín. His words now resonate with a different meaning: “You have to be there” for a long time—for ages longer than the two hours that the Government affords—to feel accountable to the community, to begin feeling obligated or committed to the practice of guelaguetza. Indeed, years longer than I spent in the field—a lifetime, maybe.

You have to be there for a long time but often, people from Oaxacan pueblos feel the need, have the desire, or are economically forced to move away from home and find work in other parts of Mexico or the United States. What happens to guelaguetza once they leave? Having focused on guelaguetza as a practice in Oaxaca, I turn in these last pages to California, the state where I was born and to which I returned from Oaxaca, where many groups of Oaxacan migrants, along with United States cultural institutions, are, unsurprisingly, also staging Guelaguetza festivals.
MOBILITY AND RESOURCE EXCHANGE

What began as a geographically rooted practice of exchange has begun to expand beyond place-based communities. In post-NAFTA Oaxaca, with so many people migrating to the United States to look for employment, the circle of giving has opened up (Stephen 2005, 97). In a sense, capital, in the form of cash remittances, becomes a material replacement for the presence of loved ones when they cannot deliver their guelaguetza in person. However painful this distance is between family members, the people I spoke to in Teotitlán were not bemoaning the practice of transnational reciprocity nor did they refer to guelaguetza with nostalgia as a lost practice. Guelaguetza has always been about the exchange of resources and is undeniably an economic structure. Even with thousands of miles of separation, guelaguetza has the potential to maintain the economic importance that it held between people who lived in the same village.

And it is not just the financial components of guelaguetza that keep the practice alive in a globalized, capitalistic world. Something more ephemeral than the material circulation of resources and material dependence holds these communities and these systems of exchange together. Marcel Mauss writes, “To accept something from somebody is to accept some part of [their] spiritual presence” (1954, 12). If we think about gifts as overflowing with something of each person who gives, it becomes possible to imagine an interdependent network of guelaguetza rhizomes traveling and thriving over long distances. In one example, and of course guelaguetza migrates differently
for each person, an uncle sends funds from California to his niece’s wedding in Teotitlán. In this gesture, he continues as a padrino in the network in which he grew up in Oaxaca. His spirit comes with the gift, and he remains committed to the reciprocal structure of the town. On holidays, his family might send tlayuda and a rug or pottery up north with a coyote.

As family members join national and global capitalist economies, guelaguetza is not going away. Rather, families are letting it shift shape to fit their new modes of community across borders. Mauss writes, “The gift seeks to return to...its place of origin or to produce...an equivalent to replace it” (1954, 13). I emphasize that in the structure of guelaguetza, whether local or transnational, it is always the “equivalent” that is being returned. In this sense, guelaguetza was always ready to be folded out into webs of exchange that could reach beyond physical co-presence and the exchange of specific gifts. Especially on the West Coast of the United States, where the majority of migrants from Teotitlán have landed, people find work and send money back to their families to help them renovate their house or to support a quinceañera. In this way, families can carry on their patterns of mutual exchange even as they are torn away from each other by the pressures of a transnational labor market.

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I am squatting in front of a huge Mac monitor, feet planted on a swivel chair. Connecticut is grey, and the rain hasn’t yet melted the snow. My right
hand makes micro movements between mouse and keyboard, taking me to the Facebook page for the Organización Regional de Oaxaca, or ORO, which coordinates the Los Angeles edition of Guelaguetza. Weeding through their videos (mostly commercials and local news broadcasts), I stumble into one much less polished. It is called “Resumen de las 26 organizaciones que participan en el evento ‘un mensaje en contra de la violencia y a favor a la paz y la unidad entre comunidades’.“ The short video is a collage of the performances put together by the twenty-six organizations that came together in the spring of 2016 in Los Angeles to send “a message against violence and in favor of peace and unity between communities.” The happening came in the wake of two murders in Oaxaca: reporter Marcos Hernández Bautista and radio host Reynel Martínez Cerqueda, both of whom were publicly in opposition to government reform and control, were killed by municipal police. Calling attention to the continuous history of state violence in Mexico, signs made tribute to the disappearances in 2006 (EZLN 2006) as well as the six who were killed and the forty three who were disappeared in Ayotzinapa in 2014 (VICE 2015). The walk with ORO also anticipated a moment of state violence the following June in Nochixtlán where 800 federal police left six dead and fifty-three wounded (RAP 2016). I collect these numbers online, impersonally, now sitting normally in my chair with the foggy sun setting.

The camera in the video collage scans the sidewalk for blocks, scrolling by hundreds of people who stand in a long line, two shoulders apart, facing the street. Some have their arms raised, holding hands in the air. Others
hold signs that read “Oaxaca,” “Guelaguetza,” “I LOVE LA,” and “Unity,” while others send political messages which the camera scrolls over too fast to read. A salsa beat overlays the first thirty seconds of the video, after which it is interrupted by a band of kids in pink button-downs. Their band is a small collection of brass, wind, and a bass drum— the type of colonial marching band that has been playing and transforming in Oaxaca since conquest. This particular song usually accompanies one of the dances at Guelaguetza. The horns are playing a call and response with each other. There is a gap for passersby between the three who play percussion and the other instruments. The tallest kid smirks at the woodwinds between trombone tones across the way. Salsa cuts back in. The people in the line holding hands and signs pivot ninety degrees, turning their attention away from the street to process up the sidewalk. In the middle of the crowd, a person with a golf cap and dark shades exclaims “Thank you, thank you. We love you. Gracias a todos” (ORO 2016). A police car makes an appearance as the crowd files into the church. I turns out that the Los Angeles Police Department is one of five sponsors of Guelaugetza de ORO, along with the National Endowment for the Arts and California Arts Council (ORO 2017).

GUELAGUETZA CALIFORNIA

There are at least seven different Guelaguetza festivals staged each year in California in the cities of Fresno, Santa Cruz, Santa Rosa, San Jose, San Marcos, Salinas and Santa Maria. It is hard to ignore that each of these
towns has a colonial-era Spanish name. In fact, each is also the name of at least one town in Mexico and at least two are also names of Oaxacan pueblos. I mention this as a reminder that the national border between California and Mexico today has only been where it is since 1848. And, in particular, that the places referred to today as California and Oaxaca were both colonized by Spanish Missionaries. In thinking about the Guelaguetzas that happen in California, I return to the discussion about nationalism and the construction of indigenous tradition, as specifically the questions which a small group of elite intellectuals posed in 1932: “Who are we as Oaxacans?” At the Guelaguetzas in California, even for people who have migrated from Oaxaca, I suggest that the festival is no longer about maintaining Oaxaca’s image. So I carry the discussion into the political climate of California and the United States and consider the ways in which festivals like Guelaguetza are often the site of discursive battles about what the United States stands for. These ongoing disagreements are often played out along political party lines. In particular, Guelaguetza in California is an example of the multiculturalism which liberal California arts organizations, educational institutions and municipalities like to hold onto as that which stands against Republican anti-Mexican sentiment and anti-immigrant violence more broadly. In contrast to the xenophobic or neo-fascist attacks on immigrants, the institutions that fund California Guelaguetzas get to build their image as liberal and inclusive, holding on to this celebration of “diversity” and openness as to define themselves as separate from the chauvinistic right.
Of course, these Guelaguetzas are a minor event on the California political scene, and are even less significant in the theater of national politics, but they do represent an important microcosm of the brand of multicultural politics one sees displayed in some cities around the country, often substituting identity politics for real economic justice and immigration reform. Importantly, the political centrality of Guelaguetza Oficial and Popular in Oaxaca is much more intense than the discursive significance of Guelaguetza in the United States. For this reason, the United States Government is not invested in the specific image that is portrayed of Oaxaca by way of these local Guelaguetzas. In distinction from the way that Ulises Ruiz’s governing body felt the need to maintain security, cleanliness and political “neutrality” at his Guelaguetza Oficial, the festivals in the United States need only name Guelaguetza as a Oaxacan folk festival to leverage it as a symbol of diversity or, conversely, to wield an “extreme,” fascist attack against it. In this way, the official, cookie cutter image of indigenous life that historically emerged in Oaxaca out of twentieth century indigenista efforts falls apart when Guelaguetza travels to California.

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The San Marcos Guelaguetza, which takes place at a community college in the city, attracted local media attention from Radio Spanglish in 2016. As reporter Sonia Cobos, who was born in Mexico City walks around, she picks up some plastic jewelry. “Everything is so beautiful,” she says,
“these things are from Oaxaca, some of our artisans’ art.” And holding a blouse with floral embroidery to her torso, she says, “These are very festive, like for Earth Day” (Navarro 2014). The way of celebrating Oaxaca in California is messy and syncretic, seamlessly folding its immigrant aesthetics and evocations of home into a United States holiday like Earth Day. Cobos’s observations of these things from Oaxaca are superficial, but here superficiality leaves room for multiple ways of enjoying Guelaguetza in California, and in this multiplicity can disrupt the reified image of what it means to celebrate a state, country, culture or people. In these ways, Cobos’s tour, and the California Guelaguetza more broadly, do not confine the festival to fictional visions of an indigenous Oaxacan or Mexican past.

At the same time, the California Guelaguetzas seem to overflow with nostalgic sentiment. If part of the appeal of Guelaguetza Oficial for the Oaxacan elites, or those who feel themselves to be living a more “modern” urban life in Oaxaca, is their nostalgia for more “traditional” ways of life, in the context of Guelaguetzas in California, this nostalgia looks quite different. Many oaxaqueños living in the United States came looking for work from pueblos like Teotitlán. The lives they were living there were exactly the ones that Guelaguetza Oficial likes to romanticize and reconfigure into that which is “authentically indigenous.” Listening to the interviews from the Los Angeles Guelaguetza, migrants from small pueblos do speak nostalgically about Oaxaca in a way that, at first, sounds extremely close to the discourse of the elite in Oaxaca city. One dancer says in Spanish, “I’m an admirer of all of
the culture of our state of Oaxaca. It’s fabulous, the cuisine… I admire them in every way.” A young kid adds, “Everyone is invited form all races” (Navarro 2014).

Looking to this and other videos of the California festivals, people thousands of miles away from Oaxaca feel free to gather guelaguetza, Guelaguetza Oficial and Guelaguetza Popular together as prideful elements of a conglomerate Oaxaca. Indeed, the advertisement for the event as well as everyone who is interviewed at the festival steer clear from professing that this festival is reflective of the most authentic Oaxaca. While brimming with a nostalgia for home, this way of speaking about Oaxaca at the California festival offers us something new, a reconstituted understanding of guelaguetza, in every iteration, of the meanings and pleasures its dances produce, of how it links people here to people there, that, I offer, does not reproduce the culturally essentializing violence of Guelaguetza Oficial.

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The maraca sits by my bed, one piece in a network of guelaguetza, which La Malinche decided to let fly North. The maraca, the dance festival and the web of exchange know this trip well. We need not harbour anxiety about celebrating them in a context different than that which made them because they carry with them a spirit of the life they had in Oaxaca, and find new ways of collective living in California. I look to these expanded geographies of guelaguetza as practices which derail both xenophobic and
multicultural ways of relating to Guelaguetza in California. La Malinche’s confidence as she offers the maraca, the joy that Sonia Cobos takes in announcing the plastic artisan jewelry, these moments unhinge the apprehension that pieces of Oaxacan material life are in danger of losing something when carried into another landscape.
Works Cited


Mexican Census Bureau. 1940. “Población que come y población que no come pan de trigo, y duerme en el suelo, cama etc.” Distrito Federal.


