Manifestations that Matter: A Case of Oaxacan Ruin Possession

Hilary Morgan Leathem

Department of Anthropology, University of Chicago

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

"There's no one. Behold the stones" (Neruda 2005: 154).

Introduction

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

Oaxaca lacked tourists in this particular moment. The aftermath of the 2006 teachers' strike, which left Oaxacans and foreigners alike maimed and murdered, still felt fresh.[1] Preparing to pay a small entry fee to enter the archaeological zone, I noticed the glut of Mitleños[2]

Fig.1. Mitla archaeological zone, February 2018. Photo by author.

1 The 2006 teacher's strike in Oaxaca started much the same as other education strikes, where teachers demanded resources from the government of Ulises Ruiz Ortiz. However, police opened fire on nonviolent protests, prompting Oaxacans to assemble into several grassroots social movements, including the still active Popular Assembly of the Peoples of Oaxaca, which demanded social justice and the removal of Ruiz Ortiz. While these movements were ultimately successful, Oaxaca suffered a series of human rights abuses on the part of the Mexican government. See Lynn Stephen's, *We are the Face of Oaxaca: Testimony and Social Movements* (2013), or Diana Denham and the C.A.S.A. Collective's, *Teaching Rebellion: Stories from the Grassroots Mobilization in Oaxaca* (2008) for a more in-depth discussion.

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

watching me from behind the gates, gathering at the edges of their market stalls whispering, "*Señorita, güera!*" I turned to them, and they flashed grins. Small women with braids and beautifully woven smocks and blouses presented me with colourful textiles, but before I could inquire more, INAH custodians hustled them away, berating them. "They should know better," one remarked, "than to just wander on to the site without permission."

When I returned nearly a decade later for my year of doctoral dissertation work in 2017, I sensed an amplified tension between Mitleños and INAH's modes of heritage governance. The ways INAH controlled access and demanded Mitleños request permission to enter a place that seemed part of Mitla yet belonged to the Mexican state generated a peculiar friction. Following Lisa Breglia (2006), we might see this friction as a form of the 'monumental ambivalence' that results from the ideological and ontological clashes heritage projects tend to produce. Like in other parts of Mexico, 'monumental ambivalence' in Mitla materializes in the stalemate between the community and INAH. It includes the distrust that ensues in the face of restoration projects that are intimately bound up in historical relations, reconfigured each time Mitleños enter into conversation with INAH or pass by the ruins. When I speak of the distrust Mitleños display toward INAH or other heritage institutions, this is meant to voice the opinion of Mitleños from a variety of sectors and of different ages and socio-economic backgrounds. While there is always some form of internal dissonance within communities, the majority of Mitleños simultaneously acknowledge the need for INAH—and the ways it brings in tourists —and perceive its presence as intrusive and problematic. My goal is not to erase this internal dissonance; quite the opposite, it is material to my argument, which is stitched together from fragments of circulating rumours whose very indeterminacy speaks to monumental ambivalence.

Alongside this growing sense of ambivalence and, for some, betrayal, there was a sudden rise in accounts of possession.[3] These narratives

3 Mitleños reiterated this sense of betrayal to me several times during my fieldwork, often citing a recent incident where an archaeologist is said to have visited and

of possession *by* the ruins described situations where the afflicted person was haunted by recurring dreams. Terrified, the afflicted descended into madness or a form of *espanto*.[4] The cure, I was told, was to visit the ruins after INAH hours with services from a *curandera*[5] who could perform the appropriate ritual.

In order to understand the tensions and ties between Mitleños and INAH, I had to consider the role that these 'relics of another world,' as Bandelier (1884) once described the ruins, have in reconfiguring the communities that live within and around them. A striking relationship exists between the production of history, the way it is mobilized and performed, and the vitality or 'becoming' of monumental heritage. Landscapes such as Mitla's are constituted by sedimentations of contested pasts. Saturated, then, with multiple meanings, Mitla's seemingly 'inanimate matter' is animated by conflicts over definition. Indeed, it is continuously resignified by these exact disagreements. As such, this paper is an archaeological ethnography,[6] interrogating what it means to be possessed by *and* dispossessed of monumental heritage in Oaxaca, Mexico. There are two particular social formations I am seeking to elucidate. First, I am interested in why it is that the ruins

informed them that excavations and empirical data pointed to the ruins being Mixtec architectural achievements, rather than Zapotec structures. This, obviously, did not go over well.

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

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

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

decided to manifest, to 'show themselves', at this moment in Mitleño history and in this particular, intangible yet embodied way. Second, what does it mean to listen to the ruins and to dwell with them? In my response to these questions, I move between posthumanist scholarship in archaeology and anthropology and the cosmological and historical worlds of Mitla, suggesting ultimately that both possession *and* dispossession must be understood in relation to the ruins' own distinctive qualities and, equally, the ongoing control of heritage sites by INAH.

Heritage Formations: Folk Cosmologies and Nationalist Ideology

The account of possession *by* ruins is an unusual story even for Mitla, where encounters with an array of supernatural beings are perceived as quite ordinary.[7] In order to understand what makes it so unusual, it is worthwhile to expand on the account of possession to which I gestured earlier. I should emphasize that this narrative is itself a composite of multiple stories—and rumours—that I was told while conducting ethnographic research in Mitla. Accounts occasionally varied in terms of particulars, but the core narrative that follows remained consistent and quotations appear when a certain phrase was used at least several times. This is itself analytically interesting, as it suggests, at the very least, stories of ruin possession were becoming increasingly common as a genre.

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

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7 For more on these 'otherworldly' encounters, see the essay 'Oaxacan Ruin Lore: When the Stones Come for You', featured on *Folklore Thursday* (Leathem 2019).

law to remove architectural pieces from the ruins and repurpose them for homes and other buildings.

With their attention fixed on the walls of the ruins, they nearly missed the presence of a young girl's braid on the bottom step of the stairs leading to the main palace. The severed braid was sticky with a red liquid—either blood or plant sap. One of the INAH custodians, a Mitleño himself, nodded and instructed them not to move it for now. "Someone came in the night," he said. "They petitioned *las ruinas*." The other custodians seemed confused; most traditional healing ceremonies had one petition: the supernaturals, a class of spirits that includes deities, energy, and ancestors, but ruins were not historically included in that category. "*Las ruinas son embrujadas* [bewitched], they have become so," the custodian continued.[8] Mitleño rituals revolve around a pantheon of energetic entities that slip among and between Western-oriented categories like spirits, deities, and ancestors (Lind 2015). The ruins are religiously charged spaces that index modes of pastness for Mitleños, yet they are usually not assigned agency, making this account of possession all the more peculiar.

I soon learned that alongside the case of this young girl being afflicted by the ruins, a man in his late 40s was said to be going mad. It began with day-visions of the ruins, particularly of the palace and civic-ceremonial centre, which then became sinister in tone and plagued him in his dreams. "The ruins visited him," one Mitleño, José, explained; the problem was that the ruins would not stop visiting him. Every night they came to him in the form of malevolent dreams until the man, deeply troubled, descended into madness. He was possessed, stricken by 'ruin envy' in the opinion of some Mitleños, though they demurred to define what was meant by this.[9] "It is something very strange," José said. *Curanderas* treated the affliction

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

9 Exact phrase used: "*Envidia de las ruinas.*"

as if it was a case of *susto*, when the soul is said to leave the body or is under attack by supernatural forces. Aside from a cleanse, they had to determine where the ritual should take place. In choosing the ruins as an instance of sympathetic magic, the *curanderas* and Mitleños wished to know: "What did the ruins say? What did they want?"

The answer appeared simple and to the point: the voice emanating from the ruins in the man's dream demanded that he must pay his dues.[10] If he would like to be released from the ruins' power, then he must visit and implore them in the physical realm. This is exactly what was done. After the man's ritual, purportedly conducted with INAH's permission unlike the girl's, he was cured.

What might not be apparent from these accounts is that possession in Mitla, particularly possession *by* ruins, was a new phenomenon, unlike *espanto* (see footnote 1). Indeed, despite the presence of deep history all around, Mitleños appeared to visitors like Constantine Rickards (1910) to be rather ambivalent—even 'non-interventionist'— about the ruins until the mid-twentieth century, simply living among them.[11] Before INAH was founded in 1939, Mitla's palatial ruins and adobe walls were heaps of rubble—ruins in ruins, they required restoration and a certain kind of discipline of care from the local populace (Bueno 2016; Robles García 2016) (fig.2). Writing in her monograph, *Mitla: Town of Souls*, Elsie Clews Parsons (1936: 1) chides the local community for their apparent lack of concern with

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

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

the ruins. Instead, she writes, "…it is the modern tourist, Mexican or foreign, who has given the townspeople a more sophisticated awareness of their value and of the need of preservation."

Parsons's observation about "the modern tourist" is not untrue. Under the reign of Porfirio Díaz (1876–1911), Mexico's goverment went through great pains to attract tourists and immigrants alike through a series of social projects that romanticized the pre-Hispanic past and indigenous art (Brulotte 2012; Faudree 2013; Feinberg 2003; Lomnitz 2001; Overmyer-Velázquez 2006). These projects were meant to refashion Mexican identity by simultaneously celebrating and claiming pre-Hispanic and indigenous achievements as the heritage of all Mexicans. In some ways, these projects anticipated post-revolutionary ideologies, like *mestizaje* and *indigenismo*, which sought to unify the relatively nascent nation's diverse population. As such, the Mexican government promulgated a preservationist ethic and spearheaded multiple restoration projects in the name of the nation-state. Ruins, as symbols of the shared pre-Hispanic past, were to be preserved at all costs. By this logic, for the Mitleños to be good citizens, they must care for (and about) the ruins in a particular way. And yet, at least in Parsons's reading, they seemed entirely unconcerned with the ruins on their doorstep. So what, we might ask, has changed? What has driven the ruins to possess Mitleños, or, perhaps, Mitleños to become possessed?

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

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

Becoming, Dwelling, Possessing: How Ruins Make themselves Known in the World

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

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

It is *de rigueur* for posthuman scholarship to consider human and nonhuman actors as animating, articulating forces within the same assemblage—that is, they coexist in one reality.[12] As the Mitleño case illustrates, however, the ruins are holdovers, vibrant debris from another temporal order, Mitla's previous reality that does not necessarily preclude the present reality, but rather punctures the landscape, complicating the ways posthuman scholarship conceives

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

of ecological assemblages and relations. These nonhumans embody multitemporal dimensions and form a part of Mitla's historical consciousness, all while seeming to stretch across and break down barriers between space and time. Indeed, rather than thinking of these ruins as foreign and built structures, Mitleños think of them as *vívida*,[13] frequently referring to them as their neighbours.

An 'Enjoyable Kind of Difference': How to Make (Im)proper Dwelling

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

Whereas the building perspective suggests that "worlds are made before they are lived in" (Ingold 2000: 179), the dwelling perspective, invoking Heidegger's phenomenology, argues the inverse: it is through dwelling that the world is built. Heidegger pushes us to reconsider how cultivation and construction—both in the abstract and concrete—belong to our dwelling in the world. The Mitleño purview is both in accordance with and against Heidegger, simultaneously embodying elements from the building and dwelling perspectives. Pre-sunrise beings dwelt in darkness and through their own volition

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13 Vivid.

constructed a world that Mitleños inherited. Mitleños, in other words, perceive themselves as having only ever dwelled in and around the ruins. This begs the question: what might a proper dwelling in the context of possessing ruins mean or look like? What about Mitleño modes of being, or the ruins' mode of being, leads to what Povinelli might gloss as a set of mutual disorientations—an improper dwelling in the world? Put another way, what leads to the possession with which we began?

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

Mutual (Dis)possessions and (Dis)orientations

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

Earlier I asked what has changed—why would the ruins choose to 'show themselves' now, and why through possession? Moving through posthumanist scholarship and raising questions of disclosure, alignment, and dwelling, I have sketched out a framework of human and nonhuman relationships that have become disoriented, framing the ruins as agentive beings seeking to *intervene* in the social context of Mitla. In this final section, I contend that the reason for this unique iteration of possession—a fresh development in the social life of ruins, if you will—is the work of INAH itself. After all, INAH legally owns—socially and economically possesses—*all* of Mexico's heritage. Meandering over to the ruins instigates a confrontation with INAH, who by policing entry to these gated huddling ruins, conjures up images of imprisonment.

Ruins possessing Mitleños through dreams speaks to a post-colonial condition and the ways rights to property function in Mexico. Notions of property and heritage are quite entangled, even conflated, by the use of the term *patrimonio*—glossed as heritage or inheritance, but with a connotation that links to ownership. There is much slippage with the term; over time it has expanded to encompass resources beyond historic monuments and ruins, while also becoming more rigid (Ferry 2005). For example, on the heels of the UNESCO World Heritage Convention of 1972, INAH introduced its own set of new

and stringent regulations. Mexico's Federal Law on Monuments and Archaeological, Artistic, and Historic Zones provides INAH with the socio-legal 'teeth' necessary for mounting offensives against any perceived act of violence against heritage, morphing it into an entirely new beast.[14] In addition, Article 27 of Mexico's 1917 constitution specifically states that all archaeological remnants, immovable structures, and transportable artefacts are the inalienable property of the Mexican nation (Litvak King et al. 1980; Rozental 2014). Despite Mitla's ruins being 'vibrant matter' (*sensu* Bennett 2010), Mexican law objectifies heritage, reinforcing a discourse of possession and

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

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

decidedly dead matter that leans heavily on dispossession—thwarting indigenous relationships with land and history.

Possessing the ruins does not silence the stones; it is the incredible efficacy of a preservationist agenda gone awry that severs or obscures affective attachments, dispossessing the ruins of Mitla and the Mitleños of the ruins. When the ruins are confronted with a second becoming as the inalienable property of Mexico, a double alienation ensues. An improper dwelling in this context is nothing more than the inability to continue building relationships with neighbours. Proper dwelling is the renewal of relations—a sensuous, constructive engagement with Mitla's beings that does not foreclose space and time in the name of heritage. Possession, here, is an intervention *from* the ruins—to behold the stones is to turn toward the future.

Decentring the human, at least in indigenous Oaxaca, should be done with caution. Though archaeology's 'New Materialisms' is a generative exercise that highlights perspectives that Western epistemology would normally not acknowledge, the call to embrace the thing before all else straddles a dangerous line in certain contexts. If we are to gaze upon Mitla's ruins with awe and wonder, we are only re-enacting a set of problematic actions, neutralising exoticist and romanticist notions of ruins. What is at issue here is neither human nor nonhuman alone, but a complex historical assemblage of relations that unfold over space and multiple temporal frameworks. To decentre the human here silences the voices of those who are already historically marginalized. While recognized by the Mexican state, indigenous Mexicans are still economically disenfranchised and underrepresented on a national and global level. I worry it might be irresponsible for us to decentre their voices in order to pursue a line of thinking that Oaxacans acknowledged centuries ago.

Acknowledgements

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