Opinion Article

LEARNING THROUGH MESSY ATTEMPTS AT HEART-CENTERED REFLECTIVE PRAXIS

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This article wrestles with the question, How can solidarity work be about the settler and not about the settler at the same time (D'Arcangelis, 2015, p. 268)? The authors are a non-Indigenous psychotherapist by training and a Maya Ixil leader who migrated from Nebaj, Guatemala to Ohio, United States. The authors work with the shared goal of upflifting deleted "the" diasporic Maya communities in Ohio as they confront State persecution and even terror. Within efforts toward coalition building and world-traveling (Lugones, 2003), a paradox develops in which settler-colonial positionality must be interrogated but not centered so that oppressive dynamics can be dismantled and Indigenous voices made principal. In this paper, the authors attempt to make visible the ways in which relational accountability provoked both rupture and growth toward more ethical solidarity work. We do so through the lens of two experiences in which interpersonal nuances (such as opacity and anxiety) reflected larger structural dynamics of colonial dehumanization. We offer learnings on using messy, heart-centered work toward political efficacy, especially healthy allyship. Finally, we offer lessons for non-Indigenous allies who seek to build a better world that supports the flourishing of Indigenous peoples.
Keywords: reflective praxis, solidarity, immigration, Maya, community psychology

1. Introduction

> "We have resistance to deep coalition work across difference...
> We do not love others well enough" (Roshanravan, 2018, p. 153).

This essay is inspired by collaborative work between a white woman born and raised in Los Angeles and diasporic Maya communities in northeast Ohio, United States. It explores interpersonal layers of solidarity work and what they reveal about efforts to undo colonial power structures. Government persecution against migrant peoples is escalating under the Trump administration and causing enormous harm to the Ohio diaspora. The need is urgent to connect to sources of strength and resistance and to work according to "healthy allyship," a concept presented by Gerónimo Ramírez. Healthy allyship requires collaborative relationships of shared power in which the communities' decisions are heard and respected. It also demands critical

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reflexivity that interrogates colonial ways of interacting so that we can work toward mutual liberation with respect and transparency. Critical reflexive practice has been identified as a core competency in Community Psychology, a field that values cultivating scholar-activists equipped to relate ethically in coalition with communities working toward social justice (Ciófalo et al., 2024; Langhout, 2015; Siham-Fernandez, 2018). What it means in daily practice can be messy and complex, requiring engagement with the heart and body in ways that serve our collective goals. This paper aims to make visible some of the heart-centered learnings wrought from attempts to work in solidarity toward ending oppression and promoting Indigenous survivance—what Almeida et al. (2017) have called "communitarian pilgrimage to a meaningful humanity" (p. 64). In the examples presented here, Maya community leaders illuminated ways in which affective elements (such as biases, expectations, and anxiety) impacted the authors' ability to work together toward liberatory goals. By reflecting critically on these moments, we contribute to discourse around embodied emotional experiences' instructive potential. Such reflections continue Community Psychology's efforts to re-integrate the colonial separation among mind, body, heart, and socio-political realities (Roshanravan, 2018).

1.1 Author Positionality

Author 1: originally trained as psychotherapist, I (Robin Chancer) have been working as a clinician for over fifteen years. I am a white, cisgendered woman born and raised in the Los Angeles area of the United States. I was deeply embedded in the psychology-industrial complex for much of my career. I made my living through psychotherapy. My professional licensure afforded me a privileged position, with the power to diagnose and treat a range of mental health disorders as outlined in the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM), the authoritative text created by the American Psychiatric Association, which has been used to spread hegemonic concepts of mental health around the globe (Marsella, 2003). I have been an actor of the State in many situations; my professional position affords me the power to influence medical records, bill insurance companies, report abuse, even to recommend institutionalization. Though I have always held ambivalence around my role, I have benefitted from the privilege it has given me.

Author 2: My name is Gerónimo Ramírez and I belong to the Maya Ixil people. I was born and raised in Nebaj, a Maya community in the highlands of what is now called Guatemala. I was brought up by my maternal grandmother, a survivor of state violence during the internal armed conflict and a lifelong defender of collective rights. Since the age of thirteen, I have been committed to defending the rights of the Maya people: our lands, our ways of life, our languages, and the rights of Mother Earth. This commitment has guided my path both in our ancestral territories and in the United States.

At the height of the COVID-19 pandemic, I led the creation of the first Maya Ixil Health Promoter team in the Washington, D.C. region, to build and implement a process rooted in the ways of Maya Peoples and to offer support in our own language to community members facing language barriers and exclusion from basic services. It was a community-led response grounded in solidarity, ancestral knowledge, and the urgent need to care for our people.

I now live in Ohio, where I continue my work as a community leader. I work especially with young Maya people in the diaspora, nurturing their leadership, cultural roots, and active

participation, while opening pathways toward historical and linguistic justice for Maya Peoples. I offer interpretation services in the Ixil language and accompany community members in legal, health, educational, and advocacy spaces.

1.2 Background

Growing up in southern California, I (Robin Chancer) became passionate about immigration justice from an early age. Many families I knew endured separation as family members were displaced or tried to gain documentation. Many lived with educational discrimination and precarious or exploitative work circumstances. As I went through my clinical training process in adulthood, I knew I wanted to address these injustices and promote a world where migrant communities were celebrated and respected. After living in Guatemala and then working with recent immigrants from Latin America, I became increasingly outraged by the multitude of harms caused by capricious, dehumanizing immigration policies.

I searched for ways to combine my professional life and political activism. I saw potential in legal advocacy with immigration cases. In 2016, I connected with an immigration attorney who invited me to work with him at the Immigrant Worker Project (IWP), a small but dedicated legal office in Canton, Ohio, United States. I began writing forensic psychological evaluations for asylum and other legal cases. When forensic reports are submitted as evidence, they have been shown to increase the chances of winning asylum (Atkinson et al., 2021). Certainly, this role was problematic as well. It focused on small-scale change. It positioned me within the government's schema for determining who "deserves" legal protection. It required me to write a person's story as a trauma narrative, perpetuating the "damage-centered" model (Nxumalo & Tuck, 2023). With these ethical drawbacks in mind, I explored ways to participate in larger change movements beyond State logics.

Most of the people I interviewed were Indigenous Maya people from Guatemala. Many had been forcibly displaced due to violence perpetrated by gangs and/or family members, but neither source of violence constituted a protected category under U.S. immigration law. IWP fought these injustices in many ways including petitioning for victims of gang violence to be protected, and filing class-action lawsuits against both a local school district and the Border Patrol for discriminatory practices (see: Muniz-Muniz v. U.S. Border Patrol, 2013).

2016 was the final year of President Barack Obama's tenure. At the time, even amid unacceptable injustice, there was a sense of relative predictability in the immigration system. As long as people followed established procedures, most did not have to live in fear of detention or deportation. I saw many people establish a sense of well-being and safety after migrating to the United States. After the election of Donald Trump in 2016, however, U.S. treatment of immigrants became even more cruel and unpredictable.. Policies such as "zero tolerance" sought to prosecute all border-crossers as criminals, and resulted in thousands of children being separated from their families with no plan for reunification (Ewing, 2018). Trump's punishing approach to immigration has only worsened after being re-elected in 2024. As of this writing, both adults and children are being shackled and detained when they appear for court hearings. Parents must decide whether to separate from their children or be deported with them. Immigration agents have been terrorizing communities by kidnapping and even disappearing people (Ghandi et al., 2025). Having worked through the first and now the second Trump administration, the authors have witnessed escalating State violence impacting the daily lives, families, and bodies of local

people. Many are afraid to leave their houses or report crimes. Gerónimo Ramírez shared that on August 6th, 2025, a member of Comunidad Sol was arrested and detained in a workplace raid (personal communication, 2025). The stakes are high and there is no time to waste in the fight for dignity and safety.

1.3 History of the Maya Diaspora in Ohio

Maya peoples began migrating to Ohio in the mid-1980s when a transnational corporation (Case Farms, Inc.) started recruiting Guatemalan refugees (Grabell, 2017). During this time, many highland communities (such as K'iche' and Ixil people) were living in the aftermath of the most brutal government-perpetrated violence of Guatemala's civil war. Millions of Maya people were killed or displaced by genocide, destruction of their villages, and resulting poverty (Foxen, 2020; Loucky & Moors, 2000). Survivors were recruited with promises of a United States-based company that offered them regular work and housing. A Case Farms, Inc. human-resources manager drove to a Catholic church in Florida to recruit the first handful of workers. The manager admitted to preferring Guatemalan laborers because they worked hard and had nowhere else to go. He is quoted as saying, "Guatemalans can't go back home. They're here as political refugees. If they go back home, they get shot" (Grabell, 2017, para. 25). With few viable alternatives, many Guatemalan people were willing to endure working conditions that others found intolerable. Working conditions at Case Farms factories have been notoriously dangerous and even illegal, and workers have routinely been fired for protesting working conditions or being too injured to work (Grabell, 2017).

Though many Guatemalan immigrants were indeed political refugees, they were never given refugee status. Only a few gained asylum (Grabell, 2017). Most remained undocumented, which meant they did not have the same labor rights as other workers (such as workers' compensation and discrimination protections). The Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA) has issued citations 70 times at Case Farms locations since 1988, but any potential penalties for have been minimally enforced—a 2023 OSHA report found that the same safety violations are ongoing and have not been remedied (OSHA, 2024). Despite deaths, injuries, fines, and citations, Case Farms has continued its unsafe practices for over three decades.

As Maya communities formed in Ohio, more family members migrated and larger populations took root. IWP estimates that Ohio now contains tens of thousands of Maya people from at least a dozen nations including K'iche', Ixil, Mam, Achi, Q'eqchi', and Aguacateco (personal communication, 2023). Migration continued even as U.S. immigration policy restricted immigrants' rights. For example, in 2002, the United States Supreme Court decided that workers may protest poor working conditions but employers are not obligated to hold their jobs or pay them back pay (Hoffman Plastic Compounds, Inc. v. NLRB, 535 U.S. 137,2002). This decision still stands today. Without legal status, workers have little recourse for labor exploitation or injuries. Furthermore, they have limited access to resources such as health insurance, social services, and housing. Adding another layer of discrimination, Maya people are not recognized as Indigenous by the United States but are grouped into the category of Hispanic or Latinx/e (Lebaron, 2012). Such categorization threatens to erase their ancestral identities.

Nevertheless, Maya Peoples in Ohio are building thriving communities, continuing cultural practices, and generating survivance. I (Gerónimo Ramírez) am one of the leaders of Comunidad

Sol, a nonprofit organization founded in 2023 by Indigenous youth and families in Ohio. Our mission is to strengthen community leadership, revitalize Indigenous languages and ancestral knowledge, and advocate for the rights and dignity of Indigenous Peoples both in the U.S. and in our original territories. All of our work is guided by a commitment to historical justice, the memory of our struggles, and the living resistance of our peoples. We are building bridges across generations, territories, and ways of thinking to ensure a dignified future for our communities.

Among many supports, Comunidad Sol provides what it calls "accompaniment" including interpretation services, connecting with local resources, attending appointments and court dates, advocating for people who are detained, and organizing gatherings where ancestral practices are celebrated and continued. Its future visions include a school for Maya children and a community garden that will serve as a sacred gathering space in which to continue Maya cultivation practices. Comunidad Sol promotes Maya resurgence and resistance despite fierce persecution.

In this essay, everything shared by Maya leaders is disclosed with permission toward the goal of building healthy allyship.

1.4 Aspiring to Solidarity

I (Robin Chancer) sought to join Comunidad Sol and IWP's efforts to fight the pervasive dehumanization and violence perpetrated by the State toward Guatemalan migrants. I have been heartbroken to see top U.S. officials treat them if they are nothing, as if their lives are expendable, as if they are evil, or as if their children do not cry the same tears as other children. My goal is to work with them in solidarity, yet I am conscious that I was formed in a colonial context and often represent State structures. I have long grappled with how to involve myself ethically. How do I simultaneously address my position while moving away from it? How do I escape my colonial biases while confronting the power dynamics of our interactions? In other words, how can our interactions be about me and not about me at the same time?

I have observed that even as I aspire to dismantle structural oppression alongside the communities, the distance between our worlds shows up interpersonally as nuances of trust and understanding must be navigated. I am learning that I must work to dismantle settler-colonial structures and harmful interpersonal patterns in myself. My immersion in colonizer worldviews has given me relational deficits which have emerged along the way and must be addressed. These lessons speak to larger issues around settlers who hope to work in solidarity with Indigenous peoples. As Cooper (2016) said in "The Interpersonal is Political: Lessons from Indigenous Solidarity Organizing": "We need to take the interpersonal seriously in order to embody our political convictions" (para. 4). The two examples discussed below revealed areas where I needed to grow relationally if I aim to approach anti-colonial allyship. By putting them in conversation with Maya colleagues and scholars, the authors share conclusions borne from three dimensions of reflective praxis: attuning to and honoring opacity, heartfelt engagement, and relational accountability. Together, these elements triangulate to form a dynamic crossroads of personal and political engagement.

2. Honoring Opacity

> "I had to begin to inhabit that unstable space of not-knowing, of admitting that I did not even know how to begin to know" (Alexander, 2005, p. 294).

A few years into my (Robin Chancer's) time with IWP, I met with a young, recently arrived new mother from Guatemala whom I will call Cecy. Cecy had been referred by a maternity care social worker who conducted home visits with young moms in the area. By the time Cecy met me, she had been approached by several well-meaning people in positions of authority including teachers, doctors, and social workers. All of them expressed concern for her well-being and wanted her to share her private feelings with them. The referring social worker was concerned that the young woman might be depressed because she appeared quiet and downtrodden. I seemed a logical referral choice according to established mental-health structures: I held professional credentials approved by our state's Board of Behavioral Sciences, I spoke Spanish, and I regularly worked with immigrants from Guatemala. Yet I had little shared experience with Cecy nor knowledge of her local wellness practices. In her eyes, I was not simply a potential helper (if she needed help at all). My position afforded me a certain degree of faith from other Western-trained professions but in no way served to gain her trust. Based on my education and social status, I benefited from the assumption that I had something to offer even though I represent the colonizer culture which had harmed Cecy and her ancestors for generations.

Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, Cecy and I met via a video call. The referring social worker believed Cecy spoke Spanish, so I spoke to her in Spanish. After introducing myself and admiring her newborn, I began asking Cecy about her emotional well-being and screening for post-partum depression.

> "Have you been feeling sad or depressed (triste o deprimida)?"
>
> "Sí," she answered. I nodded gently. After several more assessment questions, I asked,
>
> "How bad does it get for you? Do you get to the point where you think about dying?"
>
> After a pause, she quietly replied, "Sí."
>
> I proceeded through the suicide protocols I had been taught so methodically in my training.
>
> Does she have a plan? Does she have the means? "Do you think about how you might die?" I asked.
>
> "Sí," she answered. My stomach dropped.
>
> "How might you do it?" I asked, mentally scanning through possible emergency referrals.
>
> "Sí," was her reply.
>
> I paused, realizing I had made a mistake. Perhaps she did not understand me, I thought. I recalled where she was born in Guatemala, a heavily Indigenous area where K'iche' is the dominant language.
>
> "Would you prefer to speak in K'iche'?" I asked.
>
> "Sí pues," she answered.

In that moment, the dynamics of our relationship came into sharp focus for me. I was one of many authority figures who peppered her with questions. I soon learned that this was not a culturally appropriate way to interact with her. She was a young K'iche' woman navigating a new country in her second and third languages. She did not know my heart or my intentions. We had not established a level of trust in which she felt comfortable saying whether she understood me, let alone sharing her deepest feelings. I learned later that my Spanish was barely decipherable for her, as I am not a native speaker. Understandably, she spoke sparingly. By saying very little, she challenged my position as someone who had any right to her private information. I read opacity in our interactions—she kept her thoughts illegible. She pushed back against my inappropriate attempts to understand her.

Édouard Glissant (1997) considered opacity—the unknowability of the other—a generative teacher that challenges the colonial gaze. Where the colonial mind arrogates to see and know all things, scholars from intentionally oppressed groups have called inscrutability a crucial survival skill. As Taylor (2023) noted, "Glissant's *opacity* offers room to breathe…countering practices of *othering* which are then followed by trying to understand *otherness* by making it transparent" (p. 76, emphasis original). By remaining unreadable, Cecy made clear: *We are not the same. You can't make me transparent. You have no right to answers*. Her silence illuminated the space between us, revealing my intrusive and untrained eye. *You do not know me. What makes you think you're prepared to try?*

Dakota Sioux scholar Vine Deloria Jr. (2022) noted a similar experience for Carl Jung when he visited the Taos Pueblo nation. "Never before had I run into such an atmosphere of secrecy" (p. 20), Jung mused. He reflected on the distinction from more "accessible" Western civilizations, "whose sacraments have long ago ceased to be mysteries" (p. 20). Such secrecy sparked his curiosity but did not inspire him toward deeper relationship. He did not, for example, investigate *why* Pueblo people resisted sharing their secrets with him. He framed mystery as a cultural idiosyncrasy rather than an implication of him in any way. The consequences were grave. What Jung did not understand, he ultimately devalued. He interpreted opacity as a "primitive" quality generalizable to Native peoples, which fed stereotypes of their inferiority to Europeans' cognitive and rational capacities. Such degradation further cemented the colonial hierarchy of humanity. Colonialism's racist goals include "that nothing unfamiliar and 'other' should survive" (Frosh, 2006, p. 261).. In my meeting with Cecy, I was in the position to do the same. Refusing to honor opacity is therefore a violent act, devaluing both the individual's privacy and the many mysteries of their ancestral cosmology.. We (the authors) have seen counselors, lawyers, and even judges interpret a reserved communication style as evidence of dishonesty or cognitive deficit, with dire consequences for individuals' safety and autonomy. I embodied a position of power which Cecy astutely resisted. If I interpreted her manner as evidence of severe depression, I would fail to see it as an act of resistance. I could unleash the power of the State through hospitalization or the involvement of Child Protective Services. Such actions would further dehumanize her and devalue her ingenious method of subverting my intrusiveness.

Sensing that there was much I did not see, I instead sat with the confusion produced by her opacity. It generated difficult questions for me: What am I doing here? What is happening for her? Why am I asking her all these questions, if she doesn't want me to? And how could we build trust, if it were possible at all?

I offered a second meeting with a K'iche' interpreter, María Ixcoy Mejía. Cecy was reluctant to meet again, but after some conversation with María's patient and gentle soul, she began to speak more. María informed me, "She doesn't want to speak with our cameras on. She's afraid you gave her baby *mal de ojo* ('evil eye') last time." I knew only a little about *mal de ojo* and understood that I was out of my depth. "I see," I responded. In my next clumsy attempt at attunement, I asked, "María, how can we avoid giving the baby 'evil eye?'" María paused, looking embarrassed. "*Pues*, it is something we believe. No one should look at the baby for a few months."

I wondered about María's shyness on the subject. Had I failed to establish an affirming atmosphere with her as well? I asked Cecy what could help her feel more comfortable. We decided that a conference phone call without cameras would be acceptable. Speaking in this way, Cecy relaxed and began to share more. I asked again about depression and suicidal thoughts. This time, she vehemently denied any such feelings. "I didn't understand you last time," she shared. Still, her answers were very brief, and there was little emotion in her voice. I wondered if she might be suffering more than she wanted to share.

After the session, I debriefed with María. "Do you think she is feeling depressed?" I asked. She replied, "I think so, but I believed her that she doesn't think about death." She then explained, "But, you see, it's not normal to ask us these questions. We don't have a word for 'depressed.' We don't have a word for 'psychologist.' We don't ask each other questions about how we're feeling."

Translation problems only scratched the surface of my mistakes. My ignorance of Cecy's world was evident in the first few minutes of our session, when I admired her baby and betrayed my unfamiliarity with *mal de ojo.* Our worlds then collided in both the form and content of our interaction. A semi-structured interview led by me was a vestige of my colonial psychology training. For her, it was entirely foreign and unwanted. My invasive, emotion-based questions projected a subjectivity created by and for Eurocentric cultures. For her, they were inappropriate and alien. As Marsella (2003) has noted in research on depression across cultures, even my conceptualization of depression is culture-bound. In many societies globally, "Complaints of personal meaninglessness, worthlessness, helplessness, guilt, and suicidal thoughts are reduced or absent" (p. 10). María confirmed that I was screening for symptoms based on an ethnocentric understanding of mental health. Eventhe fact that we were meeting at all originated in hegemonic expectations around mental health screening and healing. The frameworks from which I related attempted to pull Cecy into my worldview rather than honoring hers.

If I wanted to bridge our worlds toward common goals, I needed not only the intention but the *skill* to navigate through them. María Lugones (2003) has called these skills "world-traveling," which she named as fundamental to love and mutual liberation. They include the capacity to see each other with openness and curiosity—to deepen our understanding of others' realities and thereby better understand our own. "Only when we have travelled to each other's 'worlds' are we fully subjects to each other" (Lugones, 1987, p. 17). Whatever my intention, our interaction was far more about me than it was about Cecy. Through opacity, Cecy demonstrated an active subjectivity that refused my misguided efforts. Her refusal also invited me into part of her world: how she viewed me. Lugones (1987) described understanding "what it is to be them and what it is to be ourselves in their eyes" (p. 17) as a vital skill of world-traveling.

Cecy showed me where I was at odds with the values of respect and solidarity to which I aspired. By doing so, she broke open the "ways intentions work in different logics [and] different

worlds of meaning," (Hoagland, 2019, p. 260). She revealed our multiple subjectivities—something Lugones emphasized in her vision of world-traveling and her analysis of the "trickster" (Hoagland, 2019; Lugones, 1987). I was a well-meaning person who cared about Cecy's well-being. I was also a dominating presence pushing colonial logics of "helping." Cecy opened a third subjectivity for me: one who questioned the logic of my position and who glimpsed how much I needed to learn. Among Cecy's multiple subjectivities, she was a young mother in a new and difficult situation, an Indigenous woman with her own sources of strength, and a shrewd saboteur who challenged imposing efforts to "help."

The rupture I experienced propelled me to make changes. I worked harder to learn about the Maya communities through consulting with María and other leaders, studying, and taking K'iche' lessons. I visited areas in Guatemala that many in the Ohio diaspora called home. I met some of the leaders' family members. I learned that non-hierarchical relationships and reciprocal dialogue are of utmost importance, and that much can be expressed through few words. I became aware that restraint and privacy were cultivated, in part, because of different villages' experiences during the civil war. I learned of complex layers of relationships among Maya nations represented in Ohio, as well as political goals which coalesced and diverged; they were centuries ahead of me in doing coalition work across multiple differences. They navigated "messy, unruly and agonistic encounters with difference on the ground" (Jazeel, 2011, p. 79) regularly as they joined together to uplift Maya lifeways and advocate for each others' rights. Jazeel (2011) identified these capacities as components of a "future-oriented political imagination" (p. 77), one in which diverse peoples work together for mutual liberation. Fighting oppression together must include the capacity to embrace even "untranslatable difference" (p. 77) with mutual respect and care.

My life trajectory changed as well. Wanting to join efforts to decolonize psychology as it is practiced by Western countries, I studied Community, Liberation, Indigenous, and Eco-psychologies at Pacifica Graduate Institute in Santa Barbara, California. Around this time, Gerónimo Ramírez came to Ohio, with an extensive background in community organizing. We began to dialogue about sounder ways to approach wellness and flourishing.

3. The Uses of Anxiety

> "It is important to explore the psychic investments which keep us complicit in oppression and out-of-sync with our values. This will cause feelings of vertigo...but can be used as an expansion." (Ahmed, 2004, para. 163)

In 2023, the authors and other local leaders began a multi-year using Participatory Action Research (PAR) endeavor. The liberatory educational philosophy of Paulo Freire is often credited as a foundation of Participatory Action Research (PAR) (see: Fine & Torre, 2021; Lenette, 2022; Lykes, 2017). PAR centers a repeated iterative process of action, reflection, and action, emphasizing collective decision-making continued over the entirety of a project. Participants are not merely informants or objects to be studied; they are equal co-researchers and co-experts (Lenette, 2022). We view Participatory Action Research as a framework that closely aligns with Indigenous values and lifeways because of its orientation toward dialogical processes,

relationality, shared power, anti-colonial resistance, and knowledge co-creation (Lenette, 2022; Lykes, 2017; Muhammad et al., 2014; Nxumalo & Tuck, 2023; Torre & Ayala, 2009).

According to Comunidad Sol, contemporary Mayan nations (such as K'iche' and Ixil) meet in assembly or *asambleas* to discuss important matters. They may dialogue for months before reaching consensus on how to approach a problem or whom to nominate for leadership positions. A top-down or "expert"-driven approach to problem-solving is culturally inappropriate. Every person must be heard, fostering an environment of mutual respect and interdependence. Similarly, PAR demands equitable power dynamics and relationality on a more profound level than does modernist extractive research. It focuses on how well researchers build relationships of trust and collaboration (Lenette, 2022; Lykes & Távara, 2020). Many Indigenous intellectuals, including Maya scholars, have emphasized that such an approach is consistent with Indigenous values of relationality with all beings (Duran & Duran, 1995; Tuhiwai Smith, 2012; Wilson, 2008). Within Maya cosmology, all beings, human and non-human, are interdependent relatives who must be treated with respect and reciprocity. Individual wellness cannot be separated from that of the community and the natural world (Banach & Herrera, 2021; MLA-TAA-JCS, 2019; Tecun, 2024). In the Ixil language, a phrase for well-being (*eela chil vatz*) can be translated as "equity," or "all the parts have to be equal" (Banach & Herrera, 2021, p. 52).

During the second year of the project, I (Robin Chancer) asked how the Maya leaders perceived my presence in the group. I thought they might want me to do more advocacy or remove myself from some gatherings. To my surprise, they encouraged me repeatedly to "feel comfortable" and to "relax." "You've been with us a long time now," Gerónimo Ramírez said. "We want to know what you really think."

Several scholars have highlighted emotional and physical missing pieces in much reflective work. Langhout (2015) called these "affective politics," or the ways in which our bodies, emotions, longings, and relationships shape our political movements (p. 267). Siham Fernández (2018) identified "heart-centered work" as vitally connected to collaborative research and action. As I attuned to my emotional and embodied experience, I reflected on Gerónimo's insight and became aware of uneasiness I did not want to feel. He was right. I felt cautious and nervous. I held a great deal of tension in my body. My breathing was shallow. I made limited eye contact. I struggled with awkwardness and hesitation as I wondered, "Am I doing this right?"

Anxiety is not uncommon in the coalition process, but it can be a major hurdle in partnership building, especially for white women (Ahmed, 2004; D'Arcangelis, 2015; Roshanravan, 2018). It prevents honest engagement and requires emotional work from the people with whom we hope to join in solidarity. I was embarrassed that the leaders sensed my unease. In trying to minimize myself, I had unwittingly caused them to expend energy making me feel comfortable. They revealed to me that my anxiety interfered with our developing relationships. "We want to spend time together, be natural, and laugh," they guided. Unless I was able to do that, my psychic walls would drive wedges between us.

Shame, anxiety, imposter syndrome—call it what I may, it was egocentric and it acted as a barrier. The result was a form of "cordial racism" in which I substituted politeness for in-depth engagement. Cordial racism has been defined as superficial niceness characterized by a "walking on eggshells" feeling that prioritizes conflict avoidance over deep connection (see: Oliveira Lima & Vala, 2004; Owensby, 2005). Once again, I was out of sync with my values of joining together

toward shared goals. In my efforts to minimize myself, I inadvertently made our interactions about me.

In truth, my anxious energy was not unique to our interactions. I had struggled with it my whole life. For years, I dutifully sought Western psychotherapy to assuage it. I learned to "self"-soothe, to change "my" thought patterns, and to face "my" fears. My self-concern ("Am I doing this right?") was not problematized, however. If anything, it was framed as a positive intention (wanting to avoid harm).I did not seethat my healing is necessary to give others the respect and transparency they deserve. The individualized therapy I received kept me trapped in an egocentric orientation, the "white indulgence [of] a gross attempt to understand the self through the self rather than through the other: narcissism par excellence" (Leonardo & Porter, 2010, p. 148). Through my conversations with the Maya leaders, I grasped the inseparability of intrapsychic, interpersonal, and political praxis. My preoccupations maintained the self/other separation of my colonial heritage. If unease kept me alienated from deeper relationship, I could not fully meet the leaders in their worlds. I drained energy that could be better spent on what they wanted: the resurgence of their lifeways and shared political power.

The PAR process of action, reflection, and action provided a framework of regular, frequent dialogue. Through it, I felt how encountering each other can make us more whole. Reflecting on Lugones' theory of multiple subjectivities, we pulled apart complex webs of intention and impact. We pursued understanding through sharing how we see ourselves and each other. Leaders of Comunidad Sol offered their vision for coalitional work across difference. They have called it *alianza sana* or "healthy alliance." They describe healthy alliance as one of horizontal relationships in which the communities' lived experiences and realities are honored. Their vision is not a positivist ideal of perfect harmony (a goal I realized was my implicit aspiration). They expect moments of conflict and misunderstanding, but look for partners who engage honestly and respect their decisions. In a meeting of Comunidad Sol leaders, they described their desire in this way: "We want allies who extend their hands, who learn alongside us. We want them to accompany us in the conservation, the revitalization, and the promotion" of their Indigenous lifeways (personal communication, 2025, translated by the author).

4. Conclusion

> "Active subjectivity is not abstraction; it emerges from within concrete complex messy contexts, not utopian ones, and we begin to comprehend how our possibilities are framed and how we take them up in relation to others." (Hoagland, 2019, p. 260)

As a psychotherapist, I (Robin Chancer) have frequently observed that small interpersonal moments are powerful. In activism, I have also seen coalitions fall apart not because of differing values, but due to interpersonal conflicts and psychic barriers that drive wedges through alliance building. In this article, I have presented two pivotal interpersonal moments which, when placed in conversation with Maya knowledge holders, connected to larger issues around solidarity work and relationship-building. As Lugones (2003) has noted, a hallmark of coloniality has been to devalue relationships and shatter kinship bonds, replacing relationality with dominance. Relationality can, therefore, act as anticolonial resistance.

Solidarity to uplift Maya migrant communities is urgent amid increased government persecution in the United States. Nevertheless, the involvement of white, non-Indigenous people generates troublesome power dynamics and harmful potential. I, as a colonizer, wrestled with the paradox of involving but not centering myself. Though I have understood the need for critical reflexivity analytically, I was unprepared for the relational ruptures, distrust, murky understanding, and anxieties that impacted our efforts whether or not I intended them.

Interactions must be *about the settler* because when colonizers enters a space, so too do our biases, ignorance, privilege, psychic limits, relational styles, and structural power. We know that our position must be interrogated, biases addressed, and ignorance laid bare. Less often examined are the emotional shortcomings and relational styles that a colonial culture shapes, and the ways those impact collective efforts to create a better world. If I am to love others more fully, I need to face who I am as it emerges relationally. My emotional awareness and health are prerequisites for ethical collaboration. Through our collaborative work, we decided on a joint project: building a garden space where the communities can practice ancestral cultivation methods, reaffirm their ties to each other, and care for Mother Earth. This project will promote wellness more effectively than psychotherapy ever did; it is a grassroots wellness initiative designed by and for the Ohio diaspora existing far outside the confines of Western mental-health interventions.

Certainly, collective work must also *not be about the settler.* In the fight to end oppression and promote Indigenous sovereignty, the desires of oppressed communities are paramount. Colonial logics, methods, and relational patterns (such as egocentricity) must be untangled even as we remain trapped inside them. I am learning that the most direct path is *through*—through relationship, through messy and difficult conversations, and through facing the emotional landscapes that arise along the way. Sitting with unease opens windows to new subjectivities. Bearing witness to untranslatable differences counters the colonial gaze so that we can better see each other's vastness. Respecting each other's autonomy breaks harmful patterns of domination. Good-faith transparency makes accountability possible. Together, these dimensions coalesce to form ever-changing crossroads of personal transformation and political engagement. In our efforts to build a better world, we are each others' guides.

I (Gerónimo Ramírez) have seen many ways in which allyship can build or fall apart. The individual and collective health of our communities is often harmed by unhealthy alliances that reproduce colonial practices. Colonial states have historically divided Indigenous peoples in order to weaken them. In both Guatemala and the United States, many do not listen to our voices or take our collective decisions into account. Governments make decisions which affect our lands and our futures. At times, even some allies—though a minority—fail to respect the processes established by each Maya people. Out of convenience, they divide the community in ways that create conflicts and collective harm.

A healthy alliance looks very different. It is built when an ally walks beside us, listens, and learns from us—without intervention, without usurping our spaces, and without assuming expertise over Indigenous matters. A true ally recognizes themselves as one more companion alongside the carriers of ancestral knowledge, someone who comes not to impose, but to learn with us and to share their own wisdom in ways that strengthen our collective path. That is the kind of solidarity that nurtures unity, dignity, and community well-being.

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