Learning under the storm

The experience of Unitierra Oaxaca

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Abstract: The expansion of neoliberalism and Modernity as a civilization project are eroding peoples commons and local knowledges everywhere. At the same time, from the grassroots, people are finding creative ways of bringing forward new and old practices to defend their commons. This research is an exploration of knowledge practices in the defence of the commons together with *Unitierra Oaxaca*. The reflections made here are based on ethnographic work conducted from February until May of 2019. This thesis explores the reconfiguration of learning and knowledge production by grassroots movements that form the social fabric of *Unitierra Oaxaca.* Through an on the ground experience the research is situated in the intersections of discussions on the commons, alternatives to education and knowledge production. Hopefully, this work can contribute to efforts happening in different contexts to reclaim the commons, the freedom to learn and to push forward the insurgencies of subjugated knowledges.

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Introduction. *Learning under the storm.*

In 1994 the Zapatistas warned the rest of the world of the coming storm. This storm is marked by two clashing winds, one blowing from the top and the other from the bottom. The wind coming from the top is blowing with increasing intensity, creating a devastating landscape of dispossession, death and environmental depletion (Marcos 1994). This wind is bringing the destruction of multiple ways of life and being (Baschet 2017, 9), eroding people's knowledges and practices to integrate them into the modern-colonial project of civilization. From the grassroots an opposing wind is blowing, characterized by collective (re)organization of life beyond the rotten structures of the state and the market. This is the contradictory situation that many people are experiencing throughout the world, the struggle of a new world to be born, in the midst of increasing dispossession, which attacks all spheres of life. The storm has changed the nature of social struggles, more and more people have stopped asking from the state and start organizing life in their own terms. The Zapatistas are making this call from their own context in Chiapas, where the struggle for live is particularly intensified. However, their call is for people in other contexts to realize that the storm is approaching and that we have to be organized and ready because it is only going to become stronger.

For over fifteen years, in the city of Oaxaca, there has been an ongoing conversation under the name of *"caminos de autonomía bajo la tormenta"* (paths of autonomy under the storm) (*Unitierra* n.d.) On a weekly basis people from different grassroots movements in the region have been gathering to make sense of this approaching storm and to share ways to organize life under it. The place were this conversation has been hosted is the headquarters of a groundbreaking learning project called *Universidad de la Tierra Oaxaca* (University of the Earth Oaxaca). They recognize that their role under the storm is to walk together with people in their path towards recovering the capacity to learn from their own contexts and knowledge practices (*Unitierra* n.d.) In their trajectory they have been immersed in diverse social movements like the Mexican indigenous movement, movements in the defence of native corn

or for food sovereignty among others. While trying to create worlds beyond the state and the market they have been redefining learning, knowledge production, subjects and practices. The main goal of this thesis is to provide a detailed account of how this redefinition is happening from the experience of *Unitierra*, with the hope to provide insights into the nature of this transformation as a way to support other processes struggling to reclaim their ability to learn and know in the reconstruction of their worlds.

This work is situated at the intersection of three debates from a concrete on the ground experience. Firstly, the work provides an ethnographic account of what many Latin American and Caribbean authors are calling knowledge or epistemological struggles. Aníbal Quijano and Enrique Dussel opened the path of what has been called the Modernity/Coloniality or decolonial research project, which sees coloniality as the subalternization of other knowledges and cultures, and as a constitutive element of modernity. Particularly, this project connects the power structure in Latin America with the imposition of a unique way of knowing, spirituality and being (See Quijano 1999, Mignolo 2002, Escobar 2007, Maldonado-Torres 2011, Lugones 2008 & Walsh 2011). Moreover, many authors and activists are underlying the centrality of knowledge (re)production in Latin America's new social movements (See Leyva 2015), as well as their redefinition of learning and education (See Zibechi 2005 & Esteva 2013).

Secondly, this thesis enters the discussion on alternatives to education from a practical example. This discussion has been marked by two lines, one advocating for alternative educations and the other for alternatives to education (Esteva 2010). The work of Paulo Freire and Ivan Illich represent both branches of this debate. Freire saw in pedagogy and education a tool for liberation, a way for the conscientization of the oppressed (1996). Conversely, Illich saw in education (particularly through schooling) the main tool of the state to co-opt people's will and participation (1971). Gustavo Esteva, one of the founders of *Unitierra Oaxaca*, has continued Illich's critique adding to the conversation that education itself -and not only schooling- has captured people's capacity of learning in freedom. The experience of *Unitierra* offers a deep insight into how an alternative to education may work in practice, contributing in that way to what has been mostly a theoretical discussion.

Finally, this piece is deeply immersed in what I consider to be one of the most relevant discussions today, both in academic and activist circles: people's efforts for the (re)generation of their commons and autonomous worlds (See Harvey 2005; Caffentzis &

Federici 2014; Hardin 1968 & Esteva 2014). Everywhere at the grassroots, people are (re)creating ways of organization and life beyond the state and the market, beyond private and public property. These grassroots movements in Oaxaca define the climate in which *Unitierra* operates, redefining learning and knowing subjects and practices. In this sense, an analysis of *Unitierra* as a radical learning project intimately connected to grassroot movements provides valuable insights on knowledge (re)production and learning in defence of the commons and the search for autonomy. Ideally, a study on *Unitierra* can serve as an important learning for other movements around the world, not as a call to mimic a model but to learn from experience.

In order to retrace the experience of *Unitierra Oaxaca* this work is structured in three main chapters. The first one is an exploration on the knowledge/power struggles *Unitierra* is immersed in by means of an analysis of four different examples. It serves as a contextualization for the rest of the thesis, a way to provide concrete examples to illustrate the different dimensions of knowledge struggles in Oaxaca. Following that there is an extended inquiry into how *Unitierra,* together with different grassroots movements, are redefining learning subjects, knowledge practices and theory-practice relations in its activities. The second chapter combines a description of *Unitierrra*, its activities and involvements with a theorization done together with some of *Unitierra's* participants. Finally, the last chapter aims to situate the concrete experience of *Unitierra* within debates on the commons and autonomy, situating the project in global and regional processes.

Throughout this research I have felt different emotions ranging from frustration to hope and excitement in practicing anthropological and ethnographic methods. I have come to face many of the constraints of the discipline but also moments where different methodologies have opened promising paths and horizons to be explored. What follows is a short description of the methods used in this research together with a brief compilation of reflections on anthropological praxis, what I have felt as its possibilities and limitations in my own exercise. Many reflections are part of longstanding discussions within anthropology that in no way I aim to solve here. I just want to provide a characterization of the dead ends and open corridors I have glimpsed while conducting this research.

My personal relationship with *Unitierra* reach back to around two years before I started this research. Since I first visited the project I have been in contact with different members and collaborated at distance, translating and drafting documents. Consequently, I

did not have to go through an arduous process in gaining access. I used the research as an opportunity to get closer to the project and learn in more detail its functioning and implications. Formally, the research started with a first meeting with two members to agree on the terms of my research and stay in *Unitierra*. From that moment on, my role was defined not only as a researcher but as a collaborator and as a learner. My role as a collaborator included different activities: translating and producing texts, contributing to the coordination of study groups and workshops, and searching for funding opportunities. The first meeting served to set a shared agenda and to negotiate the relationship I was establishing with Unitierra during my time in Oaxaca.

Typically the main method that has guided this research is participant observation, understood as an embodied activity. By participating in day to day activities of *Unitierra*, and by sharing living experiences with participants beyond formal activities of the project, the field is constituted as a sensory field (O'Reilly 2012, 99). Emotions and sensations have been all along central to the process. Fieldwork data does not exist in a rational realm separated from memories and feelings. I have come to understand participant observation as a dialogical practice, as a dialogue between experiences of living (Esteva 2018). This dialogical approach implies transcending the logos, refusing to treat ethnography solely as a way of gathering data to frame it under a logical reflexive angle (Esteva & Guerrero, 2011). Ethnography can be practiced to allow oneself to be transformed by others and not as a way of subordinating experiences of others under an analytical or theoretical framework.

While sharing life with *Unitierra* members for three months I have navigated the social fabric *Unitierra* is made up of, being the most relevant part of the research. In this sense, my fieldwork experience has been marked by different key events (O'Reilly 2012, 47). These key events have been mostly assemblies or reunions, which gather people from grassroots movements around concrete issues like water, corn or indigenous struggles. There, I could experience the formation of collective learning subjects and partially reconstruct the landscape of organizations and knowledge struggles in which *Unitierra* is constituted as an actor. A description of the different spaces I visited can be found in chapter two.

Moreover, the methodology of this research was enriched with collective discussions and informal and guided conversations of different kinds. Collective conversations were either hosted in *Unitierra* or in other spaces where *Unitierra* was present, most of which were not explicitly part of the research but have contributed to the reflection. Informal

conversations occurred constantly with a wide range of different actors, from participants of *Unitierra* to members of different social movements and communities. I recorded guided conversations with seven different members of *Unitierra's* network. These conversations focused on the particular projects each member participated in, with the hope to expand on the complexity of each space. Moreover, with my three main participants (Sergio, Valiana and Angel) I recorded several guided conversations on the functioning of the project and their experience in *Unitierra*. Finally, I recorded five guided conversations with Gustavo Esteva, a recognized intellectual in several discussions that concern this study and also a founding member of *Unitierra Oaxaca*. The conversations with him were extremely helpful since he guided me in the theorization process but also acted as a participant that has walked with *Unitierra* throughout its entire processes. Therefore, Gustavo Esteva has taken the role of an intellectual and of an experienced participant in this research.

Similarly to O'Reillys critical definition of ethnography, the design of this research has evolved in its progression (2012, 11). While I did arrive to the field with a research proposal, the study has been continuously modified by participants and the field. I have actively tried to open my research to be permeable to the field by continuously sharing conversations and concerns with the members of *Unitierra* who have been more actively involved in the process. Commonly, academic structures and logic rarely allow participants to influence the direction or content of research (Leyva & Speed in Leyva 2015, 458). I have been paying particular attention to anthropology's barriers between theory and field experiences, trying to figure out ways of blurring these lines. Rather than labelling participants views and experiences as 'emic perspectives' I have followed suggestions and efforts to place them as active knowledges in the research, in conversation with academic and expert knowledge and not subordinated to a theoretical gaze (Leyva & Speed in Leyva 2015, 461). This has been most successfully achieved in chapter two, where the concepts and ideas around which the chapter is organized have been defined by the participants themselves. After the first month of living with *Unitierra,* members I started asking several participants about the concepts they would use to conceptualize *Unitierra's* experience. After some weeks I came to agree with the most active participants on a research scheme based on three main concepts: affection, assemblies/agreement and learning/weaving. Since then we decided to have open conversations around each of the concepts. I had these conversations with Sergio and with Angel and Valiana separately, creating a space for reflection and opening the

possibility for participants to enter the theorization process. Participants themselves asked me to share the transcriptions of the interviews since they considered them useful reflections. Moreover, this aspect has been further reinforced through the organization of two open conversation circles around the topic of learning. These conversations were not only oriented towards this study but as part of *Unitierra's* activities, as a way to discuss the processes and efforts of learning beyond education. They provided a space for rich discussions where participants with different levels of involvement were able to participate. While the second chapter is the mostly oriented towards collaborative ethnography and theorization, I have aimed to include field experiences on the same plane as academic knowledge throughout the thesis.

I consider this study to be a first personal exploration towards the possibilities of collective research. Indeed, in many senses this study is not able to transcend the figure of the individual researcher and several dichotomies within the field. The writing process has been predominantly an individual process and the rhythms, format and even language of the study have been defined by institutional processes that are foreign to Unitierra as a collective. Regularly, anthropology is constituted through a set of institutional practices and discourses immersed in politics of translation (Restrepo & Escobar 2005, 113-114). This is not an exception. In a sense, being part of Utrecht University's institutional practices, this research implies a translation of knowledge across power-differentiated communities. (Restrepo & Escobar 2005, 113). Certainly, ethnography as a practice is enabled by a landscape of power relations that precede the ethnographer and the research. Therefore, I have come to be concerned with the appropriation of tools like participant observation and ethnography for collective production of knowledge accompanying broader processes, rather than wasting work and energies in trying to 'decolonize' anthropology as a discipline immersed in and enabled by a set of institutional practices and circuits. Thus, inevitably I face the question of the role of the university in this disjunction. I share the feeling that currently, the university is a place of refuge and not a place for enlightenment (Harney & Moten 2013, 26). The university can be a refuge from where to organize and support other knowledge practices, but we should also be searching how to take anthropology outside of the university and its institutional constraints.

While facing the limitations of anthropology I have also come to see its practice as a powerful tool for collective inquiry and knowledge production. Indeed, I believe its

methodologies are particularly compelling for what Foucault (1976) called the coupling of intellectual knowledges and local memories. The coupling of knowledges offers the possibility for an exercise where intellectual knowledge and embodied knowledges are brought together, avoiding the absorption or domination of one over the others. In my understanding, further steps for the exploration of this practice have to be concerned with collectivizing research processes from design to content production. In this sense, I see in practices like collaborative writing, filmmaking, photography or radio programs promising tools to turn anthropology and ethnography into more collaborative and open processes. Anthropology holds methods and practices capable of being used for inquiry in one's own world or as a way of sharing with other worlds. Anthropology as a tool box should not be immediately discarded, however it is more powerful when connected to broader processes and knowledge practices outside the restricted environment of the university.

Chapter 1: *A landscape of subjugated knowledges in Oaxaca.*

     Unitierra as a social actor is embedded in a complex context of insurgencies and social movements, which struggle against the imposition of what has been widely called the One World Project (Escobar 2016,15). On the ground this translates to multiple violences that attempt to modify every aspect of life, so that entire communities can be subjected to the state and the neoliberal political project. The most remarkable features of this imposition are dispossession and violence. Today, over 80% of the territory in the central valleys of Oaxaca has been granted to mining companies from Canada and the United States (Bessi 2018) and activists and communities opposing different megaprojects are continuously targeted and murdered. Megaprojects and the state impose themselves on territories through the systematic destruction of previous knowledge practices and organizations. Material dispossession comes together with the dispossession of knowledges and practices, *"for every sphere of day to day life there is a dispossession mechanism"* (Esteva, interview excerpt). The goal of this chapter is to offer an analysis of the landscape of *subjugated knowledges* in which *Unitierra* is immersed.

     The chapter goes through four struggles in which *Unitierra* is actively involved: the struggle in defence of native corn varieties, the struggle for house reconstruction after the earthquake in Ixtepec, the struggle in defence of assemblies and the struggle against the school. Through these struggles I analyze the different tensions and mechanisms of subjugation between the dominant scientific/development model and local knowledge practices. The struggles of this kind are innumerable. The ones presented here offer a good perspective on the general context of power and knowledge struggles in which the work of collectives like *Unitierra* is particularly relevant. Each of the struggles provides insights on different aspects and movements of dispossession, in which scientific knowledge (and its production) is involved. The present chapter will serve to describe the landscape of subjugated knowledges in Oaxaca with the hope that it will contribute to a deeper understanding of new learning and knowing practices that transgress this order.

     The idea of subjugated knowledges has been used by several activists and intellectuals to describe the relationship between power and knowledge in Latin America and

the relevance of knowledge in social movements in the region (Leyva 2018). The concept was retaken from a lecture delivered by Foucault on the 7th of January of 1976. Subjugated knowledges are those knowledges that have been disqualified from being included in knowledge hierarchies validated by science (Foucault 1976, 84-85). Everywhere, development and neoliberalism have been imposed by using science as a means to subject, extract or even erase all other knowledges that do not find their root in the Western Enlightenment tradition (Alvares in Sachs 1997, 245).

I want to stress that knowledge struggles are not abstract or symbolic. The erasure of practices, knowledges and ways of being is a violent process, infringed upon bodies made out of blood and flesh. Knowledge struggles do not belong to a separated realm of ideas.

The case of corn and the milpa

Corn is at the center of the history and culture of Mesoamerican communities until today. It is common to hear the affirmation "we are the women and men of corn". This statement was also adopted by the Zapatistas and has become central for many movements striving for autonomy in Mexico. It refers to the fact that corn would not have emerged naturally without human intervention, but also that the cultures and knowledge practices of the communities would not exist without corn. Bonfil Batalla, a referent in the study of Mesoamerican cultures and what he called the *'Mexico profundo'* (deep Mexico), notes that both big pre-Hispanic civilizations and the life of millions of people living today in Mexico have corn at their core. It has taken generations of continuous dialogue with corn to create a huge array of practices and techniques for its cultivation and harvest. Alongside these practices, different rites and myths have emerged, making corn a sacred plant that defines the mythical universes of many people. It has also ordered space and time in rural and indigenous communities, shaping social organization, ways of thinking, knowledges and forms of life (Batalla 1982).

Indeed, all the practices, rites and stories around the cultivation of corn constitute an immeasurable constellation of localized knowledge practices that vary in each community. The diversity of knowledges goes together with the outstanding biodiversity found in the milpa. The milpa is the place where all these practices and rites stand united and are continued. From a scientific perspective, the milpa has just been described as an agricultural technique that associates corn, pumpkin and beans, so each plant supports physiologically the

growth of the others. However, this vision narrows down a more complex reality both biologically and culturally. The milpa hosts a very complex ecosystem that includes medicinal plants, aromatic plants, and many different food varieties. As expressed by Angel from *Unitierra,* it is also a space of learning and it is key for the participation in community life. The milpa makes spiritual, practical and knowledge dimensions inseparable, which is not possible to conceive by scientific rationality. Indeed corn as a food and as a set of relations arguably would have never come out of the knowledge processes of today's universities, since each kind of knowledge depends on a set of practices..

Moreover, the milpa and corn are essential for the autonomy of peasant and indigenous communities. The huge amount of practices that have been developed throughout generations have provided the communities with ways of healing, organizing and eating that can be recreated at a local level, being independent from the market and the state. These practices have served for the communities to decide in their own terms upon the use of land, their diet and healing practices. Now, people all across Mexico are organizing themselves to defend these knowledges and the diversity of corn that is now being threatened by the imposition of export based agriculture and patented seeds (See Fitting 2006 & Esteva & Marielle 2003). Around corn, communities are being dispossessed of their food autonomy by eroding the practices around the milpa.

The imposition of large monocultures and industrial agriculture is as old as the colony (Parrish 1982). However, the threat towards the milpa, land dispossession and the dismantling of the practices that allow for food autonomy has increased since the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) came into effect in 1994. One of the main concerns of the agreement was to increase the exports and imports of food through the privatization of land and the imposition of industrial agriculture. Since then, the consumption of corn in Mexico has been shifted to imports from the United States up to 45,5% in 2018 (La jornada, 2018). The imports of corn has caused the pollution of natives corn with transgenic varieties, that instead of being the result of hundreds of years of a dialogic relation between societies and nature have been created in laboratories.

The places whence knowledges around corn are produced are determinant. Knowledge around corn can be produced in laboratories and patent offices or through their long traditions of seed exchange and communal creativity. They represent two different knowledge practices that unfold different models of civilization. This is the crossroads at

which Mexican agriculture and corns finds itself today. As expressed by Bonfil Batalla there are two projects around corn, one is a source of autonomy and is enabled by local practices and another attempts to extract corn from its historical and cultural context so it can be turned into a commodity serving the interests of transnational companies and the development project (Batalla 1982). Both projects have different knowledges regarding corn, and in knowing it differently they also bring forward different worlds, different social organization and even different ecological and biological conditions.

In February 2019 I accompanied a friend from *Unitierra* to a meeting called for by the National Network for the Defence of Corn in Oaxaca. This network has brought together indigenous communities, peasants and civil society organizations to work for the defence of corn against the many threats imposed by development projects and industrial agriculture. The meeting was convened after the news came out that two American universities and the transnational company Mars were patenting with a slight genetic modification a variety of corn that can be found in Mixe communities in Oaxaca. This variety of corn had the particularity that it attracted a bacteria that produced the nitrogen base that corn needs to grow, and that is usually provided by legumes or by agrochemical fertilizers in industrial agriculture. The University of Davis in California, the University of Wisconsin Madison and Mars saw in this unique feature an opportunity to introduce this variety of corn into the market and commercial agriculture. After the study, they affirmed in a scientific publication that they had 'discovered' this new variety of corn (See Van Deynze et al, 2018).

There was a shared feeling of outrage in that meeting but I also sensed that this situation was neither new nor unexpected. "The West keeps selling us mirrors", someone said in reference to the treacherous trade conducted by the first Spanish colonizers when they exchanged gold for mirrors (field notes). For the American scientists they just discovered something similar to gold, something that could be profitable in global agriculture. We must question how is this turned into a scientific discovery. Is this science unable or unwilling to recognize and see so that property over this variety of corn cannot be claimed? They discovered this variety of corn in a similar way that Colombus discovered America, negating all previous realities or transforming them enough to incorporate them to Modernity's project. Scientific knowledge within development is unable to recognize communally produced knowledge as valid knowledge, creating the illusion of discovery by a few researchers when

they step up on the Mixe corn. They must think that a set of unlikely coincidences created that variety of corn, and that they have been able to turn it into knowledge through science.

The present members on the assembly for the defence of corn were rightfully showing their open mistrust of academia and science at this point, accusing scientists of taking information away from the communities and circulating it with academics and transnational companies. The link between science and large transnational companies was being exposed. However, scientific discourse has reached a position where it is self-justified, any scientific activity finds its *raison d'etre* in it being scientific. This discourse has been largely promoted by development, where science and technology are presented as the solutions for social and ecological challenges (Escobar 2011, 4, 22 & 26). Indeed, the University of Davis and the University of Madison present their discovery as an opportunity to introduce this corn to commercialization, improving what they consider to be the most productive cereal (Van Deynze et al, 2018).

Jean Michel Ane, one of the leading scientist of this research and a professor in bacteriology and agronomy at University of Wisconsin Madison, expressed his naive surprise to his 'discovery' in the following way:

"Engineering corn to fix nitrogen and form root nodules like legumes has been a dream and struggle of scientists for decades...It turns out that this corn developed a totally different way to solve this nitrogen fixation problem. The scientific community probably underestimated nitrogen fixation in other crops because of its obsession with root nodules." *"This corn showed us that nature can find solutions to some problems far beyond what scientists could ever imagine,"*

(University of Wisconsin News 2018)

He was surprised that nature (!) was able to find a way to fix nitrogen in this way, invisibilizing the long standing relationships of Mixe communities and corn. For him and his colleagues there was no knowledge or practices involved in this variety of corn. However through scientific practices, laboratories and patent offices it could be turned into knowledge with the hope that it can serve humanity.

The widespread idea that contributions to science are contributions to humanity as a whole could not stand on its feet in the assembly of the National Network for the Defence of Corn. The people gathered in that room were claiming that the knowledge developed around corn was a communal knowledge practice developed through generations of seed exchange

and seed selection. Science is not equipped to consider communal processes of knowledge production, leading scientist to turn themselves into the heroic discoverers of human progress.

Essentially, the case of the Mixe corn is one more struggle against the dispossession of knowledges for autonomy. This dispossession implies a knowledge transfer from the communities to universities and transnational companies. Through dispossession and erasure of knowledge practices, science contributes to the centralization and monopolization of knowledge. In this way, people are being disposed of knowledges that have been mostly decentralized throughout histories, the knowledges to live in autonomy. Indeed, the dispossession of knowledges is essential to create a kind of human being that relies in specialized knowledge from bureaucracies, universities and the market to continue living or participating in society (Alvares in Sachs 1997, 253). I was discussing this situation with a member of *Unitierra* when she said in a clarifying way: "*The problem is when they come and take information out is that is given to the worst possible people, like mining companies that come to expropriate the land. Then (knowledge) instead of being a tool for communities, from which the information was taken, is a tool for expropriation and exploitation*" (conversation excerpt).

The case of housing in the Istmo

In September 2017...emh...there were two strong earthquakes, but here in this areas replicas aftershocks have not stopped, since that moment with the first earthquake it was strong and there were some damages, but the strongest one was on the 23rd of September, the second earthquake. The government said that the one on the 23rd was a replica when it was the one that caused the main damages. That means that only when is considered to be an earthquake it can receive aid, because the other was just a replica, even if the one on 23rd lasted for 30-40 minutes non stop...everything turned off, people could not even walk of how much it was shaking.

(M.C. interview excerpt)

...It was not only the earthquakes that affected around 7000 houses, besides the earthquakes there were some very strong rains and after the rains some very strong winds. Then people after having lost their house were living under sail clothes, getting wet by the rain and by strong winds.

The events described above shook the populations of the Istmo region of Oaxaca[1]. Shortly after, different actors arrived to the territory to join the reconstruction of houses. Business and state administration took the responsibility to intervene, however in the reconstruction of houses by means of external technical solutions lay an attempt to reconstruct their lives and ways of inhabiting. Houses in the Istmo are built with materials and techniques rooted in the environmental and cultural contexts. "*The foundations here, in the Istmo, are particular. In the valley of Oaxaca they are made out of rock, however here it does not work, they already tried to implement it, but it does not work here*" (M.C. interview excerpt), the houses are built meeting the natural conditions of the area, with local materials like red clay. The structure of the houses is also key in the life of the families and communities in the area. "*In traditional housing the corridors are super important. Is like a small terrace open to the outside. Life really happens in the corridor, where they put the hammocks and sometimes the dining place, women have their outside kitchen, where the comizcal[2] is, where tortillas and totopos are made, the rooms are only use to sleep*" (M.C. interview excerpt). The corridors are essential for living outside avoiding heat by making use of the regions constant winds.

Traditional housing in the Istmo also goes together with eating habits. Traditional roof tiles serve as a place for iguanas to live in, providing food for the local population. Moreover, traditional housing in the Istmo requires the active participation of its inhabitants in maintenance work, "each year you must put a thin layer with your hands, and that is the requirement maintenance" (M.C. interview excerpt). The inhabitants must have practical knowledge for the maintenance of their houses, these practices are usually done communally and through the use of tequio[3].

After the earthquakes, most reconstruction work has not taken into account these local knowledge practices around housing and inhabiting. Reconstruction work has been conducted

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[1] These events were narrated by M.C. and J.G. two young members of Unitierra that have been dedicating their work in house reconstruction in Ixtepec. They have accompanied the process for the last two years.

[2] Comizcal is a traditional cooking space common in the area of Oaxaca. It is heated with wood and particularly use to cook different doughs made out of corn.

[3] Tequio is the way of organizing collective labor in many communities in Oaxaca. When a family has to conduct construction work, or work on their field they make a call to tequio expecting other families to help in the process. It is a tool based on reciprocity and mutual help. It is key pilar in social organization in rural communities in Oaxaca.

in its majority with expert knowledge from elsewhere, restructuring life and turning the affected population into passive recipients of governmental and companies 'aid.' The help offered by the state and construction was measured in monetary terms. "*They evaluated the damages caused to your house and from that they determined if they gave you one or two checks, or half ceck, that is to say 15,000, 30,000 or 60,000 $*" (J.G. interview excerpt). The money was handed to the people under the condition that they will hire the services of a construction agency belonging to the Mexican billionaire Carlos Slim. It was in the interest of the agency to build the houses from scratch rather than to provide reconstruction, that way the company would get more revenues from their work and their 'help' was more valuable since it was quantified monetarily. Many families were pushed by the agents to demolish their houses. "*The women that we visited told us that they (the agents) came into your house gave a quick look and said: We have to demolish the house. Obviously is what they needed to be able to use the checks and say that they gave the biggest economic aid possible and that for that they needed to demolish the house*" (M.C. interview excerpt). People working in the Istmo assured that in some cases the agents were so insistent that they came several days in a row with the machinery to demolish the house without having the consent from the families.

This prompted a big opposition by local architects and by the Ixtepec Committee in the Defence of Life Territory that had previous communitarian organizational mechanisms in their struggle against minery and wind power companies. The Committee had a long trajectory in the struggle against minery and wind power projects and since 2017 concentrated their efforts in the reconstruction of houses in Ixtepec. Their work is based on habitat and communal fabric reconstruction through traditional techniques as an alternative to governmental agencies and construction companies. However, many families gave in to the aid provided by the construction companies. Their houses were demolished and high-priced concrete houses were built instead. The new constructions were completely disconnected from local techniques and ways of inhabiting. Indeed, the reconstruction of the houses was turned into an attempt for the reconstruction of community's life. "*The houses they built no longer had a corridor*" (J.G. interview excerpt), erasing the main component of traditional housing, also they no longer had the old tiles, destroying the habitat for the iguanas and the concrete made it impossible to be in the house during the day since it concentrates too much heat. Not only that, the principal consequence of the new housing model was that people lost their ability to reconstruct their own houses and the techniques to build new ones. The

construction agencies *"arrived and announced: we are going to pay half of the price of your new house but you will pay the other house. Then all that money was not really given to the people, it was used to make them in debt and build houses from the construction companies, very small houses that are super small and have nothing to do with their way of life"* (M.C. interview excerpt). The companies took the chance to introduce many families to a debt system in a way that they had to rely on with the expert services of construction companies.

The natural catastrophe served as an opportunity to dispossess people from their knowledge practices of inhabiting to deepen their dependency on state bureaucracies and economic circuits. *"There is a clear difference between the people that come to help and those who receive that help, they are ask absolutely nothing from their, it is a totally aid model: "I am going to build your house, I am not going to consult you for nothing, I am not going to ask you, maybe I make a few questions so that you feel involve, but is not real involvement", and that generates dependency"* (J.G. interview excerpt). After the catastrophe, the population were turned into subjects in need for assistance. According to philosopher Ivan Illich, the creation of the needy subject is one of the central moves in the instrumentalization of science by development, through needs subjects and practices are connected to economic processes. In his words: *"an economy based on needs – including their identification by experts and well-managed satisfaction – can provide unprecedented legitimacy for the use of this science in the service of the social control of 'needy' man"* (Illich in Sach 1997,106). Knowledge operations by state bureaucracies and companies use science as a means to make populations in need of development, in need of social control and assistance.

The case of democratic logic against assemblies

Throughout the Mexican state there are several struggles against the imposition of minery, eolic camps or touristic megaprojects in the ancestral territories of different communities. The struggle against these impositions are surrounded with fear and death. At the core of these struggles is the tension between two political forms that refer to two deeply different ways of knowing and organization. The democratic logic of the state imposes itself throughout territories that function and work through assemblies as the main convivial tool. Assemblies have been the way for peasant and indigenous communities throughout Mexico to take collective decisions and resist different stages of colonization. Their way of

functioning - as it will be explained in closer detail in chapter two - fundamentally contrasts with the state's democratic logic. Voting is always the last resort in an assembly. Instead, assemblies work by agreement, and that means that what is to be decided has to be worked on and agreed by the collective as a whole.

What has been the central political tool of the communities is constantly threatened by the imposition of megaprojects and the individualization required by democracy. *"How do you divide a community? By bursting into their assembly, by undoing the assembly communities' fabric? gets unweaved. Businessman come to the assemblies with briefcases filled with money, they know that by getting in there they can destroy life articulations of thousands of years."* (Valiana, interview excerpt). Those who organize themselves through assemblies in Mexico know how vital they are for the perdurance of rural and indigenous communities communities, and they can recall several cases of extreme violence in order to break-down these processes. Indeed, people defend their assemblies putting their lives on the frontline. The state, narcos and extractivist companies continually try to disrupt these processes and they do so joining their efforts.

If we are to say that the assembly is the convivial tool of communities, democratic queries by the state are the tools for disrupting these processes. In an assembly, the imposition of the majority has no place since everything works through agreement. Now, the administration of the new Mexican government is using a query law to give concessions to megaprojects claiming it in their discourse as citizen participation. The query law is being superimposed by the different levels of the state to local communitarian assemblies. *"They have aimed to use assemblies to impose megaprojects, to impose eolic projects, to impose many different things. This is done through a state law that says that assemblies are valid with 60% + 1 of the total number of assembly members, and this is an imposition from the state "*(Angel, interview excerpt). The state brings forward concessions to transnational companies through the imposition of these queries that position themselves above assemblies authority and their relational logic.

The conflicts between the democratic state logic and the communal assembly is not just an abstract discussion but it is a very harsh reality on the ground. On the 9th of February the activist and member of the Nahuatl community of Amilcingo in Morelos Samir Flores was murdered after his defence of the assembly as the defence mechanism of the community

facing the imposition of Proyecto Integral Morelos through a query brought forward by the state.

If you have grown up in a democratic society it might seem perfectly reasonable the way of governance used by the Mexican state, after all they are counting with people participation by asking them to vote, that is the essence of a democracy. However we must ask ourselves what assumptions are behind these democratic rules that only seem to respond to mathematics and not to ideology or politics? Spanish mathematician and sociologist Emmanuel Lizcano is able to connect eloquently the mathematical logic of western knowledge (science) with its political system (democracy). Democracy finds is mathematical logic in set theory. This branch of western mathematic defines the units that form set as homogenous and equivalent. One unit is not different from another and they can be susceptible to addition. This is precisely how populations are treated by democratic logic, one person one vote, no matter their geographical and social position (Lizcano 2006, 262). People, according to the democratic logic, are treated as equal units, subject to the same rights and equally perceived by statistical logic, while *in the real world nothing is identical to another thing, it is only a mathematical matter*” (Valiana, conversation excerpt) . Assemblies do not work in accordance to set theory since each participant is considered to be a node within a relational net. No one is an individual in a community, each of the members present in an assembly have a different role depending on their position within the social network, which is defined by their relations. People's will cannot be placed into an addition operation, as that would obey the logic of individual units.

Moreover, different logics employ different times. It is impossible that communal logic of organization through assemblies can meet the demands of the fast paced market, their politics of time are slower. Even the state's democratic logic has come to be too slow for markets times, it is impossible that every decision taken at a state level can be submitted to queries in any state. Only some events are strategically consulted through queries to give the impression of democratic and participatory projects, but states increasingly need to count with the assistance of bureaucratic experts. The decisions taken at state level are not accessible due to their very specific knowledge and the pace of decision making processes imposed by the economy, the representative governments thus have to count on an army of these experts that are supposed to act in the interest of the abstract set of the population. Specific circumstances, human and non human relations are externalities to this logic, and

thus the assembly is an inconvenient organism for the state. Lizcano calls this regime techno-bureaucracy or the political delirium of reason. The knowledge that these experts use is that of science which is presented as the representation of true knowledge, and thus beyond politics or interests (Escobar 2011, 36). This true knowledge creates the conditions and the possibilities for the imposition of extractive activities in the interest of all, of the population as the total sum of individuals.

In defending the assembly, communities are defending life from extractivist practices and their autonomy that the state and democratic logic are unable to recognize. It also comes with a recognition that what is good for the 'population' is not good for all communities within a state, and therefore that science is not good persé since it is said to work for the shared interests of the 'population.' Science as knowledge goes together with democracy as a political system, contextualized knowledges and ways of organization are at the center of the struggle against dispossession and resist the turning of communities into individuals within a state population, as beneficiaries of the market and the state. As expressed by Lizcano, the legitimization of other forms of governments comes with legitimizing other arithmetics, ones that do not base social organization upon the sum of individuals or abstract rationalities in hands of bureaucracies (2006).

The case of the school in Oaxaca

"If the system is what is screwing us, then what is the school? Only a reproduction of this system, ultimately what they do with the youth is to take them from their reality, insert them in something imaginary (the school) and bring them with a form so the system keeps reproducing itself" (Angel, conversation excerpt)

Since the formation of the Mexican state after the independence in the 19th century, the indigenous populations of Mexico were seen as an obstacle for achieving the liberal and enlightened ideals held by the white elites forming the state. The Mexican state has always been concerned with how to deal with its 'backwards' or 'uncivilized' indigenous population so that the nation could be at the level of liberal economies and states. Accordingly, education was designed to 'take the indianness out of the Indian' (Maldonado 2002, 26). The school system has been the main instrument of the state to dissolve and neutralize indigenous communities throughout the state.

We were visiting a Mixe community that is trying to explore alternatives to higher education together with *Unitierra* when one of the community leader shared his mixed feelings on education with me. He said that he wanted the youth of the community to be able to expand their knowledge and techniques. However, he expressed that all the youngsters that leave school to study at a university in the city of Oaxaca or another state never come back, and if they do they do not bring any valuable knowledge to the community (field notes). He expressed his surprise when they had to teach from scratch to a young member of the community who studied to be an engineer. *"School basically separates the youth from the community and they fill their minds with false expectations, so they think they have to leave, to reject and refuse their communities"* (conversation excerpt). The school is fundamental to separate children and youth from their communities and turn them into individuals with expectations that align with the market and the state. Illich recognizes the school as the initiation rite to introduce people to capitalist societies (1971). I was struck by the clarity with which a companera in *Unitierra* expressed the process of education as that of *formación*: in Spanish, it is common to equate education to *formación*, to give shape to something, to modify something from informal to formal, to shape them into a certain way, and this is precisely the main duty of the school. As expressed by Tolstoi, education is the act of turning something into something (cited in Esteva, Prakash & Stuchul 2005, 14). Currently schools are encouraging young people to leave their communities and find their means of life elsewhere,"*by being at the school they have ceased to learn their life possibilities within the community*" (conversation excerpt). Youth leaving the communities to join job markets elsewhere is having a strong and detrimental impact in communities and makes up a a common concern among rural and indigenous communities.

One of the clearest markers of the school as a tool to shape people's mind in a particular way is the attack against indigenous languages in favor of Spanish. The violence inscribed in the school system is very explicit when separating kids from community life and actively impose an alien knowledge system while forcing them to forget their knowledge practice and their language. In different communities the level of violence varies, however across the Mexican state people hold in their memory the restrictions imposed upon them when trying to speak their language at schools: *the first day that a kid arrived to school they told him please here only spanish, whoever speaks mayan is 2, 5, 10 pesos… that is an imposition!,* recalled a compañero in a conversation. The school was an imposition of a

certain way of thinking and the consequent attempted erasure of all the other previous languages, of other ways of naming the world and the practices from which they emanate. *"The school was imposed, many times through violence. There are entire communities like Guelatao were people lost their language, they stop speaking zapotec, because they hit the kids if they said a word in zapotec"* (conversation excerpt). It has indeed been a very effective system, Yasnaya Aguilar, a prominent mixe linguist, observes that in the last 200 hundreds years of the imposition of the school, the Mexican population speaking an indigenous language has decreased from a 65% to a 6.5% of the total of the population (in El Pais, 2019). Today the majority of the Mexican population are considered to be mestizos and not indigenous, that is why Yasnaya claims that a mestizo is an indigenous person depolitized by the state (in Nexos 2018). The Mexican state has turned most of the population into meztizos by cutting their links with their communities and communal knowledge practices. The school is precisely one of states main tools to erode communal relations turning people into individuals.

Moreover the trend continues in higher education aligning with state and transnational companies interests. People who passed through the university tend to disconnect from their communities and their local political context to live as individuals through artificial expectations created by the market (Illich 1975). Beatriz, from *Unitierra*, left university as a political action when she found out that her classmates were being asked to conduct studies to push forward eolic megaprojects in indigenous communities. Together with other fellow students they turned their backs to the schooling system claiming that the tools provided by the school were designed to shape them against their own communities. It was a strong shock for her who started seeing the university as part of a mechanism that was dissolving the communities, dispossessing them from their territory and their knowledges. Those who started leaving the university behind refused to be integrated into a system that actively destroyed the communities they came from. It was also a way of affirming the validity of the knowledges practices that are lived in the communities without the need for the legitimization of science and the university, "it always seems that one can only learn at a school, that one can only learn through and institution" (conversation excerpt). Thus, their action was a way of challenging schools' monopoly over learning and science's monopoly over knowledge

All these attacks against local knowledges and communal practices that schools and universities provoke are also commonly interiorized by people from the communities

themselves. Usually people show respect to outsiders due to the social status that their diplomas offer them. It is common to hear a communal authority or an experienced peasant say: *"I did not go to school then I know nothing"*. School and the imposition of science as the only true knowledge drive people's devaluation of their own knowledges. The discourses of education and science have been so deeply installed in people's imagination that they are thought to be the basic ingredients to overcome any situation of inequality, violence or poverty. From development experts to governments and also in the discourse of common people anything seems to be solved through more education and science. As Esteva, Prakash and Stuchul put it, education is a secular way of salvation. Humans are born ignorant, and that is the cause of poverty or violence, but with the right amount of education and science people can be saved from their own misery (2005). Indeed there is a continuity in the Western project of civilization in aiming to save people by making them similar to Western ideals, the first colonizers were concerned with people's soul and imposed the church as the means to salvation; currently 'underdeveloped' societies and communities can be oriented towards the direction of progress through the implementation of the scientific mind through education.

Education is the means through which people can be introduced to progress and science, the initiation rite to the myth of development and progress. Something that did not exist a few centuries ago has now reached the status of a universal human right, something without which someone cannot be fully human. *" In order to exist, capitalist societies had to destroy all other previous forms of existence, and the school was a fundamental tool for that purpose, to change ways of being, ways of thinking, ways of existing and adapting them into the conditions of capitalist society"*. (conversation excerpt) The struggle against the school in Oaxaca, in which *Unitierra* is deeply immersed, is thus the resistance to the imposition of a way of thinking and being from the outside. Fanatics of progress and democracy might see in the resistance to the school a sign of ignorance and even an attack on childhood, a deprivation of rights. However, people in this struggle very aware that the school was designed to dissolve them and their knowledges.

In implanting a particular way of thinking, the school is not only imposing values that are central to the project of development but also creating a particular structuring of the mind, a way of processing and understanding the world. Lizcano makes an observation that is very pertinent for this point, he finds that *"it is very significant that all research agree that the*

'capacity to accept logical tasks' is directly proportional to the level of school education. Enlightenment exports, together with its ideal of universal education, the way of knowing that is particular to the school: a logic that is as abstract as school itself, also abstracted/extracted from its context" and it's not curricular practices (2005, 217). The higher the level of school education the more abstracted the minds of people are, and thus less connected with situated practices and knowledges. In this lines Lizcano makes the connection between the abstraction of the knowing individual subjects of Modernity and the spaces where knowledge is gestated.

The school is separated from its surroundings, it separates reality from thinking and knowledge practices. This parallelism can also be seen in the other scientific spaces that have appeared in this chapter. The laboratory where new varieties of corn are 'discovered' or the offices of technocratic 'experts' share the same key feature with the school: that of being aseptic, avoiding any polluting element from the outside to interfere the scientific process. I identify these spaces in line with Lizcanos characterization as *non-places of global power-knowledge* (Lizcano 2006, 211-214). A school or a laboratory being a non-place means that its geographical location does not affect the knowledge that it produces and transfers. Science hides its origins and processes and presents itself as universal, as valid knowledge everywhere at an any time. In the same vein, development aims to promote a way of life that is the same for everyone everywhere and that it can be attained by the delivery of scientific mentality through schooling.

Chapter 2: *The Experience of Unitierra, learning and weaving other worlds*

In the midst of the dis-possession and subjugation of local knowledges, organizations, communities and social movements are finding creative ways to reclaim their capacity to learn what is useful in their own contexts. The imposition of modernity and its knowledge and power institutions in Oaxaca has not managed to dissolve collective local knowledges, frustrating the total establishment of its project. In the last decades, the emergence of subjugated knowledges through collective subjects have taken a crucial role in social and community organization both in rural and urban areas. *Unitierra* has been working together with communities and groups that are reclaiming their ability to learn and know from their own positions by disconnecting from institutional knowledge that perpetuate the figure of the needed individual. The places and subjects of knowledge and learning are being (re)defined beyond the non-places of global knowledge of the laboratory, the classroom and the office.

The aim of this chapter is to express how *Unitierra*, together with communities and social organizations, is immersed in the **insurrection of subjugated knowledges** and in the formation of **collective knowing subjects**. In order to locate different knowledge (re)production the chapter focuses on **knowledge practices,** as a way to pay attention to the social praxis through which knowledge is (re)generated and avoid separating knowledges from the social processes and places that enable them. As expressed by Foucault, truth and knowledge are part of this world- they do not stand by themselves outside social relations and practices (Foucault 1984, 72-73). The chapter takes different collectives and social movements in Oaxaca and Mexico -which *Unitierra* is part of- as learning and knowledge subjects themselves. As subjects they engage in the (re)production of knowledge in their practices. By paying attention to the nature of these practices, I hope to give light to how they are 1) provoking the emergence of subjugated knowledges, 2) forming collective knowing/learning subjects and 3) creating localized knowledge places that escape the non-places of global knowledge.

The chapter is divided into two main parts. The first section is a brief history of *Unitierra* followed by a description of the different actors that work as collective knowing/learning subjects and the activities that form the landscape of knowledges in insurrections of which *Unitierra* is part of. Thereafter, the chapter moves on to a reflection on how these practices and collectives are bringing forward ways of knowing and acting that go beyond the individual and knowledge hierarchies establish by Modernity. This is done through the reflections of the main participants *Unitierra* within this research. The aim is not so much to provide an 'emic' perspective of *Unitierra* and its activities, but make participants take part in the analysis and the conceptualization of the work. To do so, the voices of the participants are not placed under the analytical gaze of the researcher but rather they are able to propose, discuss and question what academics say on the same plane.

Unitierra: History and the landscape of knowledges in insurrection

In 1997, three years after the zapatista uprising, the Statal Forum of Indigenous People of Oaxaca declared that the school has been the main instrument from the state to dissolve indigenous communities (Madrid 2016, 286). As discussed in chapter one, the continuous implementation of schools by the state was the main factor in the destruction of local knowledges and culture since it extracted children and youth from their contexts. After this statement many indigenous peoples of Oaxaca started to close down schools in their communities. Universidad de la Tierra Oaxaca was born in 2002 when a coalition of activists, communities and researchers decide to provide an alternative to education for communities and social movements. The project was created to strengthen the resistance towards schools and provide possibilities to continue learning beyond the formal education. As expressed to me by Gustavo Esteva, the idea is that *Unitierra* works as a possibility for youth to develop a life in their own contexts and not by separating them from it (interview note), an alternative that would not imply the destruction of their own ways of knowing and organization.

In their path towards free learning, *Unitierra* has taken different shapes depending on the demands made by communities and social movements. For that reason, a study of *Unitierra* will always depend on the spontaneous happenings that define the social climate of Oaxaca and Mexico. This flexibility is only possible through the elimination of curriculum, examinations, classes and professors. The main principle of *Unitierra* is that individuals or groups define the pace of their own learning. This is one of the most striking aspects to most newcomers, that no one dictates what you have to learn, how or with whom. The main

function of *Unitierra* is to put groups or individuals in contact with those who have a particular skill or experiences to learn from (field note). This is the case for people that have approached *Unitierra* to learn about filmmaking like Diego, ecotechnologies like Esther or agriculture like me or Sergio. *Unitierra* opens the doors to an active and connected civil society that constitute a variety of learning and knowledge places. To have a glimpse of how this way of learning works in practice and what actors enable it I will first describe the main actors that form *Unitierra's* social fabric and then I will go on to describe the main activities in *Unitierra*.

Learning subjects, places and networks

The physical space of *Unitierra* is situated in a residential area close to the city center of Oaxaca. It is a small building with a few facilities for participants to use. Its appearance resembles more to a house than to a common University. The first floor is structured around a room with a conversation table in the middle. Surrounding this room there are three libraries, a room that has the facilities to conduct radio programs and workshops, and an art room with machinery for printing, painting and editing at the farthest end. On the rooftop there is an urban garden which has fruit trees, vegetable boxes and a small structure for seedbeds. While these facilities are offered to participants to organize various workshops, study groups and conversations to enhance their learning, the main pillar for learning in *Unitierra* is the social fabric it is immersed in. A whole range of different actors constitute this fabric: organizations from the civil society, individuals with different skills, spontaneous or longstanding social movements, and indigenous communities from across the region of Oaxaca. Actors are both individuals and collectives and act not only as learning places but as learning and knowledge subjects themselves. Meaning that they are not only places for individual members of *Unitierra* to learn from, but that the different groups themselves are constantly in the seek of knowledge practices to continue their work. These social fabrics have not remained static since *Unitierra* was founded over 15 years ago. They have seen several changes depending on different social and political situations and which of the *Unitierra* members were present at each moment. I will now go on to describe what I identified as the main actors of this network during the time I was in Oaxaca.

Foro Oaxaqueño del Agua:

The Water Forum of Oaxaca was created in 2003 as an open space to reunite different actors from civil society and governmental spheres with the goal of protecting and

regenerating the water processes of the valleys of Oaxaca (Foro del Agua, n.d.). As explained to me by Juan Jose, the director of one of the main organizations of the Forum, the INSO (Oaxacan Institute of Nature and Society), the forum mainly functions as a way to bring communities, governmental actors and organizations around water management (interview note). In this sense, water reunites disparate actors in the seek for common action. The materiality of water brings together different rationalities ranging from engineers to community elders. The space was created in a way in which civil society and communities could participate and be involved in water management, avoiding relegating those roles solely to expert figures.

On the 12th of April I attended the 51st assembly of the Water Forum of Oaxaca together with four other participants from Unitierra. The assembly reunited all kinds of different actors from the civil society in Oaxaca around collective water management in the region. That day the assembly was formed by around 100 people, 14 civil society organizations, three educational and research centers and 10 government agencies (Foro del Agua 2019). The assembly lasted for over four hours, dealing with different topics around the state of water in Oaxaca and the Atoyac river. The actors were different and had diverse perspectives and knowledges on water. The two main points discussed that day were the new water laws by the federal government and the attempts to heal the Atoyac river that passes through the city of Oaxaca (field notes).

The Forum acts as a learning and knowledge subject itself, since there is a constant search and (re)creation of collective knowledge in water management. However, that does not imply that the knowledge and learnings of the Forum are in any way homogenous. Due to the diversity of actors forming the Forum it is common that there are tensions between different knowledge practices. A good example occurred the day I attended the forum, when an engineer together with a member of the Oaxacan government were proposing big technical measures to fix water treatment plants that were unused. In their way of knowing they referred to water constantly as a resource, as something susceptible to engineering maneuvering. After sometime of exposing their ideas, one compañera of *Unitierra* raised her voice to say that water was more than a resource and it was precisely that narrow understanding of water that has lead to the current situation of water pollution in Oaxaca. Indeed, after her intervention some people from different communities and neighborhoods started recalling how clean the Atoyac river was around four decades ago, before modern

centralized water systems were established. People started remembering outloud how they use to swim or fish in the part of the river that crosses the city of Oaxaca, that now gives off a fetid smell (field notes).

It did not take long for the engineer to acknowledge the situation. He expressed his agreement while explaining that he did not understand water as something sacred due to his technical education. Once the different perspectives were acknowledged by both sides they went on to work on how to regenerate sections of the Atoyac by sharing the technical and community knowledge (field notes). This anecdote reflects something of which I was constantly reminded by Esteva. In the formation of collective subjects around different issues like water or health, knowledges that come from radically different trajectories come together in practice. That means, that while the engineer and members of different communities present at the Forum are unable to synchronize their rationalities on what water is, their knowledges are able to find a common path in practice.

Unitierra Huitzo:

Unitierra Huitzo is formed by a group of women working on ecotechnologies, agroecology and spirituality in the community of San Pablo Huitzo, situated around 30 km away from the city of Oaxaca. Since 2013 they have their own space in the community that they use to carry out different activities as an open learning space. The day I went to visit the project they were hosting an organic market where members of the community sell their products and learn from each other (field notes). There I could talk to three of the members of *Unitierra* Huitzo that expressed that like the market, all their activities were focused on facilitating settings were knowledge could be transmitted among community members, and particularly across generations (interview notes). Together with *Unitierra Oaxaca* they have been working on the milpa project, organizing events for children to learn and get involved in the practice of the milpa that is so well known by their grandparents. They expressed how they have seen kids recovering back the interest on the milpa after the elders of the community shared stories with them.

Today they are immersed in the learning processes of the community, but they are also part of *Unitierra's* learning network. If someone comes to *Unitierra* wanting to learn ecotechnologies or agriculture they will be put in contact in *Unitierra Huitzo* so they can learn by sharing, living and working with them.

Finally, *Unitierra Huitzo* is constituted as a collective learning subject. Before starting their own project, they were part of *Unitierra* Oaxaca so they could learn all aspects necessary to start their own project in San Pablo Huitzo. Their participation in *Unitierra* required responsibilities in a way where they could learn together whatever was necessary for their own project. In this sense, as a group they formed a collective learning subject to work towards a common project.

Red en Defensa del Maíz Nativo:

The Network in the Defence of Native Corn was created over 14 years ago at a national level to defend local seeds and food systems against the implementation of export based agriculture and seeds and techniques oriented to monocultures. *Unitierra Oaxaca* has been part of the network since its first steps. Similarly to the Water Forum, this network brings together different actors like researchers, civil society organizations and communities to defend native corn and food sovereignty from the attempts of transnational companies to transform agriculture and seeds themselves to fit profit schemes.

In the meeting I attended, I could see that the space was a learning place and subject. People took the time to update others on international legislation like the Nagoya agreement on genetic resources, that could be used to make a case in international courts to defend Mixe corn. There was also time to share updates from the communities, to discuss the spiritual dimension of corn and to comment different varieties and growing techniques (field notes). For those *Unitierra* members oriented to agriculture this space offers a great opportunity to learn by directly contributing in a topic that is central to agriculture in the area.

Comité Ixtepecano en Defensa de la Vida y el Territorio:

The Ixtepec Committee for the Defence of Life and Territory was formed after a long trajectory of struggle against minery by the community of Ixtepec in the Istmo region of Oaxaca. They work as an assembly to strengthen the communitarian fabric so that they can offer alternatives to the continuous attempts of dispossession made by transnational companies in the region. Since the earthquakes of 2017 their work has focused on the reconstruction of houses while reconstructing the communitarian fabric. Their project of reconstruction have offered an alternative to the aid based model pushed forward by companies and the state. They have recovered local knowledges on inhabiting and house building by including families in the process of reconstruction. They have paid particular attention to local reconstruction techniques like adobe walls and communal organization of

work like tequio (field notes). Rather than accepting the techniques from the state and construction business that lead to families indebtment and to the lost of knowledge practices on inhabiting, they have managed to take reconstruction in their own hands.

The Committee was formed by an old member of *Unitierra*. He went to Oaxaca city to expand his learnings so he could go back to Ixtepec and support communities resistance to minery and now eolic companies. This is precisely one of the most important points of *Unitierra*. The project is not oriented so that youth leave their communities and join economic societies, rather it is oriented for them to return to their communities and strengthen their collective knowledges and organization. This is a way of tackling one of the processes that erodes community life and knowledges the most, the massive migration of their youth to cities through educational circuits.

Concejo Nacional Indígena:

The National Indigenous Congress is the first national indigenous organization in Mexico. It was formed on the 12 of October of 1996 after a call from the zapatistas to indigenous people to organize themselves in the defence of the San Andres Agreements. As it is commonly expressed by its members, they have operated as a web when they are separated and as an assembly when they come together. They have been the main symbol of indigenous struggles in Mexico for over two decades. Two companerxs of *Unitierra* are directly part of the CNI and many others are part of the support networks.

Valiana & Angel who are part of the CNI shared with me how much they learned by being part of the movement. They told me several times that in participating in the CNI they have learnt discipline, organization and also from other compañerxs from different indigenous communities across Mexico. Listening has been the main instrument for learning by participating in the CNI. According to them, as young people they are expected to listen and take the responsibilities that are asked from them.

Indeed conversations and actions in *Unitierra* are quite connected to the processes of the CNI, in a way that the learning processes goes together with the struggle. On the 20th of February, Samir Flores, an indigenous activist from the CNI in Morelos, was murdered after his opposition to the implementation to a thermoelectric plan through a governmental consultation. That day the conversations in *Unitierra* were marked by an atmosphere of sorrow and distress. The event caused these shared feelings and reflections of *Unitierra* participants for some time. After a few weeks I joined some companerxs to Amilcingo,

Samir's hometown, to the national assembly convoked by the CNI to support the resistance and held an assembly to face the current situation of dispossession. It was the first assembly of the CNI that was opened to support groups (field notes). In no way was this interfering negatively in the compromises of *Unitierra*. It was, rather, part of its activities. Being engaged and affected by processes like the CNI is a crucial part of the process of what allows *Unitierra* to move at the rhythm of social movements.

Indigenous Communities from the Region of Oaxaca:

One of the key actors that take part in *Unitierras* activities are different indigenous communities of the region. Many different communities have collaborated with *Unitierra* throughout the years. In the months I lived in Oaxaca I could see how communities are engaged by visiting a Mixe community near Tlahuitoltepec as well as when receiving the visit of a primary school teacher from an Ikoot community on the coast with whom *Unitierra* is building a project. Generally, communities see a great opportunity in *Unitierra* as a way for their youth to expand their learnings without turning into individuals that will not come back to support the community. Some teenagers from the Ikoot community were coming to *Unitierra* periodically so they could learn what they were interested in by visiting different projects of *Unitierra's* network. After that, they agreed with the rest of the community to share what they learned in the form of workshops. In this case the learning was oriented towards productive food systems. The youth learnt by doing while strengthening social ties and creating possibilities for a dignified living in their own community.

Another way that *Unitierra* is involved with communities is by facilitating workshops on topics demanded by the community. Esther expressed that in previous years many communities were interested in developing ecotechnologies, so they brought together different people from the network of *Unitierra* to coordinate workshops about the topic in each of the localities (interview notes). Workshops are always defined by the community, avoiding missionary-like relations of which the individuals from outside decide what communities must learn.

Communities, like individuals, are learning subjects that are put in contact with those who know from experience what they want to learn. Indeed, not only are some youth from communities coming to *Unitierra* but many times communities themselves constitute collective learning subjects in *Unitierras* network. By identifying what is eroding community

life and what needs to be done to strengthen it, *Unitierra* facilitates contact with other communities or individuals that have experienced or worked on a similar issue.

Individuals and projects:

Finally, *Unitierra's* network is completed by a range of individuals or smaller projects that work in particular jobs and are willing to share their skills with others. A good example is the case of Don Chano, a man that while being the authority of his community in San Bartolo Coyotepec developed a complex system of waste separation and ecotechnologies. He assiduously receives individuals and communities that want to learn from his methods (interview notes). In my time there I met more people like Don Chano that were open to be accompanied so that people could learn their skills. As far as I could explore, navigating *Unitierra's* network can lead one to learn ecosystem regeneration, biointensive agriculture, food sovereignty, indigenous agricultural practices, agroecology, water management, diverse graphic arts, radio, communication, photography, video making, traditional healing, weaving, ecotechnologies, building reconstruction, activism around different issues, organizative practices and participatory research methodologies. However, this was restricted to the short time I was there and to the scope of my own interests. Moreover, participants soon realize that their learning is not solely dependent on those that *Unitierra* can connect them with and they start taking that attitude with them. Said differently, as expressed to me by Sergio, once you go through *Unitierra* you realize that you do not need an educational institution, one can just ask to join people that are doing what you want to learn, and most of the time people are happy to share their knowledge. Essentially, it is a way of trusting in the knowledges that people are already practicing beyond what is legible and legitimized by institutional processes.

Learning Activities

The main principle for learning in *Unitierra* is learning by doing with those who are already practicing it. This implies the constant connection and participation with groups that perform different skills or gather around different topics in civil society. The classroom and curriculum structures get dissolved to learn with the world rather than from the world. *Unitierra* does not operate like classical universities that act as a rite of passage before participating in society. Rather, participation is from the first moment the driver of learning. For that to happen different members of *Unitierra* carry with them the responsibility of maintaining participation in the different spaces mentioned above. However, the different

spaces and networks which *Unitierra* is part of are not fixed. New participants bring with them other networks, activities and spaces they were part of before joining the project. Different collectives of street artists, women groups or activist/researchers have found in *Unitierra* a place to grow and continue their activities.

However, *Unitierra* organizes and hosts activities in its physical space that strengthen the learning of groups and individual participants. Every activity is welcome as long as it is socially just and ecologically feasible. However, I could participate and observe different activities that were somehow established as key pillars for the learning environment.

Conversatorios:

The conversatorios are held in the main room of the physical space of *Unitierra*. They are a way of opening spaces for conversation around different topics depending in the current situation of social movements and struggles or the interest of different collectives. They are announced and are open for the participation of anyone. In that way members from a broad range of movements and collectives participate assiduously in the conversations. Members of feminist collectives, the teacher movement or from indigenous organizations are amongst the people that inhabit these spaces. The conversations vary from week to week depending on the happenings that define the social atmosphere. It serves as a way of constant reflection and learning through connecting with the casual and unplanned character of social movements. The conversations can be supported by readings or material that are decided by the group to enrich the discussion. However, the most important aspect of the *conversatorios* is the possibility to learn by listening, in a way that conversations are always connected to the feelings of participants and the social reality surrounding them. It is an act of collective reflection that works through sharing the word.

Workshops:

When there is enough interest on a certain topic participants organize open practical workshops. That was the case when I organized together with Angel, Valiana and Sergio, a series of workshops on urban agriculture in the rooftop of *Unitierra*. After visiting a few projects and learning from their techniques we decided to learn together and invite others to join. The first sessions were focused on the basics of urban agriculture, explaining techniques for germinating seeds, composting and preparing beds. In this way, our learning in agriculture was enhanced by studying different techniques and explaining them to each other in practice. Soon we were constituted as a new collective learning subject around agriculture. After the

first sessions we agreed to bring people from *Unitierra's* network to share their techniques with others. Through *Unitierra* Huitzo we contacted Don Heraldo, who experienced a shift from chemical fertilizers to green fertilizers in his land. He came to share his experience and learnings in *Unitierra*, combining his own story with practical development of fertilizers (field notes).

Workshops are not only carried out in *Unitierra* but also conducted in communities. As explained before communities often want to learn a particular technique and *Unitierra* facilitates the contact to bring practical workshops on the topic to the given community.

Study groups:

The centrality of practice in *Unitierra's* learning philosophy does not imply that reflection and study are neglected. Rather, they are used as ways of supporting practices by reflecting back on them. Abstractions are taken for what they are, instruments to look at reality, not as reality itself (Esteva 2013, 41-42). Study groups are constantly formed and dissolved. They can be formed around a topic, a book or an author; but are always directed to reflect back on practical processes. Like action, reflection in *Unitierra* is adaptable to spontaneous and ongoing circumstances that affect different social movements at a local, national and global level. I arrived to Oaxaca only some months after the election of the new Mexican President Andres Manuel Lopez Obrador. Profiled as progressive by media and different social sectors he has caused a big division within Mexican social movements. While he is continuing extractivists projects throughout the Mexican territory a sector of the social movements started joining his administration, simultaneously others remain in noninstitutionalized struggles against the state and big companies. In order to understand why many people involved in the same social movements as *Unitierra* decided to join a mass movement that promised to solve social problems through state structures a study group was formed around the work Elias Canetti work *Mass and Power*. The study group was dedicated to read and discuss Cannetis work in the midsts of AMLOs government (field notes). In this way, *Unitierra* punctually engages with abstract and theoretical material to have insights on practices and the sociopolitical panorama.

Like other actors engaged with new social movements (Esteva & Pakrash 1998) or societies on the move (Zibechi 2017), they have brought forward a praxis of learning and knowing that does not take the position of ideological mesias but rather it is capable to *walk*

at the pace of the slowest (EZLN)*, not dictating the lines to be followed by social movements but being able to listen and be affected by them.* In this journey *Unitierra* and others are reconfiguring the ways of learning, the relations between practice and theory and even modifying who are the knowing and learning subjects. Ultimately, they are offering new ways of thinking and acting by listening and not dictating, *being deeply immersed in social change processes and dedicates itself centrally to the exploration of new options for the creation of political, ideological and cultural alternatives* (Unitierra n.d.) .

The following section of this chapter is a reflection made with participants on how *Unitierra* learning and knowing practices are bringing forward new collective subjects and the insurrection of subjugated knowledges, offering learning alternative that are able to walk with communities and movements and not against them. The reflection first focuses on how *Unitierra* is displaying collective learning subjects that transcend the individual as the core subject of both social organization and learning processes. By engaging in the search for new ways of thinking, learning and doing the ideal of the individual is being challenged. The reflection on collective subjects moves around *affection* and *agreement* as key words in this process. Finally the learning praxis of *Unitierra* is conceptualized through the verbs *weaving* and *learning,* as powerful concepts to express how subject-object, theory-practice and teacher-student relations are being reconfigured in the learning and knowing practices and places described in the first section of the chapter.

Affection & Care

The ideal capitalist subject is the autonomous individual that through participating in the market he can sustain his life without depending on others. In academic spheres mainly ecofeminist like Vandana Shiva have expressed that this is just an unattainable illusion since life is sustained by a complex range of care relations and interdependencies even in capitalist societies (in Appleton 2013, 7-10). Now grassroot movements across the world find that care, affection and friendship are key to refuse the imposition of being individuals. In *Unitierra* affection (cariño) is identified by most participants as the guiding thread of the project, an essential for the constant formation of collective learning and knowing subjects. Affection is the glue that holds together the social fabric. Affection is not a concept that can be defined but a way of doing that builds up with time, *"it is like a relationship you build, a set of practices and things that we build as a collective 'us'….[affection] is about building*

collectively" (Valiana, interview excerpt). Subsequently, affection and care are relational practices, they are not held by someone, or belong to a specific space.

Through affection different ways of relating to others and the world are formed, *"affection should be the base for building radical ties, meaning a radicality of feeling. When you build affection with other people mutual care happens* (Sergio, interview excerpt). The relational character of affection implies stop seeing the world in segmented bounded parts but as set of relations of interdependency. *"When we talk about affection we are not talking as individuals, we do not consider ourselves individuals, we are nots within a web of relations that has been formed through centuries…. Real and political affection is built when you stop thinking only in yourself and start seeing that you are a not within a wider net"* (Valiana, interview excerpt). This realization brings a set of responsibilities and implications with others that make us acknowledge that life, thinking or learning, never happen in isolation. Life and relations are maintained through affection and care with others. In *Unitierra* this implies a constantly relating to different actors that form the social fabric of Oaxaca and also among members themselves.

Surely, as explain by Angel, care and affection are too often understood as overprotection, leading to separate kids from reality that surrounds them. This understanding of care separate us from the world rather than acknowledging our interdependence. It leads to paternalistic and protective attitudes that are taken by state institutions when kids are said to belong in schools, protected from the dangerous outside. However, in *Unitierra* groups are constantly being formed to engage with diverse real and vibrant issues together with others. *"Friendship is built by facing reality. And what happens in this world is that we are separated from this reality, from the things we live, separated from those who live and feel like we do, from those who are next to us"* (Valiana, interview excerpt). Daring to face the surrounding reality and getting together with others to see what can be done is at the core of *Unitierra*. The youth at *Unitierra* learn practices that are useful to intervene in their own communities. That is the case of the Ikoot youth mentioned above.

Moreover, in *Unitierra,* affection and friendship take the role of organizing learning beyond institutions. The individual student or thinker can only exist if there is an institutional and hierarchical framework that sustains it as a subject. In *Unitierra* the individual student is dissolved by *"creating different relationships that are not mediated by institutions"* (Valiana, interview excerpt), constantly forming collective learning subjects based on affection.

Through affection and friendships learning relationships are configured beyond hierarchical or contractual relations. *Unitierra "is a collective space, a common space, but there is no one telling the rest: we are doing this at this moment and this other thing at this moment and we should all do it together"*(Angel, interview excerpt). People gather with friends around topics they are interested in. In this sense, through affection and friendship learning is organized. That occured when we organized the urban agriculture workshops. The organizing principle was not an institutional scheme but a group of friends getting together to learn agricultural practices.

The non-places of the classroom, the laboratory and the office work to sustain the individual thinking subject that is separated from the world and thought as a solely mental activity (Lizcano 2006, 211-214). "*We can not go on and say: right now I am only thinking, I am not feeling anything because I am isolated from the rest of the world, that does not exist* (Valiana, conversation excerpt). Affection, in this sense, also implies being affected by the outside, letting others influence you, acknowledging interdependency. It implies breaking with modern dichotomies of reason/emotion, subject/object, individual/world or individual/society (Walsh 2011, 53-54). In *Unitierra* the conversations, workshops, study groups and activities are always marked by events from the surrounding social fabric. All activities are susceptible to the outside through the interconnection with the different spaces and movements. *Unitierra* adapted its activities to the Oaxaca commune in 2006 turning its space as a radio station, the 2017 earthquake in the Istmo organizing a reconstruction program with the Comite Ixtepecano or the organizations and discussions following Samir's murder last February.

Being immersed in new social movements, in *Unitierra* there are people coming from very diverse worlds. Social movements no longer subscribe to overreaching ideologies like in the case of 20th century with marxism (Federici 2011). Bringing change by taking control over the state is no longer what holds people together. Particularly in Latin America, but also elsewhere, as it will be discussed in more detail in chapter three, social movements are bringing forward ways of social organization that actively escape the state and its institutions (Zibechi 2017). In *Unitierra* participants come from rural and urban areas, from indigenous and mestizo communities, from the region of Oaxaca or other parts of Mexico. They do not belong to any abstract category such as the proletariat or indigenous, nor do they find their common ground in an ideology. What brings them together is the relations of affection in the

search for alternatives around specific issues; they join in action. Emotional ties allow to bridge the differences between participants. In *Unitierra "even if many times we have our differences, it is through affection that we remain together enabling us to continue"* (Angel, interview excerpt). Today's insurgencies are not being lead by homogenous groups neither they are organized in party structures. Today's collective subjects are based in concrete relations built through care, affection, and friendship. *"It is this affection that bring us back down here to the grassroots"* (Valiana, interview excerpt).

Indeed the collective subjects mentioned in the beginning of the chapter are people that gather together around different topics. The Water Forum or different learning communities are finding ways to come together in practice, around different topics and struggles and not around abstract categories. Affection and care are what brings and holds together these new subjects. Moreover, throughout Mexico and Latin America the war against life finds particularly violent manifestations. Social movements and communities have developed practices of care and affection to resist under the storm. *"With this capitalism we must care for each other, specially under the situation of femicides, violence, abductions, murders. There is always a net to care for each other"* (Angel, interview excerpt). Care and affection as collective resistances imply relationships based on trust and responsibility. Participants in *Unitierra* immediately engage with different projects and movements that are held together by relations of care. This does not allow for the uninterested or detached attitudes that university students often have. When engaging in different projects one is not the recipient of a course material that is delivered, you are sharing with someone, building relations that require discipline. Essentially, the difference is between a consumer individual that receives packaged knowledge certified by an institution and a relational person that learns by engaging and caring with others. Differently, *Unitierra* participants are part of different collectives and are immersed in a relational net that is maintained through care and affection.

Agreement & Assembly

The landscape of knowledge practices and collective subjects of *Unitierra* is formed by assemblies around different topics. Assemblies are *"the way in which we govern ourselves without getting governed from above"* (Valiana, interview excerpt). People are gathering in assemblies to make decisions and develop knowledge practices that enable them to govern

different aspects of their own lives. In *Unitierra* assemblies form both the main learning places and collective subjects.

While the assemblies are being threatened by the violence of the state and the imposition of megaprojects, people are organizing to defend the authority of the assembly. At the same time *"different collectives throughout the world are retaking the word assembly from their own experience"* (Angel, interview excerpt). Through assemblies people are gathering around to take action into common issues. In Oaxaca many collectives engaged in social movements are learning from the experiences in rural areas and are starting to organize in assemblies. *Unitierra* decided to adopt the assembly as a way of thinking and feeling collectively. Surely, the learning process of urban collectives from rural communities does not imply an exact copy of their assemblies but an adaptation to their context. When learning from rural experiences in a diverse urban context, *Unitierra* deals with the question of how to harmonize city's ways of organization with learnings from rural and indigenous communities (field notes). Learning and adopting the assembly in urban contexts defies the hegemonic way of knowledge transmission, that since the colonies goes from the *literate city* to rural areas (Aparicio & Blaser in Leyva 2015, 114-115).

Assemblies in *Unitierra* are the main practice for thinking and feeling collectively. The word *Mola'ay,* shared to me by Angel, expresses how assemblies dilute individuals into the collective. *Mola'ay* is the Yucatan Mayan word for assembly, in English is roughly translated as *collected within themselves*. In the process of *Mola'ay* everyone brings themselves and their experiences to share them with the collective. Assemblies are constituted as the places of different collectives, where the *"community is walked"* (Valiana, interview excerpt). They are not just a set of executive operation where individuals join to make decisions; they are the way in which collectives come to be. In democratic systems individuals or parties make proposals and try to convince others for their individual proposal to come forward. Differently, agreement is the main mechanism at work in assemblies. *"Making agreements is the moment in which you tie or weave everything that you are, all your living experience into something collective, something that you want to walk collectively"* (Valiana, interview excerpt). Collectives do not approve proposals, rather they make proposals collectively. Through agreements decisions are made by leaving behind individual proposals to think-feel collectively. In other words, assemblies constitute collective subjects.

In assemblies there is not a sense of equality understood as all members being identical. Rather, people respect legitimate authorities based on experience. People bring their experiences and offer them to the collective. In all the assemblies I attended through *Unitierra*, members were called to speak when the collective thought they could deal better with a particular problem. In the Network for the Defence of Corn the collective called out a lawyer to learn about the Nagoya treaty. At the CNI assembly people with long trajectories in the struggle were listened carefully by younger participants that took their opportunity to learn (field notes). Accordingly, depending on one's individual position within the social net their role in the recreation of the collective is different.

In assemblies the formation of collective subjects comes with the (re)creation of a collective time. Assemblies are the moments in which people gather together and the collective consciousness come to life. *"The assembly is where we get together and we know we are a whole, where we get together and we know we are strong, and we also know that the decision of an individual is not going to decide what we are, that the decisions of a few are not going to decide upon our life"* (Valiana, interview excerpt). It is where the collective itself is (re)created, where different members of the collective weave their activities, feelings and expectations into a common horizon. Moreover, assemblies also act as evaluation mechanisms. Previous agreements and responsibilities designed in former assemblies are discussed and evaluated collectively (field notes). Consequently, assemblies are ways of finding continuity by constantly reflecting back and evaluating on the agreements that are made and how they are taken into practice.

Assemblies are being used to organize life in a context of death. All the spaces, collectives and networks in *Unitierra's* social fabric come to be in assemblies. In this sense, assemblies are simultaneously knowledge practices, learning places and collective subjects. Listening is central in assemblies learning processes. As expressed by *Lenkersdorf,* from his learnings with Tojolabal Mayans, listening is not only hearing something or someone and analyzing from oneself but it implies allowing yourself to be transformed by others (2011, 30-54). Assemblies allow to *"listen to others without interruption, opening a possibility for very strong learning* (Sergio, interview excerpt). They are rich multidirectional sharing places. In assemblies people think together from their own experiences and knowledges. Assemblies also bring together people from all ages and technical backgrounds, allowing for interactions that would never occur in schools. Learning in the classroom is the individual

and unidirectional transferring of a de-localize knowledge alien to students lives (Illich 1971 & Freire 1996). Otherwise, assemblies are multidirectional, active, collective and diverse learning places where local issues are dealt with.

Participation in national, regional and local assemblies is central for learning processes in *Unitierra*. In recent years assemblies have been proliferating beyond community and local level around different issues and struggles. The different assemblies are the main learning places for *Unitierra* participants. Their participation in different assemblies depends on their own interests and implications. For example, Esther is part of the Foro Oaxaqueño del Agua since she works and learns with ecotechnologies as solutions to water pollution. Others, linked to indigenous social movements are part of the CNI. Sergio, involved in agricultural practices was taking part in the National Network in the Defence of Native Corn. Subsequently, if one is interested in agricultural techniques not only he or she learns in practice, but also actively gets involved in assemblies that engage with agricultural struggles. In this way, one gets in contact with other actors involved in the field and also gets acquaintance with local discussions on a given issue. Different assemblies like the CNI, the Comite Ixtepecano or communities assemblies are the learning places and collective subjects through which local knowledges like the milpa or the reconstruction of houses find their way through. They form a learning and knowledge landscape where *Unitierra* is immersed in. Active participation in assemblies are crucial for learning beyond institutions abandoning the figure of the individual student that is a passive receiver of knowledge.

Weaving & Learning

In *Unitierra* learning by participating in grassroot movements can be understood through the combination of *learning* and *weaving* as an alternative to education. Learning and knowledge are recognized as relational practices. From the grassroots, through weaving/learning the static transmission of standardized knowledge gets dissolved. Weaving is a creative force that emerges from the past and is constantly unfolding when relating to others. As explained to me by Valiana, we are weaved by what comes before us and we weave by living (field note). In *Unitierra*, by participating in different assemblies and struggles, learning is not confined to bounded times and spaces but rather is taken as something intrinsic to life. *Is what is getting done, what you live. We understand life as constant learning. Why should we divide learning from other spheres?... it can mean*

learning, living, doing, sharing…(Valiana, interview excerpt) Participants in *Unitierra* learn while weaving relationships and respecting previously weaved relations, giving continuity to previous knowledge practices. The case of Comité Ixtepecano, Ikoot community or *Unitierra Huitzo* are good examples of this. They assist to *Unitierra* to strengthen their own social fabric by giving relevance to different local knowledge practices (like the milpa or house reconstruction). In doing so they find ways to regenerate their communitarian relations and collective subjects. Strengthening and respecting previously weaved relations gives an ancestral aspect to knowledge and learning. *"The learnings of what we know do not solely come from what we live, but are also memory. The memories from our grandparents, of what they have walked, and that is how the thread of life is weaved. It is something that is weaving us to be what we are and to continue learning the things we must learn"* (Valiana, interview excerpt). Ancestral knowledges practiced by new generations are never identical to previous one's, but they continue the thread of the community in the present by weaving it in today's world.

When learning about agriculture one starts building relationships with people to learn with. Through these relationships knowledge practices are continued. Moreover, when participants want to search deeper into a topic they create new relations to conduct workshops. In learning, groups are formed and relations with projects in the region are strengthened. That was the case when together with Angel, Valiana and Sergio, we started to form a group to learn about urban agriculture. We started weaving relations among *Unitierra* participants and with people like Don Heraldo that came to *Unitierra* to share from his own experience. Learning and weaving occur simultaneously, the transmission of knowledge implies an active participation in the surrounding world, shaping it by forming new relations and (re)creating old ones.

Learning/weaving also occurs when experiences are shared between two collective subjects. Some years ago a community from Chiapas identified agrochemicals as the biggest threat to the community and its environment. After that *Unitierra* weaved them with a community in Oaxaca that decided to get rid of agrochemicals before them (Esteva, interview). In this way skills and experiences were shared between both communities, creating a direct relationship between them. Local knowledges based on experience were shared between two active communities as an alternative to expert knowledge brought by the market or the state.

In this sense, learning and knowing bring forward different worlds in practice (Escobar 2016, 22). So, *"if life itself is learning, what kind of life are we now living? It is a capitalist, patriarchal life marked by development, dispossession, violence and death"* (Valiana, interview excerpt). Accordingly, there are attitudes, relations and practices that must be (un)learnt and (un)weaved so we can (re)learn and (re)weave other worlds. In a context where worlds are being unweaved to impose a monoculture we have to unlearn certain practices to re-weave other worlds (Escobar 2016). *"We must learn how to reweave and unweave, when you are making a hammack and you make a mistake you have to unweave what you have done wrong, you can not continue weaving on what is already bad"* (Valiana, interview excerpt). Getting the youth to be engaged with the milpa implies unlearning the crave for fast food and consequently unweaving relations to food industry. At the same time local food relations are (re)weaved by (re)learning local agricultural practices.

The different learning places and collective subjects mentioned in this chapter come to be with the *insurrection of subjugated knowledges*, giving them a real capacity to act in the current world. This occurs when medicinal practices are passed on to new generations, when local ways of buildinging homes are recovered and practiced by communities for reconstruction after an earthquake and when the youth get interested in processes like the milpa.

In learning/weaving *Unitierra* is reconfiguring the relationship between practice and theory. *Conversatorios* are spaces where this reconfiguration happens. *Unitierra* host people from different struggles in the *conversatorio* that share their experiences through their word. In the time I was in Oaxaca, *Unitierra* hosted in the *conversatorios* a Mapuche representative, members of an indigenous University in Colombia and a member of the Kurdish liberation movement. The *conversatorio* was opened as a space to share their word from their experiences and struggles. In this settings words have a special character. The words that others bring to *Unitierra* are not concepts coined through individual research but words that are weaved in collective struggles and organizations. For example, the words shared by the Kurdish compañera resonated with many people present that day, the struggle of the Kurdish people and their organization resembles much of Mexican indigenous social movements (field notes). She did not arrive to *Unitierra* as an individual,or a thinker, rather she carried with her the word that was collectively weaved by the Kurdish movement to share it with people from the grassroots in Oaxaca. Valiana explained that words, as opposed to concepts,

come from specific processes, words are walked, they are felt and they are shared (field notes). And that is when a word is a powerful element in learning when it is weaved in collective practices to be shared with others.

Academia is the reign of concepts not of words. *"If we talk through mere concepts how are we feeling the world?...through concepts! If you listen to someone from the university talking how is (s)he speaking? with concepts and quotes of big authors, and that is how they live, through the mediation of abstract concepts"* (Valiana, conversation excerpt). Talking and living through concepts as explained by Lizcano, makes academics and professors *"not speak to anyone but publish. No one says anything to anyone from nowhere. Things are pure objectivity"* (2006, 210). Concepts stand by themselves as if they do not need a listener or someone to pronounce them. Weaved words are changing the relation between theory and practice. In *Unitierra* words are being retaken to be pronounced from specific places, from different processes and struggles. That means that a word does not stand by itself in isolation, it comes from someone and somewhere and it is shared, felt and walked.

Educators, policy makers and pedagogues all understand that learning occurs best in a meaningful context. Consequently, they expend time and efforts finding innovative and complex solutions to make what is taught in schools meaningful. They want to make the student feel that what he or she is being taught individually is meaningful. A school teacher that joined the study group on learning shared with us that as teachers they must develop *"certain strategies to sensitize the student, so they listen to what is being said, to convince them of what they need to know, what they must learn"* (conversation excerpt). They know that learning occurs when what is learned is meaningful to those who learn, but they also think that what is meaningful to people is not really what they must learn. Therefore educators job is to define what is worth learning and then make it meaningful for individual students. Learning in *Unitierra* works by liberating the definition of what is useful to know or learn from state and market institutions, by not having any curriculum, teacher or program people who participate in Uniterra get around different topics or issues and engage in collective learning. In this way people recover the trust in what is meaningful to them in their own contexts and then they find others to learn from or to learn with. Participation in grassroot movements, community life and local issues are very meaningful settings for learning with others. *Unitierra* understands grassroot movements as meaningful spaces for

learning and knowledge production. In doing so they engage in the *insurrection of subjugated knowledges* and in the formation of collective knowledge subjects.

Chapter 3. *Learning towards autonomy and in the regeneration of the commons*

The experience of *Unitierra* is not an oasis of free learning in an educated desert. People from around the world are finding ways of reclaiming learning from institutions while opening paths of transformation. In doing so, people are revaluing old knowledge practices that were discredited or silenced by Modernity. Also, new practices and forms of generating knowledge are emerging together with the old ones. As expressed by Raúl Zibechi, these practices and learnings occur in a silent manner, preceding big mobilizations that are usually what constitute social movements in academia (La Jornada, 2017). Beyond the reach of institutional radars communities are bringing forward localized practices of learning while regenerating their social and ecological fabrics. Indeed, the reconfiguration of learning by people does not occur in isolation but simultaneously engages in transforming other aspects of life. This chapter finds hope in practices and movements that are often dismissed but that are emerging with transformative potential through the cracks of the market and the state.

The main aim of this chapter is to situate the experience of *Unitierra* in broader discussions and processes regarding learning and knowledge production in social movements at a national, regional and global level. To do so the chapter first explores how social movements, particularly in Latin America, are taking education and learning as core components of the transformation they are bringing forward. Following that we will move on to the nature of the social movements that *Unitierra* is immersed in. At a national and regional level these movements are better explored through the idea of autonomy, not only as a distinctive marker of social movements in Latin America for the last 25 years, but also as a continuous element in Mexican social movements for over two centuries. Furthermore, in order to bring *Unitierra* into dialogue with experiences from other places the chapter will engage with *the commons* and *commoning* as conceptualizations that can englobe movements

throughout the world. The chapter mainly refers to literature on social movements, aiming to situate this study with *Unitierra* in wider discussions and to invite for the search of free learning and autonomous knowledge production in practices carried out by social movements everywhere.

Learning in new social movements

In order to talk about social movements in Latin America it is important to make some clarifications with regards to most literature on social movements. Initially, theories on social movements were mostly coined in American and European universities. Differently to Latin American societies, in Europe and the United States the state has incorporated most of the population into its project. Subsequently, what have been conceived as social movements are big mobilizations of people pressuring state institutions to meet their demands. Certainly, these movements also take place in Latin American societies but they are mixed with other social processes that base their social organization in their autonomy and independence from the state and the market (See Zibechi 2017; Dinerstein 2016 & Esteva 2013). This is due to the marked heterogeneity of Latin American societies where entire communities and sectors of the population, such as indigenous peoples and afro descendants, have searched lives beyond the margins of the modern state (Zibechi 2017, 2&3). Social movements that base their activities in demands to the state find organization as a means to reach their goals. On the other hand, those social movements -or societies in the move as Zibechi suggest- that seek independence from the state do not have a clear distinction between means and ends when organizing and creating collective processes. Social movements of this kind have proliferated across the region in the 1990s after the state was used for the expansion of neoliberal readjustments (Dinerstein 2016, 352). Although they have existed at least since colonization, the general disappointment with the state in the 1990s created a significant shift towards seeking alternatives in their own terms.

In his article "*Educación en los movimientos sociales*" (2005) Zibechi has encapsulated his findings in regards to social movements and education. Latin American social movements have found in learning a central pillar for transformation and the different expressions of this. Indeed, he acknowledges how social movements have designed their own curriculums or have taken over schools, but what he considers more interesting is that social movements themselves are constituted as *"educational subjects"* (164-165). In this sense, *Unitierra*

functions through this conceptualization, immersed in social movements and respecting the different spaces that emerge within them as opportunities for learning. As expressed in the previous chapter, members and participants from *Unitierra* are involved in different social movements and that is the main driver of their learnings. *Unitierra* is neither a space to learn about social movements nor a space created by social movements to push a curriculum or an educational program; rather, it is a space of learning within social movements. This is where the difference between education and learning is key. Learning at the grassroots goes beyond the participation of social movements or communities in schools or their influence in the curriculum. It implies overcoming the fragmentation of social life where learning is confined to a plan or a school. All spaces, actions and reflections of social movements are turned into spaces of learning. Paraphrasing Zibechi, social movements are turning every place, moment and experience into spaces for collective learning (2005). Indeed, this is the challenge that *Unitierra* has been dealing with: how to transform spaces that are in the search of transformation into collective learning spaces. By participating in different events and spaces of the associative fabric of Oaxaca, members of *Unitierra* gain skills and learn how to think, feel and be collectively.

Understanding social movements as spaces and experiences of learning implies both the transmission of skills and practices dismissed by state knowledge and the formation of collective subjects. The Zapatistas themselves recognize that by participating in the movement new generations have acquired practical and reflective knowledge: *"The youth now have a political, cultural and technical training that those who started the movement did not have"* (EZLN 2005). In social movements roles and skills are not strictly defined and divided following a Taylorist model (Zibechi 2005, 166), they are constantly rotating, provoking a regular dynamic of skill learning among the members of the movement. This was the case in the movements linked to *Unitiera*, where different tasks like transcription, fund raising or coordination were in constant rotation (field notes). Moreover, social movements are spaces of collective learning, where the collective is constituted as a learning subject while people learn how to be collectively. This follows the principle of *"transforming oneself while transforming the world"* (qtd in Zibechi 2005, 165). In facing new challenges social movements constantly engage in learning what is needed to overcome a given situation, causing not only a collective learning but becoming collective subject at the same time. This principle of learning in social movements has strong implications in how we

conceive knowledge, as something constantly unfolding in practice and not as something static that can be possessed.

Social movements are incorporating learning as a milestone of their processes and in doing so they are displacing the hegemony of educational institutions. The strength of projects like *Unitierra* is that they move at the rhythm marked by grassroots initiatives refusing to take avant-garde positions. They understand that social movements are learning processes themselves. This is happening all around the world, people are getting organized around different common concerns and in doing so they are creating rich environments for sharing practices and skills and for collective learning. As expressed throughout this work, the skills and the knowledge produced by these movements are going beyond individual learning and are provoking the emergence of knowledges and practices subjugated by modernity. Prakash and Esteva celebrate that in social movements people are regenerating their worlds by sharing and creating knowledge that escape commodified and mass manufactured knowledge by educational institutions (1998, 65). The movements for autonomy and for the defence and reconstruction of the commons are taking up the task of creating collective learning subjects and localizing knowledge practices.

Autonomy. Unitierra in Latin American and Mexican movements

Grassroots movements in Mexico and Latin America are working towards a conception of autonomy that is based in the recognition of the interdependence of life and communities. As shared to me by Valiana *"autonomy does not mean not depending on anyone, but rather to be able to decide collectively what we want to do"* (Valiana, interview excerpt). Indeed, *"the ability to govern ourselves"* is a guiding principle in the search for autonomy in Latin America (Baschet 2017, 6). While struggles for autonomy have a long trajectory in the region in the 1990s autonomy was taken back to the core of grassroots movements. This is due to the strong opposition against neoliberal globalization. The disappointment with the state and neoliberal policies lead movements to place autonomy at the center of their political project (Dinerstein 2016, 352). During the 1990s a new wave of movements towards autonomy in Latin America emerged, carrying their inertia up until today and finding commonalities in other continents like democratic confederalism in Kurdistan.

It is true that with the general shift in the region to progressive governments some of the movements guided by autonomy were incorporated to the state (Zibechi 2017). The

adoption of discourses of autonomy by the state through progressive governments has caused strong divisions within social movements. This is currently the case in Mexico, where participants in autonomous movements are seeing many compañerxs trusting the state again since the arrival of Andres Manuel Lopez Obrador to government.

However, the new social movements that emerged in the region in the 1990s have radically transformed the horizon of practices and organizations of autonomy. Zibechi finds that particularly movements like the Zapatistas and processes of Cecosesola in Venezuela have deepened the understanding of what an integral approach to autonomy imply. These movements have broaden the reach of autonomy to all aspects of life, including ideas, the production and reproduction of life, food and health (Zibechi 2017, 11).

In Mexico, as explained by Esteva, the struggles for autonomy precede the formation of the state with the defense from indigenous communities of their territories against the colonial regime (Esteva 2010). In 19th century Mexico all kind of rebellions were associated with autonomy. Moreover, the revolution at the beginning of the 20th century was marked by the reconstruction of *ejidos,* the communal distribution of the land that was dismantled by the reforms of Porfirio Diaz. The struggle for the *ejidos* was an explicit defence of autonomous communal regimes. Also the universities in Mexico have struggled for autonomy with a strong movement at the end of the 1920s that would set the basis for a resurgence in the 1970s (Esteva 2010, 118). The new wave of movements for autonomy in Mexico is marked by the Zapatista uprising that has influenced rural and urban movements throughout Mexico. January 1 1994 the EZLN declared their opposition to the state after the approval of the North American Free Trade Agreement that threatened once again autonomous communal regimes defined by *ejidos*. The EZLN have been walking a path towards autonomy since then, being nourished by previous autonomous organizations of the people of Chiapas. Their struggle for autonomy has implied a solid and constant defence against the infiltration of the market in community life (Esteva 2010).

The main edge of the defence of autonomy by the Zapatistas is the control of territory and land by the communities. Land is the main production source for Zapatistas communities. This has emphasized the material aspect of the struggle for autonomy. Through the massive recuperation of communal land they have explored the material conditions that allow for the construction of autonomy (Baschet 2017). From that point there have been continuous efforts

to reclaim the control over production and reproduction in all aspects of life, from food to health and learning. While their construction of autonomy is based on their territories and from their majoritarily indigenous condition, their struggle also focuses on creating political spaces where all kinds of groups and communities can gather and work towards their own understanding of autonomy (Esteva 2010, 120). This sense of the struggle for autonomy was made explicitly clear in the Sixth Declaration of the Lacandon Jungle, serving as a call of union among different movements, from rural and urban areas throughout Mexico and beyond, to explore the different meanings and senses of creating worlds beyond the market and the state (EZLN 2005). This has expanded the reach of struggles for autonomy to a plurality of meanings and contexts, sharing the principle of self organization and self governing in all aspects of life. In this sense, autonomy is not a model but a word that encapsulates a whole set of different experiences that work towards collective organization beyond state institutions.

Simultaneously, indigenous communities in Oaxaca have a long history of autonomy that has a lot in common with the Zapatistas but maintains its particularities. Autonomy has been practiced as a way of resistance by indigenous communities in Oaxaca. According to those working around the idea of *comunalidad* (Maldonado 2002; Martinez Luna 2010; Diaz 2007) the pillars of autonomy in Oaxacan communities have been territory, assembly, collective work and *guelaguetza*[4]. Oaxacan communities also host an impressive diversity of autonomous knowledge practices. Different knowledges of healing, agriculture, inhabiting or political organization are maintained through long communitarian processes and practices. The practice of the milpa reveals a long process of collective knowledge that does not depend on institutions for its (re)production or transmission. In fact, I find it revealing to note that in practices like the milpa there is no division in the process of knowledge (re)production and transmission. Autonomous local knowledges are constantly recreated in practice, practiced and transformed collectively. These practices of collective (re)production of knowledge are at the core of autonomy in Oaxaca.

The struggle for autonomy in Mexico and Latin America have marked politics from the grassroots. The organization of autonomy has existed in antagonistic opposition to

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[4] Guelaguetza is the aesthetic principle of life in Oaxacan indigenous communities. It refers to the joy of sharing life together with others. This principle is present in all aspects of community life and it precedes communities ethics. Guelaguetza as is the articulating principle of community life.

institutional, party and state politics. State politics maintains itself by constantly dismantling autonomous organizations from the grassroots, by dispossessing people's capabilities of organizing themselves in all aspects of life (Baschet 2017, 6). As explored in chapter one, local knowledge practices are dismantled in order to impose expert state knowledge making people dependent on institutions. Autonomy does not appear as an opposing force to state power, the construction of autonomy makes the state and its institutions dispensable (Esteva 2010). In this sense, the construction of autonomy implies the constant exploration of local and collective knowledge practices that make expert institutional knowledge obsolete. The construction of autonomy goes together with the insurrection of subjugated knowledges and with the constitution of collective learning subjects. *Unitierra* emerged from the endeavour towards autonomous learning of communities in Oaxaca once the state school system was identified as the main instrument to dismantle communities' autonomy. In their praxis, knowledges are recovered to undo the figure of the needed individual. These are the processes at play when *Unitierra* walks together with communities in learning around the milpa, or on in reconstructing houses in Ixtepec.

The learning subject in *Unitierra* is not restricted to the individual student, communities and groups are often constituted as collective learning subjects that join together in the recovery of practices that allow for the construction of autonomy in different aspects of life such as eating, healing or inhabiting. Unitierra does not act as a solid and confined collective learning subject. Collaborators and participants of *Unitierra* constantly form, dissolve and engage with different collective learning subjects. By creating a work group around urban gardening, a collective learning subject emerges around a shared interest. Collaborators are also part of other learning subjects beyond *Unitierra's* walls. At the Water Forum collaborators from Unitierra join other actors to create a collective space in order to learn how to manage the water of the valley of Oaxaca together. What needs to be learned is decided in agreement and different actors like engineers, community elders or organizations engage collectively in the production of this knowledge.

Autonomy, as a set of practices, is constituted by continuing collective learnings and knowledge (re)production. The struggles for autonomy are shaped by what Esteva calls the recovery of verbs. *"People are substituting nouns like education, health or tenement, that are needs to be met by public or private entities, by verbs like learning, healing or inhabiting. In this way they reclaim personal and collective agency enabling autonomous paths for social*

transformation" (2013, 3). Grassroots movements are regenerating autonomous worlds through the combination of new and old knowledge practices.

<u>*The commons*</u>

The reconstruction of the commons is at the center of the conversation of grassroot movements that are aiming to create spaces and relationships beyond public and private dichotomies. Harnies' famous work *'The Tragedy of the Commons'* (1968) launched the commons as a central idea to express many different processes that involve multiple actors. His work is based on the changes that occured in 16th century England that eroded commonly managed social and natural relations to turn them into privately owned resources. The continuous dismantling of the commons has been identified as a necessary condition for capitalist expansion in a process that Harvey calls *'accumulation by dispossession'* (2005). According to Harvey, capitalist expansion needs the continuous erosion of common relations among people and with nature in order to transform them into market mediated relations. In this sense, accumulation is the constant move in capitalist expansion and not only an early stage in capitalism's development as suggested by Marx (primitive accumulation). This is precisely what has been observed in the first chapter: a continuous process of eroding people's knowledge to organize themselves beyond the market and the state. Initially, the idea of the commons was developed as a generic term to express different social forms existing in Europe previous to capitalist and industrial expansion (Esteva 2014, 146). However, the continuous enclosure of the commons is a common feature of capitalist expansion everywhere.

Currently the commons are at the center of the conversation and a broad array of struggles gather around this notion. The regeneration of common worlds has marked new grassroots movements that depart from the revolutionary ideal of taking over the state. According to Federici this is a response to *the neo-liberal attempt to subordinate every form of life and knowledge to the logic of the market* (Federici 2011, 103). The commons are spaces of convergence where people from different backgrounds and ideologies gather to form a collective subject by caring for a common good. In this sense, people gather around practices and not around ideological doctrines. This is the case in all the common practices in which *Unitierra* participates. People gather around shared concerns like water, housing or food

production to recreate the different commons in collective action. Collective subjects are formed around the management of concrete commons.

The struggle for the commons does not only focus on the regeneration and defence of the old commons like land and water but is also concerned with new commons. New forms of collective work and action are constantly emerging in new spaces in dispute like the internet or urban neighborhoods (Federici 2011, 103). They are spaces in dispute because new commons are accompanied by new enclosures. Indeed, in the new spaces in dispute there is also the need to develop collective knowledge practices and subjects that can maintain the spaces beyond public and private property. In the Water Forum or the Space for the Defence of Corn no one is claiming ownership over water or corn, they are enacting relational practices that keep water and corn beyond ownership. These spaces serve as places for free encounters for reflection, action, learning and collective knowledge production around a given common.

Simultaneously, there is an attempt to incorporate the idea of the commons in capitalist and property schemes. Under specific circumstances collective management of resources can be more efficient and less prone to conflict than privatization, turning the commons into something that is productive in market terms (Federici & Caffentzis 2014, 86). This is the current situation throughout Mexico, after facing strong opposition from communities mining and electric companies have painted their extractivist projects with the colors of community and collaboration. In Ixtepec, Oaxaca, after several years of communitarian struggle against the constant attempts from wind power companies to disposses communities from their territories they have changed their strategy. Right now, there is a shift in discourse brought to Ixtepec by *Yansa Foundation*. They work under the slogan '*Wind. Power. People,*' and they claim to *"partner with communities to facilitate their direct participation in the just transition to renewable energy while ensuring that the communities retain control over their resources"*. The representative of the company in Ixtepec expressed to me how previous eolic companies where trying to bring development without including the community. Now, after understanding the power that community organization have in the region the strategy for eolic expansion is to 'include the community' in their development plans (field notes). That means little more than adopting the discourses of communities struggles and the commons to penetrate new territories for capitalist expansion. He was there to convince the community of Ixtepec and the Comitee in Defence of Life and Territory to give their land to wind power

companies promising that they would keep control over their resources. In order to 'include the community' Yansa is offering them 40% of the shares (field notes). However, this would imply land would be used for several decades for eolic exploitation, making community life dependent on global capital flows. This would imply an irreversible lost of knowledge practices that enable the commons in Ixtepec. The commons are constantly recreated by different collective knowledge practices like the use of agricultural land, even if capitalist expansion adopts adjectives like participatory or communitarian essentially it erodes peoples knowledges to govern themselves. In the words of Federici and Caffentzis: *the more the commons are attacked, the more they are celebrated* (2014, 86).

At the same time, the Ixtepec Committee and members of *Unitierra Oaxaca* are forming an alternative to the incorporation of community life to global flows of capital and energy. In continuity with their previous work, they are creating a space that can serve as an agricultural knowledge center. The aim is to ensure the continuity of local ways of agriculture with a relevance in current times. By sustaining collective knowledge practices in agriculture, like the milpa, they are also sustaining the common management and use of land that these knowledge allow for. As Linebaugh puts it: *"the commons is an activity and, if anything, it expresses relationships in society that are inseparable from relations to nature. It might be better to keep the word as a verb, rather than as a noun, a substantive"* (cited in Federici 2011). Indeed, several authors and activist around the issue of the commons have prefered to emphasize their relational and practical aspect by referring to *commoning* (See Esteva 2014 & Federici 2011). Commoning refers to the ongoing processes and activities in the reconstruction of the commons and communities. Commoning implies *"reclaiming and regenerating our commons and creating new commons"* (Esteva 2014, 156). The commons are not a static resource waited to be exploited or managed by a community, but a set of activities and knowledge practices. If the knowledge that enables these practices is erased and substituted by expert knowledge, the commons and collective subjects are dismantled.

The relational and practical aspects of the commons are central to *Unitierra's* activities. *Unitierra* engages in activities and projects with communities that reinforce and recreate their own knowledges that allow them to exist as a collective and maintain their autonomous relations between each other and to nature. Recovering the milpa, generating collective knowledge of inhabiting in Ixtepec or being present in commons spaces like the Water Forum or the Network in the Defence of corn are all centered around regenerating and defending

different commons. In this sense, *Unitierra* strengthens the practices that enable the commons, using commons spaces both for collective and individual learning. When *Unitierra* engages with the Comite in Ixtepec they agreed upon which activities and with whom they will generate the collective learning they desire. In the case of Ixtepec this was particularly directed to inhabiting, rebuilding their houses with their own communal knowledges. Also, *Unitierra* has a central function in opening commons spaces to young people as spaces for learning. To illustrate this I would like to mention an anecdote with Sergio. For some weeks he developed a strong interest in water systems and water management. As part of *Unitierra* we went to the Foro Oaxaqueño del Agua, where he was engaged with the conversations about water that concerned Oaxacans populations. Moreover he was able to meet there an engineer and biologist that worked in recovering river ecosystems. The Foro was acting as a space for collective management of water and collective learning but also as a place to exchange knowledge and skills that are necessary for the (re)generation of the commons.

Movements for the regeneration of the commons and autonomy do not exist separate from each other, they are intertwined and closely related. Most likely, most movements around the world that fit into these categories do not conceive of themselves in these terms. However, the commons serves as an umbrella term to describe the silent movement that is happening all around the world to recover communities practices and relations between members and with nature. For that knowledge practices are (re)generated beyond the legitimization of the state or the market, they are conceived and transmitted collectively. In Latin America these movements have been widely understood as movements for autonomy. The reconstruction of autonomous worlds is an ongoing process in different parts of the world, in rural and urban areas, in the South and in the North. The reconstructions of these worlds is intimately linked to the reconstructions of the knowledges that unfold communities and the commons.

Conclusions:

This work has served as an exploration of a broader horizon of learning and knowledge production from the grassroots together with *Unitierra Oaxaca*. Throughout the research a dynamic landscape of knowledge struggles has been unfolded. The different practices and subjects portrayed here represent the silent insurrection of subjugated knowledges (Foucault 1976) in the social fabric formed by Oaxacan grassroot movements and communities. In this context, *Unitierra* Oaxaca has been depicted as an autonomous center of knowledge production and learning. Hopefully this study can be inspiring to people in different contexts that are struggling to reclaim knowledge production and learning back to the grassroots. In this sense, this study has not offered a model or clear guidelines that can be replicated anywhere at anytime. Rather, this thesis offers an experience to learn from with one's own feet well situated on the ground below. Learning from *Unitierra* Oaxaca implies being actively involved in the re-localization of knowledge practices, refusing models and emphasizing the particularities and complexities of every context. In this sense, this study is an invitation to listen to *Unitierra* from one's own context, paying attention to the practices and struggles that are already sprouting from the grassroots. What follows are a set of open conclusions derived from this research, serving as a recapitulation of the work and as a set of learnings to be further explored from multiple realities.

- Grassroot movements in Oaxaca are engaged with alternatives to education and alternative educations simultaneously. Freire's understanding of education as a tool for liberation (1996) and Illich proposal for deschooling (1971) coexists in practice at the grassroots. For example, indigenous movements in Oaxaca are reclaiming schools

for their own project as strategic places for community organization but are also expanding the scope of learning to other places and practices beyond the school. When different communities work together with *Unitierra* they often do so through the structure of the school. However, immediately they start opening and participating in other spaces and networks as valuables learning sites. Indeed, while many Latin American movements are taking over schools and creating their own curriculum they are also opening every space and moment as valuable learning sites (Zibechi 2005, 164). This last aspect is more fitted with Illich ideas and it is where *Unitierra* finds its field of action. *Unitierra* is taking social movements, community assemblies and organizations around different commons as valuable learning sites. In this sense, *Unitierra* avoids consigning learning to the classroom. Social movements are bringing to praxis much of Illich's ideas towards learning beyond education. At the grassroot people are organizing in a way that they are bringing to practice Illich ideas of deschooling. Through *Unitierra's* experience this study has shown how learning occurs on the move, in different places and assemblies, constantly forming and dissolving collective subjects around shared issues and topics.

- The redefinition of learning and knowledge production by *Unitierra* implies a shift in the places where knowledge is (re)produced. The Water Forum, the milpa, communities assemblies or the Space in the Defence of Corn are all constituted as knowledge production places. In this places, knowledge takes a particularly local and practical aspect since it engages with concrete issues that concern local communities. Around the commons, places for knowledge (re)production are bringing forward ways of existing, learning and knowing beyond the non places of global knowledge and power, namely the laboratory, the classroom and the office (Lizcano 2006, 211-214). Knowledge practices carried out by communities and grassroot organizations are more implicit than explicit. In other words, they do not claim their own universality and reproducibility and are intrinsically situated in local practices. By being linked to concrete practices and issues the knowledges that are practiced by different actors in *Unitierra's* network are connected to time and place.

- The (re)localization of knowledge to concrete practices comes with the formation of collective knowing subjects, going beyond the figure of individual researcher or student. This research has shown how assemblies and gatherings around concrete

practices and commons constitute themselves as collective subjects. The Water Forum or the urban garden group are subjects that engage with collective learning and research. From the grassroots collective subjects that are so theorized about in academia are being formed around concrete issues. This has proven to be the main principle of learning practices in *Unitierra*. By observing how collectives subjects work I have come to have my reservations in thinking that academic efforts to decolonize thought, transcend the modern/colonial order etc can be truly meaningful if the individual subject position of the author with a hardly accessible language is not challenged. Grassroot movements beyond academia are showing that radical practices and thought come with dismantling the individual thinking subject and the formation of collective subject around localized practices.

- Throughout the research, knowledge have been identified in concrete practices and relations. In this sense, the issue of knowledge is not a collateral aspect of the commons or struggles for autonomy. Rather, knowledge practices are what constitute different commons and autonomous relations. Corn or water are constituted as commons through different knowledge practices that allow for a collective relation with them. The (re)generation of the commons comes with the recovery of concrete knowledge practices that allow for collective relations. Consequently, particularly explored in the first chapter, the dismantling of the commons by the state and the market is done through the erosion of communal knowledges and the imposition of external expert knowledge. Indeed, the struggles for the commons and autonomy are inherently knowledge struggles. Inevitably, we can not expect to defend the commons while knowledge production and learning are captured by institutions and diplomas. The (re)construction of the commons comes with a set of knowledge practices that enable us to (re)create common worlds. The challenge is both how to open the commons as learning places and how to strengthen their character as collective knowledge subjects actively engaged in knowledge (re)production.

- Some voices within the discussion on the commons are calling for a more open definition of science to include marginalized practices and social movements as contributors to knowledge production (Lafuente 2018). However, grassroots movements are showing us that what is needed is not a more open science but a more humble one. Members of the scientific community are present in most of the places

that *Unitierra* is part of. However, their role as the possessors of true knowledge is continuously disputed by other practices (field notes). In fact, science and other knowledges find a common place in practice around concrete issues. In all the spaces I visited science coexisted in practice with a broad variety of other knowledges. In this sense, other practices were not being recognized by science but rather they entered into a dialogical relationship. In order for science to contribute to the regeneration of the commons it must abandon its claims to universality and localize itself in concrete practices. In this way science can enter into dialogue with other practices.

This research has contributed to discussions on knowledge struggles, free learning and the commons. This ethnography of *Unitierra* has served as an exploration on how these three discussions come together in practice and are intrinsically linked to each other. The study has served to give light to different aspects of knowledge production and learning in grassroot movements. Throughout the research *Unitierra* has proven to be connected with many different struggles. Consequently, this thesis has had access to multiple aspects and dimensions of knowledge struggles, offering a broad contribution to the discussion. However, it is also important to note that many of the practices and issues outlined in this research remain in a superficial level due to the broad range of struggles *Unitierra* is involved with and the limitations of the research. Further research could focus on an in depth study of particular knowledge practices and struggles in different contexts. By paying attention to the knowledge struggles on particular commons different questions may arise: How do different knowledges enter into dialogue in the regeneration of a particular common? What are the practices for dismantling knowledge practices around a common? What hierarchies are being contested? What are the dialogical relations between different knowledges in the defence of the commons? What are the tensions in the formation of a particular collective subject? How is science incorporated into collective practices? How are learning and research conducted collectively around different commons? or How do subjugated knowledges insurrect in the struggle for a common? This questions can be ask from unemerable commons and topics, making the possibilities for research endless. In this way, research turns into a tool to explore the tensions and possibilities around particular commons and as a way of sharing experiences from different positions, multiplying the possibilities to learn from each other. Ideally, further

research in this lines can be conducted by collectives and communities themselves as a tool to defend their commons.

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