Auto-ethnographic Performance and Self-Empowerment in Sandra Monterroso's *Lix cua rahro/Tus tortillas, mi amor* (2004)

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Abstract

This article addresses how Sandra Monterroso's auto-ethnographic performance, *Tus tortillas, mi amor* (2004), or *Lix cua rahro* (Q'eq'chi Maya), breaks down the ethnic, generic, and social label *tortillera*, while constructing the *tortillera*'s own possibility for resistance. Recreating in video format the painstaking labor of traditional tortilla-making in Guatemala, the artist somewhat unexpectedly unravels a first-person narrative of resistance while she rethinks her own hybrid *Ladina* identity. With humor and performative intensity, Monterroso documents possible tales of passion and agency told in her abuelita's native tongue, Q'eq'chi Maya while showcasing Guatemalan women's rebellion against imposed millenary fates as tortilla makers, housewives, and gender oppression's victims. Monterroso conveys her message to the spectators about the ongoing and unstable process of identity-production using a combination of body talk and the spoken word, while succeeding to resist their gaze by becoming "hard to read," somewhat resistant to appropriation when compared to the widely circulated "text" or iconography on indigeneity and femininity in Guatemala. To produce such an effect, Monterroso's body talk brings to light her own flow of identity-production by juxtaposing the performer's corporeality to anticipated representations of ethnicity and gender.

Keywords:

Tortillas, Tortilla-making, Guatemalan women, indigeneity, and femininity

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In Guatemala, the epitomic role of indigenous women as cultural reproducers is embodied in millenary practices such as tortilla-making. For centuries, women in Guatemala have maintained the daily acts and gestures necessary to feed their families and have passed on the same technique and the memories attached to it to several generations. The cultural manipulation of and social expectations placed on women's bodies' conditions how Maya women and their descendants act and think of themselves in everyday life. Socially assigned gender and ethnic scripts such as the *tortillera* reveal the fetishization of indigeneity[1] and the complex interplay of power and representation within national identity. Diane Nelson reported one ALMG (Academia de Lenguas Mayas de Guatemala) leader's saying, "A Maya woman is not a woman unless she makes tortillas" (2001, 333). To the point is the explanation that comes afterwards in her article where she states that unlike Mexican tortilla-making where a press is often used, in Guatemala the small, fat traditional tortillas are patted out by hand in a process

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that can take several hours, from preparing the corn to rolling the tortillas for each meal (2001, 333). Thus, "the only authentic tortilla is made of corn ground by hand and rolled out in hours of painstaking labor" (2001, 333). In consequence, the women's work is naturalized and glorified as a means of preserving the culture and maintaining tradition, a reason to be prideful and as something that defines them too.

After a long history of subalternity, Guatemalan women are appearing as autonomous political subjects and slowly starting to occupy the public sphere, as documented by Ana L. Carillo (1992, 113 and forth). Nowadays, both *Ladinas*[2] and indigenous women coincide in their fight to promote women's rights, as discussed by Betsy Konefal, Manuela Camus, and Diane Nelson. I argue that Guatemalan women have been subverting, contesting, and resisting traditional power discourses by different means and strategies, including in tortilla-making. Maya women and their descendants manifest their strength and ability to rewrite history and to pass on core communal values and beliefs, which is the case in daily activities such as tortilla-making; this is a daily ritual practice in which women use a set of gestures and a given rhythm culminating in making tortillas effectively and consistently.

In this essay, I analyze Sandra Monterroso's performance, *Tus tortillas, mi amor* (2004), or *Lix cua rahro* in Q'eq'chi Maya, a performance work that breaks down the ethnic, generic, and social label *tortillera*. While deconstructing the epitomic Guatemalan *tortillera*, Monterroso also constructs her own 'anti-story' as a possibility for resistance. Because Monterroso herself self-identifies as a non-indigenous woman, and even though she has been learning and practicing one of her indigenous grandmother's native tongue – Q'eq'chi; Maya – to which she was also exposed as very young child, her auto-ethnographic exploration into tortilla-making becomes problematic. In order to debunk the Guatemalan *tortillera*, Monterroso conveys her message to the spectators about the ongoing and unstable process of identity-

production using a combination of bodily strategies, the spoken word, and auto-ethnographic exploration.[3] I understand auto-ethnography as a qualitative research method that combines different aspects of social studies; auto = self, ethno = culture, graphy = research process. It is a controversial topic in ethnography and its meaning and consideration has been shifting more recently as personal narratives become more instrumental in understanding subaltern and silenced voices: "The meanings and applications of autoethnography have evolved in a manner that makes precise definition difficult" (Ellingson and Ellis 2008). Approaching this performance through an auto-ethnographic approach allows for a better understanding of Monterroso's own subject position, artistic engagement, and the complex critical mediation she proposes as a form of embodied anthropology.[4] This performance is thus about the conflicts of identity as Monterroso questions, records, analyzes, expands on, and voices her own point-of-view or lived experience while going through the same traditional process of tortilla-making well-known in Guatemala. In this article, I analyze one of three performance strategies[5] employed by Monterroso in *Tus tortillas*, and I focus solely on her auto-ethnographic exploration. Ultimately, *Lix cua rahro* re-signifies the epitomic Guatemalan *tortillera* while opening up a venue for a counter-narrative or new social script, which I argue is anchored on a long-standing genealogy of hybridity and the hard-won contemporary status of *Ladina* women in all fringes of Guatemalan society.

Tus tortillas, mi amor is a 24-hour performance reduced to a 12:30 minute video with a mix of Spanish and English subtitles, including some references in Q'eq'chi' Maya, which is the mainly spoken language in the video. It won first prize in the 3rd Central American Video Art Contest in San José, Costa Rica, in 2004 and, in addition, also won a special prize for its "precise recording as a performance" (Díaz 2004). It depicts a woman of mixed race seated at a kitchen table chewing corn as she performs a ritual pronouncing Maya Q'eq'chi' words and spitting the corn into a mixing bowl

for tortilla dough preparation. This performance was filmed from overhead, giving the impression that everything is smaller than in real life, as if tied to the ground.

The scenario resembles the Maya kitchen in Guatemala City's ethnographic museum. It has terracotta tiles on the floor, a display of blue metal pots hanging on the walls and strategically positioned in distinct working stations, and several maize cobs and distinct natural dried herbs and elements recalling the staples of the traditional diet in the region. The background is purposefully darkened, while the projected light from above focuses on the kitchen table where the performer enacts her tortilla-making process. As the performance progresses, the lighting and camera increasingly focus more on the performer, her body, the tortilla-dough, and the tortilla-making process. Her body and the salivated corn pulp intermingle many times through a careful manipulation of camera angles and perspectives. In the video screening, at 25 seconds, she starts speaking, intoning an incantation in her grandmother's native tongue, and for each utterance, subtitles show on the screen, first in Spanish, and a couple of seconds later, in English. At 4:05 minutes, there is a close-up of the *olla* or pot with a repugnant fermenting pulp that seems to be moving all by itself. Then, at 5:20 minutes, she slowly spits into the pot a long stream of saliva, water, and a mushed corn pulp, which forms all together. From minutes 5 to 8, sweat and tears are also incorporated into the dough that the performer now steadily kneads. At around minute 9, while she proclaims in Q'ekchi' Maya that "she [the woman] fornicates" (Monterroso 2004), an assembly line of small balls of dough, like chicken eggs, is slowly laid down on the table, and at 10:33 minutes, above the subtitle "soul and body" (Monterroso 2004), Monterroso is stamping a heart shape into her now flattened out tortillas, and begins to pour her blood into each one of these indentations.[6] Lastly, at 12:10 minutes she starts to cook the tortillas in a pan, and then serves them warm in a basket for the camera. The last minutes of the performance are reserved for a voice off that repeats the title of the poem

and the performance again, "Lix cua rahro," which is then displayed on the screen successively, in Spanish, followed by English.

The act of *tortillar* explored in *Tus tortillas* is a performance that replicates a simple daily activity, and uses a traditional domestic setting, the kitchen, to deconstruct the apparently homogenous identity of indigenous women and their descendants in Guatemala. The performer engages in a strategy that allows for the visibility of mainstream representations of the *tortillera* that make her Other and leads to rethinking and reconstructing her own subjectivity and identity in a "new" hybrid iconography. I contend that such a careful set up and manipulated setting are crucial in giving the spectators a sense of intimacy and allowing them to engage with what is not traditionally available – the private space of the Maya women and their descendants' home. In *Lix cua rahro,* Monterroso goes through a visible transformation while embodying and becoming a new kind of *tortillera* – one that is purposefully detaching herself from the Ixil Museum's traditional Maya kitchen and ethnic Other. She resists the spectators' gaze or scopophilia by becoming 'hard to read' and somewhat resistant to appropriation when compared to the widely circulated 'text' or iconography on indigeneity and femineity in Guatemala. Confronting ingrained notions of authenticity and an historical devaluing of indigenous people's *cosmovisión* [worldview], Monterroso sheds light on her own flow of identity-production by juxtaposing her own corporeality to anticipated representations of ethnicity and gender.

In the scope of daily practices, smaller acts of rebellion and resistance are part of what constitutes the site of struggle and contradictions that is indigenous women and their descendants' identity. In the fight for identity as human right, indigenous women play a key role by passing down customs and knowledge from generation to generation – a fundamental contribution for the preservation of indigenous peoples' social, cultural, economic, and political traditions (Mejía López 2006). The appropriation of

gestures long thought to be socially and culturally meaningless – such as *tortillar*, creatively reenacted by Monterroso in this performance, can potentially lead to re-signifying practices that question and deconstruct the national narrative of symbolic violence that corrupts Guatemalan women's daily lives, particular indigenous women and their descendants. Sociologist Pierre Bourdieu has theorized symbolic violence as "a form of power that is directly exerted on the bodies and, just like magic, without any physical coercion"[7] (Bourdieu quoted in Plaza Velasco 2007, 135). It is thus a symbolic force, a violence, which "acts in an insidious, invisible, and gentle manner in the deepest of the body"[8] (Plaza Velasco 2007, 135). Unlike physical or direct violence, symbolic violence works 'gently' until it fulfills its goal of mining and controlling the subject from inside, as a self-regulatory or self-censorship mechanism. In the poem/incantation that accompanies this performance, Monterroso talks about a "killer of white butterflies" as a male presence that destroys the woman's soul according to Maya mythology (Monterroso 2004). I interpret this never-seen-but-felt male presence as an indirect reference to Guatemalan women's current struggle with gender violence.

Presently, the women's situation in Guatemala has failed to improve due to the predominance of a *machista* culture of violence in which women are constantly objectified and relegated to the ancestral domestic sphere. Typically, young indigenous women learn to *tortillar* starting around three years old and develop into accomplished *tortilleras* after many years of practice. From the kitchen and starting at a tender age, this adaptation and domestication of the indigenous women's bodies to the national narrative of submission and subalternity takes shape. Traditionally, indigenous women were confined to the domestic sphere, subdued in their communities to the leadership of their male relatives and leaders, and considered virtually incapable of any form of agency. Nowadays both critics and scholars observe with Michel Foucault that power implies its own resistance. In Antje Lindenmeyer's summary, "Foucault claims that the

body is permanently inscribed by power relations seeping into everyday life in the form of disciplinary practices" (1999, 49). Howbeit, subjects markedly introduce resistance to such disciplinary practices in different degrees and according to distinct circumstances, in a constant process of give and take. In *Lix cua rahro*, Monterroso herself introduces change and subverts the narrative while recording step-by-step her own artistic and auto-ethnographic process.

Several anthropologists comment on Maya cultures' connection to maize, as well as several major literary works like Miguel Ángel Asturias' *Hombres de maíz* (1949). The Maya sacred book, the *Popol Vuh*, also extensively focuses on the connection between maize cultivation and Maya subsistence and origin myths. To this day, corn is one of the fundamental diet staples in Mesoamerica and a symbol for the sun and inner strength. Millions of women in Guatemala, particularly indigenous women, engage in the preparation of corn tortillas daily. Linda Green reports, "Mayas receive their education in part through growing, preparing, and eating corn" (1999, 18). Either it is through their everyday experiences, at the *milpa*, or at home, that Maya children in rural areas learn the vital importance of corn both to their survival and to their culture. On a typical day, "young girls copy their mothers as they use their hands to shape the corn dough into tortillas, producing the unmistakable rat-tat-tat that one hears coming from Maya kitchens at mealtime" (Green 1999, 18). For Green, corn epitomizes Maya identity as through the social relations involved in its production, it "weaves a thread that connects Maya people with their ancestors and sacred spirits and their future through their children" (1999, 18). Corn's ubiquity in Maya culture is, in essence, emblematic of an identity closely related to its land and what it provides them with. Having corn tortillas to eat can be the difference between survival and dispossession, and for many Maya corn thus becomes agency[9]. Likewise, *tortillar* can also display agency and become a practice of resistance. Indigenous women's key role

as cultural reproducers is recognized internationally and that same recognition puts pressure on the Government and local authorities and institutions, many times by the presence of NGOs on the field in Guatemala. Monterroso's performance dialogues with this dynamic network of power, identity, and affects that are disseminated and converge in the daily practices and way of living of contemporary Maya women. Her careful orchestration of the tortilla-making process and its even more detailed record-keeping allows the spectator to vicariously engage in her own simulation of this complex rethinking and inquiry into indigenous identity and its reproduction.

In *Lix cua rahro*, Monterroso shows agency and a willingness to play with the traditional *tortillera* script by engaging with what Gust A. Yep describes as an "I" constantly changing faces in the cultural borderlands (2004). Monterroso as a subject questions Guatemalan identity, paying special attention to the ingrained symbolic violence that is at the core of national narratives of gender and ethnicity, which matches Dwight Conquergood's notion of ethnography as embodied research and inquiry (1991). Starting from inside the very same space of domesticity and gendered confinement, the kitchen, Monterroso repositions herself as a hybrid. This process, in turn, allows for reassigning self-value and subjectivity at the communal and national levels. Monterroso's performance is a work of patience that culminates in showcasing the value of daily practices and suggests that women's re-enactment of certain practices can bring about resistance and the power to decide who, what, and how cultural markers are embodied and perpetuated. Essentially, Monterroso brings elements of transgression into the millenary tradition of tortilla-making that ultimately transform it. Her embodiment in this performance translates into a border crossing between the *tortillera*'s assigned social role and her own rebellion against it. Concurrently, Monterroso expresses her ambivalence between her indigenous background and her current *Ladina* status. In this manner, Monterroso's performance brings visibility to

issues of contemporary identity and cultural imagery, while questioning the commodification of the Other. The efficacy of her performance depends largely on her ability to subvert such traditional socially assigned script as *tortillera* subjectivity.

According to Madan Sarup, telling one's story brings with it transformative power, as the process of constructing identity runs parallel with the process of narrating our life-story (1996, 15). Even though individuals cannot always control the effects of their narratives, or the instances of its construction, and most importantly, how they will be interpreted or acted upon, certain narratives become what Sarup designates as "anti-stories" due to their non-linear progression and logic, as privileged sites of resistance. The main focus in anti-narratives is on the subject's agency and power to change the progression of the story according to his/her will and needs. As a sophisticated ongoing process of affirmations and contradictions, influences and idiosyncrasies, identity is a complex process that involves defining and erasing, putting together what one is, in contrast to what one is not (Sarup 1996, 24). I contend that Monterroso plays with the notion of "passing" as an indigenous woman while being a *Ladina*, a strategy that allows her to change the national social scripts on Mayaness and femininity. "Passing" is a cultural and social process typically undergone by people who wish to fit in or assimilate to a new culture, which is common with immigrants in a foreign country, and can be enacted with different purposes in mind. Rueyling Chuang mentions, for example, the cases in which "to become a member of another cultural group [equals] to be accepted, to gain personal benefits, [or] to avoid persecution" (2004, 55). Therefore, the act of "passing" can be aimed upward or downward, and it can be passive or active, depending on the circumstances of each individual. In the Latin American context, it is common to talk of *superarse* or to move upwardly, either crossing ethnic, social or cultural boundaries which often implies "shedding the Indian" or leaving behind what is perceived as a shameful origin. In this

performance, Monterroso engages in a contrary move by which she focuses on empowering and bringing dignity and visibility to the *tortillera* and, therefore, to indigenous women.

Even though Monterroso's is a solo performance and a *sotto voce "*text," her intent to speak for a multitude as depicted in the poem *Lix cua rahro* as "We, women" corresponds to her new hybrid plurivocal artistic exploration. Exploring subjectivity and lived experience, auto-ethnographic performance can function as a plurivocal "text" that promotes a space for expression and evocation of a plurality or collectivity of voices in many instances perverting the boundaries between insider/ outsider, subject/ object, and Self / Other. Monterroso's engagement in a complex strategizing with Maya hermeneutics and making her voice heard while embodying the *mujer* Maya leads to a particular ventriloquism that seeks to expand on the possibilities for transcultural understandings of the Guatemalan *tortillera*. Considering Guatemala's ethnic fabric, Diane Nelson identifies the '*mujer* Maya' "as a construct, a boundary marker, a prosthetic" (2001, 314). Citing Allucquére Rosanne Stone, Nelson clarifies that "the prosthetic makes up for something missing, it covers over an opening, it overcomes a lack of presence" (2001, 314). Thus, "like a peg leg," the *mujer* Maya "supports the nation's limping political economy" (2001, 314), while proving that Guatemala is up to the challenge of modernity, but maintaining the traditions that identify and legitimate it as an indigenous nation. Nelson's collected anecdotes about the *muchachas* or the *tortilleras* that inhabit Guatemala's national imagery and cultural tropes (2001) are at the core of her analysis of how the *mujer* Maya in the *Ladino* home is a source for anxiety and how its existence is very informative of the layered social, ethnic, gender, and cultural dynamics in the nation. Therefore, by changing the script of the millenary *tortillera*, Monterroso's performance provides a first-person artistic narrative of resistance or 'anti-story', and goes against a romanticized version of the

Maya past that still lingers on the limbo of the ethnographic museum and on Mayaness as a commodity. In the same sense of expanding on the plurivocal exploration of indigenous women's identity through the embodied process of the *tortillera,* Chang argues that "autoethnography benefits greatly from the thought that self is an extension of a community, rather than it is an independent, self-sufficient being, because the possibility of cultural self-analysis rests on an understanding that self is part of a cultural community" (2016, 26).

For Mary Louise Pratt, autoethnography is a concept linked to the complicated relationship between the colonized and the colonizer, and to resistance practices and hegemonic discourses offered by the native account. Thus, it has more to do with one's own culture than with literary autobiography, "autoethnographic texts[10] […] involve a selective collaboration with and appropriation of idioms of the metropolis or conqueror [that] are merged or infiltrated to varying degrees with the indigenous idioms to create self-representations intended to intervene in metropolitan modes of understanding" (1999, 501). Monterroso's own voice is more than ventriloquist, particularly considering how she self-explores her own subject position and privilege. Thinking of Monterroso's *Tus tortillas* as self-exploration implies considering what is at stake with auto-ethnography. Even though this performance does not fully correspond to the auto-ethnographic genres explored by several critics, it satisfies most of the requirements to be considered at least auto-ethnographic inquiry for it fulfills specific criteria, particularly if we shift the focus from writing to performance and think in terms of an audience instead of a reader. Auto-ethnographic accounts are often criticized as not being real science for lack of objectivity and auto-ethnographic genres are criticized "for being biased, navel-gazing, self-absorbed, or emotionally incontinent, and for high jacking traditional ethnographic purposes and scholarly contributions (Maréchal 2010, 45). However, major defenders of this form of qualitative research such as Ellis

emphasize the "narrative truth" of auto-ethnographic accounts, for it is not so important that art represent life accurately, rather the focus should be on the usefulness of the story or narrative (2004, 126). Likewise, in the case of performance, the focus should be the embodiment's effect on the spectators. In the same fashion, Arthur P. Bochner contends that the real issue with auto-ethnography is "what narratives do, what consequences they have, and to what uses they can be put" (2001, 154), and consequently, what performances do, what consequences of effects they promote, and how useful they can be, for instance, to question rigid identity solutions, to contest authority, or to increase awareness, is crucial. In essence, what matters in *Tus tortillas* is its verisimilitude, which for Ellis and Bochner is the fact that it invokes in the readers/spectators a sense that the process embodied is lifelike, believable, and possible (2000, 751). Because Monterroso shows and embodies, rather than tells or narrates the lived experience of the *tortillera*, her self-exploratory art is key as a counter-discourse to socially assigned scripts and hegemonic power struggles that have been oppressing the *mujer* Maya. As her embodiment results in expanding ethnic positions to find her own, Monterroso's practice is often subversive and ironic. Contrary to traditional social behaviors, Monterroso, a *Ladina*, fully embraces and embodies an indigenous woman in her *tortillera* exploration.

Auto-ethnography as carnivalesque practice is a powerful way of destabilizing authority that often leads to rethinking identity. Since "everyday practices are increasingly pervaded by impulses for self-documentation and the reproduction of images of the self [,] the radical dissolution of the ethnographic 'I" and the eye blurs distinctions between ethnographic representations of others (ethnography) and those others' self-representations (autoethnography)" (Maréchal 2010, 44). Consequently, Monterroso's great care and attention in recording *Tus tortillas* – a feat precisely for which she won a prize-adds to the new current of hybrid forms and registers that

explore the manifestations of the Self and the social construction of identity[11]. Auto-ethnography is better understood as cultural practice, and as ethical practice, as story that re-enacts an experience by which people find meaning and through that meaning are able to cope with the trauma of said experience.[12] Similar insights have been developed by Deborah E. Reed-Danahay, Carolyn Ellis, and Garance Maréchal, among others. At the performance level, auto-ethnographies "contribute to remaking self and identity as a *site* for the negotiation of social, cultural, and political dialogue, often in a carnivalesque form" (Maréchal 2010, 44). Likewise, each of Monterroso's gestures and her embodiment contribute to an accumulation of experiences that, as geological strata, ultimately constitute her identity, both as performer and individual, subject and object of study. Her "passing" can be understood as what V. Chen and D. Tanno identify as a "double vision" since "a person's dual identity or multiple identity is no longer perceived as an 'either/or' choice, but 'both/and" (quoted in Chuang 2004, 55). Thus, problems often arise as there is a tendency to misunderstand an identity situation such as the one embodied by Monterroso because her identity is a combination of both/and simultaneous existence, rather than neither/nor. Often, she will be perceived as someone trying to "pass" the imaginary line between privilege and oppression.

Ultimately, it is the performative aspect of "passing" that is crucial to understand how Monterroso disrupts the national narrative of upward mobility through whitening by embodying the practices and behaviors of a *tortillera.* In fact, Monterroso *becomes* a *tortillera* [my emphasis]. Considering "passing" an act one performs by acting or mimicking a certain set of behaviors and practices, it follows that it is by performing that which is Other to her, that an individual becomes someone else, an ambivalent "I"; and therefore, Monterroso increases her social and cultural status. Whitening or creolizing her gestures would equate to denying her indigenous ancestry, while just sticking to a traditional Maya reenactment would be the same as disregarding

her *Ladina* and privileged position in Guatemalan society. Instead, her "passing" is ambivalent and could easily be interpreted as shooting either upwardly or downwardly, since what really matters is her "in-betweenness", to borrow Doris Sommer's expression[13]. Consequently, Monterroso's ability lies in the fact that as a hybrid subject, she disrupts any preconceived and expected representations, for she is a subject-in-construction and in permanent contradiction and affirmation. Pointing towards that sense, her words in the performance mention an "uncertain image" (Monterroso 2004) as if an idea is still taking shape and this identity construction is still taking place.

While her identity construction materializes, Monterroso openly manifests her intent to seduce and to fit into a new paradigm of indigeneity. Her own words presenting *Tus tortillas*: "It [her spoken words-poem-incantation and her performance] connotes the controversy of a *Ladina* woman that wants to be accepted by the same Maya culture and tries to seduce her" (Monterroso 2004). Thus, Monterroso is, to borrow Sommer's expression, "recognizing [herself] as the Other's Other, as the potential object of another (asymmetrical) desire" (1999, 30). In this sense, her "passing" becomes an open dialogue with her own heritage through her relearning of her *abuelita*'s language and through the embodiment of the long practiced daily ritual of *tortillar*. In *Tus tortillas*, Monterroso proves that there can be and there are, in fact, variations to the dichotomic line that assigns Guatemalan citizens to the subject positions of *Indios* or *Ladinos*.

While hybridizing the *tortillera*, or flipping/re-signifying it, Monterroso is a mediator between said speakers and listeners in the speech act of representation. She does not pretend to be speaking for anyone else but herself; while exploring her own path she also bridges the gap between those that cannot speak and those that refuse to listen, for she embodies a visual scream that resounds in high pitch across the complete

social spectrum. Her locus of enunciation is problematic; however, as she provides alternative paths of resistance to the *mujer* Maya by literally embodying her representation, walking in her shoes, and by doubling it, she displays the hidden violence implicit in the "housewivication" of Guatemalan women, and complicates for the audience their understanding of categories such as femininity, Mayaness, and humility. There is no stable image of the *tortillera*, and Monterroso by displaying other possibilities contributes to de-stabilize "naturalized" notions of femininity and Mayaness that have been consistently oppressing women in Guatemala. Her "anti-story" or counter-narrative is in fact a critique of such naturalization of symbolic violence against women, and of the exclusion of the *mujer* Maya from the daily democratic practices of the nation.

Nevertheless, does Monterroso have the right to speak for the *mujer* Maya?, I ask. Nelson argues that "the transparency of access to subjectivity, the very category of "woman", and the move to "speak for" the Other made by anthropologists, whites, feminists, first worlders, and solidarity activists, and so on (all locations I must speak from) have been stumped (bewildered, and made political) for some time now" (2001, 318). Ellis reminds us that performance theorists such as D. Conquergood and Ronald Pelias claim that "performers should not try to speak 'for a community,' but instead should be engaged in shared conversations in which they speak 'to and with the community" (Ellis 2004, 208). Thus, "performance is not so much representational as it is dialogic and conversational" (208) and personifying a cultural icon like the *tortillera* complicates representational issues, even if it also opens up a dialogue with the public about femininity and indigeneity in contemporary Guatemala.

I contend that this performance becomes a transgressive act by emphasizing that the iconic *tortillera* is an unstable "text." Consequently, there is a need for an emergent, situated, and reflexive construction that renames and reclaims a particular

and personal experience, in this case that of Monterroso. In that sense, as a personal embodiment that disrupts and disturbs master narratives, *Tus tortillas* is political, rather than cathartic, for it empowers the *mujer* Maya and her descendants as autonomous social subjects capable of writing their own history and of re-creating their own cultural icons and practices. At the same time, it urges the spectators, echoing Ellis's words, "to be critical, appreciative, and bear witness to personal suffering and lived experience" (Ellis 2004, 209). In this manner, spectators have the burden of competence in interpreting and producing meaning out of Monterroso's performance; however, as a critic, can I speak of a privileged locus of interpretation?

A locus of interpretation for *Tus tortillas* would have to be situated, and circumscribed to the lived experiences of the spectators themselves, taking into consideration what Sommer identifies as the "site of trouble [that] is the underdeveloped place where reader [spectator] response meets political imperatives [and] the inordinate difficulty that educated readers [spectators] have in recognizing themselves as textual targets" (1999, 13). Although Monterroso does make a considerable effort to make her performance available to Western spectators, it remains problematic how an indigenous audience would react and respond to her performance, most likely in a distinct manner. Her emphasis on reviving her indigenous fluency and her exploration of her own ethnic background, nevertheless, make her complicit with the indigenous subaltern's employment of a specific strategy of resistance. Often it is not that the subaltern cannot speak, but that the colonizers cannot listen or chose to suppress, ignore, or simply fail to understand native "texts" and their meanings. In Sommer's opinion, "To ask if the subaltern can speak, as Gayatri Spivak had asked, misses a related point. The pertinent question is whether the other party can listen" (1999, 20). In response, Monterroso's performance as is, becomes a complex interweavement of *cosmovisiones*, colliding different possibilities of meaning from two

very distinct epistemologies. "Fluidity, ambiguity, and hybridity are 'threatening' [to the audience] because they represent the possibility of an in-between, of contamination and obfuscation of not only personal, but also epistemological boundaries" (Eileraas 1997, 137). That the meaning of Monterroso's performance for a Maya audience might be distinct from an Occidentalized one, only solidifies the argument that her careful recitation of the Maya Q'eq'chi' poem *Lix cua rahro* and the latter orchestrated embeddedness with her own body fluids work in tandem to infuse her performance with coded meaning and symbolic understanding that is unavailable at a first impression. Relying on the power of Maya hermeneutics, her performance stands as a subtle, but not less poignant critique of the imported system of knowledge and meaning production of the invaders, most notably through the ethnographic model of Western Academia and its reified notion of indigeneity. Thus, her *tortillera* conspicuously undermines the representations of the *mujer* Maya enclosed in the ethnographic museum, from which it stemmed, and instead reveals the fallacies of Mayaness as spectacle, a commodity available to vast audiences.

Continuing my line of inquiry, how does Monterroso's locus of enunciation affect her performance? Noticing the position from which one speaks is fundamental for the success of *Tus tortillas* because without fully acknowledging her own hybridity and ambivalence as a cultural subject, Monterroso would not be able to display the fissures and interstices in the iconic *tortillera* as the metonymic amalgam that condenses the specificity of Guatemalan identity politics. Monterroso needs to carefully strip and bare the nakedness of her own problematic identity to highlight her fragmentary and in-construction subject position as a Maya descendant and the endless meanings for the "*tortillera*." Patrick Slattery, cited by Ellis, makes a case for arts-based autoethnography in the sense that "arts-based inquiry experiments with alternative ways to transform what is in our consciousness into a public form that others

can take in and understand" (2004, 215). Thus, "arts-based researchers include the artist's subjectivity and present their work as embodied inquiry – sensuous, emotional, complex, intimate [and] they expect their projects to evoke response, inspire imagination, give pause for new possibilities and meanings, and open new questions and avenues of inquiry" (215). Therefore, Monterroso is moving in while moving out of the iconic *tortillera* in *Tus tortillas*, and she does so in order to produce a specific effect, unsettle the audience, and to open new possibilities for the *mujer* Maya and her descendants. Provoking in the public the need to rethink contemporary notions of femininity and indigeneity in Guatemala, what matters is the usefulness of her performance, besides the aesthetic aspect or its artistic *mise-en-scène*. She wants to contaminate or infect others, to curse them, with what she sees as the need to create her own *tortillera*, thus with their own likewise problematic and inquiring cultural icons.

Monterroso is also addressing the academia with *Tus tortillas*, mainly those American anthropologists doing ethnography in her country, and she reacts against their authority and skewed view of indigenous people or their "scientific" Occidentalism. Certain anthropologists such as Kay B. Warren have long addressed such ethical and methodological issues, especially concerning, as she had already stated in 1997, "the fact that the US political and military involvement in Guatemala was part of the problem" (1997, 40), even if anthropologists like herself did not support them. Furthermore, indigenous scholars that often function as organic intellectuals in Gramsci's sense, also rebel against such depictions and outsiders' contribution to reify Maya identity. For instance, Victor Montejo writes that "Indigenous people have always complained that anthropologists do not listen to them, that instead they have represented native people with the anthropologist's preferred images: "primitives", "minorities", "backward", or just "informants" (1992, 16). Moreover, Montejo makes the point that it is the colonizer that does not listen: "We Mayans find it difficult to deal

with the academic world because if we tell the "experts" what is Maya, they are reluctant to listen; instead they find it more scientific (comfortable) to tell us what it is to be Maya, or to define Maya culture" (1992, 17). Warren explains that Pan-Maya critics of anthropology have denounced "the use of ethnographic interviews and autobiographical accounts which underscore individualism and divisions within the Maya community" (1997, 41). Spivak's notion of strategic essentialism is more necessary than ever for Maya survival as understood from the complex strategizing of ethnic organizations. While Mayanists seek to represent themselves in a politically advantageous manner, Monterroso as an artist and auto-ethnographer strips them bare, exposing the contradictions inherent to the Maya discourse of gender complementarity and overall harmony in the home as in nature.

Most significantly, and beyond such complex gaps in understanding and worldview, *Tus tortillas'* ambivalence allows it to fluctuate between being read as a typical "intercultural text", to borrow Pratt's expression (2008, 7), and as a *testimonio* (2008, 222). However, Monterroso is not a subaltern, rather a privileged *Ladina*. As an intercultural text, *Tus tortillas* would always be in-between the Maya and the Western worldviews, unstable. While *testimonio*, it would give authority to subaltern voices. Notwithstanding, this performance is not a *testimonio* or testimonial representation, rather an exploration into the repertoire, because it is more focused on the embodiment of certain cultural and identity practices than on the writing Self of subalternity and the intricacies of a "rhetoric of particularism" to use Sommer's term (1999, 1). In *Tus tortillas*, the idea of transcultural production, appropriation, and circulation of "texts" and cultural practices is scrutinized, but only to the extent that it relates to Monterroso's personal path to reinventing the *tortillera*. Monterroso's performance is a form of auto-ethnographic inquiry[14], even though not necessarily coinciding with what is

contemporarily understood as auto-ethnographic performance or an auto-ethnographic "text."

In conclusion, Monterroso's focus is on evocative self-exploration since "Evocative stories activate subjectivity and compel emotional response" (Ellis and Bochner 2000, 744). Evocative performance is at the intersection of auto-ethnography and performance studies, wherein certain postulates hold true: both the performer and the audience are key elements of research; the performer's embodied experiences create an effect and have an impact on the audience; the goal is to provoke emotion and a reaction in the spectators, and to do so in a controlled environment, in order for further analysis to take place. Hence, what is performed on stage or staged can be a multitude of representations, including daily behavior and practices as life history and the difference being that the performer is also constructing a portrait of the Self while fully embracing the Other.

This performance brings to the forefront questioning of the Guatemalan hegemonic narrative on indigenous women, their domestic work, and their social invisibility. Through the minutia's repetition of their daily tortilla-making, this enactment of millenary gestures showcases how any disruption to their social script as *tortilleras* brings visibility to their erasure, particularly considering how fundamental they are to the traditional indigenous narrative. As social reproducers and likewise as tortilla-makers, indigenous women make viable this narrative that feeds Guatemala as a nation of indigenous people and a glorious native past. Monterroso's performance questions this cultural instance from the intimate space of domesticity-the kitchen-and reflects the tedious, monotonous, and often unappreciated work of tortilla-making. Monterroso's inquiry contrasts heavily with the cultural and symbolic glorification of the indigenous past and the current heteropatriarchal capitalist structures of power that keep global indigenous women literally and metaphorically in the nation's kitchen.

In this complex and sophisticated performance, the "truth" value produced is embodied implicitly in a discourse that, in a personal subjective manner, tends to reduce indigenous women and tortilla-makers to a common denominator – they're all domestic workers in the epitomic nation's kitchen – without considering their distinct subject identities and struggles. By essentializing them as one and embodying that problematic "common" indigenous-gendered-identity, Monterroso's auto-ethnography fails as all auto-ethnographic exploration can potentially fail as it records, analyzes, and voices only **one** subject's point-of-view or lived experience. The value of this careful form of inquiry-self-inquiry-and experience-recording lies in the access it provides to a specific form of narrative, discourse, or subject position and in the complex meta-reflection that it ensues from its own narrators/observers/subjects-cum-objects-of-study. However, since performance art inherently disrupts conventions and suspends presumed values and judgements, Monterroso plays in this performance with that access and displaces the self-reflection to another level of fictionalized poetic dissonance through usage of the Q'eq'chi Maya symbolic incantations that show up in the video as simultaneous Spanish and broken English subtitles. Even though she clearly shows what a *tortillera* is – and here I see a direct reference to the Textile and Mayan Museum in Guatemala City where anyone can find an ethnographic representation of the typical Maya kitchen with a figure of an indigenous woman engaged in tortilla-making – Monterroso's goal is achieved by disrupting this narrative and alternatively, using her artistic license, juxtaposing to it another tale of a rebellious woman who doctor's her lover's food and follows a non-traditional destiny of her own choosing. This freedom to choose their own fate and the agency to keep themselves free of oppression and violence is fundamentally what indigenous Guatemalan women and their descendants lack, and that is what Monterroso's performance aims to sublimate artistically with this performance.

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[1] For a thorough analysis of what it means to be indigenous and who defines it in the Latin American context, particularly considering the Guatemalan case, see the works of Brent Metz.

[2] My Translation from the Spanish original.

Ladin@ in the Guatemalan context is a term that refers to the mestizo or mixed-race population of the country, and is officially recognized as a distinct ethnic group by the Ministry of Education, who bases its working definition of the term on a monograph by Ronald Soto-Quirós and David Díaz Arias: "The ladino population has been characterized as a heterogeneous population which expresses itself in the Spanish language as a maternal language, which possesses specific cultural traits of Hispanic origin mixed with indigenous cultural elements, and dresses in a style commonly considered as western" (Soto-Quirós and Arias (2006) cited by Reyes de Marín (2019) based on the MINEDUC original 2008 document). What is relevant for this essay is the understanding that *Ladina* women in Guatemala are a distinct social category in contrast to indigenous women who still observe the ruling and lived in their original communities.

For further exploration of the complexities and the construction of this term, which is not to be confused with Sephardic Jews designations, namely its problematic instrumentalization, see Rodas Núñez 2006 and Soto-Quirós and Díaz Arias 2006.

[3] For a detailed account of this term and its history, see Reed-Danahay 1997.

[4] For Estebán, "embodied anthropology" is a form of anthropology from which "ones questions the multiplicity of selves [Is] that characterize the scientific work through its connections to biography, research, and social and historical context" (2004, 2 footnote). Thus, the issue in question is considering anthropology's dual dimensions of self-observation and auto analysis, culminating in a broader picture of one's lived experience.

[5] I have analyzed the embodiment strategies in this same performance in Barbosa 2016 and I address the poetic disobedience and incantation as another in a forthcoming publication in 2022.

[6] The poem that accompanies this performance, *Lix cua rahro/Tus tortillas, mi amor*, is available at the end of this essay as an Annex.

[7] My Translation from the Spanish original.

[8] My Translation from the Spanish original.

[9] For more on the role maize has in Maya worldviews and their sense of place through connection to the land, and women's connection to perpetuating its symbolic meaning and presence in daily rituals, including storytelling and food preparation, see Goody 2002 and Huff 2006.

[10] Pratt theorizes autoethnographic text as "a text in which people undertake to describe themselves in ways that engage with representations others have made of them" (1999, 501).

[11] In fact, there are new hybrid genres and methods that blend ethnography and autoethnography such as "witness narratives in cases of social violence and repression; private folk ethnography in households and specific collective settings; and testimonies of daily life in captivity, total institutions, armed conflicts, or self-reflection on symbolic violence" (Maréchal 2010, 45).

[12] For the benefits of auto-ethnography, see Chang 2016.

[13] Doris Sommer calls attention to what she identifies as "the lesson of passing," through a careful examination of Henry Louis Gates, Jr.'s [*Authenticity, or the*] *Lesson of Little Tree*: "The lesson of passing, Gates concludes, is that 'No human culture is inaccessible to someone who makes the effort to understand, to learn, to inhabit another world" (cited in Sommer 1999, 17). Sommer adds that this availability is what makes minority critics angry "because ethnic cultural content is eaten up by white consumers who are careless of the people they cannibalize" (Sommer 1999, 17).

[14] For a definition of performance ethnography, see McCall 2000.

ANNEX

Lix cua rahro/Tus tortillas, mi amor

El día se aclara
The day is clearing
Mala suerte embrujada
Bad luck bewitched
Cada pueblo con su respectivo idioma
Each people with it's own language
Amar hasta rayar el alba
To love until the dawn is grate
[rahoc tixto toj iq'uec' re ("love until the break of dawn")]
Amasar
To knead
Alma y cuerpo
Soul and body
Nuestros antecesores
Our absent ancestors
Amar hasta rayar el alba
We love until the dawn is grate
Frialdad
Coldness
Se le están rodando las lágrimas
Tears are rolling down
Matador de mariposas blancas
Somos mujeres
He is a white butterfly killer
[aj camsinel pepem pompori ("killer of white butterflies")]
We are women
[Ixko ("we are women")]
Vagina
He's darkness
Xk'ajyinal
Su oscuridad
Tomar mujer es tabú
To take a woman is taboo
Imagen incierta
Soledad
Loneliness
[Junatalil ("loneliness")]
Yumbetac
La mujer fornica
She fornicates
K'un besinc
Enamorar

To fall in love
Xk'ajyinal
Su oscuridad
He's Darkness
[xk' ojyinal ("your darkness")]
Ixka
Somos mujeres
We are women
Amn iz'ejcual
Alma y cuerpo
Soul and body
[amn tz'ejcual ("body and soul')]
Culb
Corazón de palo tirado en la montaña
Heart of stick thrown in the mountain
Xquiq'uel
Mi sangre
My blood
Xk'ajyinal
Su oscuridad
He's Darkness
Aj pujuyer
Guardacamino
She guards way
Soledad
[voz off] Lix cua rahro
Tus tortillas mi amor
Your tortillas mi love

Versión Inglés – 2 –
Guatemala México Mayo 2004

(My literal transcription from the online video by Sandra Monterroso)
[Translation according to Sara Garzón, 2015]