

Learning from Nature-Based Indigenous Knowledge:

A Trail to Understanding Elders' Wisdom

by

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B.A., University of Victoria, 1998

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Abstract

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Fostering collaboration among people of diverse ethnicities is vital to improving our relationships with Nature and with each other. All knowledges known to humans have their limits, including Western scientific knowledge. This study argues that Indigenous elders have a wealth of nature-based wisdom which is urgently needed. The Thirteen International Indigenous Grandmothers have been sharing their wisdom with the world and meeting them inspired this work. Two Grandmothers, one Mazatec and member of the Thirteen Grandmothers who follows in the healing tradition of *curandera* María Sabina, the other Taíno (Caribbean Arawak), and several members of their families in Mexico and in Cuba kindly agreed to be research participants so that I could bring attention to their gifts and share with the world. Embodying their ancient wisdom they do not see themselves as separate from Nature but as integral part of her. Their relationships to all beings, humans, animals, plants, minerals, and spiritual entities, are imbued with love and care. They can be role models for people who have forgotten the most basic premise of respect, reciprocity, responsibility, and empathy for all our relations.

The methodologies underlying this investigation are Indigenous. I used strategies of inquiry such as storytelling, participant observation, and reflexive self study.

Relationality and accountability are its pillars. Being of European descent, doing research with Indigenous elders required great vigilance on my part. I had to challenge my own conventional Western views and question the truths I am surrounded with to gain an understanding of my research participants' worldview. Even with the best of intentions all I could hope for was an approximation.

As I immersed myself into the worlds of my participants the great significance of plants as part of their physical, emotional, and spiritual wellbeing became evident. Maize, tobacco, and the plant teachers *cohoba* and psilocybe mushrooms were, and for the most part still are, essential and closely knit into their cultural fabric. Coming from a background where the written word is placed high above the spoken one, and Nature is seen as separate to us, it is important to acknowledge that much rich understanding of the world is beyond pen and paper, even beyond words.

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Dedication

This work is dedicated
to doña Julieta Casimiro, doña Reina Ramírez,
their children, grandchildren, great grandchildren,
and to the memory of Roberto.

Chapter 1

Introduction

The dream is that indigenous and non-indigenous peoples will work in solidarity to envision a way of life free of exploitation and replete with spirit (Sandi Grande, 2004, p. 176).

Thinking back to the origin of my interest for Indigenous worldviews several caring and loving women dear to my heart come to mind, some of who helped my mother raise my siblings and me. I also remember a few history teachers who in primary and secondary school taught me about pre-Columbian cultures and civilizations, and the brutality and violence brought about by the conquest and colonization. This is central to the history curriculum at all schools in Mexico. Every child learns that the last of the Aztec rulers, *tlatoani* Cuauhtemoc, fought fiercely against the Spanish *conquistadores* and when captured stoically resisted revealing the location of Aztec gold even as they burned his hands and feet. Later he and other Aztec noble men were murdered by hanging. Five centuries and 21 years later Indigenous people all over the Americas are still struggling to protect their lands, their cultures, their basic rights as human beings. Their hard work of reclamation everywhere began soon after the first white people arrived.

In 1992, 500 years after the arrival of Christopher Columbus on the continent, Rigoberta Menchú, Maya spokeswoman for her people in Guatemala, won the Nobel Peace Prize. This signified a watershed moment for all of Latin America, particularly for Indigenous peoples. Rigoberta had courageously challenged the colonial hegemony in her country by campaigning against human rights violations committed by the armed forces during the country's civil war (1960-96). Now the whole world was watching!

To this day countless acts of violence¹ against Indigenous peoples continue being perpetrated from Canada all the way to Argentina as well as all over the world. In Mexico the Huicholes are presently fighting for their land Wirikuta, where they have been going on pilgrimages since the beginning of time to collect peyote for their sacred ceremonies. The government has been turning a blind eye in favour of international corporations, in this case a Canadian mining company, rather than protecting their lawful citizens. In 2012 I attended a benefit concert for the cause of the Huicholes in Mexico City. The forum held over 70 000 people and the experience was electrifying. Indigenous voices have steadily been gaining strength.



On behalf of Mother Earth.

Let's save Wirikuta!

Let's save Cabo Pulmo!

Figure 1 Benefit concert *Wirikuta Fest. For the Right of the Sacred* in support of Huichol culture. *Foro Sol, Mexico City, 2012*

¹ Two examples: the government's response shockingly out of step in the case of the Stolen Sisters in Canada; the use of an antiterrorism law to fight Mapuche Indians trying to recover their ancestral land in Chile.

Non-Indigenous people have been slow in understanding the Indigenous plight but things have begun to change. More and more of us are no longer convinced that "our" way is the only way. Regretting the deep divide between peoples we are also beginning to face that much of what Indigenous peoples stand for is common sense to restoring some balance between our consumer oriented lifestyles and sustaining Nature's bounty. This dissertation is my contribution to learning from Indigenous knowledge. My aim throughout the research has been to open a trail to understanding elders' wisdom.

My research participants are two Indigenous women, Taíno elder doña Reina Ramírez from Cuba and Mazatec elder doña Julieta Casimiro from Mexico. Being born in Cuba and brought up in Mexico helped me better understand my participants' national background.

Both my participating elders still live in difficult-to-access communities located on their ancestral territories. Ancient wisdom continues to have great significance in their lives. As I believe that nature-based Indigenous knowledge provides unique and time-proven lessons, opening a trail to connect with my participants' world was what I wanted to pursue. Looking at their lives, stories, and histories, I wanted to find the answers to my research questions:

1. What can we learn from Indigenous knowledge that might help us become more accountable to our relations with humans and with Nature?
2. Can I open a trail across the cultural divide between my research participants and myself? And if I can, how?

In my narrative I explore the importance of ancient wisdom and why it merits great attention in our developing knowledge democracy.² Indigenous elders have valuable knowledge

² Knowledge democracy: term first coined by Ray Connor (Cohill, 2001).

that we can learn from in order to live more harmoniously with all our relations, human and non-human. In a time so interconnected as ours conversations on cultivating deeper understanding among peoples of diverse backgrounds and ethnicities are most desirable.

We have much to learn from Indigenous people who maintain strong relationships with their communities and with the Earth. Contemporary lifestyles are too often severed from the natural world and it is critical to pay attention to people who continue to understand that human relationships are only part of the equation. Respectful relations with the land, the plants, and the animals are as essential to sustain all life. In the modern world this aspect has been widely neglected. Instead, humans have adopted an attitude of superiority that rules all other animate and inanimate life forms subject to their will and their actions. According to anthropologist and ethnobotanist Wade Davis (2009) we have ranked ourselves so highly by ignoring the importance of different knowledges, in the belief that Western ways are the most evolved.

If societies were ranked on the basis of technological prowess, the Western scientific experiment would no doubt come up on top. If the criterion was, however, the capacity to thrive in a truly sustainable way, with true reverence and appreciation for the Earth, the Western paradigm would fail. If the criterion was based on the power of faith, i.e., the reach for spiritual intuition, and the philosophical generosity to recognize the varieties of religious longing, our dogmatic conclusions would be found wanting (Davis, 2009).

Opening space for diverse knowledges is a necessity and furthering knowledge democracy is key in our day and age. Educator and poet Budd Hall ³ says “ ... fundamental to our thinking about knowledge democracy is understanding that knowledge is a powerful tool for

³ Budd Hall is presently UNESCO Chair in Community-Based Research and Social Responsibility in Higher Education.

taking action to deepen democracy and to struggle for a fairer and healthier world” (2013, p. 7).

Knowledge democracy acknowledges the importance of the existence of multiple ways of knowing, the frameworks arising from social movements, and the knowledge of the marginalized or excluded everywhere (Hall, 2013).

Boaventura de Sousa Santos (2007) calls modern Western thinking an abyssal thinking where social reality is divided into two realms: “this side of the line” and “the other side of the line.” Although the line keeps shifting over the centuries, on “this side of the line” are we, the Western and westernized people. “The other side of the line vanishes as reality becomes nonexistent ... in any relevant or comprehensive way of being” (Santos, 2007, p. 1). There has however been a shake-up of the abyssal global lines, a subaltern cosmopolitanism since the 1970s and 80s, manifested in the initiatives and movements that constitute counter-hegemonic globalization.

According to Santos, subaltern cosmopolitanism fights against social exclusion and for a redistributive ethos in its broadest sense. It holds that the understanding of the world by far exceeds the Western understanding of the world. The World Social Forum has been its most accomplished expression and among the movements that have been participating “the indigenous movements are, in my view, those whose conceptions and practices represent the most convincing emergence of post-abyssal thinking. This fact is most auspicious for the possibility of post-abyssal thinking, as the indigenous people were the paradigmatic inhabitants of the other side of the line ...” (Santos, 2007, p. 10). Post-abyssal thinking confronts the monoculture of modern science with the ecology of knowledges. This ecology recognizes the plurality of heterogeneous knowledges, among them modern science, and the sustained dynamic interconnections between them without compromising their autonomy (Santos, 2007).

Reina Ramírez and Julieta Casimiro

In my study I focused on Indigenous wisdom from Latin America and the Caribbean because I have been exposed to it and have therefore grown a personal interest and the conviction that I am a better person for it. Among Indigenous elders, the wisdom-keepers *live* ancestral knowledge which has been passed down from generation to generation. Many non-Indigenous people have been trying to connect with Indigenous knowledge, feeling that their own ways have lost something which can be re-established with the help of this ancient resource. Sharing this belief, I set out to look to my own relations, and opted to ask doña Reina Ramírez and doña Julieta Casimiro because of my personal connection to Cuba and to Mexico. They agreed to take part in my study.

Doña Julieta and doña Reina have very different life experiences. Doña Julieta has travelled widely, she speaks before hundreds of people, and she performs ceremonies abroad and in her home where people from all over the world come to see her. She is comfortable in her role as elder and as teacher. Doña Reina on the other hand has never left her island. She had never been asked to share her life experience in her own right before, only as the wife of her husband. She and especially her daughters were delighted that someone was interested in catching her story. As the translator and interpreter of their words I did my very best to faithfully render them in English. I hope to have captured both elders' spiritual essence.

What doña Julieta and doña Reina do have in common is their care and concern for everyone they encounter. The generosity of their hearts is authentic, and their presence radiates kindness and compassion. Their wisdom rests in being fully in the moment and in gracefully tending all their relations like master gardeners tending their grounds. They show a deep understanding of the human condition, and everyone's innate desire to be seen and to be loved

and nurtured. Their deep love flows like water, their wisdom is as pure as air, their presence provides earth like shelter does, and fire is what feeds their rituals and their prayers. These elemental attributes are sorely missed in our times. Taking note and learning from them will increase our treasure of knowledges.

I began my studies in 2009 after having attended the 6th gathering of the Council of the Thirteen International Indigenous Grandmothers. I knew about these elders thanks to Cindy, a dear Métis friend, who gave my husband and me the book *Grandmothers Counsel the World* (Schaefer, 2006). After reading it I went online and found out that their next gathering was going to be in Oregon. It was so close I immediately made plans to attend. The Thirteen Grandmothers hold that each part of the world holds wisdom. By coming together, they have shared their prayers, rituals, and ceremonies to create global healing. Forging an alliance to speak with one voice, they hope to encourage sustainability, sovereignty, and a unified alliance among all the Earth's people in the interest of life and peace (Schaefer, 2006). Meeting the Grandmothers was inspirational. I left the gathering knowing I wanted to find a niche to do my own work to help spread the Grandmothers' message. My vision was to open a trail that would connect radically different life experiences to cultivate authentic acceptance and mutual understanding.

When my research began my participants and I had already started developing relationships. They knew my family and I knew theirs. Staying in their midst, I helped with chores, and played with or cared for the children, while mothers and grandmothers cooked meals and cleaned the house. From this vantage point I had also witnessed a slice of the unfolding of relationships between family members, relationships with outsiders, including me, and relationships with Nature and the Divine.

Experiencing and observing the lives of my participants and their families over several visits before I began my formal doctoral program, was beneficial as it built trust and considerably eased the transition from a first meeting to the sharing of our hearts. Wilson (2008) talks about the importance of learning by watching and doing in traditional Indigenous research. The aim is “to gain a closeness or familiarity with a group, through taking part in their day-to-day activities over a long period of time” (Wilson, 2008, p. 40). The relationship building ensuing from this kind of sharing and participating is a basic aspect of ethical Indigenous research, which stands in stark contrast with early white research which Smith (2005) describes as: “They Came, They Saw, They Named, They Claimed” (p. 80).

In her book *Indigenous Storywork: Educating the Heart, Mind, Body, and Spirit* Jo-ann Archibald (2008) speaks about the respect, responsibility, reciprocity, reverence, holism, interrelatedness, and synergy in what she calls storywork. From the time we were getting to know each other to when I did my research, these elements were ever present. My research role was the one of story catcher (Archibald’s ‘story listener’). Archibald says that the interrelationship between the story, storytelling, and listener is critical. “Patience and trust are essential for preparing to listen to stories. Listening involves more than just the auditory sense” (Archibald, 2008, p. 8).

The last time I visited my participants, I once again came as friend, but I also had to play the role of researcher. I wanted to observe how life and work of the research participants illustrate nature-based ways that continue to be used to this day. My final research goal was to convert the delicate relationship we had been tenderly building over the past, into a strong one between my participants’ worlds and mine. The trail I walked on should eventually serve others interested in establishing relationships between Indigenous and non-Indigenous individuals in

order to better understand each other. I invite non-Indigenous people to open such a trail for themselves so that they may respectfully incorporate Indigenous knowledge into their praxis. I envision this research inspiring people, particularly educators who, as with me, are attracted to Indigenous knowledge for its holistic approach and as a way of supporting post-abysal thinking and knowledge democracy.

By 2012 I started collecting my research data. In the Spring I went to Cuba to visit doña Reina and her family and in the Fall I went to stay at doña Julieta's. (See appendix 1). Like during previous visits I spent most of the time simply partaking in their daily lives. I was fortunate to also be invited to a few special events. I gathered data by participant observation, storytelling/story catching, undergoing experiences in alternate realities, taking field notes, keeping a journal for my self study, and recording a number of our conversations. When the time came to do the first recorded session I felt quite anxious because to me the method seems fairly intrusive. To my surprise - and in both places my participants did the same - the elders took ownership of the process right before our first session by letting me know that they were bringing someone else along with them. The image I had been holding in my mind of a face-to-face encounter with my elder instantly vanished into thin air and what I was left with was a more relaxed and much richer reality. Moreover it illustrated how knowledge is a shared phenomenon and not simply something inside one individual head. Catching not only the matriarchs' stories but also those of their families enhanced the experience for all involved.

My Research

As I was working on my proposal it became clear to me that my methodology had to be aligned with my participating elders. I had been reading Shawn Wilson's *Research is Ceremony*

(2008), Margaret Kovach's *Indigenous Methodologies* (2009) and *Decolonizing Methodologies* by Linda Tuhiwait Smith (2005). What these scholars had to say about research resonated deeply with me. I began to better understand what I was about to do. Wilson's image of the Indigenous research paradigm (2008, p. 70) was of particular importance in my conceptualizing of what research entails. Axiology, a component new to me, concerns the ethics or morals of the pursuit of knowledge. It is about conscientiously weighing why we pursue what knowledge and under which circumstances. Indigenous ontology acknowledges multiple realities as these are created by relationships. Indigenous epistemology is derived from the immediate ecology (experiences, perceptions, thoughts, memories) as well as from the spiritual realm (dreams, visions, signs). Indigenous methodology has to be in agreement with the other three components so that the research is done in a good way. All four components blend into each other and are therefore interconnected. Guiding principles for this paradigm are relationality and accountability. Nothing stands alone and every part of it is relevant.

In Cuba and in Mexico I practiced distancing myself from my inherited worldview and my own learned ways of thinking to better immerse myself into the world of my participating elders. I always tried to listen with my three ears (Archibald, 2008), two to the side of my head and one in my heart, to be open and receive the verbal and non verbal teachings from the elders. In their nature-based wisdom the elders have answers that can guide us to rediscover connections for a more balanced life and coexistence. Their teachings know no borders and are applicable in diverse settings. Nature is and will always be our common link transcending all belief systems, social belonging, and cultures.

The Plant Kingdom and Its Teachers

Plants are elemental in our lives and yet too often we take them for granted. In the lives of my research participants plants are still venerated. In this study I write about four plants in particular: maize, tobacco, *cohoba* (a product of *Anadenanthera peregrina*), and psilocybe mushrooms. Maize is a staple for most Indigenous peoples in the Americas. It is considered sacred food by many for its life giving properties. Tobacco is a sacred herb used ubiquitously for ceremonies and for healing. *Cohoba* is a psychotropic snuff made by grinding the seeds of the *Anadenanthera peregrina*. It was formerly used by the Taínos in Cuba and is still common among shamans in South America. The last, not truly a plant but belonging to the plant kingdom for all intents and purposes, are the psilocybe mushrooms. They are the medicine of the Mazatecs and other Indigenous groups in Mexico since time immemorial.

Today there are ongoing legal studies dedicated to researching these little mushrooms, among other sacred plant teachers, in the United States, Israel, and several other countries. Five studies are currently underway testing psilocybe/psilocybin⁴ for its properties to cure otherwise difficult or non-treatable conditions: cluster headaches, cancer and end of life anxiety, trauma, addictions, including nicotine addiction, and mystical experiences, all with highly positive results (www.maps.org.)

In our contemporary Western paradigm there is little room for extra-ordinary knowledge acquisition yet there is evidence that great scientific breakthroughs happened during or after

⁴ Extracted compound from psilocybe mushrooms

people underwent experiences in alternate realities.⁵ Mind altering substances have been used by humans since the earliest of times (Jay, 2010).

Wandering in his primordial classroom, early man watched and hunted the teachers. ... He (sic) copied the movements of animals in dances of homage and gratitude to greater teachers in the sky. He climbed great mountains while chewing coca just as animals did before him. ... By the time of the Neolithic revolution man's brain and tools had allowed him to move to the head of the class, domesticating his former teachers, cultivating his drug plants, and transforming the Giver's garden into a laboratory (Siegel, 2005, p. 4).

Unlike our culture, which has practically removed this knowledge from its cannon, other cultures never lost it. Some still view certain plants as teachers because they teach practitioners to diagnose and cure illnesses, to perform shamanic tasks, and how to use medicinal plants (Luna, 1984). Doña Reina's ancestors used *cohoba* to get in touch with spiritual realms and to make prophecies. Today her people still use tobacco as a sacrament. Doña Julieta is a renowned healer who received her special training and knowledge from her mother-in-law and has been passing it on to her children. Her work with the psilocybe mushrooms (*niños santos*) supports people with physical, emotional, and spiritual needs.

Plant teachers played a significant role in my research as they helped me experience a "non-ordinary state of consciousness"⁶ (Grof, 2006, p. 11). What I learned in ceremony under doña Julieta's guidance cannot be learned any other way and is difficult to put into words.

⁵ Steve Jobs from Apple Computers affirmed taking LSD (first synthesized from ergot, a grain fungus that typically grows on rye) was one of the two or three most important things he had done in his life (Markoff, 2005).

⁶ Stanislav Grof, M.D., psychiatrist, author, and consciousness researcher. He pioneered the development of Transpersonal Psychology and won the prestigious VISION 97 award in Prague in 2007.

Nevertheless I did acquire knowledge through the plant that I can now draw upon. I call my research during these ceremonies the ‘experiential method,’ because the mind was left behind and no longer in control. What *was* had more to do with cellular memory and archetypes. All I (my mind) can say is that I underwent a visceral and profound experience. I sensed the veracity of different realities, relative truths and multiple sites of knowledge that Wilson (2008) talks about in his description of the Indigenous research paradigm. The fluidity of it all became evident as I comprehended how everything is in relationship with everything else, thereby needing our attention and care so that these relationships may live and grow. During these experiences of suspended everyday reality I pondered about life at large, the cosmos, the Divine, as well as about my own life, and the lives of my loved ones and all my relations. Creative thoughts and deep understanding and answers to issues that I had questions about also revealed themselves. And all this learning happened entirely without words!

Relevance of Indigenous Knowledge

As the idea of writing my dissertation on Indigenous knowledge was germinating, I found encouragement in Michele Tanaka’s dissertation *Transforming perspectives: The immersion of student teachers in indigenous ways of knowing* (2009). In it she tells the story of her journey as she collected data by partaking in the second of Lorna Williams’ seminal series of teacher education courses taught in partnership with elders from local First Nations at the University of Victoria since 2005. “... the course provides direct access to indigenous knowledge and holistically addresses issues of cross-cultural awareness and pedagogy” (Tanaka, 2009, p. 19). Williams’ intent was to explicitly leave behind academic discourses, theories, and frameworks typically found within teacher education programs, such as social justice philosophy and

constructivist learning theory and consciously shape the course to be a space where Indigenous pedagogy stood on its own, drawing from multigenerational knowledge within Aboriginal communities themselves. The course's purpose was to offer a different approach to teacher education within the context of the academy (Tanaka, 2009).

It is important to correct the persistent and inaccurate assumption that when the Europeans arrived in the Americas, they discovered poor and backward cultures. According to John Ralston Saul (2008), both the colonizers and the Indigenous peoples in Canada could be described as belonging to "medieval civilizations" (p. 37). Each had different advantages: the Europeans' was technical, but the Aboriginal advantages were about living and moving in their place. While technical advantages last at best a decade, the advantages of surviving and then doing well after adapting to Indigenous ways has lasted centuries (Saul, 2008).

Contradicting an obstinate modern day myth, Aboriginals were not poorer. In fact they considered the newcomers poorer because they dressed inappropriately and ate so badly that they died of scurvy and lost their teeth and hair. Furthermore Indigenous people thought this was the result of the great class differentiations in European civilization. Any society intentionally so unfair to many had to be inferior, and behaving according to class even when it proved detrimental was a sign of limited intelligence (Saul, 2008).

In the 21st century, the divide between long-lasting living and moving on the land, and the short-sighted implementation of temporary technical advantage goes on. Indigenous knowledge has played a crucial role in managing natural resources for centuries and is therefore inseparable from ecology (Joranson, 2007). Many Indigenous people are still at the helm of environmental movements trying to raise awareness of the catastrophic effects following actions void of foresight. Theirs is a vision which looks at the whole picture, the benefits as well as the

costs. Technical prowess needs to be coupled with sustainability or else life on Earth will become unlivable. Unchecked materialism is at the root of environmental degradation, dangerous climate changes, war and terrorism, extreme poverty, and nuclear proliferation, says Helena Norberg-Hodge. “We must begin to save ourselves from the worst consequences of our own behavior” (Norberg-Hodge in Schaefer, 2006, p. 174).

Future of Hope

In his book, *The Reenchantment of the World*, Morris Berman (1981) explains the ontological difference between modernist and traditional cultures by naming them “disenchanted” and “enchanted,” respectively. Traditional cultures, he says, view Nature in a way the West viewed it until before the Scientific Revolution. “Rocks, trees, rivers, and clouds were all seen as wondrous, alive, and human beings felt at home in this environment. In short, the cosmos was a place of belonging (Berman, p. 2).” The story of the modern era by contrast has been one of growing disenchantment. Individuals no longer participate actively in life, but have turned into detached observers of life. In *Red Pedagogy* Sandi Grande (2004) holds that the anthropomorphism of putting humans at the center of the universe, and seeing time and progress as being linear, is in clear conflict with Indigenous cosmology and epistemology. Both scholars point to the need of reconsidering what one-sided progress has brought into our lives.

We can recover some of the lost enchantment by creating trails toward nature-based Indigenous knowledge. Learning from its rich repository, where time is cyclical and humans are deeply imbedded in relationships with all of Nature, might bring back the captivating delight into the lives of modern day people. Fortunately, this knowledge remains an integral part of many Indigenous peoples around the world who maintain their traditions. Now they hold answers for a

more sustainable future for all. According to Williams and Snively (2006) traditional ecological knowledge brings the concept of wisdom to the discussion of science and technology, and demands both community and environment are sustained. This knowledge offers proven conceptual approaches that are becoming increasingly important to all BC residents, to Canada, and indeed the whole world.

Nature began losing its sacredness and magic when science and technology became main bearers of Western civilization. During the Renaissance and well into the Enlightenment, the European tradition liberated the human mind from the tyranny of absolute faith to gain personal freedom. In this pursuit, the individual was freed from the collective, a sociological equivalent to splitting the atom (Davis, 2009). According to Davis the ensuing reduction of the world to a mechanism in which Nature is understood as obstacle or exploitable resource, has influenced the manner in which this cultural tradition has blindly interacted with the living planet (2009). Understanding Nature scientifically with the mind but not experientially with the heart has caused a lot of damage, and will continue to do so until there is appropriate change. People who, over centuries, have remained rooted to land and traditions have longstanding and immediate knowledge of Nature; people who were forced to or chose to, leave, developed a relation with her that has been literally and figuratively ‘once removed.’

Opening Trails

One of my research questions asks if I can open a trail across the cultural divide between my research participants and myself. Our worlds are so different and yet I could always see our commonalities as women, as mothers, as speakers of the same language. A trail takes time to open and is easier done when people on both ends work together to walk it and keep it clear. It

also takes patience and most of all mutual trust. A tender opening of respect already existed prior to my research with doña Julieta and doña Reina. As we worked on our connections they became stronger and in time they allowed other family members to lean on them as well. With love and endurance we were able to expand our trail of reciprocity and shared trust. And, like with any path, we will have to tend it so that it remains in good shape for as long as we want to enjoy it.

The instinctive interest of many non-Indigenous people in a knowledge which is nature-based and holistic stems from the desire to reconcile present Western lifestyles with more sustainable and conscious ones. Indigenous knowledge and its practice offer genuine solutions to those searching for ways to reconnect with the land on which we live and depend, and to foster strong relationships with it and with each other. With so much development and change on a global scale as are happening now, it is a blessing that Indigenous knowledge has not only survived but is flourishing, cross-pollinating, and sending its seeds out in all directions.

This study is an example of possible manifestations which a cross-pollination between the Indigenous and non-Indigenous can engender. The number of Indigenous researchers keeps growing, and Indigenous scholars have been presenting Indigenous methodologies for several decades now. These offer valuable alternatives to the traditional Western research paradigm and often can be the most appropriate tool for the task. In my work I employed Indigenous methodologies to the best of my ability because these methods seemed most fitting when researching Indigenous participants, and because I feel aligned with them. Indigenous researchers' questioning of established academic conventions, while at the same time offering viable alternatives to traditional research modalities, opened the path for my research.

I aspired to become a good story catcher so that my work would serve as an amplifier of my participating elders' spirit. Several years later it is my sincere wish that this study does

justice to that original intention, and that the participants' communities as well as mine can benefit from it. I also hope to help increase the visibility of Indigenous women wisdom-keepers among non-Indigenous communities.

I prepared for this research by: attending two council gatherings of the Thirteen International Indigenous Grandmothers; hosting doña Julieta Casimiro, one of the Grandmothers, and the film producer of *For the Next Seven Generations*,⁷ Carole Hart, in Victoria; visiting her in her community in Huautla de Jiménez a number of times; visiting Rita Pitka Blumenstein, also member of the Thirteen Grandmothers in her home in Anchorage, Alaska, and visiting doña Reina Ramírez and her family several times over the years. I helped translate the book *Panchito, Mountain Cacique. Guajiro-Taíno Testimony of Francisco Ramírez Rojas*, from Spanish into English in 2007. The book tells the story of Reina's husband in his own words, written down by his interviewer José Barreiro. I also had the opportunity to travel to several Caribbean islands along the Taíno migratory path. During my studies I visited Larry Kimura in Hawai'i and although I do not include Hawaiian elders in this dissertation I want to acknowledge his kindness as he arranged for my husband and I to visit a Hawaiian language only K-12 school in Hilo and the Hawaiian Language Institute at the University of Hawaii. Our experience at the school inspired me deeply and made me aware of the power of appropriate curriculum when built around cultural needs and the dreams of a community.

⁷ For the Next Seven Generations is the documentary of the Grandmothers' journey since the inception of their council in 2004 to their visit with His Holiness the Dalai Lama in Dharamsala and their attempt to get an audience with the Pope in Rome.

Looking Through My Lens

As much as I endeavour to better understand the world around me, I realize that my own background, upbringing, and beliefs have marked me and filter the way I see and interpret life. What and how I comprehend things correlates with my personal myth, which emerges from the unique experiences I encounter throughout my life. Choosing to do research with participants from a cultural realm different to mine was, therefore, more challenging because our life experiences are not the same. My conviction that every Indigenous elder alive today who has something to tell the world, merits to be heard motivated me to persevere. Her message matters and my task as mediator is to portray the spirit of the mothers and grandmothers to help spread their mission of cultivating the tender connections young generations have with Nature and with each other.

What made things easier for me and bridged the experiential gap between us was our common language and without that this study would not have happened as it did. Knowing I could go to doña Julieta and to doña Reina, and listen and talk to them in Spanish was exciting as it truly empowered my research position. For Reina and I it is our first language, for Julieta it is her second, but Spanish is what she uses outside her Mazatec speaking community and sadly more and more with her grandchildren as well. Sharing the same language made it possible to go deeper and farther in building our relationships and trusting each other. Apart from our mutual language my participants and I also share the experience of motherhood. Quite different yet both elemental in a woman's life, motherhood and language provided enough common ground for us to relate and share our views, our needs, our failings and accomplishments, and our aspirations.

Mediating Understanding

The Indigenous women in this study welcomed me when I told them I wanted to learn from them. Together we worked on building a very basic link to connect our shared understanding over the abyss between our inherited worldviews. As I spent time in their communities so different than mine, I felt that, on a feeling level, there was more common ground than distance between us, because our hopes as mothers are identical: we want the best for our children, grandchildren, and great-grandchildren. These women were comfortable sharing their perspectives with me, a white woman, to the degree they could feel my heart was in the right place, and could believe I was truly interested in catching their story as well as sharing mine. My initial apprehension of trespassing cultural boundaries prior and during my investigation was overcome as I met kind Indigenous elders who were generous with their time and open for dialogue. Many elders are voicing their concerns regarding the environment and other issues that are affecting all of our lives and will affect our lives for generations to come. Some have united, such as the Thirteen International Indigenous Grandmothers. Although they hold diverse traditions, all of the Grandmothers' communities have something major in common: dominant societies are threatening their survival.

Elders who believe the time to pull together has come and are disposed to share ancestral, at times even previously restricted knowledge, are guided by their wisdom and prophecies. In this time of great cultural and social quickening I feel strong in my decision to research “the other” because I believe we all are “the other.”

Situating Myself

My generation has been interested in alternatives to Western culture ever since I can remember. The late 60s and 70s movement of revolt and discontent with authority was fed, among others, by Indigenous movements reclaiming their rights to their own ways of life. Resurging traditions resonated with young Westerners' call against uncontrolled growth and the ensuing desecration of life and Nature. They soon began emulating some of the traditional Indigenous ways, yearning to fill in the spiritual void that had been eroding their own traditions. Growing up, like so many others, without the connection to a spiritual community that truly spoke to me, I was very much attracted by my peers who were on the pursuit of deeper meaning as presented in ways not my own. As time passed however, I realized that good intentions alone were not sufficient when taking other people's customs and belief systems out of context. Taking from another culture without the necessary background information and an elder to guide and bless the process could, and often did, do more harm than good, and was ethically questionable.

Attracted beyond my conscious understanding by Indigenous ways of seeing and interpreting the world I needed to go to the source. I came to understand that I had to learn from Indigenous elders themselves who would be willing to teach me. Many years later and that much more experienced, I now recognize how difficult it is to truly comprehend another's worldview. Even with the greatest of efforts and a teachable mind and heart, one can grasp only partially at best what someone else's reality is. And yet, I continue wanting a better insight into the world of Indigenous fellow humans, because I still believe that what I can learn from them is of real value to me and other like-minded people. Therefore I aim to create a connection between the world I racially belong to and the Indigenous world, to which I owe great respect and gratitude.

Researching Indigenous Peoples as a White Scholar

We may know how colonization changed Aboriginal people, but do we know how it changed, and continues to change, white people? (Sherene Razack, 1998, p.19)

Anthropological research conducted by whites began in the 19th century and was not just instructive to whites; it caused a lot of misinformation and damage to Indigenous people (Battiste & Henderson, 2000). Eager researchers began analysing every non-white culture they could set their eyes on. Interpreting what they proclaimed as “objective” observations on the studied people’s realities seemed to be enlightening to the researcher culture, and sometimes amusing, but, in the long run, deeply troubling to those investigated. Empowered by reclaiming their cultures, their voices and their self-esteem, Indigenous peoples today have taken the interpretation and description of their information and teachings into their own hands, and rightly so. Indigenous literature is abundant and there is no need for outsiders to add anything to their experience, because they have taken full ownership of it.

What I offer here is not a study of Indigenous women elders per se, but of the impact these women’s teachings have on me and how these teachings might be transferable to non-Indigenous realms. Exploring, interviewing, and experiencing life in my participants’ midst affected me deeply. While I was doing my research, we all assumed roles that were not our every day roles but more or less adopted roles because of, or for, the encounter. This realization is central to my research. I take full responsibility for possible misinterpretations even after having shared the manuscript with my participants and receiving their approval. Partially a self-study, this research illustrates how my evolving knowledge has been affected by what I have learned from my participants.

In order to locate myself in the research I wanted to do, I had to take a careful look at who I am and what my motivations were. I knew I wanted to know more about Indigenous knowledge through study and through experiential research. What I had not expected was that crossing the racial divide would be as complex as it was. The initial enthusiasm for my project was somewhat dampened as I began realizing I was entering precarious territory. Would I be able to ethically reconcile my pursuit of Indigenous knowledge with my being white? Slowly beginning to understand more about this quandary, it was only thanks to my supervisor's trust that I felt I could and should go ahead.

The most remarkable part for me in doing this research was what began unfolding in Cuba, and then would also happen in Mexico. It was the realization that at the core of my investigation there would be not just individuals, but relationships. I evidently needed to expand my focus to include one daughter of each elder for they were the ones most openly involved in carrying on their mothers' traditions, and Reina's husband. I also included both their youngest sons as they showed interest in my research.

A considerable obstacle in my endeavour to write about Indigenous wisdom has been the limitation of language. To do this work I had to draw from literature driven by the Western view of the world. Being a product of Western education and surroundings myself, I acknowledge that my language may not always accurately reflect the deep respect I have for my subject and my participants. I apologize for that and would like to make amends wherever possible.

The Chapters

I have divided this dissertation into eight chapters. This first chapter has contextualized my research, introducing the reader to the larger problem and what part of it I address in my

research. I explain why I became interested in the project, my relationship to it, and how I approached it. I briefly introduce my research participants and finally explain my position as a white scholar doing Indigenous research.

Chapter 2 presents the literary review underlying this dissertation concerning Indigenous knowledge and education. My goal was to find examples in the academic conversations which further the idea that Indigenous knowledge and Indigenous education have inherent means for positive transformation for all cultures. While this is crucial for Indigenous students, some educators hold that, used appropriately with all students, Indigenous knowledge and education can only enrich current modern education. Indigenous knowledge is part of the collective genius of humanity (Battiste & Henderson, 2009).

In chapter 3, I first describe Indigenous methodologies and explain why I chose to use them for my research. Then I elaborate on the methods I applied to gather information and the procedures involved. I also talk about the ups and downs during the research process to render a more complete picture of what it was like to prepare for the study, to work in the field, and then to be back at home analyzing and writing my findings.

Chapter 4 is dedicated to the International Council of the Thirteen Indigenous Grandmothers, a group of elders who were my inspiration for doing this research in the first place. I tell the story of who they are, and how they came together. Then I describe my encounters with them and how I discerned that they would play an important role in my research. In this chapter I also tell my story and some share thoughts on my self-study.

Chapters 5 and 6 are devoted to the research participants in my study. In chapter 5, I introduce Reina Ramírez and her family. I briefly tell the story of how we met, followed by some background on the history and culture of her ancestors. Then I lay out data the collected during

our conversations and interviews in Cuba. Chapter 6 presents Julieta Casimiro. Here too I tell how we met, then give an account of the history and culture of her people. Following that I write about my research and experiences in Mexico.

In chapter 7 plants are the focus, and I elaborate on their significance and how Indigenous peoples preserve and respect their knowledge about them. First I describe the importance of maize and tobacco in most Indigenous cultures throughout the American continent. I also illustrate the role of two psychoactive substances occurring in Nature, *cohoba* in the ancient Taíno culture and psilocybe mushrooms among Mazatecs, and other Indigenous groups in Mexico today. Without plants there is no life, and Indigenous intelligence teaches us how they nourish not only body but also the spirit and mind. Plants are sacred and among them are teachers of profound wisdom. Science has begun to acknowledge this and today there are ongoing studies dedicated to research that respects previously neglected Indigenous wisdom.

In the concluding 8th chapter I pull together the findings from the research data and all previous chapters. I summarize the lessons I will keep beyond the scope of my research and mention worldwork as an ongoing model for relationship and community building. In conclusion I talk about radical co-presence as a way to embrace Indigenous knowledge on equal terms as Western knowledge. The time for accepting the respectful inclusion of Indigenous knowledge into contemporary society is here.

Chapter 2

Literature Review

Indigenous elders and scholars are creating an Indigenous renaissance that can be likened to the European renaissance after the Dark Ages (Battiste & Henderson, 2000, p. 13).

In this chapter I give an overview of the academic conversation that already exists around my research topic. I describe how I see my place in that conversation and what my relationship is to others. I discuss what several experts in the field understand about Indigenous knowledge. The works include those of Marie Battiste, Sa'ke'j Youngblood Henderson, Gregory Cajete, Sandi Grande, and Yatta Kanu. I refer to scholars Soenke Biermann, Chet Bowers, Leroy Little Bear, John Ralston Saul, and others as they advance awareness of the need and applicability of Indigenous ways of knowing in Western education and the modern world. The literature is predominantly geared towards fostering Indigenous education for the benefit of students of Indigenous background. As those cited above have shown, there are multiple signs that nature-based Indigenous education should be geared towards peoples of all backgrounds, as its holistic approach could be beneficial to everyone.

Indigenous Knowledge

The revival of knowledge inspired by systemic knowledge bases of the original peoples of the world is happening thanks to Indigenous peoples' growing insights that they all share experiential similarities.

Indigenous peoples regard all products of the human mind and heart as interrelated within Indigenous knowledge. They assert that all knowledge flows from the same source: the relationships between a global flux that needs to be renewed, the people's kinship with

the other living creatures that share the land, and the people's kinship with the spirit world. Since the ultimate source of knowledge is the changing ecosystem itself, the art and science of a specific people manifest these relationships and can be considered as manifestations of the people's knowledge as a whole (Battiste & Henderson, 2000, pp. 41- 42).

This knowledge system should be termed as Indigenous because it is inclusive of all, and encompasses tribal specific or local terms, such as Aboriginal, Indian, Métis, Inuit, or Native, according to Opaskwayak Cree Shawn Wilson. His *Research is Ceremony. Indigenous Research Methods* (2008) was elemental in helping me understand what Indigenous methodologies are and how I could apply them to my research. Indigenous knowledge is much more than the binary opposite of Eurocentric knowledge, (Battiste & Henderson, 2009). Eurocentric theory, methodologies, evidence, interpretation, and conclusions have limitations. Indigenous knowledge can serve to fill the ethical and knowledge gaps in Eurocentric education, research, and scholarship.

In *Protecting Indigenous Knowledge and Heritage. A Global Challenge* (2000), Marie Battiste, Mi'kmaq from Unama'kik, and James (Sa'ke'j) Youngblood Henderson, Chikasaw, state that one can describe unity in Indigenous knowledge, which is an expression of the vibrant relationships between people, their environment, and the other living beings and spirits that share their lands. Reading Henderson and Battiste clarified for me what Indigenous knowledge is, how all encompassing a system it is, where it clashes with Eurocentric knowledge, and how important it is to protect it from becoming the latest "great resource rush" (2000, p. 11). Their insights and tone gave me much to ponder, particularly around the role I play in the dissemination of a knowledge that does not come from my own heritage. I also was forewarned by them when I

read that Eurocentric emphasis on coherent wholes at the expense of unique processes of change and internal inconsistencies, conflicts, and contradictions, was and continues to be a serious limitation to Eurocentric understanding of Indigenous knowledge and heritage. This has led to serious misrepresentations of Indigenous cultures, produced by anthropologists and ethnographers hiding their role in perpetuating the colonial control of “distant” places and peoples behind “their mask of innocence (or as they put it, their ‘detached impartiality’)” (Battiste & Henderson, 2000, p. 31).

The *Oxford Dictionary* describes the word *Indigenous* as “Born or produced naturally in a land or region; native or belonging naturally *to* (the soil, region, etc.)” The word derives from the late Latin *indigen-us* meaning “born in a country, native.” Subsequently Indigenous knowledge refers to knowledge that came to life with the first human beings and in connection with their habitats. Another definition comes from The United Nations Environment Programme and says the following:

Indigenous Knowledge (IK) can be broadly defined as the knowledge that an indigenous (local) community accumulates over generations of living in a particular environment. This definition encompasses all forms of knowledge – technologies, know-how skills, practices and beliefs – which enable the community to achieve stable livelihoods in their environment. ... IK is considered a part of the local knowledge in the sense that it is rooted in a particular community and situated within broader cultural traditions. ... IK is based on, and is deeply embedded in local experience and historic reality, and is therefore unique to that specific culture; it also plays an important role in defining the identity of the community. It has developed over the centuries of experimentation on how to adapt to

local conditions. It therefore represents all the skills and innovations of a people and embodies the collective wisdom and resourcefulness of the community

(www.unep.org/ik/).

This makes clear how the term Indigenous knowledge originates as a local understanding, but as Shawn Wilson (2008) interprets it, its local specificity does not deny its global reach as the revival of Indigenous knowledges is underway around the world. Gregory Cajete (2000) states that all Indigenous tribes and all aspects of their cultural being are ultimately tied to the relationships that they have established and applied during their history with regard to certain places and to the Earth as a whole. Hence there are commonalities amongst Aboriginal people based on the idea of relationship to place. All the diverse situational understandings Indigenous peoples have on how to live and prosper on the land, and how to maintain harmonious relationships with land all beings, is presently defined as Indigenous knowledge or knowledges. According to Wilson (2008) his upbringing taught him to treasure differences between cultures, though in meeting Indigenous peoples in many countries, he noticed that they share similar beliefs and a common spirituality. He therefore considers that “Indigenous people share a unique way of thinking because of the prevalence of a common Indigenous epistemology” (Wilson, 2008, p. 33).

The Canadian Royal Commission of Aboriginal Peoples (1996) describes Indigenous knowledge as a distinct system of knowledge with its own philosophical and value base. It includes ecological teachings, medical knowledge, common attitudes towards Mother Earth and the Circle of Life, and a sense of kinship with all creatures (pp. 526-527). Here the term

encompasses all Indigenous knowledges existing on Canadian soil as having in common something that distinguishes them from other, presumably Western, knowledge systems.

Battiste and Henderson (2000) say that Indigenous ways of knowing make it possible to live within contexts of flux, paradox, and tension, respecting the pull of dualism and reconciling opposing forces. These ways of knowing share the following: knowledge of and belief in unseen powers in the ecosystem; knowledge that all things in the ecosystem are dependent on each other; knowledge that reality is structured around linguistic concepts by which Indigenous people describe it; knowledge that personal relationships reinforce the bond between persons, communities, and ecosystems; knowledge that sacred traditions and persons who know these traditions are responsible for teaching ethics to practitioners who are then given responsibility for this specialized knowledge and its dissemination; and knowledge that the teachings and social practices are passed on by an extended kinship from generation to generation (Battiste & Henderson, 2000, p. 42).

Knowledge systems of Indigenous peoples are more self-consciously empirical than those of Western scientific thought, according to Battiste and Henderson. At the individual level everyone must be a vigilant researcher to subsist as a hunter, fisher, forager, or farmer with minimal mechanical technology. Therefore the standard truth in Indigenous knowledge systems is personal experience. This is in stark contrast to the bulk of Eurocentric scholars' knowledge, which is mostly based on second hand claims, rather than on their own observations (Battiste & Henderson, 2000).

This background has given evidence that the term Indigenous knowledge, as coined by Indigenous scholars several decades ago, encompasses diverse Indigenous knowledges, based on the assumption that they all share distinctive common traits. Over the years the holistic coverage

of all areas of life by this knowledge has not just surprised lay people as well as academia, but it is challenging the long held assumption in Western spaces, that Western scientific knowledge is superior. Indigenous knowledge has been steadily gaining interest in non-Indigenous circles. It resonates deep within the ancestral memory of people who have lost intimate connection with Nature. In this knowledge reside memories of a time when Nature was still understood as animate. The Thirteen International Indigenous Grandmothers remind us that there was a time when all of our ancestors revered the Earth and used ritual to maintain her balance (Schaefer, 2006). Understanding the world beyond a predominantly Eurocentric lens will encourage new ways of thinking and problem solving (Starnes, 2006).

Finding My Niche

The following quote by Battiste and Henderson (2000) supports my endeavor to research Indigenous knowledge from a white perspective, by giving me a fair warning at the same time: “As outsiders, non-Indigenous researchers may be useful in helping Indigenous peoples articulate their concerns, but to speak for them is to deny them the self-determination so essential to human justice and progress” (p. 133). These scholars state that over the past centuries, researchers have examined and dissected Indigenous peoples. Their whole existence, even their dead, has been analyzed in detail, always heeding Eurocentric views of ethics rather than following Indigenous laws and ethics. A comment by Panchito, Reina’s husband, from the book *Panchito, Mountain Cacique. Taino Testimony* illustrates this.

Research was done here in the 70s, when Soviet professors came to study the *Indios*. That study amused us. They measured our teeth, our jawbone, our hair, our height; they checked our blood, our cheekbones; well, so many measurements only to show what we

already knew ... since from our grandparents we already knew who we were. But the study confirmed what had been so much denied ... that after all we are ... *Indios* (Barreiro, 2008, pp. 29-30).

Another notable warning came to me as I read the following,

The awareness that the demise of Indigenous populations and the loss of their languages is causing the demise of Indigenous knowledge and the loss of biological diversity has not stopped the rush on Indigenous knowledge systems by outsiders. These outsiders have not attempted to prevent the extermination of Indigenous peoples or their ecosystems; instead they have intensified their efforts to access, to know, and to assert control over this endangered knowledge and these endangered resources. This is such a tragic response (Battiste & Henderson, 2000, p. 290).

Pointing out how industrialized societies are demanding that Indigenous peoples share their knowledge to solve the various problems that the Eurocentric worldview has created, Battiste and Henderson call it “an extraordinarily bold request” (2000, p. 11). After contaminating the environment and not only refusing to have respectful relations with the forces of the ecologies, but competing with them, now they look toward Indigenous peoples for help.

As my initial search through the literature was showing, numerous and excellent contemporary Indigenous scholars have been making revolutionary contributions in the field of Indigenous knowledge. More questions than answers came to my mind. I started questioning my right to join in the conversation. Was I as a non-Indigenous person welcome in it? What could I add to the discussion? Immersing myself in the written dialogue, I began noticing that although there is a fast-growing-number of articles on Indigenous knowledge and pedagogy, not so much has been written from the angle I was envisioning. Convinced there would be a fairly unique

niche for me in the ongoing exchange about the value and place of Indigenous knowledge for all in modern times, I persisted with my exploration. Nonetheless, I continued to struggle with issues of cultural appropriation, the ongoing colonial domination in education, and my place in following this controversial path while safely sheltered in the dominant culture.

Needing confirmation that it was acceptable for me to research Indigenous knowledge, I searched through the literature, seizing any evidence that validated my involvement. After much insensitive and top down research on Indigenous peoples by Westerners, researched communities and individuals have understandably had enough, and at first the message of inclusion that I was looking for was not easy to find. Alienated by the tacit Eurocentric belief that everything revolves around white people, the Indigenous renaissance now underway (Battiste, 2008) holds that Indigenous research needs to be done by Indigenous people. I acknowledge and respect that. However my ambition to pursue the path of learning from Indigenous knowledge remained unchanged.

Thankfully Dr. Lorna Williams, Lil'wat from the St'at'yem'c First Nation, Canada Research Chair in Indigenous Knowledge and Learning, who also chairs the First Peoples' Heritage, Language, and Culture Council, kindly took me under her wing as my supervisor and reassured me it was possible to bridge the worlds, although it would not be easy. Having her trust that I could write my dissertation on Indigenous knowledge regardless of my ancestry, as long as I kept track of my own story and how the research affected me, was crucial in my decision. Every time I encountered doubts, my own as well as those of others, all I had to do was remember my supervisor's approval.

Continuing to search for small hints that supported my inclination to research Indigenous knowledge, I persevered, being confident that as long as I accepted the responsibilities that go

with it, it would work out. Thanks to the grassroots work of several Indigenous scholars, I found my way into the conversation of Indigenous knowledge beyond its cultural boundaries.

Few schools and universities have made Indigenous knowledge a priority in educating Indigenous students, much less teaching all students about diverse knowledge systems; ... which perpetuates notions of Indigenous peoples as historical and local, not contemporary and global with a knowledge system that has value for all (Battiste, 2008, p. 86).

“Value for all” was precisely what I needed to read because that had been my argument all along. I understand Indigenous knowledge as holding essential teachings for our common future. This is the insight I want to help advocate. All our ancestors were Indigenous to their respective homelands, and human knowledge emerged from living in and observing Nature. Every human culture survived by adapting to the life conditions Nature imposed on them. Over millennia people stayed, others moved, and countless were moved, migration being an answer to survival since prehistoric times. Today on one extreme are people who still tread the earth on which their grandparents and their great-great-great grandparents lived, and on the other are those who cut their ties to ancestral territories ages ago. For the latter, memories about a long removed Indigenous ancestry have mostly been forgotten and yet life on Earth still obeys ancient laws.

Nature-Based Indigenous Wisdom

Living cut off from their ancestral lands has impacted people’s relationship with Nature in radical ways, sometimes completely divorcing them from having any emotional or spiritual attachments to the ground on which they live. Not much is remembered from a time when Nature

was integrally related to how people lived, what they ate, how they worshipped, and how they aligned with the movement of the sun, both daily and annually. This development has not been all positive. The progress it engendered has been astounding in many ways, but this has come with a high price. Side-by-side to the extraordinary accomplishments are the excessive destruction and impoverishment of not just millions of people, but of the environment itself. Searching for and relearning long lost and previously degraded nature-based knowledge in a good and respectful way can be commendable. Letting oneself be taught in humbleness, ought not to be considered disrespectful appropriation. In our 21st century, the more people joining in the awareness that the revival of Indigenous knowledge is underway and, thus, holding many answers to our deteriorating environment, the better. Schoolchildren, regardless of racial or social background, should be at the forefront. Yatta Kanu (2011), originally from Sierra Leone and now living and teaching in Canada, says in her book *Integrating Aboriginal Perspectives into the School Curriculum*:

Among Aboriginal peoples, reclamation of the knowledge of Aboriginal peoples in education is seen not only as a strategy of resistance and commitment to redressing colonial processes of knowledge generation and its implications of imperialism and knowledge / power relations but also as a means of expanding the general knowledge base of education especially in the current information age when capital is invested with knowledge which in turn is invested with cultural values (2011, p. 4).

According to Kanu (2011) multiple critical sites of struggle in assisting the reclamation of Aboriginal knowledge in education have been identified in the literature. One of them is the engagement of schools to position and legitimize Indigenous knowledge as relevant and significant in the hierarchy of valued knowledges (Canadian Council of Learning, 2007).

Promoting Aboriginal interests by integrating Aboriginal knowledge and perspectives into public school curricula is important (Kanu, 2011). As Kanu explains, it is a fact that the social bonds between citizens are likely to be stronger when we actively engage in developing relationships that are based on mutual caring and mutual respect (Kanu, 2011). Therefore, the call for Aboriginal cultures to be integrated into conventional education and to be respected and held in high esteem is paramount. Making this knowledge and its application visible will have impact on Western students. Kanu (2011) also addresses the notion of “collective intelligence” which involves a transformation in the way we think about human capacity (p. 13). Collective intelligence suggests that all are capable rather than only a few. This implies that intelligence is multiple rather than a matter of solving puzzles with only one correct answer. It also indicates that our human qualities for imagination and emotional engagement are as important as our ability to become technical experts (Kanu, 2011).

A related notion Kanu uses in her thought process is “knowledge societies” (2011, p. 13). The term knowledge society is described as a society that is nurtured by its diversity and its capacities (UNESCO, 2005).

Indeed, knowledge societies should be strongly based on a commitment to human rights and fundamental freedoms, including freedom of expression. Knowledge societies should also ensure the full realization of the right to education and of all cultural rights. In knowledge societies, access to the public domain of information and knowledge for educational and cultural purposes should be as broad as possible. Information should be of high quality, diversified and reliable. An important principle of knowledge societies should be the diversity of cultures and languages (*From the Information Society to*

Knowledge Societies at the UNESCO World Summit on the Information Society, Geneva, 2003 and Tunis, 2005).

For the UNESCO, cultural diversity, equal access to education, universal access to information (in the public domain), and freedom of expression are the four principles essential for the development of equitable knowledge societies.

The concept of knowledge societies alludes to the understanding that intelligence is not singular, fixed, or property of one cultural group, but it is multiple, infinite, and shared. The emergence of this new society is invigorating the importance of Indigenous/Aboriginal knowledge in preparing young people for a world of creativity, flexibility, and change. The growing interest in the traditional knowledge of Indigenous peoples as a different way of knowing (not based on European models and thought processes grounded in rational, scientific or bureaucratic principles) illustrates this development engendered by the collective intelligence inherent in knowledge societies (Kanu, 2011).

Battiste (2008) confirms that Indigenous knowledge is being revealed nationally and internationally as a wide and important knowledge system. This is happening, not only to resolve continuing failures of the education system, but also to open up to the understanding that the 21st century education must learn to operate in distinct knowledges. Battiste speaks of a truly “higher” educational system as “a place of connectedness and caring, a place that honors the heritage, knowledge, and spirit of every Indigenous student and contributes to the building of transsystemic knowledge for all students” (2008, p. 90). We can all learn from Indigenous peoples that, rather than having dominion over the Earth, we are an integral part in the family of the Earth (Kanu, 2011).

Traditional Aboriginal ecological knowledge based on detailed, local, long-term observation, is now one of the new frontiers in scientific understanding of ecosystems. In the race for knowledge to cure various diseases there is a convergence of Indigenous knowledge and Western science. For example, ethnobotanists and biologists are working hand in hand with Indigenous communities to gather and document plants and medicinal remedies (Kanu, 2011).

Gregory Cajete (2008), Tewa Indian from Santa Clara Pueblo, holds that an integrated relational education process can have a profound meaning for the kind of modern education needed to be ready for our century's challenges. Cajete (2009) subscribes to an education for "life's sake" or "seeking life" (p. 34) as embodied in the legacy of the traditional forms of American Indian education. According to him, seeking life, for life's sake, is to complete and become complete, to be of good heart and good thought, and to find harmony. Multiple combinations of these phrases have translations in all Indian languages (Cajete, 2009).

The goal of education is to attain knowledge, seek truth, wisdom, completeness, and life. Traditional Indigenous education is an exploration of a nature-centered and community-responsive philosophy of research that invites a deeper understanding of our collective role as caretakers of a world we have collectively been responsible for throwing out of balance (Cajete, 2008). Cajete believes that dominant education must reorient itself from being primarily focused on specialization, toward a focus on integrated knowledge. Objective science needs to give way to systemic science, and rather than concentrating only on structures, education should be geared to understanding process. Cajete suggests we use the metaphor of "networking" rather than building when referring to knowledge, as education at its core is learning about life through participation and relationship to community, including people, plants, animals, and the whole of Nature (2008, p. 206).

Kanu (2011) explains that beyond the economic benefits the integration of Aboriginal cultural knowledge and perspectives into regular school programs, rather than promoting Aboriginal school divisions, can potentially support better intercultural understanding among all students. It would foster solidarity and community building and create an overall enhanced social climate. Eurocentric biases have been strengthening in the last 500 years and need to be overcome (Battiste & Henderson, 2000). Battiste and Henderson maintain that it is difficult for most Eurocentric thinkers to imagine the possibilities of an enlarged awareness of Indigenous thought. According to the Indigenous scholars the teachings and artificially constructed frameworks of these thinkers hinder their own growth. Indigenous people on the other hand make this cognitive leap to physically survive on a daily basis.

Over the past decade, scientists, industries, and governments have expressed an astonishing interest in the knowledge of Indigenous peoples. This interest has brought back the predatory mentality of Eurocentric thought, and raises questions about Indigenous peoples' ability to survive it (*Cultural Survival Quarterly*, 1991). Written over 20 years ago, the article, *Intellectual Property Rights: The Politics of Ownership*, describes how since the early 80s Western knowledge has been looking to expand without giving due credit to the keepers of Indigenous knowledge. The basic premise of respect and reciprocity remains unlearned. However, as Battiste and Henderson (2000) attest, Indigenous scholars trained in the Eurocentric tradition are challenging the beliefs and methodology of their professions. They are talking about new forms of cognitive imperialism and discrimination.

Systemic discrimination against Indigenous peoples during colonial times has been exchanged with subtle cognitive and linguistic frameworks that legitimize and perpetuate imperialism, posing the most substantial cultural challenge facing humanity today. "Meeting the

responsibility of challenging these frameworks is not just a task for the colonized and the oppressed; it is the defining challenge and the path to a shared and sustainable future for all peoples” (Battiste & Henderson, 2000, p. 12).

Indigenous people can offer unique approaches to peace-building and ways of living together in cooperative and just societies. Battiste and Henderson (2000) hold that new efforts must come forward to create intercultural venues for dialogue and cooperation, to strengthen intercultural diplomacy, and to stop ethnic warfare, separatism, and apartheid. I concur with these scholars and I firmly believe that we can reach a shared and proud future. An era of great cooperation, understanding, and respect among diverse peoples of the earth is possible and we can all forge a true renaissance. Everyone who believes in one human species and is against further injustice toward Indigenous people, counts, as everyone has a powerful and indispensable role to play.

And when we meet these challenges, the judgement of history will be that each intellectual tradition met and respected the others’ heritage and knowledge. Together this honor and respect will lift our cultures and heritage into a fair global order and into a new higher level of civilization the world needs. We cannot afford not to do it (Battiste & Henderson, 2000, p. 17).

In her book *Red Pedagogy. Native American Social and Political Thought*, Sandy Grande (2004), a Quechua woman living in the United States, writes about the need for understanding other cultural patterns as legitimate and competing sources of knowledge, since dominant patterns of belief and practice are being identified as integrally related to the cultural and ecological crises in which we presently find ourselves. According to Grande (2004), voices of Indigenous and other non-Western peoples have become increasingly vital, because non-Western

peoples and nations exist as living critiques of the dominant culture, and can provide “critique-al knowledge and potentially transformative paradigms” (p. 65). Perhaps then the countless generations of abuse and neglect may be healed. Grande describes red pedagogy as “historically grounded in local and tribal narratives, intellectually informed by ancestral ways of knowing, politically centered in issues of sovereignty, and morally inspired by the deep connections among the Earth, its beings, and the spirit world,” (2004, p. 35). Curious about the origin of the term ‘red’ pedagogy I emailed Grande to clarify it and she wrote:

The term red pedagogy is something I used early in my work to reference "red" as in Indigenous peoples but also gesture toward a Marxist analysis ... which I work in solidarity with but also draw distinctions from ... the term at some point was also used by Marxist feminist scholar Teresa Ebert ... but she used it in terms of Marx exclusively (private communication, December 12, 2012).

According to Grande (2004), red pedagogy is profoundly “inter - and cross -disciplinary” as it remains rooted in *indigenism* and imports the language and visions of the ancestors to the concerns of the present (p. 171). It offers the choice to live differently and stand in defiance of the uninspiring emptiness of the “whitestream” (Grande, 2004, p. 4). It encourages resisting an education where connections to Earth and the spirit world are looked upon with skepticism and disdain. Red pedagogy and narratives of survival compel moving beyond romantic calls for an imagined past toward developing a viable vision, and it asks that conversations about power include an examination of responsibility (Grande, 2004). It demands that we all consider our collective need to relate and reciprocate. Human rights need to move beyond the anthropocentric discourse of humans-only, where battles for voice may give way to an appreciation for silence. The educative process of red pedagogy can re-enchant the universe, reconnect peoples to the

land, and is as much about belief and acquiescence as it is about questioning and empowerment. Creating a viable space for traditions, this pedagogy will help shape schools and processes of learning around the “decolonial imaginary” (Grande, 2004, p. 176).

Richardson and Villenas (2000) describe red pedagogy as the manifestation of sovereignty. It engages the development of “community-based power” in the interest of a responsible political, economic, and spiritual society (p. 272).

The dream is that indigenous and nonindigenous peoples will work in solidarity to envision a way of life free of exploitation and replete with spirit ... the world of knowledge far exceeds our ability to know. It beckons all of us to acknowledge that only the mountain commands reverence, the bird freedom of thought, and the land comprehension of time (Grande, 2004, p. 176).

All societies work to shape the biology and consciousness of children in some way, and modernist societies and their institutions mould consciousness in ways that are deeply destructive and unsustainable (Grande, 2004). According to Gregory Smith (1992), socialization to modern consciousness is made easy by cultural, economic, and political institutions, and public schools have served as one of the primary vehicles, replacing “more localistic and sectarian forms of morality with a set of secular universal values constructed ... to subsume all traditions” (p. 48). Consequently school encourages children to develop as progressive, competitive, rational, material, consumerist, and anthropocentric individuals (Smith, 1992).

Chet Bowers (1993) concludes that children learn definitions of reality, and the associated vocabulary through a particular intellectual curriculum, which lays down the socially accepted boundaries of discourse and reflection. In a knowledge society the knowledge base is broader and encompasses diverse worldviews. However, one common denominator that concerns

all humans is nature-based knowledge as reflected in ancient and contemporary Indigenous understanding.

Value for All

The difference between modern and traditional societies finds expression in their competing views of land and Nature. This is what can explain the persistence of serious conflict between such societies. While modern secular societies see land as property, property as capital, and capital as wealth-status-power, land in traditional sacred societies means connection to family, tribe, and ancestors (Grande, 2004). Land is thought of in connection to sacred sites, burial grounds, and medicinal plants. Rather than accepting these differences however, they are perceived as deficiencies within the hierarchical structures of Western power. “The sacred is viewed as subordinate to the secular, space as subordinate to time, and tradition as subordinate to progress” (Grande, 2004, p. 72). Wade Davis (2009) illustrates this point in the *The Wayfinders. Why Ancient Wisdom Matters in the Modern World*.

What matters is the potency of a belief, the manner in which conviction plays out in the day-to-day lives of people, for in a very real sense this determines the ecological footprint of a culture, the impact that any society has on its environment. A child raised to believe that a mountain is the abode of a protective spirit will be a profoundly different human being from a youth brought up to believe that a mountain is an inert mass of rock ready to be mined (Davis, 2009, pp. 122-123).

Countless numbers of Indigenous peoples have resisted by choosing to live in ways consistent with their traditional values and refusing to surrender to a system that places humans above all

other creatures and treats Nature as an unwelcoming entity to be exploited, subdued, and abandoned (Grande, 2004).

As long as the Western notion of progress continues to overwhelm life-sustaining ecosystems, Indigenous peoples and their allies, including critical scholars, must strive for political, economic, and educational reforms that acknowledge the intrinsic connection between the cultural and ecological crises (Grande, 2004). Cajete (2009) explains that modern education and traditional education can no longer afford to remain historically and contextually separate entities. All communities have to incorporate the learning happening through modern education into the cultural bases of knowledge and value orientations that allow them to perpetuate their ways of life. According to Cajete (2009), a balanced integration must occur. He says that the universals he explores in *Look to the Mountain. An Ecology of Indigenous Education* (first published in 1994) may be understood as “archetypes of human learning and as part of the Indigenous psyche of all people and cultural traditions” (Cajete, 2009, p. 18). In his view, objectivist research definitely adds a dimension of insight, but it also has considerable limits in the multidimensional, holistic, and relational reality of the education of people. Affective elements, such as subjective experience and observations, communal relationships, artistic and mythical dimensions, ritual and ceremony, sacred ecology, as well as psychological and spiritual orientations have shaped Indigenous education since time immemorial.

American education must rededicate its efforts to help Americans understand and appreciate “spirituality” as it relates to the earth and the “places” in which we live. It must engender a commitment to service rather than competition as an espoused social value. It must promote practiced respect for individual cultural and biological diversity (Cajete, 2008, p. 206).

Dimensions such as these and their inherent meanings cannot be quantified, observed, or easily verbalized. That is one of the primary reasons why they have been lacking credibility in mainstream approaches to education and research. These very aspects of Indigenous orientation do, however, make up the framework for learning through exploring the multidimensional relationships between humans and their inner and outer worlds (Cajete, 2009). Cajete's exploration of Indigenous education tries to develop insights into the community of shared metaphors and understandings which are specific to Indian cultures, but also exhibit what human learning as a whole represents.

Traditional systems of Indigenous education correspond to ways of learning and doing through a Nature-centered philosophy. These are among the oldest expressions of environmental education in the world, and, taken as a whole, they represent an environmental education process with great meaning for modern education. Facing the challenges of living in the 21st century, we can use these nature-based ways to develop "a deeper understanding of our collective role as caretakers of a world that we have thrown out of balance" (Cajete, 2009, p. 21). For a collective, harmonious and whole future, viable to pass on to our children's children, we need to imagine and apply innovative ways to educate for ecological thinking and sustainability. The change must be embraced by Indigenous and non-Indigenous alike. "The choice is ours, yet paradoxically we may have no choice" (Cajete, 2009, p. 23).

In their article, *Naturalizing Indigenous Knowledge in Eurocentric Education*, Battiste and Henderson (2009) explain that, since the early 1970s, Indigenous scholars educated in Eurocentric postsecondary tertiary institutions have been spearheading a decolonizing movement which reverses forced assimilation and reclaims Indigenous voice and vision. In the past two decades, Indigenous scholars, educators, professionals, and activists in Canada have been

confirming the significance and usefulness of Indigenous knowledge, and governments, international organizations, universities, scholars, and policymakers are beginning to pay attention. The growth in the number of publications on the relevance of Indigenous knowledge in a variety of policy sectors and academic disciplines is growing rapidly. The Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples in Canada (Government of Canada, 1996) was important in embracing Indigenous knowledge in the reconciliation and renewal of relations with Aboriginal peoples. It is necessary to appreciate that neither Indigenous knowledge nor Indigenous perspectives invoke a return to the past. “They are a challenge to sustain knowledges, renew our understanding of our relationship with the natural world, reconnect to the spiritual dimension of being, and reshape the institutions and processes that shape our lives with our renewed understandings” (Berry, 1999, cited in Battiste & Henderson, 2009, p. 9).

Indigenous knowledge teaches the ability to live well within the limitations of the surrounding life and its processes, and exposes the inherent order of a vulnerable biosphere.

It has implicitly generated the largest cognitive transformation of humanity that states that every place matters and that the stewards of those lands, the Indigenous peoples, have values that will help sustain those spaces if they are allowed to thrive and flourish. It has nurtured a cascading global uprising, a movement of ideas, to reclaim basic human rights in relation to the earth (Battiste & Henderson, 2009, p. 9).

This is an uprising that has overrun ideologies of Eurocentric knowledge, which are arising from personal insights but inform a collective knowledge. Battiste and Henderson (2009) describe it as a movement that has inspired a decolonization of knowledge and people are searching for change in a post-colonial civilization. Traditional Eurocentric views of Indigenous peoples and their

heritage as exotic objects have been deconstructed and discredited. The empire of Eurocentric knowledge nevertheless continues resisting the Indigenous renaissance. Global consensus of the value of Indigenous knowledge is growing in international organizations and law, but in Canada, aside from efforts by dedicated elders, community leaders, and professionals, it is yet to be applied in a concerted way in learning programs.

Honoring the Learning Spirit

When Indigenous knowledge becomes naturalized in educational programs, the learning spirit is nurtured and animated, empowering Aboriginal people to decolonize themselves, their communities, and institutions (Battiste & Henderson, 2009). This leads to transformation and change benefiting everyone because naturalizing Indigenous knowledge creates potential for Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal learners in ways that Eurocentric knowledge alone cannot do. Unfortunately not many professional schools, universities, or educational systems across Canada or anywhere else have made naturalization of Indigenous knowledge a priority yet. Assimilation or ignoring is still the primary pedagogy, but through the efforts of Indigenous professionals and scholars and their allies, improvements are being made. Naturalizing Indigenous knowledge in Eurocentric knowledge to create a trans-systemic synthesis is an arduous task, and it is not only a constitutional requirement, but a promising and valuable practice. The two are distinct but complementary knowledge systems and the transformation is long overdue and necessary, conclude Battiste and Henderson (2009).

In the synthesis paper *Naturalizing Indigenous Knowledge*, Leroy Little Bear (2009), member of the Small Robes Band of the Blood Indian Tribe of the Blackfoot Confederacy, affirms that Indigenous knowledge is part of the collective genius of humanity.

It represents the accumulated experience, wisdom and know-how unique to nations, societies, and or communities of people, living in specific ecosystems of America, Africa, Asia, and Oceania. It represents the accumulated knowledge of the earth's people that represent over 5000 languages and cultures contained in more than 70 nation-states (Little Bear, 2009, p. 7).

Little Bear (2009) explains that knowledge is not tangible, but its manifestations may be. Knowledge is a methodology, a validation process, and in the Aboriginal context it is represented as multiple and diverse processes. Dreams, visions, insights and teachings that validate one's sensory intake are all different ways of knowing. From an Indigenous perspective, knowledge is the relationships one has to all relations, not something written in a book or contained in other memory mechanisms. Aboriginal paradigms are holistic, cyclical, linked to place, repetitive, generalist, and process-oriented. They harbour ideas of constant flux and motion; concepts of energy waves/spirits generate a perception that all is alive and animate. Humans, animals, plants, rocks, the earth, the sun, the moon, and the stars are energy and spirit to which one can relate. Constant transformation, reformation, and restoration produce a 'spider web' network of relations, and the ensuing interrelationships are expressed in the saying "all my relations" (Little Bear, 2009, p. 9).

To this day, Indigenous knowledge, customs, and ways of being are too often pushed aside as meaningless, superstitious, and inapplicable by newcomers to the American continent. Those who push aside can see no value in Indigenous knowledge, not understanding that their

early existence in the New World was dependent on it. Aboriginal people made great agricultural, medical, and pharmaceutical contributions, which scarcely receive mention in schools or daily conversations. “If true lifelong learning is to be a reality; if the education establishment is to become responsive to the needs of Aboriginal people, the schools, the teachers, school boards, and the government will have to address the hindrances to the learning spirit of Aboriginal people” (Little Bear, 2009, p. 18). Little Bear believes that “telling truths about Canada, including its Aboriginal roots, will go a long way to naturalizing Indigenous knowledge. It is the responsibility of the education establishment to bring out these truths” (Little Bear, 2009, p. 25).

According to Cajete (2009), since the arrival of the Europeans, traditional expressions of education have been mostly replaced by institutions founded on the psychological premise of behavior modification, of command and control. Any attempts to integrate the understandings that come from cultural diversity are resisted, and most Native Americans have had to adopt new ways of living to survive. In Cajete’s view, the “homogenizing, technosocial paradigm” (2009, p. 78) founded on the Western mechanistic philosophy of control of Nature and the idea that homogenization creates more freedom, need to be balanced with the deep ecological philosophy and understanding of relationships to the natural world. The remaining Indigenous groups around the world have an accumulated knowledge representing a body of ancient thought, experience, and action that needs to be honored and preserved as a vital storehouse of environmental wisdom. It is a testimonial to the ingenuity, creativity, resourcefulness, and ability of people to learn and to teach a harmonious way of existence with Nature. This ancient knowledge evolved over thousands of years and hundreds of generations through ongoing relationships with specific environments. The “art of relationship” with the land can be included in the modern education

system in order to create “social and economic structures that may mean the survival of modern societies” (Cajete, 2009, p. 78). This sense of relatedness to the natural world came from a source beyond intellectual understanding. Everything was mutually dependent and nothing in Nature, especially humans, could be viewed as entirely self-sufficient.

The Spoken Word

Traditional societies depend on the spoken word for communication rather than the visual word that dominates modern education. Cajete (2009) believes that modern people are deprived because their natural poetic sensibility has been largely schooled out of them. “Humans are storytelling animals,” Cajete (2009, p. 117) says, since story is the primary structure through which humans think, relate, and communicate. Myths, legends, and folk tales have been cornerstones of teaching, and thinking and communicating poetically through the structures of myth is a natural expression of human learning. Today however, in the “mad dash” to make children literate and skilled, this powerful dimension of human knowing and understanding is neither recognized nor honored (Cajete, 2009, p. 131).

Literacy and the written word are very recent in human history and evolved from illiterate mythopoetic roots. Saul (2008) holds that the Canadian intellectual class, whether lawyers, social scientists or those who teach literature, is constituted to deny the centrality of the Aboriginal cultures. It exists to deny any particular Canadian approach toward culture. “They write it out, marginalize it, even when ways are found to give the oral written form” (Saul, 2008, p. 36). Although many believe there is no alternative, the truth is that the historic basis for most of what is taught in the humanities was oral or largely oral for millennia.

The negative connotations that Western cultures have promoted regarding illiteracy as a sign of being uneducated, uncivilized, and primitive are limiting, as honoring oral traditions and orality in children offer crucial insights into natural learning. A better understanding of orally-based learning will open up new dimensions that have become dormant with the preponderance of literacy. Bowers (2003) believes that the Western approach to literacy emphasizes patterns of social relationships not found in oral-based cultures. In those cultures, “participation is the central feature of life rather than the analytical and decontextualized judgment that fixed texts make possible” (Bowers, 2003, p. 15).

Changing Times

Cajete (2009) sees a new paradigm and a new era of myth beginning to unfold. Leaving the “individual ego writ large” paradigm of Western society behind (Cajete, 2009, p. 136), the new one reflects a stage of consciousness wrestling with an evolving global community, the unfolding environmental crises, and progressive democratization. This paradigm and the myths coming to light are signalling a mutualism and interconnection of all aspects of the Earth and are earth-centered by the necessity of human survival. Cajete (2009) emphasizes that modern educators must realize that they urgently need to integrate and interconnect with the educational perspectives of other cultures in a mutualistic way. Indigenous education and its emphasis on the mythological have much to contribute to the advancement of modern education, and it is the responsibility of Indigenous people to lead and stimulate the consciousness of their counterparts in Western society.

In Indigenous education each person is one of his or her own teachers and learning is connected to each individual process. Meaning is looked for in everything, and all things

comprising Nature are deemed to be teachers of mankind. A cultivated and practiced openness to the lessons that the world has to teach is all that is required. The educational legacy of Indigenous people is to enable individuals “to reach completeness by learning how to trust their natural instincts, to listen, to look, to create, to reflect and see things deeply, to understand and apply their intuitive intelligence, and to recognize and honor the teacher of spirit within themselves and the natural world” (Cajete, 2009, p. 228). According to Battiste (2007) both Indigenous and non-Indigenous scholars have a responsibility to unravel the still existing prejudices, and Indigenous people need to recognize that within their traditions there is a store of knowledge that will help restore healthy and connective relationships.

Soenke Biermann (2011) concerns himself with the question of why Indigenous peoples’ pursuit of decolonization as a means to resist colonizing and assimilatory educational agendas, should also concern non-Indigenous people. Why should restoring Indigenous philosophies, knowledges, and processes to their rightful and valued place matter to those living as majorities in modern settler states? This goes to the heart of how the privileged deal with the inequalities (re)produced by colonialism in the Academy and beyond.

Biermann (2011) asks himself, how he can possibly reconcile his privileged position as a white middle-class man working at a university with principles such as fairness, equity, and social justice. As a migrant slowly establishing a sense of belonging in a settler state, and benefiting from the inequalities produced by colonialism and its aftermath, Biermann sees at least three reasons to decolonize. The first is rooted in principles of solidarity and social justice. Recognizing the injustices of colonial oppression and, as a fellow human being, doing all within one’s power to dismantle unequal and unjust structures, which produce privilege and disadvantage, is paramount. The second reason comes from the realization that colonial systems

of oppression diminish everyone's humanity. Resistance by those who are systemically privileged, for example, by whiteness, becomes a necessity. The last reason is mutual benefit. Engagement with Indigenous philosophies, knowledges, and processes might facilitate a better understanding of the human condition and its questions and challenges (Biermann, 2011).

Despite the contemporary lip-service to Indigenous knowledges and philosophies concerning their inherent worth and value, Biermann claims that all too often universities still position the knowledges and philosophies as alien and outside the scope of academic knowledge. Indigenous philosophies still do not receive the same recognition as other knowledge systems. This is an issue rooted in colonial attitudes of superiority, and has been compounded in recent years by non-Indigenous and Indigenous people underlining the importance of Indigenous cultures "at the expense of other ways of conceiving of Indigenous systems of knowledge" (Biermann, 2011, p. 392). In academia the concepts of cultures, ways of learning, or worldviews are presumed to be less rigorous and complex than, for example, civilizations and philosophies. Putting Indigenous philosophies on par with other intellectual traditions within universities challenges power relations and intellectual sovereignty in modern "settler states" (Biermann, 2011, p. 393).

Indigenous philosophies do not just amount to additional or different content-knowledge within the Western framework, but display separate kinds of process-knowledge. The difference in understanding the process of knowledge generation, legitimization, and dissemination, which cannot be simply slotted into existing structures, is a great challenge to institutional mechanisms of curriculum design, pedagogy, and assessment. Authentically embracing Indigenous knowledges and epistemologies within academia requires a process of intellectual

decolonization, through which disciplinary boundaries, established epistemological traditions, and normative assumptions will be deeply challenged (Biermann, 2011).

The impact of colonialism and its ongoing structural, discursive, and psychological dimensions are massive, and authentic and progressive institutional, theoretical, and practical change will not be easy, but in the 21st century it is imperative. Strong anti-colonial education movements, calls for substantive curricular equity within academia, and global crises, require collaborative solutions. Non-Indigenous educators, scholars, and researchers should think through what the process of intellectual decolonization can offer in terms of social justice, ethical engagement, and the development of more democratic forms of interaction. Biermann (2011) suggests we start at the personal level by unlearning our own assumptions, valuing the complexity of considering a variety of knowledges, and engaging with the trail-blazing theoretical work of Indigenous scholars and thinkers as well as the complex lived-realities of local Indigenous communities. Doing this study gave me the opportunity to personally connect with such an undertaking.

Rethinking how to organize curricula, run classes, and conceive the role of the teacher-learner relationship will invite flexibility and a desire to improve present patterns. Revisiting the Eurocentric conception of who is a “qualified expert” will help inform dominant conceptions of pedagogy within the institution and will encourage educators to experiment with taking students out of the classroom and into the community (Biermann, 2011, p. 396).

In his book *Fair Country, Telling Truths about Canada*, Canadian author John Ralston Saul (2008) contends that competition, rivalry, and survival of the fittest are part of the hidden infrastructures of the present education system, which is aimed at capitalistic materialism rather than at good citizenship.

We are a people of Aboriginal inspiration organized around a concept of peace, fairness and good government. That is what lies at the heart of our story, at the heart of Canadian mythology, whether francophone or anglophone. If we can embrace a language that expresses that story, we will feel a great release. We will discover a remarkable power to act and to do so in such a way that we will feel we are true to ourselves (Saul, 2008, xii).

Saul (2008) also calls Canada a Métis civilization. The first thing that the newcomers experienced with the First Nations was a deeply rooted sense of egalitarianism that included a clearly defined sense of individualism, Saul affirms, pointing out that the courts have come to realize this fact. Egalitarianism, individual and group rights and obligations, balanced complexity, reconciliation, inclusion, continuing relationships, and minority rights are pillars of Canadian civilization. Talking, negotiating, developing relationships, and enlarging the circle were all about intellectual superiority in Indigenous terms.

According to Saul (2008), the way Canadians imagine themselves, how they govern, how they live together in communities and how they treat one another when they are not being injudicious is deeply aboriginal. Regardless of background, he believes that intuitions and common sense as a civilization are more Aboriginal than European or African or Asian, “even though we have created elaborate theatrical screens of language, reference and mythology to misrepresent ourselves to our selves” (Saul, 2008, p. 1). Were Canada to embrace Saul’s realization about its autochthonous roots, incorporating Indigenous peoples’ approaches to education would be a logical step.

Gonzalez, Moll, and Amanti (2005), lament that the gatekeepers of Western intellectual traditions have repeatedly written off traditional Aboriginal knowledge as inconsequential and unfounded. They believe that as a knowledge society, Canada should be drawing on its pool of

collective intelligence for more success in a competitive global environment, rather than decreasing its founts of knowledge. Indigenous knowledge offers Canada and other nation states an opportunity for a more comprehensive view of humanity. Western intellectuals should understand Indigenous humanity and its manifestations without paternalism and condescension (Battiste, 2007). Battiste and Henderson (2009) recognize that some European and Canadian scholars are realizing how important Indigenous knowledge may be to the survival of the world. Deriving benefit from this knowledge is only acceptable as long as it is recognized as the domain of Indigenous peoples and does not get subverted by the dominant culture. The threat is real, because dominant society has a tendency to take elements of Indigenous knowledge out of context and claim them for itself. This activity is the final stage of colonialism (Battiste & Henderson, 2009). Instead, Indigenous knowledge has to be incorporated respectfully and in a truly democratic way. In so doing it will strengthen the knowledge democracy underway.

The following chapter presents the research strategies employed in my investigation. My goal in doing this research is to contribute toward building a bridge of mutual understanding between Indigenous and non-Indigenous peoples.

Chapter 3

Research Strategies

Every story brings the imagination and reality together in moments of what we might as well call faith ... Wonder and wondering are closely related, and stories teach us that we cannot choose between them. If we try, we end up with the kind of amazement that is satisfied with the first explanation, or the kind of curiosity that is incapable of genuine surprise (J. Edward Chamberlin, 2004, p. 3).

Indigenous understanding and worldviews have resonated with me for a long time.

Growing up in Mexico I had a close connection with numerous Indigenous people, and their authenticity stood out to me even then. Many years later I am still moved by Indigenous thought. Academically trained to believe that the goal in research is to attain detached objectivity, the idea that subjectivity is the result of maturing objectivity (Aluli Meyer, 2008) has been refreshing and a principal motivation for me in pursuing this research.

My investigation falls under the category of interpretive research in which participants and researcher develop collaborative, public, pedagogical relationships. This research searches for contextualized realities, and recognizes multiple truths (Kovach, 2009). Denzin and Giardina (2007) describe interpretive research as a form of research in which:

The walls between subjects and observers are deliberately broken down. Confidentiality disappears, for there is nothing to hide or protect. Participation is entirely voluntary, hence there is no need for subjects to sign forms indicating that their consent is “informed.” ... Instead, acting together, researchers and subjects work to produce change in the world (p. 20).

Under this framework my participants and I enjoyed common moral values and this research was rooted in a concept of care, love, kindness, and the moral good (Denzin & Giardina, 2007, p. 28).

Respectful relations must be at the core of the research methodology when working with elders. The researcher as listener must be ready to hear the stories when the elders are ready to tell them. Between teller and listener, a dynamic relationship unfolds and asks the researcher to remember that deep respect is required in a storytelling approach to research (Iseke & Brennus, 2011). Antoinette Oberg (2004) describes a profoundly respectful way of relating as being open, paying attention, and not knowing, that is, presuming as little as possible about others.

Margaret Kovach (2009) affirms that Indigenous methodologies encourage Western traditions to engage in reflexive self-study and to consider a research paradigm outside a tradition that offers a systematic approach to grasping the world. Many non-Indigenous young people are attracted to the Indigenous approach and according to Kovach, “It has to do with a generation seeking ways to understand the world without harming it” (2009, p. 11). She invites non-Indigenous academics to adjourn disbelief and consider alternative possibilities as the Indigenous presence and interest in the academic landscape keep increasing. This development is triggering a desire among a growing community of non-Indigenous scholars to move beyond the binaries found within Indigenous-settler relations and build new, mutual forms of dialogue, research, theory, and action (Kovach, 2009).

Encouraged by this shift I decided to use Indigenous methodologies as my research strategy. As Kovach (2009) puts it, these methodologies have an “insider/outsider relationship” with qualitative research (p. 30). Two interrelated characteristics that Indigenous methodologies and qualitative research share are their relational approaches and their need to show evidence of process and content. Qualitative research is “quintessentially interactive” (Rossmann & Rallis, 2003, p. 35) as it emerges from the direct and ongoing contact between the researcher and research participants. Founded on an interpretive tradition it is therefore relational. There are,

however, two fundamental differences between Indigenous methodologies and the qualitative approach: form and knowledge itself. The form concerns the fluidity and motion of Indigenous knowledges, whereas Western frameworks see knowledge as fairly static. Furthermore, knowledge is not the same as Western knowledge since Indigenous methodologies are guided by their own epistemologies. Indigenous epistemologies challenge the very core of knowledge production and purpose (Kovach, 2009).

Epistemology speaks to theories of knowledge, explaining how we come to know. In essence, how we come to know is a methodology or a validation process. For Aboriginal peoples knowledge is validated through actual experience, stories, songs, ceremonies, dreams, and observation. “Indigenous people’s epistemology is derived from the immediate ecology, their experiences, perceptions, thoughts, and memory, including experiences shared with others, and from the spiritual world discovered in dreams, visions, and signs interpreted with the guidance of healers and elders” (Battiste, 2007, pp. 115-116).

Related to Indigenous epistemology is the sacred and ethical epistemology Denzin and Giardina (2007) talk about. Sacred, ethical, or existential epistemologies place humans in a non-competitive, non-hierarchical relationship to the Earth, to Nature, and to the larger world. Stressed are values of empowerment, shared governance, care, solidarity, love, community, covenant, morally involved observers, and civic transformation. Moral values excluded by Western rationality are recovered. This sacred epistemology is grounded on a philosophical anthropology that considers all humans worthy of dignity and sacred status. It “recognizes and interrogates the ways in which race, class, gender, and sexuality operate as important systems of oppression in the world today” (Denzin & Giardina, 2007, p. 29).

Indigenous Methodologies

Shawn Wilson (2008) explains that the Indigenous research paradigm was developed by Indigenous scholars in four stages. In the first stage, Indigenous scholars were few and far between in the dominant system universities, and to be successful they were bound to work within Western frameworks. The second stage introduced the notion of an Indigenous research paradigm but the struggle to be accepted by the mainstream still permeated the work of Indigenous researchers. The latter believed that incorporating culturally specific models of research would be problematic because of the predetermined methods available. Indigenous research continued being defined by being compared with Western models for the acquisition of knowledge.

In the third stage, the process of indigenizing Western methodologies emerged. Maori scholar Linda Tuhiwai Smith (2005) best articulates this stage in her groundbreaking book, *Decolonising Methodologies. Research and Indigenous Peoples* (first published in 1999): “Research seems such a small and technical aspect of the wider politics of indigenous peoples. It is often thought of as an activity that only anthropologists do! As indigenous peoples we have our own research needs and priorities. Our questions are important. Research helps us to answer them” (2005, p. 199). Challenging mainstream methods and the ensuing research on Indigenous people, the movement of decolonization had a strong following among Indigenous scholars.

The fourth stage grew out of the awareness of colonization and the conviction that Indigenous worldviews merited their own research paradigm. This stage, also called Indigenist Research (Martin, 2003, cited in Wilson, 2008) is presently changing the landscape in a number of mainstream universities at which Indigenous perspectives are respected as another and equally significant paradigm.

This change has been welcomed, not only by Indigenous researchers and students, but also by many non-Indigenous scholars who appreciate the refreshing enrichment Indigenous ways of research and knowledge acquisition bring to the arena, thus adding a much needed element of wholeness to contemporary university education (Wilson, 2008). According to Kovach (2009), there has been, however, little systemic shift in the ideology of knowledge production. The essentialism of Western thought pervading research is still there, regardless of the space created by critical theory and postmodern analysis for representation, voice, and multiple truths. Colonial relationships continue being reproduced, manifesting themselves through Western-based policies and practices that govern research, and through the cultural capital necessary to survive inside institutional centers.

The major difference between dominant research paradigms and the Indigenous paradigm, is that in the first, knowledge is seen as being individual in Nature, and in the latter, as belonging to the cosmos of which we are part and where researchers are only the interpreters of this knowledge (Wilson, 2008). In dominant Western research paradigms the researcher is an individual in search of knowledge, and knowledge is something that is gained and may, therefore, be owned by an individual. The Indigenous paradigm is based on the belief that knowledge is relational. Knowledge is shared with all creation, humans, the earth, the animals, the plants. “You are answerable to *all* your relations when you are doing research” (Wilson, 2008, p. 57).

The Indigenous knowledge system integrates the areas Western knowledge separates as science on one side and art and religion on the other. Science in Indigenous terms is therefore both religious and aesthetic. While Western tradition approaches knowledge through the intellect, Indigenous people include the senses, empathy, and intuition in their approach

(Cordero, 1995). Trying to do research solely through the intellect fails to acknowledge that researchers after all are human emotional beings, and feeling is connected to the mind.

Indigenous research affirms subjectivity, as it recognizes that objectivity is an illusion that no living human can accomplish. Going beyond the idea of individual, relational knowledge demands accountability to all relations and belongs to no one in particular. Since all things are related they are all relevant. Empirical knowledge and evidence are not superior but part of knowing the world. The three Rs, Respect, Reciprocity and Relationality, must guide Indigenous research (Wilson, 2008, p. 58) and can and should be adopted by mainstream research as well.

In her book, *Indigenous Research Methodologies*, Bagele Chilisa (2012) says that research with the formerly-colonized, the oppressed, and the disempowered needs to follow orienting decisions which answer questions such as:

- Will the research bring about change and transformation?
- Will the research have a clear stance against the political, academic, and methodological imperialism of its time?
- Will the research take a stance against Western archival knowledge and its colonizing and othering ideologies? (p. 298).

Chilisa (2012) also talks about the indispensability of the researcher having a clear and conscious definition of the self in relation to the researched. She further points out, that post-colonial Indigenous research methodologies emphasize research *with* people, rather than *on* people. In an era that promotes multiplicity and difference, the worldviews from post-colonial *and* Indigenous communities add to the rainbow of diversity. The role of academic institutions and researchers is

to recognize the legitimacy of Indigenous methodologies and make them visible by integrating them in the academic discourse and the global knowledge economy (Chilisa, 2012).

Radical methodologies which emerge as alternatives to traditionally sanctioned methodologies, and relational accountability are pillars of the movement toward the unapologetic inclusion of Indigenous knowledge into academia. To Taiaiake Alfred (2004) “Indigenizing the academy” means, “that we are working to change universities so that they become places where the values, principles, and modes of organization and behavior of our people are respected in, and hopefully even integrated into, the larger system of structures and processes that make up the university itself” (p. 88). It is this view of change in research and knowledge acquisition that truly speaks to me.

The new paths to do research in culturally appropriate ways that Indigenous academics and teachers are scouting out are creating a diversity of opportunities for researchers, and have helped me, a non-Indigenous scholar, do my work perhaps more sensitively and personally satisfying, and with heightened awareness around my own role as researcher. Although according to Indigenous scholars much remains to be done, the work that has already been accomplished in the field is inspiring and I feel excited to be able to make a small contribution to such a vibrant area that is challenging the very foundations of what knowledge *is* and how people come to know.

I did my research on Indigenous knowledge bearing in mind that my ancestry is Indigenous to a different geography from the one I call home. People whose ancestral memories tie them to the land they inhabit have a wealth of wisdom that people such as I lack. That is the reason why I was attracted to this topic in the first place. Some of the wisdom with which I have become acquainted resonates deeply with my own beliefs. With this study I want to encourage

making connections between people of Indigenous roots and people like me, who are attracted to the holistic Indigenous worldview that puts community and relational accountability before individualism and personal gain.

My Research

My primary strategy to initiate the research was to be aligned with methods that fit the ontology, epistemology, and axiology of the Indigenous paradigm. This meant that I needed to proceed in a way that fostered the axiology of relationship building and relational accountability. Wilson (2008) states that the elements of an Indigenous paradigm are interrelated, so it is difficult to separate one from the next as there is no great distinction between them. He explains the Indigenous research paradigm with the help of the medicine wheel. Putting ideas in a circle or wheel indicates that they are interrelated and that each blends into the next. The implication is that research happens in a cyclical fashion. All parts are equal and depend on each other (see appendix 4: research wheel).

The parts of this research paradigm (i.e., ontology, epistemology, axiology, and methodology) are not four separate entities, but, circularly, they connect and influence each other, rendering a circle that is greater than the sum of its parts. All components of this paradigm deal with relationships. Ontology and epistemology process relationships which shape a mutual reality. Axiology and methodology maintain accountability to these relationships (Wilson, 2008). Indigenous ontology, concerned with the nature of being and reality, also referred to as cosmology by Kovach (2009), may have multiple realities. The truth is not external, and reality is in the relationship that one has with the truth. Reality is not an object but a process of

relationships and different sets of relationships make up an Indigenous ontology. Realities in and of themselves are not important, the relationship that one shares with reality is (Wilson, 2008).

Axiology refers to the ethics or morals which guide the search for knowledge (Wilson, 2008), and speaks to what knowledge is important and worthy of pursuit. The axiology underlying my research was to impeccably tend my relations with my participants and to acknowledge that it was an honor for me to catch their stories. What they would share with me needed to be held in great respect. I agree with Christians (2002), that the purpose of research is not the production of new knowledge per se. Research has pedagogical, political, moral, and ethical purposes which involve: the enhancement of moral agency; the production of moral discernment; a commitment to praxis, justice, and ethic of resistance; and a performative pedagogy which resists oppression. In my understanding of the Indigenous paradigm, my first and foremost responsibility is to the people participating in my study. All other obligations, such as completing my degree or sharing my results are also important, but not as significant as respecting my participants and the relationships we have built. I have strived to do my best by upholding relational accountability toward them and their families. This has not ended with my research because our relationships existed before and with their permission I will keep in touch with them in the future.

What prompted me to do research with Indigenous women elders as my participants was my belief that they harbour knowledge crucial to all people in search of a more balanced and sustainable lifestyle today. The elders I write about in this study accepted taking part in my investigation so that their wisdom may find its way into broader circles. These elders do not believe their Indigenous nature-based knowledge they shared with me belongs solely to them or their communities. They agreed to disseminate their messages of urgency and of hope to all

peoples so that future generations may fully acknowledge and embrace their belonging to Nature. Through this study, doña Julieta, doña Reina, and several of their family members offer a unique opportunity to catch a glimpse of their perspectives. Perhaps this will move some of us to reconsider the way we live, too often ignoring nature-based knowledge in fear of losing some of the comfort to which we have become so accustomed and upon which we are seemingly dependent.

Strategies of Inquiry

The term “strategies of inquiry” is useful when one specific method does not fit the subject of study (Wilson, 2008, p. 39). Rather than planning to stick to one or more research methods, it is often more helpful to develop a general strategy the researcher wants to pursue. A strategy is similar to a roadmap that helps one arrive at one’s destination (Wilson, 2008). My broadly laid out roadmap showed that I would be traveling to Cuba and to Mexico to spend several weeks immersed in the world of my participants. By participating and observing, listening and talking, writing, and recording interviews, and generally being open and present, I would gather enough data to work on my project. Once I returned back home I could study, analyze, and organize the information to complete my dissertation.

The strategies I used to find out more about my participants and their knowledge had to be congruent with and respectful of their realities. Whereas Western logic is linear, Indigenous ways of thinking insist on a circular approach to problems, and my challenge was to suspend my conditioning as much as possible to allow myself to enter a realm less known to me. Doing my research I was able to embrace the Indigenous paradigm that sees knowledge as belonging to the cosmos of which I am part (Wilson, 2008). I understand that knowledge is not mine to own and

that I am only an interpreter of it. Committing to this path meant that I had to make sure I would be accountable to my participants and their families, I would cause no harm, and my research would benefit them in some way (Kovach, 2009). Prudence and respect were crucial when deciding what I could and would share in my writing, and thus in delicate instances I included only cultural knowledges that have already been published elsewhere, and would preclude my breaking of confidentiality or secret knowledge.

Some of the principles Judy Atkinson (2001) believes guide Indigenous research which I used are the following:

- my participants approved the research and the research strategies
- I related and acted in their communities with an understanding of the principles of reciprocity and responsibility
- my research participants felt and were safe and I respected issues of confidentiality
- I watched with quiet awareness and listened deeply with more than my ears
- I considered what I saw and heard with reflective non-judgement
- I had an awareness and connection between logic of mind and feelings of the heart
- I listened and observed my own self and my relationship to others, and acknowledged that I brought my subjective self to the research

According to Susan Krieger (1991) the researcher's analysis, no matter how oriented to participants' points of view, reflects the researcher's interests, choices, and concerns. She argues that researchers should, therefore, acknowledge their interests rather than attempt to subordinate

them to those of the participants. I claim and acknowledge my interpretive authority in rendering my participants' contributions in this study.

In preparation for my research I attended two council gatherings of the Thirteen International Indigenous Grandmothers. I hosted Grandmother Julieta Casimiro in Victoria and spent time with her in Mexico. I visited Reina Ramírez and her family over the years, and helped translate her husband's book *Panchito, Mountain Cacique. Guajiro-Taíno Testimony of Francisco Ramírez Rojas*, from Spanish into English in 2007 (Barreiro, 2008).

Before I traveled to Cuba and to Mexico to officially begin my research I already knew that my participants were well-respected elders in their communities, and also that they were willing to engage in my study. Nevertheless, when it was time to embody the roles of researcher-participants, I felt somewhat troubled. Doing research on people is always an ethically complex undertaking. As Ruthellen Josselson (1996) experienced, I also was feeling guilty knowing that by analyzing my participants' contributions, I would in a sense be talking behind their backs. In the process, my intimate relationship with them during my visits and the interviews would give way to a relationship with others. Many of these others would be critical people, and would have difficulty capturing the richness of what my participants and I shared, once the liveliness of oral language had been condensed into its written form. My participants also entrusted me with their stories and I would use them to advance myself.

Fortunately, finding Josselson's work helped me understand that once I had agreed to go ahead with my research, this unease would be normal, and perhaps a good thing. Josselson maintains that the guilt and anxiety when telling "an Other's story" is what honors our participants (1996, p. 70). She claims that being uncomfortable with this work is what protects us from going too far. "When we interpret a life story we do not simply report what our informant

told us. ... Instead, we convert what we have been told from one kind of account into another” (Ochberg, 1996, p. 110). Richard Ochberg adds that it is not the way participants intend to be heard, but there is no other way.

I spent three weeks each with the Ramírez family in Cuba and the Casimiro family in Mexico for the research project. Since our relationships had been established well prior to my study, we were able to move fairly quickly into the actual research. The delicate and time-consuming effort of becoming acquainted, building trust and consequently feeling at ease with each other, was behind us.

By the time I went home I could feel how connecting with my participants’ ancestral ways and witnessing their respect and reverence for Nature on a daily basis had increased my own admiration. While with them I had experienced the elders’ great presence and generous spirit. They had accepted me not just as a researcher or as a white woman, but as a human being deserving of empathy and kindness. This was a great lesson for me and I hope never to forget how important it is to be fully there and in-the-moment when relating to others.

Methods

In order to generate this study I used a combination of methods compatible with

Indigenous methodologies:

- participant observation
- storytelling and story catching
- responsive interviews
- journal entries and self-study
- experiential participation

- translation

During earlier visits I had made sure to find out what the protocol was to address my hosts and to involve them in my research. Prior to engaging in any of the above methods I followed the culturally expected actions and statements ancient tradition expected of me, the researcher making a request from the elders (Archibald, 2008).

1. Participant Observation:

Participant observation is a term used to describe what comes naturally to Indigenous research, namely learning by watching and doing. The aim is to gain closeness with a group, through taking part in everyday activities over a prolonged period of time. James P. Spradley (1980) describes four degrees of involvement when engaging in participant observation, the fifth category being non-participation that is purely observing (i.e. studies of television programs). The types of participation are passive, moderate, active, and complete. In my case I did moderate and active participation. It was not appropriate to try to be actively involved in everything. Moderate participation let my participants know that I was not expecting to be taken care of all the time. We mutually respected our boundaries. At times active participation came naturally and the better we got to know each other, this degree of participation prevailed. Nevertheless I remained conscious of my outsider position so as to not overstay my welcome.

Doing participant observation is similar to what everyone does in newly encountered situations. Generally, not knowing the tacit rules of behavior makes people participant observers (Spradley, 1980). While engaging, the researcher is simultaneously observing behaviors and analyzing why people are doing things in their way. Participant observation puts emphasis on face-to-face relationships and sharing of daily living experiences. Relational accountability requires the researcher to form reciprocal and respectful relationships within the communities

where she conducts research. It is in stark contrast with observational techniques that attempt to be unobtrusive and not influence the environment studied. While at my research participants' homes, I was able to partake in their families' daily lives and several special events. We engaged in conversations, storytelling, and deep listening.

2. Storytelling and Story Catching:

Storytelling and story catching are deeply embedded in Indigenous culture. Jo-ann Archibald (2008) calls stories and storytelling for educational purposes storywork, which is comprised of seven principles: respect, responsibility, reciprocity, reverence, holism, interrelatedness, and synergy. As my participants shared their stories with me there was no question about their role as teachers and mine as learner before the magnificence of oral tradition. Listening intently with all three ears, two on the sides of my head and the one that is in my heart, I quietly sat with them catching their stories.

In *Tell Me a Story* (1996) Daniel Taylor discusses how story treats emotions with respect. Contrary to rationalistic prejudice (emotions hinder finding truth and knowledge; emotions thus, must be suppressed along with other forms of subjectivity) story says that only by acknowledging all parts of what and who we are can we know what is true. Taylor (1996) claims that body-mind-spirit are intertwined and nothing can happen to one without somehow affecting the other two. "Seeing our lives in terms of story makes plain to us our connectedness (Taylor, 1996, p. 150). During my stay in Cuba and Mexico my participants, their families, and I shared many stories and songs, alternating our roles as storyteller and catchers. A story I told numerous times was the one why I sound like a Mexican native but do not look like one. The most touching story I received was from doña Julieta as she created one to give me advice on how to feel more rooted and find identity in the place I was born.

3. Responsive Interviews:

Responsive interviewing is a specific variety of qualitative interviewing. It emphasizes flexibility of design and expects the interviewer to change questions in response to what she is learning (Rubin & Rubin, 2012). The technique accepts and adjusts to the personalities of both conversational partners. It respects the interviewees' rhythm of thought and sequence and is more appropriate than preformatted questionnaires when working with elders. This conversational and open-ended type of interview is what best suited the project as well as my own personality.

The sets of questions I had prepared prior to my trips were helpful when natural pauses occurred during the conversations, but more than anything they gave me a feeling of security. Once we had begun the interview process I intuitively followed the responsive technique which allowed for spontaneous questions and narratives. The resulting interactive method of telling, listening, clarifying, and understanding as it would happen in a regular conversation was far richer and made for a more satisfying experience for both, interviewees and interviewer.

When I was preparing for our first recording session in Cuba I asked doña Reina if she was ready for the interview, and looking at her daughter, Idalis, she asked me if she could join us. Before I could say "yes" Reina's husband Panchito and her son Vladis told me they also wanted to come along, so Reina would feel more relaxed. I appreciated their concern for Reina and was happy everyone had spoken up. I would much rather be flexible and broaden my approach than make any of my participants uncomfortable. That is how unexpectedly I would now be reporting on more than doña Reina, since her husband and children had become instant participants. At doña Julieta's in Mexico it was her daughter, Eugenia, who accompanied her mother during our interviews. Again, the interview process shifted from a one-on-one

conversation to a more accommodating format, where daughter supported mother by being there and at times sharing in the conversation.

Since I had envisioned one-on-one interviews, I had not prepared for a talking circle, a kind of focus group, where each person has the opportunity to take an uninterrupted turn in discussing a topic. Nevertheless, something similar to a talking circle is precisely what emerged spontaneously in Cuba during a couple of recording sessions. It was wonderful to observe, and be part of, how Reina, her husband, her daughter, and her son naturally adopted a sharing circle, where everyone had an equal chance to speak and be heard. Wilson (2008) explains that the circle represents the holism of Mother Earth and the equality of all members. The respect and grace with which all participants gave each other turns was humbling.

Before beginning with the first recording sessions I explained to the elders and their families how the interview process was structured and how we would proceed. Not knowing how organically everything would play out, I gave examples of possible questions beforehand. When we were ready and I was setting up the audio recorder, I allowed plenty of time to make everyone feel at ease. I first recorded a few sentences and played them back to my participants as a sample. After that I left the recorder on. The reality unfolding before me was not the one I had imagined; every person added a new dimension to the process. Always trusting that what the elders, their daughters, and other family members chose to talk about was precisely what I needed to hear, as they deemed it important to be mentioned, I mostly just listened carefully. Following the flow of stories, thoughts, and ideas, I sometimes asked my participants to go deeper or to explain further. A few times I asked someone expressly if they wanted to answer a question or add something. It seemed the right thing to do as everyone involved was being very kind and respectful of the process and I wanted to make everyone feel included.

4. Journal Entries and Self-Study:

I regularly wrote things that were happening concerning my research and self-study in a journal. When I came back from the field my observations, experiences, and thoughts jotted down along the research process were invaluable as I was getting ready to assemble all my gathered material and write.

The concept of self-study as part of my dissertation had not been clear to me at the beginning, but engaging in it has been unexpectedly rewarding. As I write this I can say that this study of self has widened my perspective on myself and the world that surrounds me. Some expression of this personal work appears in this document. Many insights and thoughts, however, go far beyond the framework of a public document and will stay with me as priceless nuggets of self-exploration and understanding.

5. Experiential Participation:

The most valuable method, because of its lasting effect, was fully participating in traditional healing ceremonies. Immersed in ritual and feeling its effects on body and psyche altered my outlook on my own life and life at large. Accepting unconventional ways of learning and experiencing existence without having the mind dictate thoughts and perceived emotions was transforming. I received exceptional knowledge while being blessed by my participants for opening to the experience.

I consider myself fortunate to be able to include a completely unconventional method of inquiry in my research. Doña Julieta is a traditional Mazatec healer and works with psilocybe mushrooms. As part of my learning I participated in *veladas* (nocturnal ceremonies) held in her home. I ingested the holy mushrooms and explored non-ordinary states of consciousness while doña Julieta guided my inner journey with song and prayer. This method is profound and

exhilarating and can help uncover detailed personal as well as immense issues of human nature. It is as old as any knowledge known to our species since the ingesting of plants predates our existence as *Homo sapiens* (Jay, 2010). Interested in plant knowledge for a long time I have been informally gathering field and scholarly information on the subject. This was invaluable in helping me ground the experiential part of my research. In chapter seven “Knowledge in Nature: the Plant Kingdom” I display a summary of my findings.

6. Translation:

At the heart of my study lie translation and interpretation. At the beginning of my research I worked mostly in Spanish, the language of communication with my participants. Some of my notes I took in English, foreseeing how much translation there was going to be and therefore laying some groundwork that would later help me get the target language flowing.

After collecting all my data I carefully translated the transcripts, always painstakingly aware to stay as close as possible to the intended meaning of my participants’ words. That is when accurate interpretation became paramount. I did not translate field notes and journal entries verbatim since they were my own words and more like a memory help. As I read my thoughts and observations in Spanish I formulated their content in my mind in English and then I integrated them into my research. Although this last method added a fair amount of work, I enjoyed the process because moving from language to language has been at the root of my being since I can remember.

Sculpting My Research

Throughout my research I was guided by some questions Chilisa (2012) suggests are basic to performing research with Indigenous people:

- What part of this reality is worth finding out more about?
- What is it ethical to do in order to gain this knowledge?
- What will this knowledge be used for?

I also heeded Atkinson's (2001) principle of listening and observing my own self, by keeping a reflexive journal before and throughout my research. Writing in this personal journal that served to capture my everyday thoughts and emotions so that I could read and reflect on them later, allowed me to consciously track my personal interests and biases. Reflecting on my personal story and experiences encouraged an ongoing self-study and prepared me to listen to the stories of my research participants. Through entering their stories and becoming inspired by them I learned *from* them, not merely *about* them.

As I began to unravel my data, I could relate to Antoinette Oberg's (2004) description of how the process of identifying categories to group them into themes (as taught in methodology classes) takes insufficient care in developing rich interpretations. Following the more organic approach of telling the story by "Seeing 'the underlying pattern beneath appearances'" (Nachmanovitch, 1990, as cited in Oberg, 2004, p. 244) opens up a new way of seeing and hence a new world of possibilities. "Radical thinking" according to Caputo (1987, as cited in Oberg, 2004, p. 244), refers to thinking which resists the desire for definitive answers and instead stays open to the question of how to live in relation respectfully. The proper way to study human sciences is interpretation and there is no method for opening, paying attention and not knowing,

a state of mind in which prior knowledge is suspended and every situation is humbly regarded as a teaching experience, concludes Oberg (2004).

My data, beside the interviews and journal entries in the field, include photos; the film, *For the Next Seven Generations* (International Council of Thirteen Indigenous Grandmothers & Carole Hart, 2009); the books, *Grandmothers Counsel the World. Women Elders Offer Their Vision for Our Planet* (Schaefer, 2006), and *Panchito, Mountain Cacique. Guajiro-Taíno Testimony of Francisco Ramírez Rojas* (Barreiro, 2001, in translation 2008). I also gathered historical data from books and articles to enrich the descriptions of my participants' ancestral backgrounds. By the end of my exploration, and after having received the approval of doña Reina, doña Julieta, and their families, a new story has come to light crafted from Indigenous women elders' knowledge that woven into an academic piece bridges different ways of knowing and understanding.

As every exchange we had was in Spanish, upon transcription I translated those parts of the interviews that I would use in this document. At the end I translated my analysis and the interpretation of my participants' stories back into Spanish so doña Julieta, doña Reina, and their families could comment on them and ultimately approve my rendering of their accounts.

Linda Tuhiwai Smith (2005) writes about 25 projects of decolonizing Indigenous research and as I ponder which one resonates with my work, I have no clear cut answer. This is not only because some projects overlap or complement each other. As Smith presents them from her Indigenous point of view for Indigenous researchers, my applying them to my research inevitably demands some adjustments. Nevertheless I would say that this dissertation mainly, though not exclusively, exhibits the following methods: a) storytelling, b) connecting, c) reading, d) democratizing, and e) sharing.

a) Storytelling, oral histories, the perspectives of elders and of women are an integral part of all Indigenous research. The story and the storyteller both serve to connect the past with the future, one generation with the other, the land with the people and the people with the story (Smith, 2005). Storytelling informed my research and at the same time I became the storyteller of that research.

b) Connecting, or bridge building, lies at the core of my work. As I collected my data and wrote my findings I needed “a critical conscience about ensuring that [my] activities connected in humanizing ways” with my participants (Smith, 2005, 149). I also connected my participants by way of sharing the work we did with each other so that although they may never meet, they have a connection through my research.

c) Reading: I engaged in critical rereading of Western knowledge parameters and academic expectations to free my research from standardized conventions within an acceptable frame. My hope is that this dissertation will contribute to the literature critical of colonial, that is abyssal thinking, which distinguishes between “this side of the line,” or Western ways, and “the other side of the line,” that is non-Western ways (Santos, 2007),

d) Democratizing: driving my research is the ideal of knowledge democracy and the understanding that all knowledges have an equal right to be, and all knowledge seekers have an equal right to know. Its goal is radical “co-presence” of all knowledges and belief systems (Santos, 2007). Showing that Indigenous wisdom has value for all, and that Western knowledge is but one of many ways to interpret the world, will quicken the democratizing impulse.

e) Sharing contains views about knowledge being a collective benefit as well as a form of resistance. Sharing is related to educating people adequately and appropriately to keep them informed about issues and events that will impact them (Smith, 2005). As the researcher of my

work I have the responsibility to share my findings with my participants in plain words. In this way I can reciprocate the long hours they spent with me so that I could fulfill the requirements for my dissertation.

The five projects described above sum up the ways I used to develop and present my research in a non-colonizing way. As an ally to my participants and their families my intention has been to contribute to the movement of decolonizing the academy.

Chapter 4

The Grandmothers' Story and Mine

There is an order and a structure to the universe.... All things are dependent upon each other. This is why reciprocity and remembering to hold the relations among all people and all things as sacred balances the universe (Schaefer, 2006 p. 146).

In this chapter I briefly summarize the story of the Thirteen International Indigenous Grandmothers and their alliance. Getting to know these elders was elemental in my decision to proceed with this research and I want to acknowledge the important role they played in the process. First I introduce them and then I share some of my experiences as I participated in two of their council gatherings. After that I disclose some thoughts arising from my self-study and I end reflecting on my role as white scholar doing research with Indigenous elders.



Figure 2 International Indigenous Grandmothers at the 6th Council Gathering. Oregon, 2009

The Grandmothers' Story

In 2004 Thirteen Indigenous Grandmothers from around the globe began traveling the world, inviting people from every culture to come together in the spirit of increased communication and mutual understanding. During councils and gatherings, these women elders have imparted their teachings and celebrated ceremonies with people who want to learn from them. The Grandmothers came together invited by Jeneane Prevatt, who became interested in the contributions Indigenous traditions could make “in helping people to discover their innate wisdom and power” (Schaefer, 2006, p. 8). Prevatt began a sustained prayer that would help her find a way to protect and honor the teachings of Indigenous peoples. Through a series of her visions and, after she sent out letters of inquiry, 13 Indigenous Grandmothers responded to the call and gathered in Phoenicia, New York, to meet each other and form a new global alliance.

At this first meeting, the Grandmothers said, “We have united as one. Ours is an alliance of prayer, education, and healing for our Mother Earth – for all her inhabitants, for all the children, and for the next seven generations” (Schaefer, 2006, p. 1). Expressing their deep concern with the unprecedented destruction of the Earth they spoke about:

The contamination of the air, waters, and soil; the atrocities of war, the global scourge of poverty; the threat of nuclear weapons and waste; the prevailing culture of materialism; the epidemics that threaten the health of the Earth’s peoples; the exploitation of indigenous medicines; and the destruction of indigenous ways of life (Schaefer, 2006, p. 1).

The Thirteen Grandmothers believe their ancestral ways of prayer, peacemaking, and healing are crucial for the world of today. Wanting to nurture and educate their children, to uphold the practice of their ceremonies, and to affirm the right to use their sacred plant medicines free of

legal restrictions, they trust the teachings of their ancestors will light the way through an uncertain future. At that first gathering, the elders convened to act on their beliefs by holding councils to advance the new alliance. They would come together twice a year, each time visiting another of the Grandmothers' homelands.

In the Summer of 2009, one of my daughters and I drove down to Lincoln, Oregon, to participate in the sixth gathering of the International Council of the Thirteen Indigenous Grandmothers. Agnes Baker Pilgrim, Takelma Siletz and eldest of the Grandmothers, was the host. Agnes is a world-renowned spiritual leader and Keeper of the Sacred Salmon Ceremony, which she revived after it had been lost for over 150 years. My daughter and I arrived on time to join everyone around the sacred fire started hours earlier on the magnificent West Coast beach. After we were all cleansed with cedar smoke by gate keepers of the ceremonial circle, Grandmother Agnes welcomed us, said her prayers, and gave us an idea of how the gathering would unfold. The event was divided into prayer and ceremony by the sacred fire outdoors, and the council meetings and dialogue indoors. The themes of this gathering were: blessing our elders, blessing our waters, blessing our earth, blessing our youth, and blessing our ancestors.

Each Grandmother was responsible for guiding a ceremony and prayers around the fire and, sitting at a round table on the podium during the council meetings, they also took turns to speak. Four of them, Grandmothers Aama Bombo, Tamang from Nepal, Julieta Casimiro, Mazatec from Mexico, Clara Shinobu Iura, of Japanese ancestry born in Brazil, and Tsering Dolma Gyaltong, Tibetan now residing in Canada, had interpreters to communicate with the others in English, the dominant language. Grandmother Bernadette Rebienot, Omyené from Gabon, was not able to attend, but her picture was placed prominently on the table and a short clip of her to greet and wish everyone well and to tell about her work, was shown at the first

indoor meeting. Bernadette is master of the Iboga Bwiti Rite in her country. Iboga is now being used effectively in addiction recovery work. Bernadette sent an ambassador in her stead, an initiated white Princess from France, who substituted her and performed the ceremony at the gathering. By the end of the four-day event, all Grandmothers had held their prayers, and although they were very different from each other, ranging from heavy and sad to deeply joyful, one element remained constant across their traditions: the devoted belief in prayer as the most powerful way to connect with Spirit.

For the Grandmothers, nothing goes without prayer, and prayer comes in many forms. Prayer is founded on a sacred attitude of deep gratitude toward life and surrender to a higher power that can be expressed in words, song, or silence, individually or in community, while working or resting, in happiness and sadness, but always with respect and an open heart. Prayer can also be defined as focused positive intention. The Grandmothers modeled this focused intention by being fully present and in-the-moment during the prayers and ceremonies, and showing great kindness with all people in attendance.

Participating in the ceremonies of the Brazilian Grandmothers, Maria Alice Freire and Clara Shinobu, and the Mexican Mazatec Grandmother Julieta Casimiro, I realized that the most notable difference between their prayers and songs and those of the Grandmothers from the Northern part of the American continent was the overall acceptance and non-contradictory overlapping of Indigenous with Christian traditions. This synergy of ancient ceremony with the religion of colonizers is joyful and full of color. Observing the Grandmothers from Latin America, I felt that I was witnessing a brilliant phenomenon that had allowed their ancestors to incorporate foreign religious elements in such a way that their ancient worship could survive

undercover. The resulting religious syncretism is a product of colonization and exhibits the integration of beliefs from unrelated traditions.

Syncretism is a common occurrence wherever a culture is conquered, and the conquerors' religion does not succeed in entirely eradicating the old beliefs and practices. Often the locals keep their old beliefs and learn to overlay the Christian ones without affecting the integrity of their original beliefs. Grandmother Julieta reads the New Testament, and her prayers in Spanish speak of Christian symbols. She also has songs and prayers in Mazatec, some are translations from Spanish, and others belong to her ancestral tradition. Her most specialized ceremony, the *velada*, perfectly illustrates the effective combination of Indigenous and Christian elements without antagonizing either. In chapter 6 I give a description of this Mazatec ceremony.



Figure 3 Doña Julieta and her assistants preparing for her ceremony around the Sacred Fire.
6th Council Gathering, Oregon, 2009

During their sixth gathering, the Thirteen Grandmothers' film *For the Next Seven Generations*, produced and directed by Emmy award winner Carole Hart, had its debut. It was a resounding success and I will never forget the happiness and laughter as the Grandmothers saw themselves on the screen. This film covers the story of the International Council of Thirteen Indigenous Grandmothers from their beginning encounter to their visit with his Holiness the 14th Dalai Lama in Dharamshala in 2006. It took place during the Grandmothers' fourth gathering.

In December 2009 I attended the Grandmothers' seventh gathering in Sedona, Arizona. Hopi/Havasupai/Tewa Grandmother Mona Polacca was the host. This time I went alone. I had now been in my doctoral program for three months and could not let the opportunity pass to participate again, since Arizona was relatively close compared to Japan and Brazil, which were announced as the next gathering places.

At my first meeting with the Thirteen Grandmothers, I had begun talking to doña Julieta about participating in a future study on the knowledge of Indigenous women elders. At that point I thought perhaps two other Grandmothers from the council should be included as well. I had already been thinking about a research study involving Taíno Grandmother Reina Ramírez, whom I had met a few years earlier while on a trip to Cuba. So I was envisioning inviting three or more participants to join my research.

My intention for the seventh gathering was therefore to confirm doña Julieta's interest in collaborating, and to talk to a few other Grandmothers about the research and their possible involvement. At this council there were only eleven Grandmothers, because Grandmother Tsering and Grandmother Bernadette were unable to be there. Grandmother Bernadette has not come to any of the following gatherings either.

The awe-inspiring location in the land of the Hopi, where the gathering convened, was hard to access but once I was on site it worked its spell on me. It took place at a retreat that spread out over hills of sand, stone, and desert vegetation, and was surrounded by huge red, orange, and ochre rock formations. The place is considered powerful and sacred for the natural vortices that are on the land. The Grandmothers had to be driven from the dining room to the indoor site and to the sacred fire up on top of the property, because the terrain was rough and the distances considerable. Once again the gathering was initiated at the sacred fire, this time by Grandmother Mona. The theme of the seventh council was honoring creation and celebrating community in prayer for a global future. Early the next morning it was Grandmother Julieta's time for prayer and, just as in Oregon, she had decorated her setting beautifully with lots of flowers in a circle around the fire. She performed her ceremony the way she had learned from her elders. Her syncretistic belief system, closely knit into Catholicism, had her recite from the Mysteries of the Rosary, and this time I noticed that her prayers were being taken with scepticism by several of the attendees. Afterwards I did hear critical comments from a few people unable to fathom the place of Christian language at an Indigenous event.

Talking with doña Julieta in private later on, she told me that someone had asked her to tone down the use of Christian vocabulary. She did not know how she could be asked such a thing, since those were her prayers and that was how she had been taught to pray by her parents and grandparents. She was visibly upset and it was sad to witness how people had misunderstood her message. It made me aware of how difficult it is sometimes to overcome prejudice. Once again, like during the previous gathering, I was pondering on the perceived discrepancies between Indigenous beliefs and Christianity. It is a fact that in Mexico, as well as in most colonized countries, the only way for Indigenous peoples to survive was to adopt the imagery

and vocabulary of the conquerors' religion. This compromise was more successful in protecting traditional beliefs, albeit undercover, than categorical resistance.

Mexico's colonial history is among the oldest on the American continent. Spanish missionaries worked hard at converting *indios*, but the children were never torn away from their families and put into residential schools as happened in the North. In Mexico and other Latin American countries, Indigenous people were mistreated just as in the United States and Canada, but they were able to deal with the horror as relatively intact families and communities. In more recent history, with the emergence of the *Teología de la Liberación* (Liberation Theology), the Catholic Church has even become a safe haven for Indigenous people. I deduce that these are the reasons why the Latin American Grandmothers are at peace with their religious present.

In November of 2012 the Grandmothers held their 12th council gathering in Grandmother Aama Bombo's homeland, Nepal. In a letter from November 28 they wrote:

We only have two more gatherings we would like to complete so that our prayer for peace and harmony amongst all people is laid down globally. We are here in Nepal in the land of Buddha realizing how much we have grown in this deep alliance of our lines of prayer. ... We are beginning to envision how to pass these teachings onto our huge global family. How to involve our youth is imperative now. We want to encourage all our family to cultivate the seeds that the grandmothers have planted along the trail. ... As we are becoming older, we don't know how many of us will be able to travel so far from home. That is why your presence and involvement is so needed and called for (email received from Center of Sacred Studies, December 1, 2012).

The work of the Thirteen Grandmothers over the last eight years has been remarkable and their energy and wisdom have moved thousands. Even when the end of their alliance is near,

their teachings and words of wisdom have opened the hearts of many to share and collaborate across social, religious, and racial divides. As these wise elders say, we are all connected. That anyone is separate from anyone or anything else that is happening in the world is an illusion. Grandmother Agnes calls this lack of understanding “spiritual blindness” (Schaefer, 2006, p. 145). All Grandmothers remind us that everything is sacred and at the seed of everything are relations. Our very existence on Earth implies a spiritual connection to the Earth, to all of Nature and to the Spirit World.

Grandmother Bernadette explains that we are all naturally part of the great whole of which only certain parts are visible. “The Sacred Universe, the world of Spirit, is like the submerged part of an iceberg waiting to be discovered,” she says (Schaefer, 2006, p. 145). That is how vast this realm is, defying any attempts at measuring or analysing it. It is there for us to experience and cherish. Wanting to put it into words is a distraction, as language is too limited to describe it satisfactorily. Personally I can confirm that having met doña Julieta and the other Grandmothers has helped me to be more aware of Spirit’s touch in my own life. Being exposed to their presence and their authentic concern for all of Nature and Her creatures has left an imprint in my way of perceiving the world.

My Story

As I was taking graduate courses and talking to my supervisor, it became clear that my original idea to include several Grandmothers from the Council and the Cuban Grandmother was too ambitious. Taking the advice of my committee, I eventually ended up with the plan to invite only the two Grandmothers with whom I had already established relationships. It would be the two Grandmothers with whom I could talk in my native language, and who lived in two

countries dear to my heart: Cuba, where I was born, and Mexico, where my mother was born and where I grew up.

In trying to comprehend the strong appeal Indigenous knowledge has had for me over a long time, there is one persistent thought that comes to mind, and that is how touched I feel by the kindness and generosity several Indigenous women in my life have extended to me. In a world that consistently privileged me, and which more often than not showed unkindness and disregard for them, they were able to accept me and care for me. I admire the beauty of their spirit and know there is much I still have to learn from them.

My story is diametrically opposite to the story of my participants as far as ancestral roots and belonging to the land are concerned. Both my maternal and paternal ancestors migrated, sometimes more than once. My parents, my siblings, and I have migrated as well, and I believe this shifting from land to land lies at the heart of the intense interest I have for Indigenous knowledge. Raised in several cultures and blessed with understandings of difference and otherness that have enriched my horizon, in my youth, I, nevertheless, often yearned for a feeling of greater belonging to my community. I imagine that my yearning for rootedness stemmed not only from the moves in my own life, but it probably goes back to the history of my forebears.

I was born in La Habana, Cuba. My mother expected to give birth in Mexico, but due to a strike at the Genoa port in Italy, she and I did not make it back on time. My parents had married in Germany and planned to live in Mexico, where my mother was born and had lived all her life. The strike had delayed the ship's departure by nearly four weeks and when the *Andrea Gritti* finally was docking in La Habana my mother went into labor. One week later she and I flew to Mexico. My mother is the daughter of immigrants from the former Austro Hungarian Empire and Germany, my grandfather was born in Gablonz, my grandmother in Offenbach. My father

was born in Jerusalem, Palestine, where my 17-year-old great grandfather, his mother and his siblings had emigrated to in the 1860s, following the Templers, a German Protestant splinter group who sought more religious freedom in the Promised Land. There they founded a prosperous agricultural colony. My grandfather married my grandmother who had come to Palestine from Germany to work as a nanny. Because of the escalating unrest between Arabs and Jews during that time (LeBor, 2007), my six-year-old dad, his sister and his mother moved to Germany. My grandfather stayed behind hoping that he would soon be calling his family back home. Unfortunately that never happened. During a brief work absence to do business in Germany the political situation shifted and he would no longer be allowed to return to his country of birth. The Nazi movement had been gaining strength and German settlers in Palestine became unwanted. Had my grandmother, her children, and later her husband not left their home when they did, they would eventually have been shipped to an internment camp in Australia. That is where most other Templers, who had refused to leave all their belongings and life's work behind, were sent.

In essence the story of my ancestors on both sides is a story of migrations and we have been pulled by the roots numerous times. My connection therefore is strongly attached to the place in which I grew up, much more than to an ancestral homeland. I am European by blood line, but my upbringing was imbued with a mix of cultures. In finding my identity, I hold to the belief that through my physical land connection to Cuba and to Mexico, I have a right and a duty to honor and learn about these countries. As an uprooted being, like tumbleweed in the wind I have long felt that the original peoples in both places have been teaching me about belonging.

As a teenager I felt self-conscious and somewhat foreign in what was supposed to be my home, because of the color of my skin. On the street I was often called a *gringa* (American foreigner) which never ceased to upset me. My voice however allowed me to belong. Through language I could cut right through the barrier of my skin. Now that I live in Canada, neither the land of my birth, my upbringing, nor my ancestors, when I travel to Mexico and Cuba I continue enjoying being able to merge linguistically. Quite regularly I am invited to tell my story of how I sound like a native but do not look like one. That is why Grandmothers Reina and Julieta and members of their families knew my story before I knew theirs. They are good listeners and story catchers and I hope I could be the same to them.

Being white in a mostly *mestizo* country, where the minutest hew of skin coloring was decisive in one's placement on the social scale, I often felt inadequate. However, I was never in the dark about my privileged existence. Becoming aware of discrepancies between my white world and the majority world of brown people around me early in life made me question what I saw beginning in my young teenage years. Though being imbedded in privilege hindered me from taking an honest look at how my advantages came to me at the expense of others.

A big moment of reckoning happened when I managed to correct my previously held idea that *seeing* social injustice and the ills of racist prejudice was enough to make me a better white person. My awareness began shifting toward my own personal implication in the status quo. I slowly understood that my privilege was directly linked to lingering colonialism in society and its structures. As Lisa Blitz (2006) explains, some elements of racism are visible and actively hurt people of color, while more subversive and less visible racism is perpetuated by systems and institutions that grant unjustified privilege and opportunity to white people. Thus obscured, the dynamics of oppression are now woven into the fabric of the institutional culture. The last ones

to understand this are people such as me, who have been exposed little to white racial discrimination.

Reading about whiteness and privilege gave me the language to fill in the gap in my understanding of colonizer and colonized. Comprehending at a deeper level that colonialism has never stopped existing, since it is maintained alive systemically, came as a huge insight. Living on the “white” side of life, where few question my role, my way to overcome the nearsightedness of unearned privilege was to let myself be educated. Facing “my complicity in the seductiveness of whiteness” (Suchet, 2007, p. 872) forced me to take a more honest and reflective look at my own existence. The learning path on which I embarked has no end in sight. I hope that by remaining constantly aware of white seduction, I may continue approximating my understanding to the realities of non-white people. Being aware of living as a privileged white woman has allowed me to be more at peace with myself. I can now accept *my* otherness without having to resort to lessening the significance of race.

Colonization has often misled white people and their perception of justice. Misled to believing that we have a superior worldview, our lack of consideration has been at the root of harm perpetrated for centuries, not only onto others but spiritually onto ourselves as well. Melanie Suchet (2007) points out that until recently the burden of writing about race fell on those with darker skins. It took whites decades to understand that a racialized subjectivity is crucial not just for others, but for themselves.

Whiteness in Aileen Moreton-Robinson’s view (2006) is a form of essentialism that can silence and dismiss non-Western constructions. This can only happen from the position of power instilled in white Western knowledge, as long as it is accepted as the definitive measure of what it means to be human, and what does and what does not constitute knowledge. I do not claim to

occupy the position of the universal, and I acknowledge the limitations of the only scope I am able to encompass as the result of my birth and the space I inhabit. Although there is some flexibility, and I endeavor to widen that scope to the best of my ability, I cannot look through someone else's lens. The fact that, unlike non-whites, "white bodies do not have to face their whiteness" (Ahmed, 2007, p.156), has resulted in whites missing out on evolving our knowledge of self and our sense of place. Fortunately this has begun to change.

Similar to Suchet (2007), I too was born into whiteness in a land of colors and had difficulty defining my deep loving relationship with a motherly woman, who for all intents and purposes was part of the family. She was like an auntie to my siblings and me. Her name was Concha Nieves Luna and she served in our home for the entirety of my childhood and early adolescence. One day she packed up her belongings and returned to her own home. She had an elderly mother who needed her care. Where Concha used to be in my heart, now there was an emptiness difficult to understand, since life went on as usual and we rarely spoke of her again. Years later I was talking about the loss I experienced when an old Mexican acquaintance said to me that it could not have been that serious since Concha was not "like us." I began arguing but soon turned away from the conversation. My words were not being understood because the view that person held is still all too common to this day.

Blitz (2006) says, "Race and racism may have been invented *for* us, but it is also something that is done *to* us" (p. 252). She explains that our participation in a racist society without consciously acknowledging its institutional systems of oppression, and our own role in the process, makes healthy development for everyone in that society impossible. Being white as being colored is forever inescapable and those wanting to distance ourselves from racism have to wake up to the fact that wanted or not, we are beneficiaries of whiteness.

What does it mean to be white? For most people, that is a strange question for which they have no answer. Whiteness is that which is not seen and not named. It is present everywhere but absent from discussion. It is the silent norm. The invisibility of whiteness is how it maintains its natural, neutral, and hidden position. This silence is central to the power of whiteness (Suchet, 2007, p. 868).

I have stories of being an unjustified recipient of advantage, but since I did not have to ask for special treatment, I rarely questioned that. There were times, however, when alarms did go off inside my head because of the absurdity of what I was witnessing. In Cuba many years ago, I was doing research on a renowned black poet, and as she and I walked toward the entrance of a prestigious hotel in Havana to sit down and have coffee, we were approached by the bell boy who looked straight at her and told her she was not welcome on the premises. It happened again last year when Idalis, Reina's daughter, and I wanted to retrieve my bags from the *casa particular* (private home accommodation) at which I had been staying in Santiago de Cuba. The hosts had been most friendly and hospitable, but this time the man of the house opened the door and instantly changed his look when he saw Idalis. I introduced her as my friend and explained we had just come to get my bags. We both walked in but the man positioned himself squarely in Idalis' way and whispered, "You stay here!" Both times I felt ashamed for having just stood there unable to say anything to protect the women as they were being humiliated. Had they been white like me, no one would have dared to stop them.

Much earlier as a youth in Mexico I saw many incongruities in treatment between whites and the Indigenous women employed as servants in every Mexican household, white and *mestizo*. Regardless of their age, the help is usually called by their first name and addressed with

the familiar “*tú*” form, otherwise only used among family, friends, and minors. To this day, it is common that whites and *mestizos* address *indios* with “*tú*” rather than “*usted*” in other daily encounters as well. On the other hand, for Indigenous people to use the familiar form when talking with whites and *mestizos* would be considered outrageous. Things have changed somewhat, particularly among young people, but the grip of language keeps the old order in check much more than anyone likes to acknowledge.

Once the awareness of racist attitudes strikes, feelings of shame and guilt are inevitable, but disowning whiteness to sidestep responsibility inhibits the genuine acknowledgement of privilege, directly leading to perpetuating racism (Thompson & Neville, 1999). Being nice without going the distance is therefore no longer an option for me. Seeing through whiteness unveiled for me what Suchet (2007) describes as the “perpetration of violence, terror, and the infliction of psychological damage” (p. 874). Accepting my own implication in this was difficult, but in the end releasing. Once I had looked into the eyes of my racial shame, helplessness subsided, eventually allowing me to be more authentic in all my interactions. I now cherish the space of mutual recognition, where we are distinct and separate yet much alike. Letting race occupy one’s psyche, thinking, and feeling moves one beyond shame and guilt to be immersed in the turmoil and complexity of race (Suchet, 2007). However, there is no easy way, but there is room for improvement according to Seyla Benhabib (2002). I, as with her, would like to see the “pluralistically enlightened ethical universalism on a global scale” which she evokes in *The Claims of Culture* (Benhabib, 2002, p. 36).

In Benhabib’s opinion, we need to see cultures as open entities, which will invite the possibility of a dialogue of engagement between and among cultures. Her model offers an alternative to the dominating paradigm known as the “clash of civilizations,” which summons a

pessimistic image of discord and battle. Because I believe in dialogue, I am happy to have chosen to do this work of bridging race and culture, despite the problems that at times appeared.

Chapter 5

Doña Reina Ramírez

What humans do is not as powerful as what Nature does. We are only a part of her. Nature is sacred and she gives us all we need, food to eat, medicine to heal our bodies, shelter, and our loved ones to live with and be happy (Reina, in conversation, 2012).



Figure 4 Doña Reina, don Panchito and their daughter Idalis and son Vladis. Cuba 2012

In this chapter I present doña Reina Ramírez and some members of her family from La Ranchería in La Caridad de los Indios, in the province of Guantánamo, Cuba. The infamous Guantánamo Bay, still in the hands of the United States, is a small but strategic piece of land immediately south of Guantánamo City, where two of Reina's daughters live with their families. Below I tell the story of how I met the Ramírez family, and I provide some historical background which will situate my research participants in the larger context of ancestral belonging. I then lay out the work we did for this research and let doña Reina and her family talk about their knowledge and experiences. The main lesson that I learned during the times that I visited them

was to be in the moment. For Reina, Panchito, and their children, past and future are less of a concern as they live authentically engaged in the present. Their straightforward presence was refreshing, with my coming from a Western paradigm which is predominantly past concerned and future focused.

The Taínos

Doña Reina's ancestors, the Taíno people, were among the very first to encounter the Spanish *conquistadores* as they arrived at the shores of an unknown world that would never be the same thereafter. Christopher Columbus briefly landed near their current home during his first voyage in 1492. Unfortunately the early destruction of the Caribbean Indigenous population during the colonization process was so harrowing that much of their culture was lost forever. Until recently it was widely believed that the Cuban Taínos had completely ceased to exist. This view has also been supported by the communist Cuban government, who does not want any unique cultures attracting tourists to them. That is why my meeting doña Reina and her family was so exciting and catalyzing, because I also had bought into the myth of extinction until I began hearing about a few Indian families alive and well, settled on the eastern part of the island.

The information that exists on the Taíno people in Cuba is scant, but efforts are being made to change that. Cuban historian Alejandro Hartmann, who introduced me to the Ramírez Rojas family, and Cuban-American researcher José Barreiro are both at the forefront of present day Taíno research in Cuba. Since the 70s, Hartmann has been tracing Taíno descendants on the island. He introduced Barreiro to Francisco Ramírez Rojas (Panchito), Reina's husband, and since then both scholars continue doing research in the Ramírez family community and other surrounding Taíno communities. Some videos have been shot and, recently, Cuban filmmaker

Ernesto Padrón and his crew produced a film in La Ranchería, where Reina and her husband live surrounded by several of their children and other relatives.

How I Met the Ramírez Rojas

I visited the Guantánamo area and the family in 2007, 2008, 2009, and 2011, and then early in 2012 when I met with Hartmann, Barreiro and the Ramírez family all together. They were gathered in Santiago de Cuba to visit an ancestral cave site, most probably used for ceremonial purposes by Taíno ancestors, in Niquero, in the province of Granma. The Ramírez family and Barreiro performed a tobacco ceremony, sang and said prayers. After this and a couple of days in Santiago, I accompanied the Ramírez family back to their homes to do research for this study.

Years ago, challenged by my husband about the veracity of the myth of extinction, I went online to learn more about the disappearance of the Indigenous population on the biggest island in the Caribbean. Until then I had believed Caribbean archeologist, Irving Rouse (1992), who remarked that because Indigenous people of the northern Antilles were no more, it had been the archeologists' task to assume the sole responsibility for researching their cultural ancestry. What I found searching "Taínos in Cuba" was unexpected and exciting. After reading several articles I contacted their author, José Barreiro, who lives in Washington DC. The reality is the Indians in Cuba were not all vanquished. Some were able to flee into the mountains and have remained there ever since. Many have been intermarrying over the generations and others have moved away to find work. A small number still have the memory of being of Indian descent and are proud of it.

Barreiro recommended I visit Hartmann, who would help me get in touch with the Ramírez family. Shortly after that my husband and I went to the city of Baracoa in the easternmost province of Guantánamo. In that first visit Hartmann gave me a book that Reina's husband Panchito and Barreiro had produced in collaboration. Back at home, I called Barreiro to thank him for his advice and told him I would like being involved in helping the little community of La Ranchería in some volunteer way. He said that one task I could do was to copy the entire text from the book that had been given to me, onto the computer, because the original blueprint had been lost. A second thing would be to help with its translation into English. A year later I sent the bilingual edition to Barreiro. Unfortunately he has not found a publisher for this unique work yet, but as soon as I had finished the translation, I made copies of the prototype. The next time I went to Cuba I handed them over to don Panchito and doña Reina and each one of their children. It is their story and the most important thing for me was that they should have it. When I visited last time, I saw a copy which they had displayed prominently in their home.

Since the time when we first met, the Ramírez family and I have become quite close. I try to stay in touch by calling them on their neighbors' phones on a regular basis although often the connection is so bad that we can hardly understand each other. Letters to and from Cuba take months, and no one in the family has a computer, so our communication is extremely frustrating at times. Over the years I have met more family members, including Reina's eldest grandson who is a police officer in La Habana. Talking with him and with his wife in 2012 was enlightening. The grandson is aware of the attention his family back east is receiving lately, and he is concerned that people are profiting from his grandparents.

Recently he had seen a picture of his grandfather being sold in a tourist shop, and he knew his grandfather had no idea about it. Living in the big city the grandson has more access to

information, and he is keeping an archive with every article and picture related to his family that he finds to save for posterity. What he really needs is a computer, he said, so that all the material can be properly stored and shared in the future. I promised him I would make all that I had gathered prior to and during my research available to him, and the next time I see him I plan to do that. Until further changes in the country I cannot send anything by mail without risking that it will never make it to its destination.



Figure 5 Doña Reina's daughters Nasaria and Idalis with children, grandchildren and great grandchildren. Cuba, 2012

Historical Background

Shortly after the arrival of the first Europeans on the Caribbean islands in 1492, the Taíno world was changed forever. Enslavement, starvation, and disease had reduced their population to a few thousand by 1520. Tony Castanha (2011) says the assumption in the body of European ideas is that since so many Indigenous people were killed off in the Caribbean they must have

become extinct. It is widely believed that native populations in the northern Antilles were wiped out by the mid 16th century, affirms Castanha, who attributes this information to Fray Bartolomé de Las Casas. Although the friar became a tireless defender of the *Indios*, he “certainly did not conduct a viable study based on the available data ... he further did not evaluate the environmental and cultural conditions of the island[s], nor consult with the remaining indigenous peoples, this point being rather mute as the native was rarely if ever consulted with anyway,” (Castanha, 2011, p. 44). Nevertheless, Las Casas became the unquestionable authority on the matter. Only in the last decades have scholars, such as Castanha and Barreiro, been able to begin rectifying this misinformation extensively disseminated in academic literature.

Since I first began to educate myself and met doña Reina’s family, new research has been mushrooming on and by Taíno descendants. Groups of Taíno survived notably in Cuba, Puerto Rico, and the U.S. state of Florida. Several heritage groups have been established since 1998 for the affirmation and restoration of Taíno culture, language, and religion outside of Cuba (personal communication with Hartmann, 2011). The numbers might not be high on the largest Caribbean island, but there are Taíno descendants, some living in hamlets scattered in the east, and others integrated in towns and cities across the country. Sadly they have lost their language and much of their culture, although some of their ancestral traditions were incorporated into the Cuban fabric and are now integral part of it.

The Taíno, also known as the Antillean Arawak, were agriculturists who lived in villages, some with as many as 3000 inhabitants, and practiced slash-and-burn cultivation of cassava and maize. They recognized social rank and gave great deference to theocratic chiefs. Religious belief centered on a hierarchy of Nature spirits and ancestors, paralleling somewhat the

hierarchies of chiefs. Despite their complex social organization, the Antillean Arawak were not given to warfare.

Just as the word *Indio* was a misnomer because Columbus believed that he and his crew had arrived in the East Indies somewhere in Asia, *Taíno* is not what the natives called themselves, but what Spaniards picked up as their name. The word Taíno was first mentioned in a letter written during Columbus' second voyage in 1494. In it is described how as the conquerors descended on the island of Guadaloupe, the women and men watching from the beach kept saying “*tayno, tayno*” to the newcomers. Cuban linguist José Juan Arrom explains that “*tai*” is an Arawak root meaning noble, good, non-belligerent, and “*no*” is the sign of a plural. Therefore what the people on the beach were trying to convey was something like “we are good, we are noble, we are friendly” (Arrom, 1983, cited in Torres Etayo, 2006, p. 72). By repeatedly using that word, the natives on Guadaloupe might have wanted to establish a differentiation between themselves and the Caribs, another Indigenous group that had been fighting and displacing the peaceful Taíno people from the Lesser Antilles shortly before the Europeans arrived (Torres Etayo, 2006). The words *Indio* and *Taíno*, as they refer to ethnic groups, are but two examples of the power wielded by the Spanish, who not only imposed their rules through deadlier weapons, but also by interpreting and classifying everything they saw from their point of view. The colonizers' nomenclature soon caused the loss of many original names and so began the sad demise of hundreds of native languages from the world treasury of languages. In the case of the Taíno, this loss was devastating.

Before taking hold of Cuba, Spanish occupation had already been well-practiced for a decade beginning in 1492 on La Española (the name Columbus gave to the island of Haiti and the Dominican Republic). Hence the conquistadors armed with swords, fire, and the cross,

wasted no time on Cuba. They dismantled Indigenous organizations quickly and efficiently, and subjugated all people to one sole objective: the colonizers' quick enrichment through forced labour in the gold mines. Despite this cultural genocide, Indigenous ways of life did not vanish completely, thanks to staunch yet usually heavily-punished resistance. A great number of Taíno people had no choice whatsoever but to comply with the colonialists' impositions, which ultimately meant death due to the atrocious conditions of inhumane labour, hunger, and disease. Alternatives were limited: one option was to die for openly resisting the oppression or going into isolation by escaping to the hills; another option was to accept the tragic fate of subordination to the Spaniards. This last option was the cultural survival mechanism which went a long way to saving the Indigenous culture (Torres Etayo, 2006).

Tribal agricultural societies in the Antilles originated in South America. In his book, *Taínos: Mitos y realidades de un pueblo sin rostro*, Daniel Torres Etayo (2006) writes that, starting in 1025 BCE, a considerable number of Arawak migrations were underway, moving from the lower half of the Orinoco River to the coastal regions. Around 500 BC, another migration headed into the Caribbean Sea, quickly moving from island to island up the chain of the Lesser Antilles all the way to Puerto Rico and the southern part of La Española. For reasons still unknown the migratory movement stopped there for more than a thousand years (Wilson, 1997).

During this time, a thorough transformation of these societies occurred as the complexity of important social, economical, and ritual processes increased on Puerto Rico and La Española. Around 600 AD the culture had spread from these two islands to Cuba, Turk and Caicos, and the Bahamas (Torres Etayo, 2006). New agricultural practices and the ensuing food security made it

possible for the social structures to grow more complex, leading to bigger towns and the incorporation of greater rituality into daily life.

The resulting tribal societies were headed by a *cacique* or *cacica* (chief), whose leadership encompassed their village and sometimes a whole region. The *nitaynos* were counsellors or nobles whose task was to assist the *cacique*. The *naborías* or commoners were in charge of the tribe's fundamental subsistence. According to Torres Etayo (2006) *naborías* were a remnant from earlier non-hierarchical times, when cohesion was maintained by forms of reciprocity and cooperation. A person of great importance in the community was the *behique*, or shaman, who was not only a healer but the performer of many of the ceremonies and rituals. His power was also used by the *caciques*, and during the last hierarchical phase of the Taíno system, *behiques* were monopolized by the *caciques*, as they took over ritual and ceremonial functions (Schaffer et al., 2012).

Myth and Cosmos

Most of our knowledge concerning Taíno cosmogony (creation of the existing universe), mythology, and perception of the cosmos came to us through Jeronymite friar Ramón Pané. Pané travelled on Columbus' second voyage in 1494 and stayed on La Española. By the late 15th century he had written the first book of the colonizers in America: *An Account of the Antiquities of the Indians: Chronicles of the New World Encounter* (completed around 1498). Living among the natives and learning their language, Pané was able to bring together, little by little, the many aspects of Taíno mythology and cosmology (science or theory of the universe as an ordered whole).

According to Taíno mythology and cosmology, next to the presence of one overarching, omnipotent creator there were more accessible deities or *cemís*. José Juan Arrom (1997) tells that, according to the myth, a man named *Yaya* was proclaimed as a supreme being who created everything in the universe. The story of *Yaya* tells about the origin of the first ocean and a mythological communion of fish with all sources of life. The Taíno cosmos was ordered hierarchically, with *Yaya* as divine creator, and 12 *cemís* known as deified symbols, idols, or gods that had a greater impact on daily life. *Cemís* were depicted as anthropomorphic and zoomorphic icons made of bone, clay, coral, cotton, shell, stone and wood. *Cemís* linked the mystic world of humans to their environment. They contained the blueprint of the cosmos, and a consistent code of ethics, which was useful to humans in their endeavor to maintain the cosmic equilibrium amid physical and spiritual realms. Thus, *Cemiism* contained a vital piece of Taíno ideology and socio-political structure (Schaffer et al., 2012).

What we know about the first years of colonization has come down to us in letters and several chronicles. Columbus kept a diary but unfortunately his original manuscript presented to Spanish monarchs, Ferdinand and Isabella, along with other evidence of his discoveries have been lost for centuries. The primary surviving record of the voyage is a transcription, part quotation and part summary, of the complete copy of the diary made in the 1530s by Dominican friar Las Casas. Las Casas also wrote down his own experiences, which became a valuable and extensive source when studying the encounter of both worlds in the early stages. Although Castanha (2011) points out that Las Casas made wrong assumptions which would hinder later investigations, without this missionary's literature, much more information would have disappeared. Las Casas traveled as a young soldier and colonizer on Columbus' fourth and last

voyage to the Americas in 1502. In 1510 he was ordained on La Española. Five years later he handed over the land and Indigenous laborers he had been assigned. To the end of his long life he became an ardent and very vocal protector of the colonies' native people.

The story of one heroic Taíno leader, Hatuey, appears in Las Casas' *History of the Indies*, a three volume book he worked on from 1527 to 1562. According to his account, around 1512 *Cacique* Hatuey and some 300 of his people tried to escape Spanish domination by leaving their native island of Haiti for neighbouring Cuba in canoes. Hatuey and his followers left their homeland after years of witnessing the colonizers' unspeakable brutality against which they had been fighting to no avail. When they landed in Cuba, barely preceding the Spanish colonizers, Hatuey summoned all inhabitants from the surrounding areas to warn them about the Spaniards and the atrocities they had committed on his island. He told them the only thing the newcomers were interested in was gold, which they worshipped as a god. For the metal, he told them, they stole, plundered, raped, and murdered, and he recommended throwing what gold they had into the river before the bearded white men saw it. Not all believed his terrifying message and only 200 to 300 people joined Hatuey's rebellion in Cuba. Severely disadvantaged by the enemy's weaponry and their animals (horses and tracking dogs), after a few months the rebels fled deep into the forest. Fearing however that the *cacique's* tenacity might continue stirring other natives, Spanish soldiers persecuted him until he was caught. Accused for having encouraged resistance against them, Hatuey was condemned to be burned alive. While Hatuey was tied to the stake, a priest offered to baptize him so he could become a Christian and his soul could go to heaven. Hatuey asked if the newcomers' souls went to heaven and, when the priest said "yes," Hatuey refused baptism (Las Casas, 1909).

Today Hatuey is celebrated in Cuba as the first freedom fighter in the Americas and has become a national hero. Another Taíno warrior found not in Las Casas' *History of the Indies*, but through other sources, *Cacique* Guamá from Cuba, also spearheaded a rebellion which extended from 1522 to 1533. After living through the horrors of colonization with no end in sight, he, his wife Casiguaya, and his people took into the hills of the Baracoa region. With quick and surprising attacks they rendered the paths around the entire area almost impassable for over a decade. Both Spanish and Indigenous people lost many lives during this guerrilla warfare. Circumstances of Guamá's death are still debated, says Yolanda Díaz Martínez (investigator of the Institute of History in Cuba) in the Cuban newspaper, *Venceremos* (n/d). One version points toward an assassination by the colonizers. Another, quoted more often, speaks about Guamá having been killed by his brother Guamayry with an ax while asleep. In this version Guamá is said to have seduced or abducted his brother's wife. In September 2003 the Cuban newspaper, *Juventud Rebelde*, announced that a skeleton had been found, and there were some signs that it could be *Cacique* Guamá's. Since then I have not seen any further news. Regardless of the ongoing debate, Guamá, as with Hatuey, has gone down in history as a great defender of the Indigenous people. Today Taíno descendants still praise him in song.

From Don Panchito's Book

Early colonization gave way to a turbulent history in Cuba and the Taínos were present in many battles. During the wars of Independence in the late 1800s, they fought side-by-side with African slaves and Spanish descendants born in Cuba against Spain. They also marched alongside Fidel Castro with the advent of the Cuban Revolution in 1959, although their

participation in these events is mentioned as the participation of *guajiros* and *campesinos*, not *indios*. The term *guajiro* is common among the Cuban Taínos (Barreiro, 2006).

In his book Panchito talks about some of his elders having gone to battle. He also knows from them what their community used to be like in earlier times.

That whole area belonged to *Indios* only. ... La Ranchería [that] had [the] twenty-five houses. ... La Escondida had another larger amount, San José next to La Ranchería, La Lora, all were and are *Indio* hamlets. Mainly there were the surnames Ramírez and Rojas, those branches, but there are also others. The Castillo and Paja and Ara mixed with the *Indio* and those were the first ones to mix. ... My grandfather used to talk to me and he'd say, "Darn it, the Castillo came to ruin the Indian race," and he did feel regret because he didn't like that they would mingle with the *Indias*. An *Indio* yes, *Indio* with *Indio*, well, we married; second cousin with second cousin married in order to preserve the race and continue on. That was the elders' ancient instruction, to try to maintain our people of race. Today that attitude hardly exists anymore. I keep it because I'm married to an *India*, but many here hardly do it anymore. Now, up to my generation, yes, the grandparents kept it (Barreiro, 2008, p. 52).

His grandfather also told him that the Spaniards brought the Africans, and then black mixed with *Indio* and *Indio* with the Spanish race. Panchito observes, "It might be unfortunate or for good taste, but that's what happened. Later, things kept evolving and we get to what we have today. But since here in Cuba we are all worth the same, we talk about all our origins. Cubans are from the three races and we're all Cuban" (Barreiro, 2008, p. 53).

Language and Traditions

Although in Cuba the Taíno have lost their language, with the exception of some words, in Puerto Rico a language revitalization process is underway and children are once again being taught their ancestors' language.

Taino is an Arawakan language of the Caribbean, originally spoken in what is now Puerto Rico, Cuba, the Dominican Republic and the Bahamas. Today there are two Taino languages: the original Taino tongue - which, though not spoken as a first language today, is being taught to Taino children in an active language revival program - and a unique Spanish - Taino creole, spoken by many Taino people, using Spanish grammar but with half of its vocabulary words Taino in origin (www.native-languages.org/taino.htm).

Even as the language almost ceased to exist, many Taíno words survived and not only in the Caribbean but, spreading into the mainland via the colonizers, they were picked up and absorbed into Spanish as well as into other languages. A few examples are *barbicu*, *canoa*, *hamaca*, *huraca'n*, *iguana*, *maraca*, *tabacu'*, to name the ones easily recognizable in English (www.taino-tribe.org/langlinks.htm). *The Taínos of the past* also left countless artifacts behind which help reconstruct their history and many of them are now exhibited in famous museums around the world and in museums all along their migratory path. Prior to my beginning this research, I had the opportunity to visit several islands where I saw remarkable exhibits of Taíno pieces from pre-Columbian times.

Reina and her people still remember some ancestral traditions; they dance the *areito*, a form of round dance; and they prepare dishes from the past, such as *casabe* and *tucunú*, one made with yucca, the other with corn. They also perform tobacco and other ceremonies, such as

the *altar de cruz*, which has mixed Christian elements into the pre-Columbian tradition. When I was there in the spring, Reina's granddaughter, who has two young sons, shared with me how the family performed an *altar de cruz* to ask for her baby's healing when he was so sick they thought he might die. The little one was happily running around as his mother was telling me the story with tears in her eyes.

Visit with Doña Reina Ramírez and Her Family

My visit with doña Reina and her family took place in the spring of 2012. On a previous stay I had asked Reina if she would be willing to participate in my study and be interviewed and recorded. She agreed. At first I spent time with her and her family simply being together, playing with the kids, chatting, and remembering past visits. Once we met to begin our first recording session, Reina had told her youngest daughter and son, and her husband that she was a little nervous and wanted them to accompany her. That is how our interview became more like a talking circle. We all stayed together, sitting around the table and everyone was comfortable. During the second and third recording sessions Reina was accompanied by her husband and her daughter. At the end of the process I had learned that having other family members present, helping out when Reina asked them about something she could not remember, and contributing their own thoughts to the conversation, was invaluable. The sessions opened my eyes to what living and knowing in relationship means. Reina and her family showed me how relationships are more important than the individual, because all we do is relational and, among the Ramírez family, I could actually witness it.

As we were all sitting under the shade around the table, Reina began by introducing herself:

My dad's name was Emeterio Ramírez Ramírez, my mum's Adriana Ramírez Ramírez. They were born in La Escondida, I was born there too. It's a little place close to La Ranchería where we live now. I was born with a midwife. My mother had three girls and two boys. I was her fourth child. The only thing I remember about my grandparents at my old age is that one grandmother was called Vicenta. My grandfather was Jacinto Ramírez Rojas. They lived close by, but that's all I can remember now. (See appendix 5 map of Cuba and Guantánamo region)

La Escondida (the hideout) is the place where her ancestors hid from early colonizers. When the Spaniards arrived, all Indians had to abandon everything and flee deep into the forest and up the mountains to survive. There they stayed and built small *Indio* ranches with their *bohíos* (houses) and *bateyes* (common spaces around which the *bohíos* were erected). These communities are now known as La Escondida, La Lora, Bernardo, San José, Vega del Cedro, Negro Toro, Ocaral, Caridad de los Indios, and more. Most families in those communities and in several other areas in the eastern mountains have Indian roots.

Although most people, even in Cuba, believe there are no more *Indios*, there are Indian families in Yateras, Jiguaní, and Maisí. "Look at me, look at them," Reina said smiling pointing at her family. Her husband Panchito added, "We do exist, we are right here. Many were killed or died, but there was no extinction. That's a myth! We continue carrying our culture and I have taught my children to respect it and teach it to their children. The ancestors' teachings are with us and we take good care of them."

Reina explained that many, even her children, have married with people of Spanish or African descent, but that didn't change that their roots were still firmly attached to the Indian tradition. She has lived up on the mountain all her life; all her children grew up there, and she

would not want to move anywhere else. “Up here the water in the rivers is clear and uncontaminated, the air is pure, and the food we eat is grown all natural. Even our little animals have free and happy lives. Nature provides everything,” Reina said and after a little pause continued,

Our community is humble but we all help each other. My husband says that we live like the five fingers of one hand. We are separate but know how to pull together. There are eleven houses up here and we all cooperate. That’s what our grandparents and great grandparents used to do. All families helped each other. When they went hunting or fishing or when someone cooked cassava, the whole community had food. To this day, when someone butchers a pig everyone gets meat, no one goes hungry. Mother Earth is plentiful and offers all she has so humans may live. Of course we must work and take good care of her, but she always gives us what we need.

Her husband Panchito asked if he could interject and added,

I once had a dream about Mother Earth. She showed up all big and wonderful, high up in the air, and I surrendered to her with love. I asked her what she would like me to do and she said, “Plant lots of food, tend your *conuco* so you always can eat and feed your family. Take care of each other, of the animals as well, and don’t burn the forests because that hurts, it is as if you were burning me. Love me and live off me and tell everyone to do the same.” My dream went on and on, and at some point she said she needed us human beings to help her by cultivating her and asking from her because she has so much to give. She told me to ask the sun to purify the land and warm up the soil just right, so that the seeds I sow can grow, and everyone’s seeds can grow into strong plants. That way the whole world has plenty to eat.

When her husband had told his dream story Reina said that we all need to love Mother Earth and everything that she provides. Her ancestors had that tradition of being respectful and tender with Nature. “We are Mother Earth’s children. She takes such good care of us,” she smiled.

When Reina was a child there were more houses in her community but everyone was very poor. They were tough times. Describing her memories she said,

My mother made our clothes and cooked and cleaned the house. When I was little we played a lot, I didn’t go to school because there was no school where I lived. My grandparents and my parents taught me things. I asked my mum, “How do you do this?” and she’d say, “Well, just like I’m doing it, just like they are doing it, that’s how it is done.” For example, when I was learning to wash, I’d ask and they would say, “Watch us and do it like we do.” When learning how to cook it was the same, to cook rice, to cook beans, meat, I learned by doing it the way my mother showed me. I also learned how to clean coffee beans, roast them, make the coffee, strain it and drink it.

Doña Reina was born in the 1930s and in her childhood, the authorities in her community were the elders and they still are, although a lot has changed since then. The old people taught the younger generation how to be good and honest. Children worked hard to help the family and there was no money to buy anything. The governments of that era did not care about the poor. The market was far away and during harvest there was little opportunity to sell products. But on the mountain, nobody went hungry, because every family planted their *conuco* (family crop garden) and always had enough to eat. Still, she and her husband remember that, during Batista’s dictatorship (1952 to 1958), there was great suffering. No one went to school, very few could read, and people lived in fear because the *guardia rural* (rural guard) killed and hanged anyone who was deemed troublesome, often for some unknown reason. Life started changing right after

the triumph of the Revolution at the start of 1959. Children were able to go to school because the revolution brought schools and teachers to all neighborhoods. It also brought clinics and doctors, and education and health assistance are since available to all.

Reina married at 17, "...very very young," she laughed. Back in those days people married in their community before the elders or their parents, because there were no courts. The marriage was celebrated with great respect and people truly valued and honored the role of the elders. "There's less respect these days because people are more civilized, but we tell our grandchildren our ways are also civilized" she declared. When she talked about her motherhood she said,

I have seven children, and with that one (pointing at Vladis) who is the last one of the boys, they had to take me to the hospital, the other ones were all born at home. My mother-in-law was a midwife and she caught my babies. But with my son's birth, they saw I was having difficulties, and took me to the doctor. I almost died, and they had to carry me on a stretcher from La Caridad de los Indios all the way to Manuel Tames, where they had a doctor. That was when we still didn't have a clinic close by, but now it's different. Every community has a doctor nearby. I was very lucky with my son. Now he and the others are all grown up and have their own families. The first one to marry was Almeida, the eldest, and she (pointing at Idalis) is our youngest girl. I had five girls and only two boys. They are all spread out. One daughter lives in Matanzas, two live in Guantánamo, but they all have their little place in the mountain.

Panchito added that many *Indios* from the mountain from La Caridad have moved to Matanzas, because they found work in agriculture. He also mentioned having some family as far away as Havana.

Reina talked about how she always has been a *campesina* (farmer), and, therefore, had worked in the fields and at home doing chores all her life. When she married, her husband, with the help of neighbors, built their *bohío* out of *guano* (fleshy part of the palm leaf) and tied it with *bejuco* (pliable reed) because back then they had no nails. Building a *bohío* for the newly wedded couple is a custom that continues to this day, explained Panchito. Sadly, the palm trees have been dying out and the palm groves of former times are disappearing, so the materials for the construction are no longer the same.

Just like her mother did with her, Reina taught the girls how to cook, sweep, wash and iron clothes, and do all the things around the house. “All of that I was able to teach them.” When I asked what dishes she had passed on to her girls, her daughter Idalis jumped in, “A *compuesto, mamá!*” and Reina explained how to prepare a *compuesto*, a dish made from a leaf vegetable she calls *calalú*. She boils the leaf until tender, then chops it and adds it to whatever *sofrito* (a combination of aromatic ingredients, such as garlic, onions, and tomatoes fried in oil) she has available, and it is always delicious. This they eat with rice or with *vianda* (root vegetables), mostly with yucca or *malanga* (root vegetable). Another dish the girls learned from their mother is the *ajiaco*, a stew made from different ingredients, depending on what is available.

Ajiaco is a national dish in Cuba. “We prepare the *ajiaco guajiro*. That’s traditional from here. To make *ajiaco* you take food from your *conuco* and put in a pot,” Idalis began explaining and Panchito underlined, “*Ajiaco* is in the pot what the *conuco* is in the field. Everything gets blended together.” Idalis went on, “You put some water in the pot and add some bones, or if you have a chunk of meat, or a hen, and then you take your *vianda* and your vegetables and add them too. *Ajiaco* is more than just a dish because it is mostly prepared in community, it’s a feast. To

do it people get together and have a good time.” “When there is *ajiaco* everyone eats” Reina filled in. “It’s healthy and tasty and the broth is the best part.”

Reina’s son, Vladis explained that their Indigenous system is to raise many things, harvest many foods. He went on saying,

We grow many things, like *malanga*, *boniato*, beans, and corn. We are taking care of all our corn seed, because some varieties are disappearing and we want to prevent that. We *Indios* consider corn an ancient brother. There are over a dozen dishes made from corn. It is a great food source for us. Yucca is also an important food source mainly for *Indios*, particularly in the olden days when it was essential for our nourishment. It used to be that cassava makers could trade this food for protein from hunters or fishermen.

Panchito added, “Yucca has its own spirit and it has powers. It helps with the eyesight. In my ways you can connect with it and ask it. I used to wash my face with the morning dew on the yucca and I would ask the plant for clarity in my vision.” “Unfortunately many varieties of yucca have also been disappearing,” Vladis said, “There are very few left and again, it is our responsibility to preserve what we still have.”

When the conversation moved toward traditional healing and medicinal plants, Panchito wanted to talk first.

In our ways, when you work with medicinal herbs, we have a system of respect. You cannot just come and rip off a piece of the plant, which is a living being just like us. When I need a little leaf from a plant, first I think about that leaf. Then I ask for permission to pick it, and only then can I receive the power of that plant that will help me heal the illness or the pain. Sometimes I take the branch of a plant or a tree to bless someone. Again I ask permission from the plant. Respect in our relationship with Nature

is crucial. That's our Indian system. We have to reciprocate when taking something from Nature. When I need to pick a plant, I make an offering of a little tobacco or a penny and place it by its stem. That way the plant offers all the strength the earth has put into her, and also senses how her destiny is to restore the health of a person. In our ancestors' traditions, that plant is almost a human being, she feels just like we do, and if we just rip a piece of her away, she may wither. So we have to make an offering that she may gain strength and live. The plants feel when humans communicate with them. This natural feeling of give and take comes to us from belonging to the earth, because we are *Indios*. It's been a system that our ancestors passed down to us and now we are passing it down to our children and grandchildren.

Reina and Panchito had much to say about several plants they use for medicine. They described the mountain as their school where life becomes the teacher, and explained that, by observing things unfold in Nature, we can discover how everything relates to each other, and that way we begin to understand that we are all relatives. They said that their natural medicine is what students today call *medicina verde* (green medicine). What they have in the mountain is a natural treasure.

Honey is one of the most important gifts of Nature according to doña Reina. "Eating bees' honey makes you strong" she said and continued,

Honey is the cream of the flowers for our people. It's sweet and delicious and it's good medicine as well. The little bee gets the flower's strength and as honey that strength benefits us. A spoonful of honey is full of vitamins. I use it in teas and syrups. For example honey is good for cough syrup, also for anemia. Drink parsley juice with honey and an egg yolk and you'll no longer be anemic!

Then she and her husband went on enumerating important plant products they still use.

The boiled leaf of the *guáramo* (no translation) is good for headaches. Trees, such as the *jagüey* (a tree with air roots) and cedar, are used for wood but are also medicinal. Cedar smoke is great for cleansing. Reina mentioned that the *flores y hojas de naranja agria* (flowers and leaves of the sour orange) can be used in the bathwater to reduce fever. She once healed her son Vladis when he was running a dangerously high fever. She boiled the orange leaves, added the extract into the bathwater, and gave her son three sips of the water before he took his healing bath. A little later his fever was gone. *Mejorana* (marjoram) is used for cooking but, taken in tea or juice it is good for healing respiratory problems. *Yerbabuena* (spearmint) and other mints are boiled in water to make teas that are calming and help with digestion and stomach problems. There is also *albahaca mondonguera* (wild basil variety) and another variety of basil which is planted in the garden. Apart from its culinary use, basil has several health benefits: for example, it is an excellent tonic to strengthen the nerve system and for depression. Another herb that grows abundantly in the mountain is *salvia* (sage), and Reina uses it to make syrup against colds. She takes 101 sage leaves, boils them, strains them and then adds sugar or honey to the liquid. Sometimes when she has both, she adds one part of sugar and one part of honey, and then lets it boil until it becomes thick and syrupy. She lets it cool down before pouring it into containers, in which she stores the medicine until someone needs it. Many Indigenous plant medicines have been transformed into pharmaceuticals, however there are many yet to be understood by Western science.

When Reina took a little break, Idalis asked if she could add to what her mother had said about the use of sage,

We use *salvia* to bless, to bathe in. When a child is feeling sick, without energy, doesn't want to eat, you bless that child. You take three *salvia* leaves and ask the sun for help, and pray. You bathe the child and you can feel how the little body gets stronger. It is also helpful when your mind is troubled, everything becomes clear when you pray and use medicinal herbs. I learned this from my parents and I still follow our tradition. When I don't feel good or I'm sad, or I'm thinking of things I shouldn't be thinking of, I go to a *matica* (little plant) and I ask that *matica* for help. For example I go to the *salvia* and I tell her I'll pluck three of her leaves. Then I get this premonition that something might happen, and even if I don't know what's wrong with me or with anyone else, I ask the plant, "*Tú como salvia tienes que salvarme* (you as *salvia* have to save me). *Salvia para que me salves* (*salvia* to save me)." And if it's my husband, who is a *chofer de guagua* (truck driver), I say, "*Sálvalo* (save him) and clear his mind. Grant him good vision in case there is something on the road, so he has enough time to avoid it." And if he is in pain, and it can't be healed, "let him be calm at least."

Reina and Panchito talked also about copal and tobacco. The copal tree is of great importance and has several uses. It is good for headaches and the bark makes a tea that is used for colds. A good cure for a splitting headache is putting a bit of copal resin on a *guáramo* leaf, or on a yellow yam leaf, and sticking it to the sole of one's foot. From the resin they also make tiny balls; swallowing two or three of them helps with bad colds as well as headaches. With copal you can also pull out splinters or the stinger left behind by an insect. Kneading the resin into a little patch, it can be placed on the skin and, after a couple of days when the patch is pulled off, out comes the splinter or stinger attached to it. Last but not least, copal is essential for

cleansing. Copal is used for prayers and ceremonies. It is sacred to *Indios*. Tobacco is extremely important for cleansing and for ceremonial use as well. People also like to smoke it for its aroma.



Figure 6 Doña Reina performing a tobacco ceremony

Reina explained,

For a blessing, take a large leaf from the tobacco plant and burn it to make smoke, and that smoke can be an offering to a saint that you carry. You cleanse the saint, oftentimes it's San Lázaro, and ask him for permission to take away the bad influence. Sometimes we put a fresh leaf of tobacco on a swelling or an irritation of the skin and the green leaf cools it down and makes it feel much better. Some people also toast the little seeds of the plant to make cold medicine.

Panchito then added, “In everything, the first offering you make to a spirit, to a plant, or to a saint, is a cigar. Tobacco is the greatest sacrament. But I tell you that to get the benefit of these plants it is most necessary to be genuine and respectful.”

When talking about disease Vladis said,

Not everything is about a doctor; there are things that a doctor, regardless of his wisdom, can't find out, and people such as my parents, who were born with something special, know how to heal certain problems, such as those headaches, which can't be cured by medical doctors. This knowledge should never be forgotten. I've been able to see and to

hear some of it, and I believe that it will always be carried in our culture, regardless of the passing of the generations someone from the same bloodline will continue practicing this tradition. Ours is a natural culture, ignorant in that there has been no opportunity to learn how to write, as happened with my parents, or to study, but tremendously rich in other ways, in spiritual ways.

There is an affliction Reina and her family talked about called *mal de ojo* (evil eye). This ailment comes from someone sending a bad influence or an evil look at a person, sometimes even at an animal. The evil eye can be like a spell that a bad person puts on people to harm them. But *mal de ojo* can also be contracted from Nature as a result of having wronged others or not having fulfilled some duty. In these cases a copal cleansing can cast away the spell.

This account led me to think about *despojo* (a ritual where all the negative energy is stripped away from a person, common in Mexico and Cuba, like the evil eye) and I asked if someone could describe what it is. Idalis said laughing “Ah, maybe you want my dad to give you a *despojo*,” and explained that to do it you take *salvia*, *albahaca*, *rompezaragüey* (a shrub endemic in Cuba and used for rituals, especially for *despojos*, as it cleanses away dark forces and malevolent spirits), and sometimes other plants. Taking some leaves or branches from each plant the person healing can then perform the *despojo*. This ritual is good for many things and people, not only the Indigenous, like using it. After the *despojo* the person receiving the healing feels stronger in body and mind.

I asked Reina if she performed *despojos* and she nodded. She boils the herbs in water, pours the liquid into a bucket and leaves it standing in the sun until it is ready to be used for the *despojo*. Her son Vladis added, looking at Reina, “She was born with *esa gracia* (that gift), because she *sees*. Thanks to her vision she can see and sense things, that other people can’t, I

can't! But she has that gift, a light that illuminates her, and in her mind she then knows how things ought to be, what setbacks might come up and how to ask Nature and life for help.” At the end of my stay I underwent a *despojo* performed by both Reina and Panchito. It was a powerful experience and I truly felt something lift from my heart. Reina was delighted I accepted the healing, and after it I was surrounded by lots of laughs and humor.

One last traditional healing method we talked about was *sobar* (to rub with a light touch). Vladis said he did not do it himself, but he explained,

Sobar is a tradition to pull out an *empacho* (indigestion), an infection a child or an adult might have. We have two cousins who dedicate their lives to this here on the mountain. When someone has a bad digestion, they rub that person and truly heal her. They also take away headaches and sorrow and that makes them doctors, natural doctors, with special gifts.

Idalis spoke after her brother,

You can learn how to heal by rubbing, although some people, like the ones Vladis is talking about, were born with that wisdom. But I rub my children, and I make them herbal teas for different ailments. Sometimes people come to see me and ask me to do a blessing for them or give them advice on how to use and make plant remedies. That has all come down to me from my parents.

When we talked about tradition and its passing down from generation to generation, Reina asserted that it was important to her that her children and her grandchildren never lost their Indian culture. “We have to move forward with what we have, because that is what comes natural to us *Indios* and *Indias*.” Here Idalis interjected, “She hopes that her grandchildren all follow our culture, of course, so that this tradition never is lost.” Reina added, “That neither my

children nor my grandchildren nor anyone lose it. We all must move forward with our knowledge.” Idalis continued, “The love of the Earth, of Nature, respect of Nature, and above all, we have to trust Nature, be caring with her. After all, we live on the Earth. All is earth and without earth no one can live.” “*Sí señor* (emphatic ‘yes’),” Reina said and then affirmed,

We all become ashes, we become dust, yes, and the whole world ends up beneath the earth, even those people who feel greatly important. What for? To end up like the rest of us, beneath the earth, *sí señor*, that’s how it is! There is nothing more important than getting along with everyone. We are all equal. Blood runs inside of you and me and in all of us. We all are happy when we feel love and we all hurt when it is taken away.

Doña Reina and her family sing to the Lord brought by Christians, to the spirit of the *ceiba* (most sacred tree in Cuba) and other entities in Nature, and to the saints. The most revered of all is *la Virgen de la Caridad del Cobre* (Virgin of Charity of the Copper), patroness of Cuba. When picking a little medicinal plant, a song might go like this, “*Virgen de la Caridad*, give power to this plant or help me so that this plant gives me her healing power,” Panchito explained. Their grandparents and great grandparents used to sing the songs of Indian heroes such as Hatuey and Guamá, the rebel *caciques* who fought to the very end in the mountains of Baracoa. The Spaniards burned Hatuey, and Guamá resisted for several years longer, but he too was killed. The elders used to tell their stories, and some of the songs are still remembered.

I asked if someone would sing a song and Reina and Idalis sang two beautiful songs that go like this, “*Ay Mama, ay Mamalina, ya me voy pa’l monte con Guamá*” (Oh Mama, oh Mamalina, I’m ready to go to the mountain with Guamá) and “*Yara, Yarisa se va con el Cacique Guamá. Yara la India se va con el Cacique Guamá* (Yara, Yarisa is leaving with the *Cacique* Guamá. Yara the *India* is leaving with the *Cacique* Guamá). The song keeps repeating, every

time mentioning a different person who is singing in the circle: *Yara, la Reina se va ...*, *Yara Idalis se va ...*, until everyone has “left” to be with *Cacique* Guamá. Both songs reminisce on the historic event, when the Taíno fled from the encroaching Spaniards to join Guamá’s rebellion up in the eastern mountains.



Figure 7 Doña Reina and daughter Idalis singing. Cuba, 2012

Apart from their songs, Panchito asserted that they also have their own dances such as the *ruedo*, the *carril*, and the dance of the Mamalina, the most important one that he learned from his grandparents. It used to be performed during the *areito*, a ceremony for the living to communicate with the spirit world through music and dance and in the olden days with *cohoba*, a psychotropic snuff. *Areitos* take place to celebrate birth and marriage, to mourn the dead, or to celebrate important visitors. In the *areito* dance, everyone dances, one behind the other, in a circle and Panchito described the beat as, “*chaca, chaca, chaca*,” held with a maraca originally made from bamboo, which today is usually substituted by the *güira* and the *guayo* (percussion instruments). The *Indios* also took traditions from the Spanish and the Africans, for example the

changüü. This dance is Cuban and combines Spanish and African elements. Vladis is a singer and musician and, with his band, he performs the *changüü* among other styles.

When the topic of spirituality and religion came up, Panchito said, “Our culture is spiritual and joyful.” People call him a *cruza ’o* (*cruzado*: crossed) because in his belief system he has something from the spirits of the mountain, something from the saints, and something from *santero* (from *Santería*, the syncretistic Afro Cuban religion that emerged from African spirituality combined with Catholicism). “But at the core of a *cruza ’o* lies the force of Nature, the Indian element. It’s all mixed, and that’s the way of the *cruza ’o*,” Panchito explained.

In Cuba all the different elements have mixed. Christians brought the saints and they adapted so people can invoke saints as they do with other spirits. They use the Lord’s Prayer, also the Creed, the Hail Mary, and other Catholic prayers. But they also have the *bembé* from the African tradition. The *bembé* is a ceremony, almost a culture. Panchito and his community celebrate a *bembé* every year in December. “I sacrifice a pig, or a goat, sometimes a hen or a turkey instead. We have a great feast. The *bembé* is for *San Lázaro* (known as Babalú), for *Elegguá* and for *Changó* (Orisha deities in *Santería*)” he said.

He continued explaining how, in the spiritual realm, his people take shelter in everything, from the Catholic, the African, and their own ancestors, and it all works since their foundation is the earth. “The main thing in all of it is to show respect to every spirit that is here in our land,” he finished. Reina spoke about Mother Earth and how everything in Nature must be respected as well. “We have to protect plants and animals because they are part of us. The old ones always told us that. We need the air, the water, the earth, and we are the earth! She protects us, she gives us life, she’s like a relative and that’s what we believe.”

Studying tells people different things, according to Panchito, “But our old methods still exist; not everyone follows them anymore. When people leave the mountain they don’t take our system with them. So we are very few who keep it alive.” He then talked about the *madre de aguas* (mother of water) who, for the old people, was a great and powerful being. They would light a candle on a rock by the river to honor this water spirit and that tradition has always stayed with Reina and her family. She said,

Bathe yourself in the mother of water, jump into the river three times and light a candle for her and if you ask respectfully she will cleanse away all evil and will help you purify yourself. Our ways honor water. It is sacred, tears from heaven and tears from earth. We must appreciate and take care of all waters. Water from heaven, waters from earth, they’re all blessings that give us life.

This led Idalis to talk about the *siete potencias naturales* (seven natural powers):

The sun gives us strength and warmth, also to the plants so we can have them; the star, the water, the air we breathe, the whole world breaths, the earth without which we have no life, as we have no life without water either, because we live on the earth and sustain ourselves with water, and father sun and that moon that lights up all the darkness, the stars as well. These are the natural powers and in our community we ask them to help us, we pray to them when someone is sick or in need.

The other reference for prayer is the recognition of the four cardinal points, Panchito added, and explained that, even when people are building a *bohío*, the four directions are always considered and blessed. Reina said she had learned from her parents to pray in all four directions, and she had taught her children and some of her grandchildren to respect that tradition. “Respect

is most important and that begins with the children. We have to listen to the children and love them well. They are the future and they learn from us,” she went on,

We are humanitarian and love everything there is on our Mother Earth. We have to look after the children and the elders, the land, the animals, and all the plants. We must also take good care of our water, and not contaminate it or waste it because there is no life without it. All these things are gifted to us by Mother Nature. Everyone needs them, rich and poor all over the world. The seven natural powers don't belong to anybody and bless us all.

Children belong to their parents and grandparents, and must be taken care of, Reina said when talking about family and children. “My parents and elders taught me when I was young, and although I have little education, I do know many things thanks to my elders. When my children were born it was my turn to be there for them. Also with my grandchildren, they all had to be taught to appreciate what they have, and to love their family, their teachers, and their elders.” “Selfishness and envy bring unhappiness and we are a happy people,” Panchito followed. “The most beautiful thing of humanity is getting along and treating a person with love, and giving advice in a good way is love. We advise our young to respect everyone, young and old, and to love their mountain culture, and all that it entails,” he said, and Idalis added, “Yes, my youngest one is always asking grandma to sing her songs and all the grandchildren love listening to their grandpa talk and explain things.” Their culture is about sharing things without expecting anything back, without self-interest, Reina pointed out, and her husband concluded, “Our ways come from the heart and from Nature, and that also has its science. Simple, but it is the *Indio's* science.”

Children need to learn to share responsibilities early on, according to Reina and Panchito.

He said,

With five or six or more in one household and only one taking charge of things, that is not right and the others don't care. We teach the children to take on responsibility by letting each one take ownership of one animal and that teaches them to love and care for a goat or a pig. That way we all look after the animals because everyone is responsible for one in particular and at the same time we share the task.

"Yes," Reina emphasized, "We can't go shopping all the time. We make things and grow our food ourselves." "And it's good that way, because with the blockade and so many things that can go wrong, it is necessary to know how to cultivate the land to be self-sufficient, and not have to depend on others," Panchito ended with conviction.

The last time we set down to record our conversations, Panchito said he had a message for the world and wanted me to include it in this study.

We need to take care of Nature, the Earth, the Water. Water is the main substance for humanity. Because, who sows a field without water? What plantations grow without water? None, not one! What human being doesn't drink water? All animals drink, each and every one. Let's take care of it. That's the most important thing that our divine Lord has given us. Let's take care of the forests and all that water, and make sure we don't contaminate it, because it is being contaminated and we have to make sure that it doesn't happen anymore. That water is for the entire world, and that is my message to you.

Reina's was the last word. "What humans do is not as powerful as what Nature does. We are only a part of her. Nature is sacred and she gives us all we need, food to eat, medicine to heal our bodies, shelter and our loved ones to live with and be happy."

Chapter 6

Doña Julieta Casimiro

The world can be a better place if we teach all children to live with respect, peace, and love. Human beings who live conscious lives have one mission, and that is to take care of themselves and of Mother Earth (Julieta Casimiro, in conversation, 2012).



Figure 8 Doña Julieta in Victoria, May 2010

In this chapter I present my second research participant, doña Julieta Casimiro. After a brief introduction of how we met I give an overview on the history and culture of doña Julieta's people, the Mazatec from Northern Oaxaca, Mexico. Then I lay out the research work we did while I stayed with her and her family in Huautla de Jiménez in the fall of 2012.

Doña Julieta was born and raised in Huautla, and lives surrounded by some of her children and grandchildren in a home of several levels, built directly into the steep mountainside.

Julieta's first language is Mazatec and all her children have learned it and can speak it. The continuing use of ancestral languages in many Mexican Indigenous communities has been the most significant factor in the preservation of ancestral traditions. The times are changing though, and Julieta's grandchildren speak primarily Spanish, although they still hear Mazatec spoken at home but unfortunately only learn it officially in secondary school.

How We Met

Doña Julieta and I have had opportunities to talk and relate to each other over five years. I met her at the Thirteen Indigenous Grandmothers' sixth gathering, and since then I have been to her place four times, and she has been to mine once. It was in 2010 when my supervisor, Lorna Williams, several sponsoring groups on campus, and I organized two fundraising events for the Thirteen Indigenous Grandmothers. We screened their film *For the Next 7 Generations* in Cinecenta at the University of Victoria.

For the second fundraiser we invited Doña Julieta and the two-time Emmy-winning film producer, Carole Hart, to attend. We had four screenings over two days. Julieta and Carole were able to answer many questions from the audience at the end of both early shows. Before the first screening on day one we were invited to the First Peoples House on campus where local elders welcomed our guests. Students, teachers, elders, and people from the community received a blessing from Doña Julieta, followed by a session of questions and answers about the Grandmothers and their film. The UVic Indigenous students' drumming circle played for us at the end.

Coincidentally, the Tofino Indigenous film fest was taking place at the same time, and the organizers had scheduled the Grandmothers' film to close the event. When they found out we

were bringing one of the Grandmothers and the filmmaker to Victoria, they invited us to come to their screening. All we needed to do was make our way there, so Lorna, Julieta, Carole, and I drove to Tofino. The people in the audience at the festival were delighted to have Grandmother Julieta present, and again we closed with an avid question and answer period.



Figure 9 With doña Julieta and Dr. Lorna Williams in Tofino to attend the Indigenous Film Festival, 2010

Being with doña Julieta is an honor for me and I do not take it for granted. Her inner beauty and remarkable ability to make everyone around her feel comfortable and seen is quite phenomenal. When I first met her I knew I was in the presence of a woman who would broaden my spiritual horizon. It is this being-in-the-moment presence which appears to be the greatest gift of every elder I have met. Doña Julieta's acceptance and kindness reminded me of loving women who extended to me a feeling of safety and belonging during my childhood.

Respecting doña Julieta, her knowledge, and her way of life is important to me. She remembers the ways of her ancestors and lives accordingly, and does not ask questions of

background or heritage, but simply accepts you as you are. I foresee continuing to tend our relationship well beyond the scope of this research, for through her I am now also connected to her family, in particular to her daughters and grandchildren. The many hours spent at their place, chatting, laughing, watching TV, praying, playing with the kids, in ceremony, or simply sitting in silence have marked me. I have learned that when one has good intentions and is open, receiving new knowledge is not only possible but very rewarding.

Historical and Cultural Background

In Mexico, Indigenous peoples and their cultures are, in many instances, still rich and vibrant with millions of individuals fluent in their native languages. During the Spanish colonization, Indigenous populations suffered terrible losses, but never was there a question of extinction as there was in Cuba and other places to the north and to the south of Mexico. When the conquerors coming from the Caribbean islands penetrated the country, the Indigenous nations had important advantages: their numbers, their diversity, and the vast and rugged territory they inhabited. While Cuba and other islands were crushed by the European scourge, the Mexican landscape would never allow that. Today numerous Indigenous people still live in the remote areas in which they have lived since before the arrival of the colonizers, or where they moved shortly after to escape them.

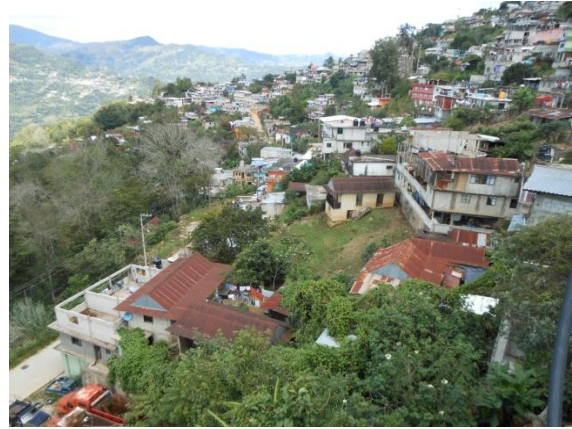


Figure 10 Huatla de Jiménez



Figure 11 Sierra Mazateca, Oaxaca, Mexico

The Mazatec region has been inhabited since 7000 to 9500 BCE, first by hunters and gatherers and early agriculturalists, followed by small hamlets, and then urban centers that gave rise to governing theocracies and political entities (Luna Ruiz, 2007). Mazatecs call themselves *Ha Shuta Enima*, meaning those who work in the mountains, humble and traditional people (Luna Ruiz, 2007). The word *mazateco* seems to derive from the *Nahuatl* language *mazatecatl* meaning people of the deer. This name was given to them by others apparently for their great respect for that animal or perhaps because of the abundance of deer in the region (Quintanar & Maldonado, 1999).

Huautla (later renamed Huautla de Jiménez), believed to be founded as early as the 12th and as late as the 14th century, is located 254 km northwest of Oaxaca City. It is the political, economic, and cultural center of the highlands of the Sierra Mazateca. The Mazatec region is divided into the lower, middle, and upper areas, often also described as just the highlands and the lowlands, each with quite distinct climates and economies. Huautla is located where the middle and upper areas meet. Between 1948 and 1954 the dam Presa Miguel Alemán was built to contain the Río Tonto and other tributaries in the zone for irrigation purposes. Today it produces electric power for Oaxaca and neighbouring states. However much of the population in the lower region had to be resettled and lost their lands and significant connections to their cultural and religious context. The lowland Mazatecs tried to revitalize ceremonies, but their main sacrament, the visionary mushroom, did not grow in their new environment and sadly their connection with their ancestors and their places of power subsided. At the end, an already waning tradition almost disappeared completely in the 60s. The building of a second dam (finished in the 80s) further modified the original lower Mazatec habitat, moving many Mazatecs to the neighbouring states of Puebla and Veracruz. The upper area where doña Julieta lives, on the other hand, has literally remained much closer to its roots (Luna Ruiz, 2007).

The city of Huautla de Jiménez is practically invisible in state and national archives. Mazatec and non-Mazatec chroniclers of the region's history explain this lack of documented sources by evoking a secret or a magical history. The secret history puts forward that the community knows it but won't tell anyone, or that outsiders stole all the records and keep them in locked vaults in foreign libraries. The magical history on the other hand suggests that it is accessible only through mystical ways such as the ingestion of mind-altering plants, venturing deep into caverns, or questionable pacts with demons or foreigners (Feinberg, 2006).

There are very few sources of information about the history of the Sierra Mazateca. Ruins remain unexcavated or are located deep in caves that are risky to enter. It is not certain from where the Mazatecs originated. Perhaps they belonged to the Olmec-Xicalanca group and came from the east, but they might also have descended from the Nonualcas, who after a devastating confrontation with a warrior nation abandoned the great city of Tollán (Tula) and moved south (Luna Ruiz, 2007). What is certain though is that the Mazatecs were invaded by the Mexicas (Aztecs) during the reign of Moctezuma Illhuicamina in 1450 (CDI, 2009). The invaders established military posts and imposed taxes so high that, on multiple occasions, the Mazatecs attempted to rebel but the Mexica were too powerful. It was only when the Spaniards arrived that the Mazatecs were able to free themselves of Mexica domination. However this freedom was short lived as it soon turned into Spanish domination.

Not imagining how badly it would eventually turn out, the Mazatecs, among other groups, solicited protection from Spanish *conquistador* Hernán Cortés. The contact with the Spaniards destabilized the social order, legal and political systems, the economic organization, their borders, and Mazatec ideology. Cunningly the colonizers adapted the old Indigenous tributary system that had vassals pay tribute in spices, merchandise, or services, depending on the region they were from. The Spaniards demanded food, rocks, and jewelry instead, basically becoming an extension to former Mexica domination. The diseases brought from Europe coupled with mistreatment, poor nutrition, and heavy labor devastated the area, reducing the Mazatec population to a tenth of its original size (CDI, 2009). Of the 25,000 inhabitants that were there at the moment of contact only 2500 were still alive at the end of the 16th century.

The introduction of Christian religion changed Indigenous practices and produced the religious syncretism that is still alive in many places today. Early on, the Catholic Church

reached even into the most hidden crevices of Indigenous habitat, forever altering the social fabric of most communities. Nevertheless, Indigenous resilience proved to be strong. Efforts of religious assimilation could only go so far because people soon knew how to protect their ancestral belief systems and traditions beneath a Christian vocabulary. The ensuing syncretism was the best way for Indigenous spirituality to survive under oppressive Spanish rule.

Soon after their arrival, the colonizers realized that in their view and for their purposes of resource extraction the Mazatec region was not productive enough – there was no gold, and the access to the region was extremely difficult. However, commerce had been a significant activity well before their coming, and the Spaniards used the pre-Hispanic commercial routes to establish a trade circuit from Teotitlán (at the foothills of the Sierra) all the way to Chiapas and Guatemala (Luna Ruiz, 2007).

During the period of the *Porfiriato* (president Porfirio Díaz' dictatorship from 1876 to 1910), land was hoarded by cattle and sugar-cane ranchers. Indigenous elders tried to lead in resistance, but the ranchers responded with violence. In the upper and middle regions of the Mazatec territory, foreign *latifundistas* (owners of large estates) arrived, beginning in the 1890s, and took over huge extensions of land, establishing multiple *haciendas* dedicated to coffee production. When the price of coffee collapsed in the 1980s and continued to fall in the 1990s, many farmers abandoned the crop.

In recent years, increasing numbers of Mazatec-speakers have migrated to Mexican cities or to the United States. Today, Huautla's economy is greatly influenced by the fact that most teachers for the Mazatec region come from that town, and their salaries and pensions constitute the most important source of income for local businesses. Thus, the Sierra Mazateca's economy was transformed by the passage from coffee production to a service economy (Feinberg, 2006).

In the *Porfiriato* era, immigrants from neighboring cities became part of the local elites and merchants. Consequently, a class structure already existed at the beginning of the 20th century and, at its peak, a privileged group of whites and *mestizos* controlled commerce and all other contacts to the outside world, while the Indigenous population had their own economy in place that was not adequately linked to the national economy. During the Mexican Revolution (approximately 1910-1920), Mazatec groups fought among themselves because they adhered to different political groupings. The old Mazatec *cacique*, leader of the elders' council, had already lost considerable power in the 19th century. At the end of the struggle, Mazatecs from the lower region recovered their land, but political leaders continued wielding their power over access to the land and all commercial networks. Mazatecs in the upper regions recovered their land in two ways: by occupying it and by buying it from old landowners (Luna Ruiz, 2007). The question of land titles continues to be a contentious issue for many Indigenous people in the area and in the entire country. Doña Julieta told me how she had to fight for her land titles after her husband died because officials kept putting hurdles in her way. She finally has all her documents in order.

Presently the greatest level of Mazatec political organization is at the municipal level. The municipal head is the central ruler of communities and *rancherías*. In each, there are elders who, in some municipalities, organize themselves into a council of elders. But although ethnic power goes hand-in-hand with municipalities and communities, Mazatec government is split into opposing factions, and there is no longer a general government to defend ethnic interests. This fragmentation is a colonial product. Social, economic, political, and religious power was centered in the elders' council and, until at least the beginning of the 20th century these councils represented the group-power founded on social alliances based on kinship structures. All those who had had various political and religious responsibilities, that is, individuals who had

undergone prolonged apprenticeships, could become part of an elders' council. Also, those capable of resolving conflicts, mediating, and generating trust in people who represent their economic, social, political, and sacred points of view were eligible for the honored position.

As time passed, the elders' council in the lower region disappeared or was relegated to communal levels. Mestizo merchants, following the logic of gains rather than the ancestral law of reciprocal help, took over greater portions of land. New social tensions arose and the alliance system expressed by the elders' council began being questioned. In the middle region, the elders also lost their political influence. Elders there are recognized individually and for their knowledge, but they no longer have responsibility or authority in front of the group. In the upper region, however, the old structures of elders' councils as heads of municipalities and communities still exist. In larger centers, such as Huautla de Jiménez, the general assembly of the community, in which all citizens participate, executes the greatest authority. This adaptation to changes in government and lifestyles has led to a reduced influence by the elders, although they are still well-respected (Luna Ruiz, 2007).

After the introduction of coffee in the highlands and the construction of the dam in the lowlands, a political phenomenon, *caciquismo*, appeared hand-in-hand with capitalistic development. *Caciquismo* is a term derived from the Taíno word, *cacique* or chief, but in contemporary Mexico it is used as synonymous to power misuse and nepotism. *Caciquismo* is upheld by loyalties and *compadrazgo* (loosely translated as god parenthood, though in Latin America not limited to baptism; it may be a term used to attract a patron for a variety of supports). In the Sierra, *caciquismo* is not attached to the coffee production but to federal political parties (Luna Ruiz, 2007).

When I first met doña Julieta, she told me about the violence, triggered by partisanship, happening in her community. People close to her have been killed. The last time I visited, one of her sons, who had polio as a child, told me how he had been training and hoping to make it to the 2012 Paralympics. Because he was known to adhere to a party of opposition, he was, however, cut off at the local level. “Unfortunately that’s how things work here,” he explained.

One of the elements that ties all three regions of the Mazatec habitat together is the production of corn and other plants for self-sufficiency. Mazatecs grow their staples in the *milpa*, a plot of land where corn, beans, squash, and *chile* are raised jointly. They collect edible spices in the surrounding areas and raise animals for consumption. Today Mazatecs are incorporated into the national and international market through: cattle ranching and sugar cane plantations in the lower region; coffee and sugar cane plantations and a bit of cattle ranching in the middle region; and coffee plantations in the upper region.

Worker migration is another Mazatec economic strategy when the expected production of corn falls short and the earnings of other commercial products, such as coffee, are not guaranteed. Migration, however, brings consequences which affect the entire community. The organization of labor is changed, because migrants pay for the work with money or spices, and in the *milpa* mutual help is increasingly substituted by paid labor. When they return, migrants often prefer to speak Spanish and dress in non-traditional clothes, which frequently results in abandoning the language for good and distancing themselves from their neighbors (Luna Ruiz, 2007).

Language

A language is not merely a set of grammatical rules or a vocabulary. It is a flash of the human spirit, the vehicle by which the soul of each particular culture comes into the material world. Every language is an old growth forest of the mind, a watershed of thought, an ecosystem of spiritual possibilities (Davis, 2009, p. 3).

Perhaps because they are concentrated in a small area far removed from urban centers, Mazatec-speakers have not received as much attention from linguists and other anthropologists as have other Indigenous linguistic groups (Quintanar & Maldonado, 1999). I was fortunate to meet French linguist Jean Leo Leonard, 13 years after Quintanar and Maldonado's article appeared. Although such a long time has passed, little has changed and, as far as Leonard and his French and Mexican team are aware, they are the only ones presently researching the Mazatec language. It is astounding since the Mazatec region maintains one of the highest concentrations of speakers of Indigenous languages in Mexico. Mazatec is the ninth most widely spoken Indigenous language in Mexico, with 215,057 speakers in 1995. In the year 2000 the population of Huautla was 31,040 people; 25,542 spoke an Indigenous language of which 99.7% was Mazatec (Serrano Carreto et al., 2002). (See appendix 2)

Since the 1970s, young generations in Mexico theoretically learn their ancestors' languages not only at home but also in school. Sadly, the truth is that at least for the Mazatec language, the government is not investing enough resources to back up their promise of a truly bilingual education. Even though Indigenous rights are established in Mexico, in reality its rich Indigenous heritage is not well respected. These rights have never been held on equal terms with those of *mestizo* and white populations. Indigenous languages are protected by a law which recognizes the many still existing languages as first languages, beside the official Spanish

language, but the pressure on people to fit with the times, especially for economic reasons, is overwhelming.

I met Leonard during my last visit to doña Julieta's. The linguist from the Sorbonne believes the language is rapidly disappearing and the process is almost unstoppable, because children are not learning Mazatec in school until high school. According to him, language teachers face an uphill battle because, although people still speak the language, there are twelve types of Mazatec, which vary substantially from community to community, and teachers are oftentimes sent to work in communities which speak a different variety of the language than their own.

Encountering Mazatec is considered a watershed moment in the history of linguistics. It is such an absolutely unique and complex language, and its grammar of such sophistication, that it literally opened new ways of thinking about language. Leonard and his team have been working on their research for several years. To create a repository, they are recording as many variants of the language as possible and encoding them for teaching purposes and future reference. Workshops with bilingual teachers are organized so they can discuss issues arising from teaching the language in the classroom. There are over one thousand bilingual teachers in the Mazatec area needing assistance in order to successfully teach the language to their students. The language's complexity, including the many variations spoken make the teachers' task difficult, and they are painfully aware of the risk of losing their language unless real support from state and federal government materializes.

Leonard recommends that, although not officially counted as endangered, Mazatec should be put on the list. The majority of parents with young children today have switched to Spanish. When they went to school, their parents were fluent in their own language and often did

not speak any Spanish. Learning Mazatec back then was not considered as important compared to learning Spanish, an essential tool that would enable them to communicate on equal terms with the outside world. The resulting loss has become serious.

Belonging

Among Mazatecs language with its local variants is a very precise identifier of cultural belonging, because the dialect identifies where everyone is from. Clothes, especially women's, also show belonging to a certain region. The *huipil* (blouse dress) from Huautla de Jiménez characteristically exhibits stitched birds and flowers, representing the flora and the fauna of the area. In the social sphere belonging is established by birth and strengthened by participation in the community. An individual is inserted into the social net through a complex system of reciprocal interchanges. Communal participation is established by the *tequio*, mutual help, and a system of responsibilities. *Tequio* (from the Nahuatl language *tequitl*, work or tribute) is an organized work format benefiting the collective. It consists of members of the community having to contribute materials or their work power to accomplish or build comunal projects: for example a school, a well, or any activity needing to be done (Luna Ruiz, 2007).

Belief System

Mazatecs share a symbolic universe of great vitality. Their notion of the world is expressed in syncretistic ways. Side-by-side to the institutionalized religion, a traditional and more comprehensive religious practice coexists. Mazatec cosmology finds expression in the healing rituals practiced in the region. Mazatecs tend a traditional relationship with their surroundings, referring to *dueños* (owners) of places known as *chicones* or *chiconindú*, which are

spirits that regulate their cultural world. These spirits receive offerings in caves, springs, mountains and ravines. In their daily practices, Mazatecs experience magical-religious perceptions that connect them with the *chiconindú*. Any benefits the people obtain or illnesses they contract might depend on their attitude and relation to these spirits. The healing space is a religious sacred space and people combine beliefs about illness and healing with the ancestral spirits of the land (in conversation with Julieta's sons, 2012).

The Catholic faith is predominant in the entire region, but with different nuances. Mazatecs do not go to church except for festivities, baptisms, and weddings. There are popular forms of religion that the community follows: for example the *Semana Santa* (holy week) in the Spring, and *Día de los Muertos* (day of the dead) in the Fall. In the religious sphere, myth is commonplace and is integrated into experiences of the Catholic calendar, agricultural cycles, and festivities of the communities' patron saints.

For Mazatecs, the world and their geographic surroundings are sacred. Their territory is delineated by consecrated trees which are very important to the people's cosmogony. On top of the *Cerro de la Adoración* (Mountain of Adoration), there is a sacred tree called "Navel of the World." Being born, eventually dying, and being buried close to where one was born, are part of the sacred circle that identifies them. The earth is that sacred space where beings from the sky unite with beings from the earth. This is still true for the Mazatec highlands, where people have kept their land intact. In the lowlands however, where land was taken away to build dams, the Mazatecs were forced to separate from their place of birth and, consequentially, lost their original roots. The new geography is broken as many sacred spaces are now under water, but a few main references remain above water. In these transformed landscapes, people created and

recreated new spaces for the *chiconindú*. However, traditional identity could only partially be recovered.

Mazatec ritual serves to unify believers as it brings order to their lives. The ordering action redefines the spaces where it is performed, be it a special place such as a temple, a cave, or a common one, such as the home or the *milpa*. As a social alliance, the ritual needs to be constantly renewed. This happens with or without mediators of the divine, men and women of wisdom, and the directly involved. All aspects of social life and all alliances, such as baptisms and weddings, are considered sacred and lend cohesion. Agrarian activity is also considered sacred as is the space where it takes place as well.

The most salient collective ritual is the celebration of the dead, on dates which coincide with the harvest. This is such an important occasion that even migrants who have moved far away return home to their families to celebrate it. Last year, Grandmother Julieta had to attend the 12th gathering of the Grandmothers in Nepal, and she had to leave a few days before the *Día de los Muertos*. Although it saddened her that she would not be home for such an important festivity, she did the best she could by beginning to set up her *Altar de Muertos* in advance, so it would be ready for the day when the deceased and her family would come together in celebration. “I’ll be here in spirit,” she said with a smile.

Myths continue being significant for social identity, and Mazatecs call them *cuentos* (stories) to explain life. Other kinds of *cuentos* are those to entertain. When elders are asked to tell a story, they often call on an astute uncle *Conejo* (rabbit), an uncle *Tlacuache* (opossum), or a foundational myth. When wise men or women perform a shamanic ritual, they recount myths

on the journey of mind-altering plants. People going on their first initiatory shamanic journey receive shamanic powers through knowledge presented in story form. Stories therefore are integral part of Mazatec life. Most community members partake in the telling of stories ‘for fun,’ but telling the ‘serious’ stories is the task of *ancianos* (elders).

Traditional Healing

Today more and more Mazatecs visit centralized health centers, but if a sick person does not heal, he or she will certainly go to traditional healers, as the effectiveness of their methods are well known. *Curanderos* (healers) and *brujos* (witches) used to have great power, and, although today they have been relegated to a secondary level, their influence in informal spheres continues to be very important. The role of the *brujo* is transcendental and represents all knowledge and concepts the Indigenous person has needed to survive. In the Mazatec language, *Shuta Tshinea* means specialist or healer. *Shuta Teej* or *ShutaTaa* means person of knowledge. Both, the *Tshinea* and the *Teej* organize and lead ceremonies. They are the intermediaries between the group and God, saints, *chicones*, and animals in sacred spaces. The most recognized *Tshinea* is *Tshinea Ditho*, and apprentices still needing support from the group are called *Tshinea Thingui* (Luna Ruiz, 2007). The use of organic psychotropic substances is common among healers. Under the influence, the healer shapes the religious ceremony and goes on a magic flight during which he or she abandons the body and tries to communicate with spirits of Nature, animals, and plants, of those of light as well as those of darkness.

Men and women of knowledge have always had direct or indirect ties to elders’ councils, and although these have disappeared in some places, men and women of knowledge are still

integral part of Mazatec society. Doña Julieta is respected and held in high esteem by many in her community and beyond. People from all over Mexico and abroad travel great distances and up the steep mountain highway, which during the rainy season can become treacherous, to see Mama Julieta and participate in her healing ceremonies.

In the year 2000, the authorities at the Anthropological Institute in Switzerland invited doña Julieta to talk about her mission and its importance. Since then she has been asked to attend many conferences in Europe and the United States. She helped identify and collect medicinal herbs native to her region to contribute to a book by Dr. Silviano Camberos Sánchez.⁸ In the fall of 2004, doña Julieta was invited to join the International Council of Thirteen Indigenous Grandmothers. The Mazatec elder thought that if the Grandmothers were going to be able to speak up, and if their voices “taking wings” were going to be heard around the world, then she would be happy to join the council. When doña Julieta spoke at the Grandmothers' Council for the first time, she said,

All of us here want the same thing. We want to walk in peace, and we want no more war. We don't need war. All the suffering and pain that is going on in the world, especially of little children and elders, really hurts me inside. Our Mother Earth is hurting. They are destroying our Mother Earth. They are destroying our Mother. They need to have respect for Her. We need to walk with respect, especially during these times we are living to change. I carry my rosary with me everywhere. It is an honor to be here and pray with all the Grandmothers. I hope you like my words (Schaefer, 2006, p. 91).

⁸ Dr. Camberos Sánchez was a renowned Mexican physician and ethnobotanist. He died in 2009 at the age of 47.

During the gathering doña Julieta shared that there was a lot of violence in her homeland, just as in too many other places in the world, like a never ending story. “We need to keep hope alive, we need to strengthen our faith so that the important spiritual work can continue,” she often has said.

In our conversations she affirmed, “I am an international Indigenous Grandmother and we travel the world to show our work and put our spirits and our prayers together so that there may be peace in the world, so that people understand that we must take care of Mother Earth because we have children and grandchildren and they will still be here when we all are gone.” The Thirteen Grandmothers went to Huautla de Jiménez to celebrate their third gathering hosted by doña Julieta in 2006. With the other Grandmothers and their ambassadors she has traveled to the countries of her allies and other places, where she and sometimes two or more Grandmothers hold conferences and ceremonies.

At the time of my last visit, Doña Julieta had just returned from a tour to Europe, where she went to Sweden, Holland, Spain, and the Czech Republic with Grandmother Rita Blumenstein (who I visited in Anchorage, Alaska in 2011) and their ambassador. They were welcomed by royals and held conferences and ceremonies. Doña Julieta was delighted that everywhere they went their results were great. Reminiscing about that trip she said “I’m very happy and I’m doing well, I’m calm and I enjoy talking about all these things.” Less than a month later she would be going to Nepal to the Grandmothers’ 12th council gathering.

At Doña Julieta's

My last visit to Huautla de Jiménez was different from the previous visits because now I was not just visiting Huautla on doña Julieta's terms, but I was coming to complete the data collection for my research. We had already spoken about it and, on our last phone call I asked her if she was still willing to participate in my study, and when it would be a good time for me to come. She answered "*Claro que sí*" (of course) and told me when to come, so that she would have enough time for me. Once there we had several informal conversations regarding the research and for the recorded conversations she chose the time and the setting. She brought one of her daughters along and became quite formal once sitting around the table where I had placed the recording device. Then she engaged in telling about her life, her work, her thoughts, and answering the questions I posed along her story. This and the following sessions naturally arose from what doña Julieta deemed important to share. I reached for the outline of questions I had prepared for the interviews only towards the very end to make sure we had covered what I had thought I needed to ask when I was planning my research. For the most part, doña Julieta and her daughter had in their own way answered all questions I came up with prior to my visit.



Figure 12 Lucio, Indila and Regina, three of doña Julieta's grandchildren. Mexico, 2012

The recording sessions went well, and when we were all done, doña Julieta let out a sigh of relief. Talking while being aware someone else was keeping the words on record had taken a lot of energy and she was visibly happy when it was over. I knew I had done what I was expected to do as a researcher, and my participants had voluntarily agreed to collaborate. Nevertheless as a human being accountable to my relations, I felt I had come very close to making doña Julieta feel uncomfortable, and I did not want to do that again. Fortunately she was very pleased when she listened to the recordings later on, which indicated that, although they had been somewhat taxing, she ultimately saw them as a positive experience. When I confessed my worries to her she laughed and said, “*Ay, Gabriela, si todo está bien, mujer! No te preocupes pues*” (Oh, Gabriela, but all is well, woman! Don’t you worry). I laughed and was able to make peace with my own discomfort.

To begin our recording process, I introduced her daughter and her and briefly described time and setting. Doña Julieta began by welcoming me and stated they were happy to have me and wanted to help me with my research. Acknowledging our relationship that began a few years ago, she said,

You want to learn because you want to move forward. You can do it, because no one takes that away from you, and the words that we are going to give you, Gabriela, they are going to guide you. You already know more or less what you’re doing, with your studies. And all of that is good, it is good to also bring the light to other people, your friends, your teachers, your professors.

Doña Julieta continued by explaining how her people are people of roots, of the eagle, of the deer, and of the *temazate* (a small reddish mountain deer). Then she said she does not like politics, and what she follows is God’s path, the spirit’s path. Before beginning with her story

she added, “It is not possible to tell you about many of our customs, but I will tell you about things I can share. I will tell you my story from the beginning.”

Doña Julia Julieta Casimiro was born in 1936 in the neighborhood of Agua Abundante in Huautla de Jiménez, Oaxaca. Her parents were María Petra Estrada and Maclovio Casimiro. She had eight brothers and sisters. Julieta went to primary school at an early age and learned how to read and write, but she had to leave school to start working, helping her mother with household chores. At the age of 15 she met the man who would be her husband. Lucio Isaías Piñeda Carrera courted her for two years and in 1954 they married. They had ten children: Jorge Adalberto, Lourdes, Jacinto Librado, Jesuita Natalia, María de los Ángeles, Magdalena, David Lucio, Eugenia, Jazmín, and Omar. She has 30 grandchildren and more than 20 great grandchildren. We did not talk about all her children, but I learned that one son is a lawyer, another is a biology graduate, one daughter is a teacher, and another is an anthropologist, ethnographer, and historian based in Mexico City. Traveling in the mountains of northern Oaxaca the anthropologist has been researching her own and neighboring cultures.

Doña Julieta talked about how, in Huautla, no one is born with money. That is why it is hard to begin things when a young couple marries. They need to figure out how to live, how to have a little house, and have shade, the womb of life. “Then the man begins to work, and we the women like me, Julieta, here in Huautla, we also work and I started looking for my life, embroidering, washing and ironing clothes for others. I know how to embroider, cook, cultivate my garden and heal people. I learned that work of healing from my mother-in-law Regina Carrera.” Doña Julieta explained how everything that we can do here and in the world, we must

do, because God placed us here to do it. “Just as He gave to us, we have to give in return. We cannot stay behind.”

Doña Julieta started on her path to becoming a wise woman with her marriage to don Lucio. He was very supportive and it is through his family that Julieta received her wisdom. On Lucio’s maternal side, there had been wise men and women known throughout the Mazatec region for many generations. Don Lucio was the son of doña Regina Carrera Calvo and Professor Librado Piñeda Quiroga, and they had eight children. After observing all the official rites and traditions of marriage Julieta joined her husband’s family, and much of the knowledge she received from them she would later contribute to the world.

Doña Regina used to take young Julieta along with her and teach her daughter-in-law the sacred work from her elders. “I began apprenticing and working with the knowledge as good as I could,” Julieta asserted. “We don’t want to lose the tradition that our grandmothers and grandfathers left to us, especially my mother-in-law.” Julieta dearly loved and respected this woman who was also a midwife, and calls her “a great wise woman.” Doña Regina spoke to her about her own mother, great aunts, and sisters who were all involved in sacred healing work. Doña Julieta is very grateful for this and claims that the plant medicines helped her gain wisdom and deepen her relationship with God.

“I believe that dedicating one’s life to this path requires courage, honesty, and humbleness. One must have a clean heart for things to go well. My work has been like that, seriously, and that is why people believe in it. And I’ll just keep going. God gives me the strength to keep going.” Doña Julieta feels that doña Regina trusted her very much and put a lot

of confidence in her. Trust is crucial since that is what creates security in any field, and, in the end, Julieta believes that, between her mother-in-law and her, there was a mutual commitment to help and care for each other. Julieta's teachable disposition would ensure the continuity of the work with which her mother-in-law was entrusting her, a work dedicated to assist people on their healing paths. Their teacher-student bond was strong and held by profound reciprocity.

Doña Regina also loved her son dearly and always asked Julieta to take good care of him and watch out for him. Since she could see how much Julieta did love her husband, the women's alliance continued strengthening. Furthermore, doña Regina taught her how to be courageous and to know how to fight when necessary, though only if necessary. Doña Julieta also reminisced on how she and her husband would accompany her mother-in-law to her little *milpa* (piece of land to grow food), which to this day helps sustain the family. She said,

I'm already 76 and I'm still taking care of the land that my mother-in-law left us. We get wood from it, we get fruit. We also plant it a bit with whatever we can, a little bit of beans, some corn, all to take advantage of the land, right? So as long as we sow our food, as long as we move and don't idle, it will grow, a little bit, but here we are! We never go hungry. All of that nourishes us and keeps us healthy.

When we finished talking about her mother-in-law, I asked doña Julieta about her own mother. She said she valued her mother a lot because she raised her children and taught them to respect, above all, things that did not belong to them and the people they did not know. She taught her daughter to be a woman of integrity, truth, and honesty. "Mothers teach their daughters to be good mothers," she explained, "and, as long as the older mother treats all

members of their family well, the younger mother will follow her example. If on the contrary the older mother mistreats them, she will lead her daughter astray and risk the loss of values, and possibly even the loss of family.” I have witnessed doña Julieta being a loving and caring mother and grandmother every time I have been at her place. She also translates this energy into her being an elder for all.

Doña Julieta shared how, in her community, people pray and make offerings to Mother Earth and the elements, so that she may listen to their pleas. Her people pray to the mountains, caves, and volcanoes and their offerings are lots of cocoa beans, considered Nature’s money by her people. “This is serious stuff” she said warningly, “An offering has to be done, not just because you’re going to write a book, or sing a song, or make words, and talk. No! No, Gabriela! Those things stay with you to the end, to the very roots.”

In the olden days things were very different in her community. “The old ones had no clocks. Their clocks were the stars in the sky and the little animals, like the rooster, the hen, the donkey, goats. When you heard them crowing or moving around, that was an indication of the time. And so it is with many things, a lot has changed since I was young, some for the better and some for the worse,” she sighed.

There are certain things however that have not changed. “Because we don’t have money for doctors, we heal ourselves with the little mushrooms. We believe that God gave them to the *campesinos* and to people who couldn’t read so that they could have a direct experience of Him,” doña Julieta said. “I think this work is about all the energies being present at the moment. In a healing session, one works with all the energies, with all the strength that each human being

has.” She explained that it is important how these energies are handled, the direction one sends them, and why they are sent that way. During the ceremony, space and time are sacred, setting a proper realm in which the ritual with the *niños santos* (holy children, a name given to the psilocybe mushrooms by Mazatecs) can be carried out safely. This space and sacred time are filled with song and prayers of those who oversee the ceremony. A good ceremony guide offers trust, security, affection, love, and acceptance.

Everything must be done during this most important moment so that the patient can benefit from it. “At this time the spirit finds itself at the highest point; it’s the moment of the encounter with God,” Doña Julieta confided. She teaches that ceremony with a good ritual eases the relationship between human and God. “God manifests himself, he proves his existence, helps the transformation, makes us aware, and leads us to reflect deeply on who we are and what we want.” It is essential that the guide of the ceremony be present, watching over everyone, and prepared to use each and every tool when the need arises. When such a moment presents itself, doña Julieta must use her entire being. She becomes a warrior and intercedes on her patient’s behalf. “The guide gives herself over and is committed to His work,” she explained, humbly assuring she is only a servant of God and nothing more.

She actually does not like being called *chamán* or even *curandera*, because her belief is that she simply does what God asks her to do. Her elder, María Sabina, did not want to be called healer (*curandera*) either. She also objected to witch (*bruja*) and said she was a Wise Woman, nothing else. Doña Julieta says, “The work I do is good. With prayers and songs I invoke God and the earth, the rivers, the mountains, the stars, the angels, and the saints. I pray and sing in my maternal language, Mazatec, as well as in Spanish. I’m present with my thoughts, my feelings,

and my desires.” She prides herself that her work is legitimate, because it is useful in helping to cure people who, often very sick, come to her as a last resort.

By now doña Julieta has been practicing her healing work for over 40 years. People come from the capital, Mexico City, and other states in the Mexican Republic, from Europe, Russia, and the United States. She told me how, in the 1960s, lots of people started coming to Huautla from many places in Mexico and from other countries after María Sabina, considered one of the great figures of Native American shamanism, allowed the first outsiders to participate in a mushroom ceremony back in 1955/56.

María Sabina’s initiation into the world of ecstasy came to her in the midst of terrible poverty in which she and her sister lived. Through the mushrooms she learned to see and talk with the dead and to heal “the sores and wounds of the spirit” (Estrada, 2003, p. 29). The *niños santos* gave María Sabina the power of universal contemplation. In her oral autobiography, she shared how the holy children taught her to see the origin. With their help she could arrive where the world was born. María Sabina was harshly criticized by her community when they found out she had broken the secrecy of their traditional ceremony. But, in her mind, she had done no harm and always believed it had been her destiny to initiate ethnomycologist, Gordon Wasson. María Sabina died in 1985 in her late 90s, and today she is regarded as a sacred figure in her hometown.

After Gordon and Valentina Wasson had participated in a nocturnal mushroom ceremony called *velada* and he published an article about their experience in *Life Magazine*, Huautla de Jiménez would never be the same again. People from everywhere flocked into the formerly

sleepy town, wanting to meet María Sabina and other Wise Ones, who could provide them with a visionary experience. Doña Julieta remembers that strangers were not welcome in those days. Many were hippies and quite poor. But people kept coming in search for an alternative way of perceiving reality. At first doña Julieta and her husband worked secretly because it was against their culture to open doors to those who did not belong. “But all of that has changed now” she said, adding,

The work we do here in the *sierra* is good. People come to see us so that we heal them.

The thing is we all have microbes, we might look perfectly well on the outside, but inside we all have something. That is what we can help with, to see what is inside and let it heal.

We can do a *limpia* (purification) so that all the bad stuff gets cleansed away and the person can get better.

Preparing for a *velada*, doña Julieta cleanses everyone present with the smoke of copal. She then lights candles in front of her altar in the ceremony room and starts praying. Sometimes accompanied by one of her daughters, she guides her participants through their healing journeys which take several hours. Doña Julieta prays and sings in Mazatec and in Spanish throughout the experience. During a *velada*, people gather wisdom and elevate themselves in order to reach greater understanding. To end the ceremony, doña Julieta thanks God and the Virgin of Guadalupe for helping the participants to see the light in their lives.

“To do this work we count on the *niños santos*. The little mushrooms that purify are not just anything. Nobody plants them, but they come up all on their own. They only emerge on Mother Earth when it’s God’s will. They are *agüitas*, *limpiecitos* (little waters, very clean), these

little mushrooms, because they are not sown, not chemical,” she elaborated. “These mushrooms are medicine, good medicine, and they help with problems of the mind and other ailments,” doña Julieta said, worrying that some people get confused and think the mushrooms are bad because they are drugs, but they are nothing of the sort. “When it’s time they come up naturally. They emerge after the rain like little droplets of water.” At times she also called them sweat of God and sweat of Mother Earth. Putting the experience of communing with this sacrament into words, doña Julieta elucidated,

Wisdom is the light of understanding. When a person takes the holy children and allows me to guide her, she crosses through superficial, everyday thoughts and feelings, she enters her fears, and she has profound visions and reaches mystical knowledge. It is not a game. Wonder is to be truly grounded in your five senses. What you see is wonder. The holy children open your mind and your heart. When you consult them you have to be patient, it takes time, but they will give you wisdom and wonder.

You should never abuse of the sacred medicine. I give a little bit to a person, and then, because every head is its own world, sometimes a little more to some, depending how they are feeling. The first thing I do is ask, “How are you feeling?” Then I feel his or her head and I sense what the person’s issue is, sometimes a stomach problem or a bad kidney, an imbalance of the mind or the soul. People with bad illnesses have come to this house and the holy children have healed them. At times I spend up to five hours with a person until he or she can leave his or her problem behind. I give people the medicine, pray and sing, and at the end they often give me hugs in appreciation. I do not do it for

the money. I am a servant of God and this is my work. That's just what I have to do when sick people present themselves here in this house.

Doña Julieta also said that the *niños santos* balance the visible and the invisible inside a person. They can cure everything if you have faith and surrender. They answer questions if you know how to ask them. Lots of people come to her home to receive healing and advice. "Sometimes there have been those who come saying all sorts of things, telling me who they are and why they are important, and it's a disaster! When that happens, I only look at them and don't say a word" she said. "I don't want problems. All I do is guide my people, and my children and grandchildren know about the *niños santos*. Some of my children are initiated in the sacred work and assist me. They can hold their own ceremonies as well."

Describing some of the problems of the patients she has worked with, doña Julieta mentioned people with emotional problems, who after years of other treatments had not become better. Healing chronic depression has been one of her great successes. She has also been called to help with emotional diseases, with cancer, AIDS, heart ailments, and other health problems. Her patients feel safe, because of doña Julieta's striking presence and spiritual force.

For the work to go well, she always invokes God and says, "That way the people feel well and can express what they are experiencing." She mediates between different realities, "because eating the mushrooms isn't like anything else. The *niños santos* have a soul, and this soul has strength, and strength helps one to access other states and other realities." Her job as guide is to stabilize the journey, with the help of all her allies, saints, and, in particular, with the Virgin of Guadalupe. She has learned that journeys make patients stronger at the physical,

emotional, and spiritual level. Her healing experiences satisfy her deeply and she feels extremely gratified.

After a long practice, she has concluded that “Traditional medicine, the medicine that comes from the earth and was used by our ancestors, works well in today’s world. It is needed because not everything can be solved through science and technology alone.” After people, who work in health professions and who went into ceremony with doña Julieta, reported to her on their experiences, she believes to have added to the knowledge of others. “I have contributed to their education. I have inspired their interest in healing through spiritualism. I believe that I have created a school for people searching for an alternative way to cure their illnesses, and they in turn can help others.” Doña Julieta understands these people as branches of herself.

Eugenia, doña Julieta’s daughter also shared some thoughts during our recordings. Eugenia has three children and lives with her husband in her mother’s home. She explained that her mother’s work is about not ignoring the human part of people, and not focusing solely on the spiritual. Her father used to talk to his children about values. He commended them to know the medicine, to try it and to always and only use it with good intentions.

Eugenia learned “somewhat compelled” as she describes it, not because of her parents, who gave the kids quite a bit of freedom to choose for themselves what they wanted from life. She felt obliged by her own destiny, because when her first baby was very young he became seriously ill. After seeing doctors and having to go all the way to a hospital in the city, she was encouraged by doña Julieta to go into ceremony and pray for her child’s healing. That initiated Eugenia’s belief in, and a great respect for, the sacred medicine. Since then she has been apprenticing at her mother’s side, which according to her has taken a lot of courage and

awareness. She has long realized that she would follow her family's lineage and her mother's footsteps. What happened with her son was a miracle and she feels privileged by life. In reciprocity and thankfulness, she had to pick up her part and do the right thing.

Eugenia explained that the energy Nature moves through the sacred mushrooms is real and goes beyond science and beyond human power. She wants to help those who are very closed in their spiritual consciousness or have forgotten about themselves, to open up a little. She sees it a bit as rescuing. "Mainly to rescue the awareness of where you come from, where your roots are, because anywhere you are, anywhere on the planet, you always have to have something below you, something that holds you, a root," Eugenia concluded. She wants to support people and, once again quoting her father, she remembered when he told his children, "You are an example of life. If you move respectfully, those coming behind you, if you bring a light, they will follow you." When I asked Eugenia if she had any thoughts on her children following the family's lineage, she said that, just like she had a choice, she and her husband wish to give their children the freedom to choose their own paths. If one of them did decide to take it on, she would be more than happy, although no one should ever be forced into it.

One last thing we discussed was the issue of belonging. I told doña Julieta and Eugenia how my ancestors migrated multiple times in the hopes of finding better futures in new lands. In my family of origin, I have witnessed how hard it has been for some to establish new relationships while yearning for what no longer is. Even when new roots begin to grow, the temporary loss of context can be quite difficult and, for some, might leave permanent marks behind. Doña Julieta and her daughter nodded empathically.



Figure 13 Doña Julieta and daughter Eugenia in their patio kitchen. Mexico, 2012

Eugenia said the most important thing is to examine one's conscience. She then recommended I look at the beginnings of my own life. Who is my mother, who is my father, who are my ancestors, from where do they originate - all of that constitutes my roots. "You'll see what you are capable of doing, what you're actually doing, and then you'll learn to do what you want, your later work. That's what I believe. When you begin resuming your life in that way, you can feel all your ancestors behind you, all those who came before you. They are the roots you can hold onto," Eugenia concluded.

On a similar note, doña Julieta told me the story of Juan Diego and *La Virgen de Guadalupe*. At the end she asked me who the most prominent saint in Cuba was, and I answered, *La Virgen de la Caridad del Cobre* (Virgin of Charity of the Copper). She said, "That's where you must begin! Learn about her as much as you can. Ask questions and they will guide you to your roots."

The Virgin of Guadalupe plays a central role in the lives of most Mexican Catholics and doña Julieta is no exception. She prays to her and always has her present in her work. For several years and, until the death of her husband in 2003, doña Julieta organized the yearly procession to the shrine of the *Virgen de Guadalupe* in December. Guadalupe is the protector of all beings and her presence has been spreading into other Latin American countries and even into the United States along with Mexican migrants. Also called *Tonantzin*, she represents the human physical embodiment of the ancient earth goddess *Coatlicue*, mother of all gods, who was revered by the pre-Hispanic civilizations for millennia. In the 1500s, the Virgin appeared to Juan Diego, a pious Indigenous convert to Christianity, at the same site where people had worshipped *Coatlicue* since time immemorial. It is now the grounds of two Basilicas of Guadalupe, the original and a new one that was needed for the thousands of people that come to pray every day at the northern outskirts of Mexico City.

As for the Cuban spiritual deity doña Julieta told me to learn more about, I have been to her sanctuary in El Cobre, Santiago de Cuba. Following the elder's advice, I have begun reading about her. *La Virgen de la Caridad del Cobre*, known as matron of women in labor, represents a Catholic synthesis of the primary tricultural mythology of the Cuban nation. Legend tells that the Cuban Madonna was rescued out of the turbulent Caribbean ocean by an Indian, an African, and a Spaniard in a Taíno canoe (Barreiro, 2006).



Figure 14 Son Omar and doña Julieta tending to the food. Mexico, 2012

One afternoon Omar, doña Julieta's youngest son, and I decided to record our conversation, since he had showed interest in the project and has also been working with the holy children. Omar left Huautla to study biology and for a while had detached himself from his people's ways. Now in his early thirties he is back and holds ceremonies in his mother's house. He is very knowledgeable in Mazatec cosmivision and patiently explained facets of his ancestors' belief-systems to me. His main message was to be respectful in every way when working with sacred plants. All allopathic medicine derived at some point from plants, so considering the teacher plants as a bad influence shows in his mind limited understanding.

At the end of our interviews doña Julieta said, "I've already entered my 76th year and here I am, thank God, because my God gives me strength, my dear little God; I don't feel tired when I pray with my rosary. On the contrary, I begin feeling warm, because my spirit goes up." On my last day in Huautla de Jiménez, doña Julieta looked at me intently and said, "I've given you a little bit of the root. Those are seeds, Gabriela, what we're giving you are seeds, a little bit for you to sow, mmmm! You ought to take good care of that, because you don't always find people that will explain things to you, alright? It's true, it really is." We smiled at each other and I nodded, "I know, doña Julieta. I'm honoured to receive a bit of root, some seeds from you to

take with me. I'll treat them with great care and plant them where they can grow healthy and strong." We hugged each other and laughed together one more time.

Doña Julieta Casimiro is a woman whose students have contributed in spreading her reputation as a trusted spiritual guide around the world. All those who have received an answer to their inquiries regard her as a great wisdom-keeper. For me she has been a generous and kind woman, who continues teaching me, with her presence, words, and medicines, how to open my heart without fear, and deeply trusting the process. I will now share some of my own experiences while in the hands of doña Julieta and her medicine.

Velada

The traditional Mazatec *velada* takes place in a dark, comfortable setting in which the participants lie down and stay warm. Preparing for a ceremony and before entering the ceremonial space, doña Julieta cleanses every person with smoke rising from the copal burning in a big hand-held clay *copalero*. She lights candles by the altar covered with images of Jesus, the Virgin of Guadalupe, and numerous saints. When everyone is settled, she offers a little plate of mushrooms, usually in pairs, to every participant. On the plate she also places a few cocoa beans, sometimes a little honey as well, which she tells people to eat while chewing the mushrooms to sweeten their earthy taste. Then she blows out the candles and begins her prayers.

It takes a while before the psychoactive effects start taking over. They indicate the onset of the journey which will take several hours. Doña Julieta, sometimes accompanied by one of her daughters, prays and sings throughout the ceremony, keeping an eye on everyone's safety and

well-being. Once people start coming back from their inner journeys, doña Julieta gives thanks to God and the Virgin of Guadalupe for having helped the participants to see the light in their lives. Making sure that everyone is feeling well before she leaves, doña Julieta finally goes to rest.

The next day she is ready to answer questions and talk about matters which are brought up by the participants. Often she has details of what she saw during each person's journey and shares them with the individual. At the end there is a communal feeling among all those who went through the experience. The good-byes are filled with warm well-wishing and a deep-seated hope to never forget.

Since I met doña Julieta I have had the opportunity to do this work with her four times, one every visit. Below I will share some of the insights I gathered while participating in the *veladas* in Huatla de Jiménez. The experiences defy all conventional knowledge and are therefore hard to put into words. I will try my best to give a glimpse into this completely alternate world, accessible through sacred plant or fungi teachers.

Every ceremony began after dark. I and usually one or several other persons who had come from far away to work with the little mushrooms went down to the ceremonial space, where doña Julieta cleansed us with copal smoke before we sat down on mattresses lying on the floor. Soon after, we were ingesting the mushrooms, honey, and cocoa beans our guide had placed on little plates, for each one a specific amount as determined by doña Julieta. She began her prayers sitting on her low seat beside us where she remained for the rest of the *velada*. Slowly all laid down on the mattresses, covering ourselves with blankets to stay warm during the experience. After that we all waited for the effects to commence.

The first thing that comes to mind when reminiscing on all four ceremonies is the clear understanding that, although on separate occasions, they were not four separate journeys, but in a sense one continuous voyage interrupted by longer periods of everyday reality. Intently listening to doña Julieta's prayers for a while, my inner journey tended to begin without myself being fully aware of when I caught on (doña Julieta uses the verb *prenderse* to catch on, to go up in flames). All of a sudden I would notice myself marveling at colorful visions and rich textures which gradually began to move either slowly or rapidly in a continuously flowing motion. Sometimes the visions were more like alternating geometric patterns which would mesmerize me for what seemed a long time. The sense of time however completely dissolved, giving way to an infinite feeling of profound awe which carried me throughout all my experiences.

Once passed the first visual symptoms and leaving the familiar senses behind step-by-step, afloat somehow in weightless space, with a feeling of anticipation, I would sooner or later inevitably be hurled back to where my previous journey had left me off the last time I had entered through the doors of perception. It is this that most fascinates me about the work with the mushroom teachers. Without planning it the experience took me back to the very point to which I needed to return in my personal work, the next chapter in my story. Thus the healing and awareness which come from the work are indisputably cumulative. I have heard it being described as the peeling of an onion: every time you go in, another layer can be removed, thereby coming progressively, but very slowly, closer to the core.

The altered mind returns, in a non-linear fashion, to previous issues that need attention. This is perhaps the key element to unlocking habitual patterns within the linear mind, thereby exposing them to one's psyche with the potential to have previously non-thought-of experiences.

Seeing the world around us, the people we love, the problems we are trying to tackle in a holistic mandala-like way can help us break through perceived limitations or boundaries. As Albert Einstein said, “We can't solve problems by using the same kind of thinking we used when we created them” (thinkexist.com). My experiences have been joyful but also allowed me to face my worst fears and deepest grief. It was never by choice that I went there, but the incommensurable knowledge of the little mushrooms, allied to a wise woman humbly offering her protection while I ventured to those unfathomable places, revisiting past unresolved personal losses in my unconscious, made it possible. On the other side I have been blessed by an awakening of my spiritual self. I have experienced the oneness of all beings in my own flesh. I have solved what had been complicated issues as one solves puzzles once the missing piece is found.

Most of these insights and intuitive openings which happened during ceremony have made me feel more centered and available to others. With each journey, I have incrementally decreased my need to judge and increased my empathy towards people. I never would have learned so much about myself and the footprint I leave behind wherever I go in such a short time, had it not been for the experiential knowledge I received by allowing myself to go through a completely unconventional form of schooling. On three of the four journeys, the experience for me at some point crossed over to what some describe as ego-dissolution. I would describe it as shape-shifting when once I merged with hawk energy, feeling the smoothness of its feathers and seeing the world through its eyes. I could sense the wind while flying high above the world. I can still vividly recreate the sensations I felt in mind and body that time and the message I received through hawk. It left me with a cellular memory of becoming one with Nature.

As I think back on this I can hear doña Julieta's beautiful voice, sometimes in Mazatec, sometimes in Spanish as she gently guided me through the rapids of consciousness expansion. Thanks to her dedication I, like so many others, have gathered wisdom and greater understanding. It is a visceral understanding, hard to put into words and only partially conveyable, but definitely rooted in my being and, therefore, affecting my actions.

To comprehend this ineffable non-human plant intelligence, I had to suspend the questions and take the experience of such different intelligence on its own terms. In return my awareness was propelled to inner landscapes I had never seen before, and that helped me feel the connectedness between self and the natural environment with my whole being. Coming from a material-oriented background, void of deeper spirituality and possessing an academic education that ranks knowledge hierarchically, the power of ceremony and the existence of non-human knowledge gave me much to reflect upon and integrate. Ceremonies invoke something that, when it comes up, it has to be worked and ultimately dealt with. When going through the powerful, non-ordinary states of mind, I had the good fortune to come in touch with the immanent Divine, the essential oneness.



Figure 15 With doña Julieta and her grandchildren Lucio and Regina.
Mexico, 2012

Chapter 7

Knowledge in Nature: The Plant Kingdom

Plants were the basis of life, and because they held a particular power or medicine, Indigenous people began to view them as playing an essential role, not only for healing, but also as bridges to the spiritual world of Nature. Plants such as tobacco, corn, datura, peyote, and a number of other medicinal plants, played a role as intermediaries between humans and the spirit world of Nature (Cajete, 2009, p. 110).

This chapter is about the importance of plants in our lives and the knowledge inherent in them. As demonstrated by my research participants in chapters 5 and 6, Indigenous people who still live close to their roots have never forgotten the significance plants have in their lives. They know that humans need to relate to all of creation in order to lead a balanced and sustainable existence. Humans are not separate or greater, but simply an integral part of the whole. Mineral, plant, animal, human, and spirit worlds are interconnected. Indigenous knowledge helps illuminate these connections. It teaches respect and reciprocity in all relations.

There is a wealth of Indigenous knowledge concerning the plant kingdom. Plants feed us, heal us, teach us, and connect us with the spirit world. I will talk about four plants in particular because they are tightly knit into the lives of my research participants. In the words of Santos Vilca Cayo, an elder from the Aymara community in the Andes: “For us, all those of us who live in this *pacha* [locality, local world] are persons: the stone, the soil, the plant, the water, the hail, the sun, the moon, the stars, we all are a family. To live together we help each other. We are always in continuous conversation and harmony” (Ishizawa, 2002, p. 23).

The first plant I present is maize (from the Taíno *mahiz*). It was the primordial food for most Indigenous people in the Americas, and continues to be so in many cases. The *milpa*⁹ is

⁹ *Milpa* is a crop growing system used throughout Mesoamerica. From Nahuatl *mil-pa* means “to the field.”

elemental in the successful development of maize and also deserves mentioning. The second plant is tobacco, another plant that, similar to maize, spread around the world like wildfire as soon as the first colonizers set foot on the continent and shipped samples of unknown species they encountered back to Europe. The third plant, like tobacco, does not feed the physical body, but mind and spirit. It is called *cohoba*, a mind altering substance, the use of which the South American Arawak passed on to their Taíno descendants in the Caribbean. The fourth plant is not strictly a plant but a fungus. The pre-Columbian use of psilocybe mushrooms for healing ailments of body, mind, and soul continues being practiced by numerous Indigenous people in Mexico, including the Mazatecs from Oaxaca.

Maize and the *Milpa*

The milpa is one of the most successful human inventions ever created. Mesoamerica still has much to teach us (Wilkes in Mann, 2011, p. 226).



Figure 16 Altar at *Wirikuta Fest. For the Right of the Sacred*, in support of Huichol culture. Mexico City, 2012

Oaxaca is part of the isthmus in southern Mexico, considered the most ecologically diverse area in Mesoamerica. There are mountains, beaches, wet tropical forests, and dry

savannas. Some parts of Oaxaca are over 2700 metres high while others are at sea level. The diversity in the major landscapes present equals the diversity in Oaxaca's human geography (Mann, 2011). There are more than a dozen major Indian groups with a long and difficult history who all contributed to the development of Mesoamerican agriculture, "...arguably the world's most ecologically savvy form of farming, and of its centerpiece, *Zea mays*, the crop known to agronomists as maize" (Mann, 2011, p. 219).

Maize originated in a strange, wholesale mutation of its wild predecessor *teosinte*, which happened either by genomic shock, a complete reordering of DNA in which a new species can arise quite suddenly, or by conscious development executed by determined and knowledgeable plant breeders, which Mesoamerican *Indios* certainly were (Mann, 2011). Either way, over 6000 years ago, these people took the first steps in cultivating modern maize, one of the few farm species that is more diverse than most plants. To this day the variety in Mexican maize is startling, and people have developed unique uses for each one of them.

Indio farmers grow maize in the *milpa*, a field in which they plant several crops at once (e.g., maize, beans, squash, chilis, tomatoes, sweet potatoes). This is an elaboration of the naturally occurring phenomenon that lets certain plants benefit each other when growing together. *Milpa* crops are nutritionally and environmentally complementary. Beans and maize together are a complete and balanced meal. Adding squashes to that provides fiber and vitamins, and avocados supply fats. Maize researcher H. Garrison Wilkes (cited in Mann, 2011) explains that the *milpa* has a long record of success as there are places in Mesoamerica that have been cultivated continuously for 4000 years and are still productive. The *milpa* cannot be replicated on an industrial scale, but studying its essential features (crop rotation, variety of plants that complement each other grown side by side) might be greatly beneficial to lessen the ecological

depletion conventional agriculture brings about (monocultures for example use up the same soil elements over and over again, until the soil becomes exhausted). Furthermore the *milpa* is tended with nurturing and love by its growers, an element unimaginable in the detached agricultural business. Wilkes believes Mesoamerica still has much to teach the world, and ancient farming methods may be the cure for some of the ailments of modern agriculture (cited in Mann, 2011).

Where the *milpa* flourished, so did high culture, according to archeologist Michael D. Coe (cited in Mann, 2011). The first evidence of large-scale clearing for *milpas* appears sometime between 2000 and 1500 BC, and with it emerged the Olmec, Mesoamerica's first great civilization. The Olmec appeared seemingly out of nowhere, and built a sophisticated empire with monumental architecture, carved stele, earthwork pyramids, hieroglyphic writing, ball courts, and fine artworks (Mann, 2011). Coe wrote in 1994 that there is little doubt that all later civilizations in Mesoamerica, including the Maya, ultimately rest on an Olmec base (Mann, 2011).

Maize and the *milpa* slowly spread throughout the Americas, stopping only where the climate grew too cold or too dry. For example, at the arrival of the Pilgrims, New England was lined with fields of mixed maize, beans, and squash, many times extending for miles into the interior. Once brought to Europe by Columbus, maize had the same impact, particularly in Central Europe.

In Mexico, Indigenous people carry on the tradition of growing their food in *milpas* wherever possible. In Cuba some Indigenous communities in the eastern mountains still grow their food in *conucos*, the Taíno version of the *milpa*. Because of the climate in Cuba they use several different plants, such as manioc and sweet potatoes, but corn and beans still are central to the common diet. “*Conuco* is like a little plot, a chunk of soil somewhere. *Conuco* is our

salvation, our mountain store, our resistance” says Reina’s husband, Panchito (Barreiro, 2008, p. 121). He asserts,

With the Indian *conuco* there is always something to eat, because if you plant everything, you have everything. And plants help each other. You can see that there are some that go together, for example beans and corn. Corn always grows above all the rest. When corn is ready at five months, you can gather it. ... Little by little you’re gathering food and you keep replanting the *conuco*. With several good *conucos* and young people willing to help, that system works and everyone eats. That’s something we *Indios* offer to our country. ... That’s a system of old from ancient times, from my ancestors (Barreiro, 2008, p. 121).

Talking about maize, Panchito mentions the *coa*, a Taíno word for an ancient tool used widely in early Indigenous agriculture in the Americas. It continues to be used in mountainous terrain. The *coa*, a long digging stick, is good for planting corn because the seed gets inserted more deeply into the hole, making it harder for insects to get to it (Barreiro, 2008).

In our conversations, doña Reina mentioned several corn varieties and the many dishes her people prepare with corn. There is a yellow variety called Argentinian corn; there is a purple variety; and there is the creole corn, natural to Cuba, which is light-colored and grows with a fine stem and very small kernels. “We say corn is our friend, our brother” Reina told me,

Because we use it in a bunch of ways, for example, toasting it, frying it, roasting it over a fire, boiling the whole cob or making it into corn stew, cutting it finely when it is still tender to mix it into the *congrí* (dish with rice and beans), grating it to make it into thick *atol* by cooking it in water or milk, making it into bread which is cooked in a big pot, grinding and roasting it to make *pinol*, and more. There are so many corn dishes, I can’t even remember them all (personal communication, March, 2012).

In his book Panchito says, “Something very important are seeds, corn seed for example. When I was a kid our grandparents kept seeds, they just kept them because they didn’t buy corn, so the family’s seed, the whole community’s seed was a main source of life in the mountain,” (Barreiro, 2008, p. 120). Panchito further describes how corn was dried in the sun and then stored, and thanks to that custom corn has never been scarce. But it is important to take care of the varieties, since some have already been lost.

His father and his grandfather used to slash and burn. They cleared the land and then set the slash on fire. That was in preparation for planting their *conucos*. In the past people also sang when they were planting. “Our grandparents always sang songs, like the *quiribá*, and they used to sing in the plantations, harvesting or planting corn and other plants, but not directly to the plants, but to all of Nature, for the pleasure of being there in the field, in Nature,” (Barreiro, 2008, p. 126). They sang *décimas* to the collective of the *conuco*, of the whole crop.



Figure 17 Cooked corn sold at a public market in Mexico, 2012

This brief history on the significance of maize in the native diet of Latin America and the Caribbean and the system of the *milpa* and *conuco* would not be complete without briefly mentioning the mythic aspect of maize in the consciousness of its ancient people. According to the *Popol Vuh*, the book of knowledge of the Maya, maize is both the material from which

humans are formed and the material which provides nourishment to that form (Huff, 2006). The cycle of maize production and consumption is never-ending for Mesoamerican Indigenous peoples who are involved in subsistence agriculture. This primary food staple symbolizes more than sustenance. It is the substance of life and is linked to spiritual, cultural, and social activities. Maize is considered sacred and its cultivation holds great ceremonial significance (Huff, 2006).

Psychoactive Plants

Tobacco, *cohoba*, and psilocybe mushrooms, called plant teachers by some, are also known as psychotropic and entheogens. In Greek *psykhe*, means “soul;” *tropos* means “to guide / to direct;” *entheos* means “full of the god, inspired, possessed;” and *genesthai* means “to come into being” (online dictionary). All Native American cultures practiced some form of entheogenesis, the search for God by looking inside one’s self during trance states often induced by mind-altering substances (Aguilar, 2003). This search was the traditional healers’ main task. Through trance or ecstasy they would turn into intermediaries between the human and the supernatural world. By ingesting psychotropic plants they believed they could talk to the dead, gods, and spirits of Nature.

Participants in sacred plant ceremonies have experienced that these plants can, according to their effects, either excite the mind, lessen mental tension, thereby inducing sleepiness, or produce illumination. The state of mind in illumination is such that time and space give way to: feelings of inner peace and fraternal and universal love; a tendency to introspection; the recovery of past memories; and a sense of intimate union with Nature and strong belonging to the cosmos (Aguilar, 2003).

Tobacco

Offering tobacco after taking the life of an animal, such as the deer or antelope or buffalo, was a reflection of the understanding that one had to maintain relationship to the natural sources of life. It is the understanding of mutual reciprocity (Cajete, 2009, p. 89).



Figure 18 Don Panchito and doña Reina tending their tobacco plants

According to Indigenous creation stories and teachings throughout the Americas, spirits love tobacco as much as humans. Spirits placed it on the Earth to help people communicate with them, with Nature, and with the Creator (Cohen, 2006). Tobacco is the sacred herb of prayer, and its smoke offered to the spirits expresses the gratitude to those who help us, and it protects us from those who could harm us. Lacandon Maya in Mexico believe that the lords of rain and thunder are passionate smokers. Comets are seen as glowing cigars the Gods have thrown away, and some legends describe how the Gods of the Winds and the Four Directions strike rocks together and with the sparks they light their cigars. On Earth we can hear the thunder of the rocks and see the lightning of the sparks (Cohen, 2006). In essence tobacco must always be used with awareness and respect, because it is a sacred gift.

The tobacco used by the Classical Maya was *Nicotiana rustica*, which is still used among South American aboriginal populations. This species is much more potent, chemically complex,

and potentially hallucinogenic than the commercial *Nicotiana tabacum* available today (McKenna, 1992). Apart from smoking it to induce a state of mental calm, prayerfulness, and expanded awareness, tobacco can be: chewed; used for cleansing a place or a person; blowing on a patient to enhance healing; or sprinkling dried crushed leaves on the ground, on an altar, or in the fire, as a gesture of gratitude and respect. The fresh leaves can be used for tea and its extract drunk as juice.

Tobacco was and is the ever-present adjunct of the more powerful visionary hallucinogenic plants wherever in the Americas they are used in traditional shamanic ways (McKenna, 1992). Recently I participated in a shamanic *ayahuasca* ceremony as translator for a Peruvian healer. He used tobacco several times during the ceremony to blow smoke on the person needing healing. This blowing of tobacco smoke on a patient encourages friendly spirits and dispels harmful ones, who hate its scent. It also seals the healing energy in the body (Cohen, 2006). The healer from Peru also smoked the herb to break through to the other side, and later explained how the spirits of the dead had been trying to obstruct his path. He said it had been very difficult and only after smoking lots of tobacco was he able to lower the resistance of negative energies that had taken hold of the patient. “Tobacco is my helper,” he said smiling.

Doña Julieta, whose medicine are the sacred mushrooms, uses tobacco (called *San Pedro* by Mazatecs) in instances where people are not able to feel the effects of the mushroom and cannot open their hearts or their minds to enter the world of the spiritual journey. In her tradition, the tobacco is used fresh, ground with lime and garlic into a paste that can be applied to the patient’s body. The effect of *San Pedro* in this combination is very noticeable and creates a quickening of the physical metabolism, a wave of heat in the system, thereby inducing a deeper experience of embodiment (Schaefer, 2006).

In Cuba, Reina Ramírez and her family grow tobacco plants for ritual purposes. Her community performs tobacco ceremonies during which tobacco leaves are rolled into a big cigar and passed around in a circle, everyone taking a puff and expelling the sacred smoke upwardly to the heavens. This ceremony is accompanied by prayer and songs. Tobacco is also used widely to purify and cleanse, and is offered as *pago* (payment) to other medicinal or sacred plants in reciprocity for allowing themselves to be picked. In the words of don Panchito, Reina's husband, "When you pick a little leaf of an herb, you offer a cigar. . . . That's the first offering you make to a spirit, to a plant or to a saint, a cigar. For Nature, the ceremony is of tobacco. The prayer of the Seven Powers is . . . with tobacco, the greatest of sacraments" (Barreiro, 2008, p. 65).

Don Panchito further explains how smoke is also used to bless people by taking a large tobacco leaf and burning it. Some relatives of his take the seeds of the tobacco plant, which they toast and then use as medicine for colds. Furthermore, the leaves are anti-inflammatory. An inflammation in the body can be relieved by placing the tobacco leaf on it. As the leaf withers the inflammation subsides (Barreiro, 2008).

In many early sources describing the Taíno people in Cuba, the word tobacco is confused with the word *cohoba* or *cohiba*, perhaps because the *cohoba* was sometimes mixed with tobacco and the Spaniards picked up one word for the other and then passed it down in letters and chronicles. Be that as it may, one famous Cuban cigar brand is called *Cohiba*, and it used to be Fidel Castro's favorite.

After the arrival of the Europeans, tobacco became one of the main trading goods promoting colonization. Hundreds of years later and divorced from its original context, it has been desecrated by a powerful profit-making industry. In contemporary societies it has been changed from an agent of healing to a destroyer, not because the tobacco plant causes harm, but

because of the way the industry has tinkered with the product and the way the non-Indigenous populace uses it. Since the ceremonial surround is missing, although smoking a cigarette can have a ritualistic aura to it, tobacco users in our midst are frowned upon. Cigarette use has little in common with the original use of tobacco by Indigenous peoples. The ongoing desecration of tobacco in modern times makes it hard to see the tobacco plant without bias, understandably so because nicotine addiction and smoking are a serious drain on our society's well-being. But it is critical to understand that it is not the plant, but the human interference with the plant that has become dangerous. As described by doña Reina, the tobacco plant is used by her people to make medicine and purify a person or a space. Many Indigenous people know about tobacco's healing properties. Once this powerful plant is taken out of its traditional context and mixed with other ingredients to enhance or in some way manipulate its inherent qualities, it can no longer be considered natural.

Another good example of the damage that can be caused by human manipulation is the production of cocaine from the sacred *coca* plant of the Andes. When synthesized into the highly addictive substance, coca is thoroughly changed. Tobacco, like coca, is a sacred plant that has been used by Indigenous peoples since time immemorial. It is strong and as long as it is treated with reverence it is an agent of healing physically and spiritually. When this fails to happen because humans, in their drive to enhance Nature, rather than "loving the world as it is" (Ishizawa, 2002, p. 21), change the natural composition of the plant in order to make it more potent and more profitable, rather than life it can bring death.

Cohoba

Cohoba, one of the strongest, or perhaps the strongest, hallucinogens native to the Americas, is made from the seeds of a tree (*Anadenanthera peregrina*). Ricardo E. Alegría (1997) explains that the Taíno mixed the powdered seeds with crushed shells from the sea and sometimes with tobacco to enhance its effect. Inhaling this mixture through nose tubes produced visions that the Taíno interpreted as apparitions of, and messages from, gods and ancestors. While performing the *cohoba* ceremony the *behique* (healer) recited sacred chants and sounded the *maraca*.

For the ceremony, the Taíno had especially carved sticks, often elaborately made and used to induce vomiting as a mode of ritual purification. They also had special spoons to scoop the *cohoba* into nose tube inhalers made from manatee or bird bones, pottery, or wood. One of the most important and beautifully handcrafted artifacts featured prominently during *cohoba* ceremonies and also during *bateyes* (ritualized ball games) were the *duhos*, ceremonial seats highly prized by *caciques* and *behiques* as symbols of power and prestige (Ostapkowicz, 1997). These usually four-legged low seats are still used today among shamans in South America. Bartolomé de Las Casas (1909) noted that much of the *cohoba*-related paraphernalia was made so beautifully, that nothing else more beautiful had ever been made of gold and silver.

In the literature about Taíno culture, there has been confusion concerning *cohoba* and the ceremony for which it is central. After the first accounts by chroniclers, such as Columbus, Pané, and Las Casas, *cohoba* oftentimes was thought to be another word for tobacco. But American ethnobotanist William Edwin Stafford (1916) was able to identify that *cohoba* was indeed *Anadenanthera peregrina*, known to various South American Indian groups of the Orinoco River basin as *yopo*. There its use continues to be widespread. In Cuba it seems to be forgotten.

Everyone I asked, Indigenous and non-Indigenous, told me that the *cohoba* ceremony was strictly a tobacco ceremony.

When the Spaniards arrived in Cuba, the *cohoba* ceremony was integral part of Taíno ritual. We know of its practice thanks to numerous accounts in chronicles and letters. It also appeared in history school books (for example, in *1 Historia de Cuba*, published in 1974) well into the 70s, maybe longer. Torres Etayo's book on the island's Taíno culture (2006) depicts several purging spatulas and describes them as tools for ritual purification, but does not mention anything about the actual *cohoba* ceremony. It is interesting that, after this practice had been readily discussed, today it is hard to find any information on the topic, except in old literature. The Cuban government does not want to attract attention to the Indigenous remnant in Cuba, and officially all non-pharmaceutical psychotropic substances are frowned upon and criminalized.

Many examples of the practice of *cohoba* ceremonies during the conquest are found in documents produced at the time. Cuban historian Fernando Ortiz collected and discussed a number of entries on the subject in his book, *Contrapunteo cubano del tabaco y el azúcar* (2002) first published in 1940. Columbus wrote in his diary that he had not been able to find out about idolatry or other sects among the natives. He noted that each of their many kings had a house to himself (*bohío*), separated from the village in which there were wooden images of *cemís*, or god figures. According to Columbus, the only work done in those houses was a certain ceremony and prayers similar to what happens at a church. He described a round table on which there were some powders that were ceremoniously put on the heads of the *cemís* and then inhaled through a double-branched cane into their noses (*Historia del Almirante Don Cristóbal Colón*, cited in Ortiz, 2002, p. 301). Pané, commissioned by Columbus to study the Indians' customs, also wrote about the ceremonial practice of *cohoba*.

In 1494 the abbot, Pedro Mártir de Anglería, wrote that, when the *caciques* wished to consult the *cemí* about the results of a war, the harvest, or health, they would go into the *bohío* consecrated to the god, and, through their nostrils, inhale *cohoba*, a plant that instantly turned them delirious. As soon as the temporary “craziness” was over, with their heads down and their hands on their knees, they remained quiet for a little while. Finally they raised their heads as if awakened from a deep and heavy sleep, and with their eyes toward the sky, they shared what the *cemí* had communicated to them (cited in Ortiz, 2002, pp. 301-302). Las Casas, who had the opportunity to intimately know several Indigenous communities and their customs, describes the *cohoba* ceremony in minute detail. He compares it to Persian rituals, as told by Herodot and Estrabon. The Persians, when they had to decide things of great importance, always ate and drank until they were “well loaded with wine,” assuring that the determinations taken in this state were more firm than the ones taken in sobriety (cited in Ortiz, 2002, p.303). Las Casas further says that, once the person inhaling looked up in the sky and said certain prayers, the others answered in an ‘amen’ like fashion, then thanked him and eagerly asked him to share what he had seen.

From the start, some accounts of the ceremonies witnessed by the colonizers are fairly unclear, because some chroniclers mention the use of *cohoba* as the main sacrament, and others interpret the substance as simply being powdered tobacco. But Ortiz (2002), who carefully researched not only all the old original texts but also many subsequent interpretations of these, attests that *cohoba* and tobacco, although at times plausibly used together in ceremony, are two distinct plant products with entirely different properties.

Psilocybe Mushrooms

Today psychotropic fungi are still commonly used in Mexico. To collect and ingest mushrooms, just as with other plants, such as *peyote* and *yopo* (same active ingredients as *cohoba*) that are considered sacred and divinatory, the users of these sacraments follow time-honoured ceremonial ways. The psilocybe mushrooms are traditionally taken fresh and in the dark in a ceremony called *velada*, a purification rite during which the *curandero/a* (healer) or guide holds the sacred space and accompanies the inner journey with prayers and chants (Aguilar, 2003). In the Mazatec Sierra the mushrooms are known by the name of *niños santos* (holy children).

Gastón Guzmán (2012), Mexican mycologist and anthropologist, and the world's foremost authority on psilocybe mushrooms, clarifies in his most current article on the topic, what he believes to be a confusion of names. The so called magic mushrooms are known in the literature as *teonanacatl* ("flesh of the gods" in Nahuatl), ever since Franciscan friar and early ethnographer, Bernardino de Sahagún (1956), proposed that term in his *General History of the Things of New Spain* (also known as the Florentine Codex), a twelve volume book collaboratively created with Indigenous informants and scribes.¹⁰ From then on, it has been used extensively and generically in the bibliography for hallucinogenic mushrooms after they were discovered in Mexico. According to Guzmán, no ethnic group in the country uses the term today, but he did come across a word in 1959 when he was talking with Indigenous people in the state of Puebla. The word was *teotlaquilnanácatl* (Guzmán, 2012, p. 93).

¹⁰ In his five decades of research Bernardino de Sahagún invested his life's effort in meeting, interviewing, and interpreting Indigenous people and their worldview as an expression of his faith. While others - in Europe and New Spain - were debating whether or not they were human and had souls, he fell in love with their culture. The books were written in Nahuatl and later translated by him into Spanish.

Guzmán describes that, at the beginning of this encounter the Indians were highly surprised that a white man had sacred mushrooms in his hands. Back then it was very rare for a non-Indigenous person to be taking such mushrooms, as they were considered a secret. These Nahuatl-speakers, after some insisting by the researcher, told Guzmán that what he was holding were *teotlaquilnanácatl*. The inserted word, *tlaquil* derived from *tlacuil* means paint or painting; thus, the meaning of the whole word is “the sacred or divine mushroom that paints or describes through colored figures” (Guzmán 2012, p. 94). This description agrees well with the effects produced by psychotropic mushrooms, i.e., colorful figures or color hallucinations. According to Guzmán, it is possible that Sahagún did not hear the word properly. It is probable that the Indians preferred to keep the knowledge of these mushrooms secret, so it is believable that the name was never corrected.

Mexican Indigenous tradition of sacred psychotropic plants is as ancient and prolific as it is illustrated in the Indigenous culture. Various codices have representations of mushrooms associated with deities, and, in the Maya regions, ceremonial sculptures of mushrooms are relatively frequent. It is evident that the tradition of using entheogens was deeply imbedded in ancient knowledge, and there existed great sensitivity toward the effects these substances had on the mind. The Indigenous healer is without any doubt an expert in alternate states of consciousness, at the epicenter of human personality (Díaz, 2003). José Luis Díaz, surgeon and investigator in neurobiology at the *Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México*, regrets how little attention Indigenous cultures have received from the Western world. In his opinion, it is time that the knowledge of sacred, delicate, and lucid space not only receives greater illumination, but also deserves, at a minimum, an attitude of respect, admiration, and a willingness to learn (Díaz, 2003).

Guzmán (2008) writes that references to sacred mushroom usage in Mexico are found in the very earliest written documents or codices produced in the Spanish New World. Sahagún (1956) mentions mushrooms used in special ceremonies by the Nahuatl Indians. In the Magliabechiano Codex, a pictorial Aztec codex created during the mid 16th century, he presents a color drawing of a Nahuatl Indian eating a blue-staining mushroom. The references found in Mexico to the specific use of the divinatory mushrooms by Mexican Indians are valuable but incomplete, according to Alvaro Estrada (2003). Several chroniclers wrote about the subject (e.g. Sahagún, Motolinía, Diego Durán, Ruiz de Alarcón, Tezozomoc), but without doubt the informants did not tell all they knew about the various hallucinogenic plants they were aware of and used, because they followed the principle of not revealing religious secrets to any outsiders. It is now known that the ingestion of these plants was always connected with religion. Every religion has secrets; even Christianity speaks of mysteries (Estrada, 2003).

The Spanish colonizers, however, suppressed the mushroom ceremonies soon after their arrival, believing them to be of the devil, and any mention of sacred mushrooms disappeared from the literature henceforth. Early in the 20th century, Stafford (1916) therefore believed that *teonanacatl* (sic) was not a mushroom at all but the hallucinogenic peyote cactus used by the Huichol people of Mexico to this day. By the mid 15th century, the use of peyote had spread north into the Great Plains, prompting the emergence of the Native American Church several centuries later. The exact origins of the church and its incorporation of peyote as sacrament of communion are not clear, but Native believers agree that it began in the Southwest, making its way up from Mexico (Walthill, 2011).

It is now clear that the sacred mushrooms of Mexico belong almost exclusively to the genus *Psilocybe*. Although several species of *psilocybe* occur in the lowlands of Mexico,

traditional ceremonial use survives only at higher elevations (1500 meters and above). This is likely the result of the persecution of mushroom worship by the Catholic Church. Hence the ceremony persisted only among groups that remained in, or retreated to, remote mountainous areas.

[But] the classic mushroom cults of Mexico were destroyed by the coming of the Spanish conquest. The Franciscans assumed they had an absolute monopoly on theophagy, the eating of God; yet in the New World they came upon people calling the mushroom *teonanacatl* (sic), the flesh of the gods. They set to work, and the Inquisition was able to push the old religion into the mountains of Oaxaca so that it only survived in a few villages where Valentina and Gordon Wasson found it there in the 1950s (McKenna, 1994, p. 40).

In 1955 ethnomycologist Gordon Wasson (1957) and his wife visited Huautla de Jiménez, Oaxaca, in search for a mushroom variety local to the area, and were the first white foreigners on record to participate in a *velada*, a ceremony during which all participants ingest the visionary mushrooms as a sacrament to open the gates to alternate realities. They met with now legendary healer, María Sabina, a predecessor of doña Julieta Casimiro, and experientially learned about the mushrooms, called *niños santos* (holy children) by the Mazatecs.

María Sabina is the most renowned Mazatec shaman but she is only one of many in a living tradition. They all show similarities in their vocabulary and chants, but also differences (Munn, 2003). María Sabina often said “I am a woman of the light, I am a woman of the day,” and “I am a woman *espíritu*,” a woman of the spirit¹¹ (Munn, 2003, p. 142). She was born outside of Huautla in the Mazatec highlands towards the end of the 19th century (Rothenberg,

¹¹ “Spirit woman” is a more accurate translation

2003). She grew up in the house of her maternal grandparents and in her later years was to become the first Mexican *curandera* known to have allowed Westerners to participate in a *velada*. In 1957 Wasson published the article *Seeking the Magic Mushroom* in *Life Magazine*, telling about his experience. As a result of this article, news of the contemporary ceremonial use of a sacred mushroom used for healing and visionary purposes spread around the world.



Figure 19 Psilocybe mushrooms

Gastón Guzmán was invited to study neurotropic fungi in Huautla de Jiménez shortly after Wasson had published his landmark article. The young researcher met Wasson and they became friends. Both Guzmán and Wasson noted how the sacred mushroom ceremonies had been strongly influenced by five centuries of contact with Catholicism (Guzmán, 2008). Now, after five decades of contact with recreational drug users and tourists, the mushroom ceremonies have been further changed. I contacted Guzmán as I was researching the scholarly view on the sacrament of Julieta Casimiro's people. He told me he had just been in Huautla after a very long

time and was quite disillusioned to see a town so different than the one he remembered from the 50s. He is planning to write an article and maybe a book on the state of the mushroom use today, which he called “too commercialized.” He also pointed out that a few people do not know their mushrooms any more, at times even mixing varieties, which was strictly prohibited in the past (personal communication, December 3, 2012).

Back in the 1960s, María Sabina’s healing art began attracting thousands of counterculture mushroom seekers, scientists, and others. By 1967 people from the US, Canada, and Western Europe were renting cabins in neighboring villages. Numerous 1960s celebrities visited María Sabina (e.g. Bob Dylan, John Lennon, Mick Jagger, Keith Richards). Many of the travelers were penniless, and they contributed little to the local economy, especially when they learned to find the mushrooms and pick them on their own. They often displayed a distinct lack of respect for the sacred and traditional purposes of the holy children; this disrespect saddened María Sabina (Estrada, 2003).

Although the *Life* article had made María Sabina famous, it also brought her great suffering. Her home would later be burned down and she was banished to the outskirts of town as punishment for divulging the Indians' age-old secret about their use of sacred mushrooms. Nevertheless she never regretted having met Wasson, and felt that it was destiny (Rothenberg, 2003). María Sabina died in 1985 and, since then, she has become an icon for people interested in ancestral healing and consciousness-expanding technologies, not only in Mexico but around the world.

According to Feinberg (2006), in the wider world of the Mexican imagination, Huautla de Jiménez is not known for its coffee, its teachers, its tonal language and accompanying whistle speech, or even for its vast subterranean universe explored by intrepid cavers. It is known for two

things only: mushrooms and the photogenic and brilliant *curandera*, María Sabina. Perhaps because of the forbidding, rugged terrain, and because of the lack of industrial disturbance (i.e., absence of valuable minerals), the people of the Sierra Mazateca were able to retain certain pre-Hispanic practices that were stamped out in most other Mexican regions. While the hordes of foreigners dwindled to a trickle after the army evicted them in 1969, many Huautla families developed a strategy to accommodate mushroom-seeking visitors. Also, the mushroom and María Sabina have become a new not-quite-so Catholic Indian Goddess for today's *mestizo* youth (in conversation with Julieta's son, October, 2012).

Doña Julieta has been healing people with sacred mushrooms for over 40 years now. I have had the opportunity to participate in sacred plant ceremonies, some guided by her. When safe guides or elders are present in the room, profound learning happens as the psychotropic plant substances open doors of perception to realms never experienced before. Taking the teacher plants in sacred ceremony is self-study embodied.

What the Thirteen Grandmothers Have to Say

Traditional medical knowledge originates with plants and is as old as human life on Earth. It is free, received through prayer and offered in prayer, because prayer is what empowers traditional medicine. Every culture has known traditional medicine, and its knowledge has been passed down, tested, and practiced through the generations. Even modern medicine is founded on plants (Schaefer, 2006). The difference between traditional and modern medicine is that the first aims to heal and restore wholeness in the patient, by enhancing harmony and well-being. The second tries to cure, to make the disease go away, often destabilizing the rest of the system. Grandmother Maria Alice Campos Freire believes that saying that modern medicine deals with

the disease much more than the health and wellbeing of a person is not a judgement. Traditional and modern medicine is not good or bad, they both are part of the whole process. Both approaches need to be understood and have much to contribute to each other (Schaefer, 2006).



Figure 20 Brazilian Grandmothers Maria Alice and Clara at the Sacred Fire. Oregon, 2009

The Thirteen Indigenous Grandmothers want to create a bridge between traditional and modern medicine that must rely on the principle of equality, a dedication to the salvation of humanity, and a just exchange of resources. This bridging dialogue must be based on the sincere wish to contribute to the health of humanity. As long as modern medicine approaches the dialogue from a place of power, the bridge will not hold. Competition is a big obstacle to collaboration, and as Grandmother Maria Alice says, “A good structure for our bridge is surrendering one to the other” (Schaefer, 2006, p. 203). In the Amazon in Brazil, there is a place called *Santa Casa*, Maria Alice explains, where doctors and nurses from modern medicine collaborate with traditional healers and often go to the traditional healers for their own needs. Patients in this holy house have the option of using modern or traditional medicine.

Grandmothers Maria Alice and Clara Shinobu live and work in a small spiritual community deep in the Amazon forest. Here they practice medicine with sacred plants. Maria Alice prepares the medicines and Clara leads a small hospital, the *Centro Medicina da Floresta*, where people can stay and become healthy again. One of the plant medicines Clara and Maria Alice use is *santo daime*, also known as *ayahuasca*, the vine of the soul. Clara explains that *santo daime* is a great teacher. “It teaches us to grow and provides for us whatever we need to experience at the moment. ... *santo daime* opens a door to our perception, so when people say that *santo daime* is a drug, drugs leave everybody unconscious and *santo daime* on the contrary makes us even more conscious” (Clara in the film *For the Next 7 Generations*, 2009). All the Grandmothers agree that all these healing plants must be used with profound respect and in sacred ceremony.

Although the plants the Grandmothers use differ according to their homeland and climate, when they came together they discovered that their traditional healing methods had great similarities. Every healing begins with a purification ceremony which can be done with plants, water, or fire. The healer offers a safe and comfortable setting for the person who will receive the healing, treating him or her with care and affection to raise the morale and guard against feelings of isolation (Schaefer, 2006). Traditional medicine takes into account that there are three categories of illnesses: natural, psychosomatic, and spiritual. Modern medicine can deal with the first two, but only traditional medicine deals with spiritual diseases or wounds of the soul.

Grandmother Bernadette Rebienot says that people with a spiritual sickness can suffer greatly, but the doctor, even with the help of medical tests, may not find anything wrong. Traditional medicine can heal in those situations (Schaefer, 2006). Every part of the world has what is known as a “master” or sacred plant teacher that heals spiritual sickness. In the traditions

of the Thirteen Grandmothers, peyote, *ayahuasca*, iboga, and the holy mushrooms are examples of such sacred plants used to heal physical and spiritual illness.

Building the Bridge

Slowly the healing power of sacred plants is being recognized by some sectors of modern medicine. Scientists in several countries are researching the healing properties of these plants and finding out that, although not always scientifically proven, traditional medicine is in some instances ahead of school medicine. Some of the sacred plants are being used to treat drug, nicotine, and alcohol addictions, and trauma, and are showing more promising results than Western treatments. Iboga and ayahuasca treatment centers have been arising in several countries. Fear and misinformation often make the efforts difficult to succeed, but the work continues because of the overwhelmingly positive outcomes in helping people overcome substance abuse and other debilitating conditions. News that psilocybe mushrooms help against cluster headaches (Husid, 2007), a debilitating condition for which until now there had been no treatment, made headlines. This news was followed up by a 2012 National Geographic television channel documentary on hallucinogens. Doctors are administering psilocybin to cancer patients and the terminally ill to help them overcome anxiety and become spiritually available (MAPS¹²). At the Johns Hopkins School of Medicine, research with psilocybin and other mind-altering substances is ongoing. In 2011 the following was published:

¹² MAPS: Multidisciplinary Association for Psychedelic Studies was founded in 1986. It is a non-profit research and educational organization that develops medical, legal, and cultural contexts for people to benefit from the careful uses of psychedelics and marijuana.

The psychedelic drug in magic mushrooms may have lasting medical and spiritual benefits, according to new research from Johns Hopkins School of Medicine. ... In their study, the Hopkins scientists were able to reliably induce transcendental experiences in volunteers, which offered long-lasting psychological growth and helped people find peace in their lives — without the negative effects.¹³

This is nothing new to Doña Julieta and fellow healers in Huautla and other places where the sacred mushrooms and other entheogens have been used safely and beneficially since ancient times. “Scientists now confirm what shamans have long said about the nature of nature” (Narby, 2006, p. 146). In his book *Intelligence in Nature. An Inquiry into Knowledge*, anthropologist Jeremy Narby reasons that the difference between contemporary humans and other species is that humans accumulate knowledge outside themselves in artifacts such as written texts. This makes it possible to acquire and transmit knowledge at an unprecedented rate, and it has given us dominance over most other species. Since humans currently abuse their power and are depleting Nature at an unsustainable rate, he claims, “We have yet to learn to control our predatory nature” (Narby, 2006, p. 147). That scientists are engaging in these conversations means encouraging progress and gives hope that building the bridge Grandmother Maria Alice talks about is not only feasible but is actually happening. Time will tell if the project can be finished before the damage on land and forests has become too great, and the physical and spiritual displacement and disregard of the ancestral keepers of Nature and its sacred medicines stops once and for all.

¹³<http://healthland.time.com/2011/06/16/magic-mushrooms-can-improve-psychological-health-long-term/#ixzz2DGzLARnZ>.

Chapter 8

Conclusions

The interesting thing is not to say who is right and who is wrong. Had all of us followed that devotional trajectory, yes, we wouldn't have put a man on the moon, but we wouldn't also be talking about climate change and our capacity to really affect the life support systems of the planet (Wade Davis, February 14, 2013, CBC G. Stroumbouloupoulos).

In the National Gallery in Ottawa a few years ago, the curators re-imagined their Canadian galleries and began to integrate Aboriginal art of the equivalent era alongside mainstream art (Saul, 2008). This gesture holds great meaning, John Ralston Saul contends, because art, as with culture, is never about small steps, but a herald of new things to come. Hence, we are starting to imagine ourselves in another manner and think in different ways. Another sign of advancement comes from the Canadian Supreme Court which is giving weight to oral culture and has ruled that oral testimony is admissible as evidence in court.

Our universities however, rather than being in the same philosophical and cultural universe as our highest levels of justice continue to deny the importance of the oral. At the core of learning in Canada, and in most countries that subscribe to Western education, lies an obsession with the written, and the overall accepted notion that learning means written. The higher the studies, "... the more they are built around narrow, exclusionary ideas of truth, tightly tied to a world of people footnoting one another" (Saul, 2008, p. 36). To bring change it is necessary to welcome and accept other truths. In Williams' words,

... in a sense, universities are the tradition keepers of the Western world. And to bring Indigenous ways of learning, to bring Indigenous ways of being, to bring Indigenous ways of teaching, to bring Indigenous knowledge into the academy, and to try to

construct it being faithful to the Indigenous ways, is the only way I think that people can take, even a tiny step into experiencing another way of being (Williams & Tanaka, 2007).

What I learned from doing this research and spending time and sharing stories with my participants is that the oral is at a minimum as rich as the written language. Of course the written has its place and without it we could not be where we are in our development, but that should not cast aside the original and most powerful form of communication: the spoken word. It has the great advantage that it never turns stale as it continually grows and adapts to new contexts. We need both, written and oral language. Each serve specific purposes and have to be regarded with equal respect.

A Trail to Better Understand

Having challenged and continuing to challenge my own worldview and questioning inherited or learned beliefs I can now better listen to what Indigenous wisdom-keepers have to share. They can help me understand how there is hope by instilling all my relationships, human and non-human, with respect and reciprocity. As long as I am true to myself and to all my relations I am honoring life and doing the part assigned to me.

Nature-based Indigenous knowledge is an intrinsic part of what humankind needs to understand and apply so that every human being can live a full and dignified life. Western science has been main contributor to the development of modern lifestyles. Prosperity and life in amazing comfort have been luring more and more societies and individuals to put money and power above all other interests, physical, emotional, and spiritual. This one-sided material growth is causing enormous harm. Nobel Prize winning scientist and Green Party leader Andrew

Weaver says, “You cannot have continued growth. There’s only one end point of infinite growth in a finite system, and that is collapse. That’s true whether it’s phytoplankton in the ocean, people on Easter Island, or caterpillars on a tree” (Weaver in Campbell, 2013).

I have endeavored to showcase that knowledge comes in different forms. Nature-based Indigenous knowledges provide unique and time-proven lessons. Acknowledging them, just as it has been done with art in the Ottawa’s National Gallery, is indispensable for today’s advancement of knowledge democracy. Looking at the Thirteen International Indigenous Grandmothers and, in particular, at the lives and stories of two Indigenous elders, doña Reina Ramírez and doña Julieta Casimiro, I set out to find answers to my inquiry. For my first question: What can we learn from Indigenous knowledge that will help us become more accountable to our relations with humans and with Nature? I found the following answers: We can learn that teachings come from people and from our surroundings and Nature herself. Nature *is* knowledge. The reverence my participating elders have for Mother Earth and Spirit is genuine and they understand that everything we are and everything we do in this world depends on these entities. They live guided by their wisdom to stay in harmony with Nature. We can follow this approach. The above ties in with respect, reciprocity, and responsibility, not just for their own families and communities, but for all communities, mineral, plant, animal, human, and spiritual ones. We can learn how to tread more lightly on the Earth, leaving minimal footprints behind and always taking only our fair share. Too often we tend to take more than our share driven by our society's drive toward individual success and that brings imbalance. We can learn from the elders' presence, their kindness, empathy, and deep respect and love for Nature and all beings. These are virtues greatly needed in today's world.

The second question: Can I open a trail across the cultural divide between my research participants and me? And if so how? I have answered with a resounding yes! I can begin to open a trail across the cultural divide as long as I am willing to temporarily step out of my known worldview and challenge the truths I am usually surrounded by, and that I know are relative, so that I can be more open to receive other ways of seeing and being in the world. The emerging relationships and connecting trails, like all relationships and trails, need to be tended and cared for so that they remain strong. In my search for answers to my questions I hope to have helped increase the visibility of Indigenous women wisdom-keepers and offered an example of their knowledge to non-Indigenous people attracted to the richness of Indigenous wisdom.

My Experience

At the onset of my research I had the expectation to learn from my participants and open a trail of understanding between the Indigenous and non-Indigenous worlds. My basic premise was that people in contemporary societies can benefit from listening to Indigenous elders and learn from their knowledge which is relevant in today's world. Many of these elders have a deep understanding of what the ailments of our times are. They recall what the Earth looked like before the environment became endangered and before so many people began losing their connections to communal structures. Their ancient wisdom can help find more sustainable ways to live and a more caring way relate with each other.

Collecting data for this study was at the core of my visits to Cuba and to Mexico, but the truth is that everything around it, e.g., talking and listening to stories, singing and dancing, playing with the kids and helping with the chores, truly enriched my life. What struck me the most while staying at my participating elders' homes was their inner peace as they were always

in the present moment, rarely complaining about the mundane. All that I learned about the deep awe for Nature and all its elements, the kindness with which I was treated, and people's generosity when spending so much time with me while always making me feel welcome, has touched me in ways I will never forget. My participants and I were able to meet on the trail we all were walking on to get to know each other better, to understand each other, and to learn from each other. With their help and goodwill I was able to begin to bridge the cultural divide.

During my stays I had the opportunity to temporarily immerse myself in different realities, one in the very small community of Taíno descendants in Eastern Cuba, the other in a large and vibrant community high up in the mountains of Southern Mexico. Doña Reina's family lives in one of a few Indigenous hamlets on the island. People live humbly and although she does not like going down to the city unless necessary, the outside world in Cuba is not as drastically different from her life as it is in other countries. The Castro brothers' regime has kept progress and materialism at bay. The decades-long embargo and overall lack of resources everywhere in the country have motivated many Cubans to return to herbal remedies or green medicine and to plant food communally in *organopónicos*. These are garden plots or *conucos* raised in empty lots, or at the edge of basically every village, town, and city on the island.

Doña Julieta's community is formed by people who follow traditional lifestyles as well as by those whose interests have been changing with the influx of popular Mexican culture and economic pressures. While in Cuba going to the nearest city is an ordeal and the Ramírez have rarely if ever been to La Habana, and never off their island, Doña Julieta has travelled the world, although her way to Mexico City and Oaxaca City is also arduous and long. All these differences notwithstanding, both families revere their ancestors, their relatives, their community, and all elements in Nature. They are integral part of their being. Contrary to the Western beliefs in

individualism and the separateness from our surroundings “the world is alive, we are all relatives, and we all accompany each other” (Ishizawa, 2002, p. 24).

While in Huautla the godson of one of doña Julieta’s daughters was christened and I was able to observe the syncretistic way they celebrated the occasion. When the music began doña Julieta wooed me into dancing. Once on the dance floor I kept being asked to dance and I obliged, to Julieta’s and the children’s delight. In Cuba Idalis, her sister Nasaria and their children and grandchildren taught me the moves to their dance. We had an instant *fiesta* going, everyone laughing, singing and clapping their hands. Letting my guard down as I closely followed their dancing moves and rhythm to become part of them was probably the most powerful way I could have shown my compliance, and afterwards I could feel their trust in me increasing step by step.

Episodes like these along my research journey had me participating with the heart even more than during other times. They taught me that it is most important to be who I am, to allow myself to be vulnerable, and to show respect and a willingness to go with the flow no matter how awkward it might feel at the beginning. It was I who approached my participants to further my own interests, and in return I had and have an obligation to meet their interests and curiosity. Saying “no” to participating in their lives be it dancing or sharing food, while wanting to gather information from them for any purpose would be a gross trespass in protocol. My duty as guest was to respect and reciprocate all that I was being offered. Otherwise I would be taking more than my fair share.

My most remarkable lessons came to me through the experiential research I was able to do in Huautla with doña Julieta. Realizing that knowledge is embodied in different forms has significantly expanded my horizon. Anthropologist Jeremy Narby talks about “liquid

knowledge” when he describes the understanding that comes to people by drinking the Amazonian brew called *ayahuasca* (Spirit Plant Medicine Conference at UBC in Vancouver, June 17th-19th, 2011). As in psilocybe mushrooms, *ayahuasca*’s psychoactive compounds are called tryptamines, and besides helping participants to overcome physical and emotional disease, they aid them examine their life’s journey in ways that are healing and enlightening. I call the knowledge I received thanks to the little mushrooms “fungi knowledge.” There is nothing like it. Words are too awkward to fully describe it. It brought me primordial and, at the same time, sublime understanding of myself, my life, and all my relations.

Where I Came From and Where I am Headed

Reading through the literature which Indigenous scholars, the intellectual elders, have been producing as they have defeated the pernicious colonial yoke that had kept their predecessors’ creativity under wraps, taught me more about the Indigenous renaissance underway in Canada and around the world. These scholars bring a breath of fresh air to the entire academic community, Indigenous and non-Indigenous, questioning the status quo and offering real alternatives to the way knowledge, knowledge production, and research have been habitually looked at. Taking their findings into consideration I based my research on Indigenous methodologies which stress relational accountability and reciprocity, as well as experiential ways of learning.

The story of the Thirteen International Indigenous Grandmothers gave me the initial motivation and inspiration to go ahead with my study and unearth my own story along the way. Reflecting on my life and on my race, I found a new and more conscious place for myself in my own. Spending time with Taíno Grandmother Reina Ramírez in Cuba, and learning about her,

her family and her ancestry filled me with respect and humbleness. Mazatec Grandmother Julieta Casimiro and the work we did while staying at her home in Mexico and everything I learned about her people and her extraordinary healing ceremonies left me in awe and transformed the outlook on my life. Both research participants helped me viscerally understand the significance of plants in Indigenous ways and in all human life, as they shared their views of the world, their stories, and their practices with me. I learned from them that the division between humans and plants is artificial, as are all divisions that make us feel alone in the world. We are not. We are integral parts of the whole, forever sharing in “love, nurturance, symbiosis, conversation, reciprocity, and dance” (Ishizawa, 2002, p. 21).

When I set out to enhance my understanding of the research participants by trying to see their worldview from their perspective and mine, my objective was to find evidence to support my assumption that Indigenous knowledge is needed by all today. Instead of linear and compartmentalized like Western knowledge, Indigenous knowledge is holistic in its approach; it is not something people can own; it is not static; but it is there for us to discover and build upon. Throughout my work, I learned that Indigenous knowledge has much to offer as long as I keep an open mind and allow myself to see things as they are and not as I interpret them from a solely Western perspective. This was not an easy task coming from an analyzing tradition that taught me the best way to do research is to become a fly on the wall.

I did not know how poignant the research path would be for me until I had been on it for a while. On the other side of it I now feel changed by the process. Going back to Cuba has helped me reconnect with my birth roots, more mythical than ancestral, but, after all, very real for me. Getting to know doña Reina and her family grounded that experience in ways I could only have dreamed of. I have understood, at a deeper level than when I started my work, how

being of different ethnic background does not hinder my connection with my Indigenous participating elders as long as I come from the heart.

Lessons to Keep

The Thirteen International Indigenous Grandmothers say that, in their traditions, people always have to act thinking ahead seven generations (Schaefer, 2006). Respecting this philosophy could considerably change many of the controversial political moves in today's world. Rather than being focused only on economic profit, good politicians, as true elders of government, would create authentic progress in worthy human endeavours, such as protecting people's endangered and unique habitats, sustaining productive soils, protecting our water resources and fish habitats, protecting endangered species and their habitats, and protecting all the important plants that people need to continue to grow physically and spiritually. Tending to the needs of all, and prioritizing an education, that nurtures the learning spirit in every child, can be a turning point in today's imbalance. Our children and everyone's children are the hope of tomorrow, and guiding them in a good way by modeling authenticity in our presence, and kindness and empathy in our relations will foster a healthy awareness of self and community.

Another wise Indigenous elder lesson to pass on to our young is how everything that happens on the planet will eventually affect everyone, including the animal, plant, and mineral kingdoms, because all life is related and interconnected. Allowing children to feel special is necessary for their self esteem and yet we have gone too far in promoting competition to become the only best. Being special in such a context is isolating rather than connecting. Being special among others who are also special in their own right will cultivate a sense of belonging, teach reciprocity, and down the road create a community of responsible young men and women.

Reciprocity in all our relations is essential, and, when heeded, everyone will be taken care of. Doña Reina told us how, in her community, no one ever goes hungry, because everyone looks after everyone else. Doña Julieta and her daughter mentioned the need to teach children respect, and to be an example of light that others will want to follow. Nurturing all our relationships, human and non-human, with altruism, love, and empathy is the primary elders' message that emerges from this study. In this the elders show great knowledge, not learned from books or by doing studies, but by paying close attention to the moment and devoting their lives to a reciprocal relationship with Nature, acknowledging that they are not better but simply one intrinsic part of this complex life-giving and life-sustaining system. In this lies their wisdom.

Indigenous people are not sentimental but have a kind of mystique based on the idea that they have responsibilities for the Earth (Davis, 2013). The planet is a living entity with which people have personal relationships. The humans' task is to care for it. Progress at the expense of the environment will not be progress for long. Since Columbus, the people of the Sierra Nevada de Santa Marta in Colombia have watched as outsiders violate the Great Mother, tearing down the forests to establish plantations of foreign crops – bananas and sugar cane, marijuana, and now coca for illicit production of cocaine (Davis, 2009). Their Elder Brothers, a group of men instilled with ancestral wisdom from childhood on, remind us of the ancestors' voices. On January 9, 2004 the Kogi, Wiwa, and Arhuaco Brothers issued a joint declaration:

Who will pay the universal mother for the air we breathe, the water that flows, the light of the sun? Everything that exists has a spirit that is sacred and must be respected. Our law is the law of origins, the law of life. We invite all the younger brothers to be guardians of life. We affirm our promise to the Mother, and issue a call for solidarity and unity for all peoples and all nations (in Davis, 2009, p. 147.)

As with the Elder Brothers and many others, doña Julieta's, doña Reina's and their families' messages truly matter. My task as mediator was to listen to their words and experience different ways of being so that at the end I could tell their story as I saw it and my story as I experienced it. In telling this I offer the reader a glimpse into the elders' world and convey an idea of the significance their wisdom carries in their communities and beyond their own cultures. As I had assumed before beginning my research, there is deep understanding and acumen in Indigenous elders' ways and I believe they can benefit people of any background. In our contemporary world, much effort is put into competition and individual success. Being authentically in the present moment rather than overwhelmingly concerned about the future seems to have become a luxury for many of us. The elders' presence and their kindness, empathy, and deep respect for Nature and all living beings are virtues greatly needed today.

Seeing the world as a mechanism, with Nature but an obstacle to overcome, has influenced our cultural tradition leading us to blindly interact with the living planet (Davis, 2009). Battiste and Henderson (2000) lament that, since the focus of Eurocentric thought is outward toward the world as object, an arena in which most humans do not interact but which they can change, the inner consciousness of humans is given little chance to be explored. Curricula emerging from this worldview isolate the known self and reinforce specialized interests among students instead of creating communities.

What we need in the 21st century is to open new trails and allow plenty of space for nature-based Indigenous wisdom to bloom beyond tribal Indigenous realms. The basic understanding of how to behave as conscious beings in our shared world, leaving only minimal footprints behind, and taking only one's fair share in all things shared will come as knowledge democracy spreads, and with it everyone's exposure to diverse ways of knowing and being. This

movement will trigger more trail blazing and bridge building and expand everyone's possibilities to grow and live more balanced lives.

Extra-ordinary Knowledge

The inclusion of plant knowledge and the plant teachers in this dissertation gives a glimpse into realities that, although not explainable by using the mind and being difficult to articulate, exist on Earth and offer a completely different experience of knowledge acquisition. The wisdom inherent in Nature is real and not to be dismissed. All human ancestors were acquainted with alternate states of consciousness, be they through the ingestion of psychotropic plants, through music and drumming, intense dancing, fasting, and other methods. The human spirit yearns to connect with Great Spirit and that also is knowledge. All ways leading to human growth and wholeness deserve their rightful place and respect. It is hubris to believe that the knowledge produced in Western societies is superior in any way. Not better or worse, it is as much an equal part of the treasure of human knowledges as any other knowledge. Plant teachers, many of them also known as psychedelics, are powerful guides into a better future.

Ethnopharmacologist Dennis McKenna says:

I do think psychedelics propel the cultural evolution process ... the changes of the last fifty years or so owe a lot to the diffusion of psychedelics into the wider society ... and it's still happening. Things like ayahuasca are literally "emerging from the jungle" because they have a very important message for our species ... I really think these plants are the way we communicate with the rest of the biosphere ... I'm not speaking in any mystical sense here, I'm talking biochemistry. You really have to view these compounds in the larger context. Psychedelics, the natural ones anyway, are plant secondary compounds. A

good deal of human history is shaped by human interactions with plant secondary compounds. Contacts between Europe and Asia were about spices, Europe raped the New World to get their hands on their drug and food plants, coca, chocolate, etc., even while vigorously stamping out the "demonic" entheogens (in Pinchera, 1997/98).

Worldwork

Fostering self-knowledge and community building should be at the center of a new paradigm in education and in all forms of communal living. When this is taught in schools, the communities around these schools will flourish, causing a ripple effect to follow. In his book, *Sitting in the Fire* (1995), Arnold Mindell presents worldwork, a form of group work that is based on eldership. Worldwork is an aspect of Indigenous cultures as it uses the talking circle and relationship-building. It creates rapid political and psychological change based on how people actually relate to one another. The key in this work is that people in groups are capable of great wisdom and awareness. Instead of trying to control groups, worldwork helps people open up to one another by increasing their understanding for the other and addressing the problems together, and then re-creating relationships from scratch. Mindell (1995) asserts that only when all members of a community grow in awareness of power in themselves and others can true change occur. He tries to increase peoples' understandings of the human experience and dynamics of abuse, power, and history, and believes that more healthy communities can and will emerge through the process of worldwork. I see great potential in this type of work for groups of young people as they learn to better understand each other and cooperate for the greater good. It is in this setting that co-presence will be deeply felt and acknowledged.

Radical Co-Presence

Indigenous knowledge has to be respected on a par with Western knowledge. Western abyssal thinking that has led to dividing “this side of the line” from “the other side of the line” has to transform into post-abyssal thinking so that Indigenous knowledge stops being either appropriated or violated. The first condition for this to happen is radical co-presence, which means that practices and agents on both sides of the line are contemporary in equal terms. Co-presence is radically life affirming as it “presupposes the abolition of war, which, next to intolerance, is the most radical negation of co-presence” (de Sousa Santos, 2007, p. 11).

Lorna Williams’ Earth Fibres course mentioned in chapter one is a good example of how radical co-presence can be implemented. The established system has to make space so that courses like it “can exist firmly planted in an eco/social/spiritual Indigenous pedagogy, rather than adapting to or going along with positivist, or even progressive or social critique theory” (Tanaka, 2009, p. 238). The course description read as follows:

In this course students will be engaged in an experiential educational practice.

They will learn firsthand how teaching and learning occur in an Indigenous world. ...

The course will integrate hands-on practical activities with theoretical and academic goals. Students will experience the principles of traditional Indigenous ways of teaching and learning such as: mentorship and apprenticeship learning; learning by doing; learning by deeply observing; learning through listening and telling stories and singing songs; and learning as a member of a team; learning by sharing and providing service to the community (Williams in Tanaka, 2009, p. 19).

The new paradigm for our times should be inclusive and respectful of all knowledges, particularly those that promise crucial lessons to restore healthy relationships with the Earth

(e.g., in light of climate change). This will open trails linking cultures, so that they can let through the ever-increasing number of people full of healthy curiosity and wonder for others. The emergence of a knowledge society, which becomes richer the more diverse knowledges are democratically incorporated into its folds without trying to change or misappropriate them, looks promising. Perhaps in a not so remote future we will all, Indigenous and non-Indigenous peoples alike, be able to celebrate the new Indigenous renaissance Battiste and Henderson (2000) speak about. This resurgence of ancestral knowledges around the world is a turn in a direction that makes us reflect on what has worked in the past and what needs to be changed so that we can create a better future for our children and grandchildren.

Coming to the end of this study, I hope to have motivated you to consider opening a trail of your own to better understand the need for nature-based Indigenous knowledge in today's world. Making yourself available to that possibility is a step toward knowledge democracy. No matter how educated in this or that knowledge system a human being might be, relationships with each other and with Nature are everyone's common denominator. Nature is ground zero, the point where all begins, and caring for it and all life can and will restore a more balanced existence. Here in Canada as well as everywhere along the entire continent and in the world precious knowledge and wisdom from the ancestors of the land are still alive in their descendants. To our good fortune many ancestral laws have not been forgotten yet. We will all benefit when everyone is treated with the same respect, when every relationship is created equal and truly reciprocal, and when each one of us takes the responsibility to be accountable to all our relations.

To conclude let me express what an honour it has been having had the opportunity to open a trail of understanding between the Indigenous world of my elders and my own. On an

academic level I have done this research to get my PhD, but little did I know that in the end this journey and my elders would mark me so deeply emotionally and spiritually. I thank doña Reina and doña Julieta from the bottom of my heart for all the help and support I received during my research. On my next visit I will bring along copies of my dissertation and all the material that I gathered with their help so that they have it for future reference. And with that I hold that our relationship may continue to grow.

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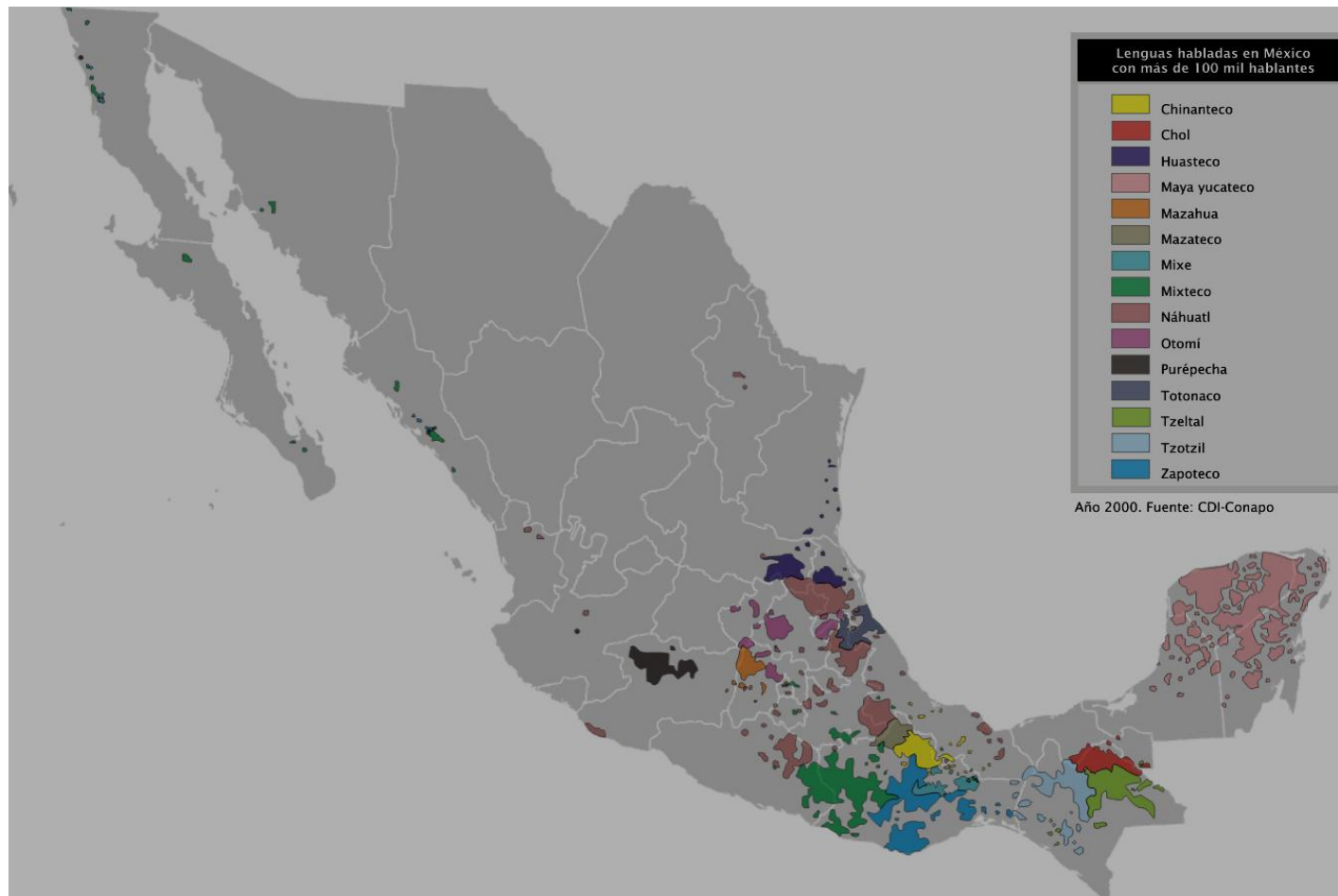
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Appendix 2

Indigenous Languages Spoken in Mexico Today



Mazatec, doña Julieta's language, is 6th from the top

It is spoken mainly in the Sierra Mazateca, Oaxaca

Appendix 3

Recruitment Script

SCRIPT (in person)

I will be writing my dissertation and am interested in interviewing you for my study. I want to learn from you because your knowledge is relevant and my research will be a testimony to that. You and I have had previous conversations and you indicated you were interested in participating in my research. I acknowledge however that your interest does not automatically imply consent and now that I have received my university's ethics approval to move forward with the project as described I respectfully ask you: Are you still interested and agree to be a participant in my study?

My focus is on Indigenous women elders' wisdom and how their teachings deepen relations with nature and with each other. I will interview two women and you are one of them. I will come to your town and stay for approximately one week. During that time I hope to do several interviews with you when and where it is most convenient for you.

Note: Before I began my PhD program I had asked both my participants in person if they would be interested and willing to be interviewed by me in the near future. Although this is not the conventional route, in my case and with the respect I owe to my participants, I needed to know first that they would consider being in my study before I could begin. Prior to the actual research I will ask them again, this time officially, to follow due process.

Appendix 4

Participant Consent Form

Learning from Nature-Based Indigenous Knowledge: A Trail to Understanding Elders' Wisdom

You are invited to participate in a study entitled “Learning from Nature-Based Indigenous Knowledge: A Trail to Understanding Elders' Wisdom” conducted by Gabriela McBee.

Gabriela is a graduate student in the department of Curriculum & Instruction at the University of Victoria. You may contact her if you have questions by telephone at 250 477 4066 (Canada).

As a graduate student, I am required to conduct research as part of the requirements for a degree in Education. It is being conducted under the supervision of Dr. Lorna Williams. You may contact my supervisor at 250 472 5499 (Canada).

Purpose and Objectives: This research project will help shift people who are contemplating ancient Indigenous ways of knowing in a time when examples of sustainable lifestyles and communal spirit are much needed. Indigenous women elders' insights illuminate nature-based and balanced lives. With my research I hope to encourage those contemplating this approach to deepen their interest.

Importance of this Research: This project is important because Indigenous knowledge and wisdom is being lost and this research helps capture some of it.

Participants Selection: You are being asked to participate because your stories and words of wisdom matter and will broaden the state of knowledge.

What is involved: If you agree to voluntarily participate in this research, your participation will include doing several interviews, during which I will ask you to share stories you feel comfortable telling and being used for my research. I will audio record the interviews and later transcribe them. The transcriptions will serve as data base for my investigation. We will schedule the interviews over a one week period. I also ask your permission to keep a journal in which I will write down my experiences during my stay. I will take photos only after first asking for your expressed permission.

Inconvenience: Participation in this study should not cause any inconvenience to you.

Risks: There are no known or anticipated risks to you by participating in this research.

Benefits: Recognition by being listened to with respect; the pleasure of sharing stories with others; sense of purpose as your knowledge is valued by others. You have important messages for younger generations concerning how to live more harmoniously with nature and with each other. Your ways of knowing, teaching, and learning are unique and can enrich mainstream ideas of what knowledge is.

Compensation: As a way to compensate you for your participation, you will be given an honorarium. If you would not participate if the compensation was not offered, then please decline.

Voluntary Participation: Your participation in this research must be completely voluntary. If you do decide to participate, you may withdraw at any time without any consequences or any explanation. If you

do withdraw from the study your data will be used only if you give permission. I will ask for it before I use it.

On-going Consent: To make sure that you continue to consent to participate in this research, I will stay in touch with you to verify that you still do so. I will also establish ongoing verbal consent throughout the week at the beginning of each interview session.

Confidentiality: I will protect your confidentiality and the confidentiality of the data by keeping all research notes and data in a locked filing cabinet in my home and in a password protected computer file.

Dissemination of Results: I anticipate that the results of this study will be shared with others through my dissertation, published article/s, and directly to both participants.

Disposal of Data: With your permission I will keep the data from this study **TO PUT IT INTO THE ARCHIVES OF THE UNIVERSITY OF VICTORIA.**

Contacts: In addition to contacting me and my supervisor, you may verify the ethical approval of this study, or raise any concerns you might have, by contacting the **Human Research Ethics Office at the University of Victoria (250-472-4545 or ethics@uvic.ca).**

Your signature below indicates that you understand the above conditions of participation in this study, that you have had the opportunity to have your questions answered by the researcher, and that you agree to participate in this research project.

<i>Name of Participant</i>	<i>Signature</i>	<i>Date</i>
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Waiving Confidentiality *PLEASE SELECT STATEMENT only if you agree:*

I agree to be identified by name / credited in the results of the study: _____ (Participant's initials)

I agree to have my responses attributed to me by name in the results: _____ (Participant's initials)

Future Use of Data *PLEASE SELECT STATEMENT:*

I agree to the use of my data in future research: _____ (Participant's initials)

I do not agree to the use of my data in future research: _____ (Participant's initials)

I agree to be contacted in the event my data is requested for future research: _____ (Participant's initials)

I agree to archiving my recorded and transcribed oral history: _____ (Participant's initials)

A copy of this consent will be left with you, and a copy will be taken by the researcher.

Appendix 5

Guiding Questions for Reflective Interviewing

1. What are the most pressing issues of living in harmony with nature and with each other that can be addressed by your stories and words of wisdom?
2. How did you receive/understand your elders' teachings as a young girl?
3. What do you see as being the role of women elders in their communities?
4. What is your role? How do others see your role?
5. How do you share your knowledge with others? ... with children? ... with adolescents? ... with young adults?
6. How does sharing your ancestral wisdom help increase virtue and communal spirit among youth? ... your community? ... family?
7. What are goals and accomplishments you recognize as important for children and youth? Why are they important?
8. Does your community differentiate between levels of understanding in individual's wisdom? Are these levels divided by age? ... experience? ... initiation?
9. How do you teach and motivate children to collaborate without relinquishing their own sense of personal autonomy?
10. What are your core community rituals that bind the group together?
11. How do you affirm and bless children and young people?
12. What rituals, ceremonies, celebrations are important to maintain a balanced life?
13. Tell me about a time when you were learning from your elders.