# Creating and Contesting Knowledges at the Museo Migrante

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## Introduction

Later in this chapter, we will introduce you properly to the Museo Migrante (MuMi). Then, we will discuss the ways in which MuMi and other such spaces can challenge dominant ideas and widely accepted knowledge about the Mexican nation state and about the people who live and migrate within and over its physical and imagined borders. Before we do that, we are inviting you to take a moment to think with us about your own life, and the migrations, genealogies, and epistemologies that have informed it. First, think about the city, town, or village in which you were born. Did you grow up there? Do you live there today? Are you still in the same country? How far from that place are you now, as you read these words? Think about the distance between here and there. What do you know about that place? How does thinking about that place make you feel? Below, there is a map of the world, showing where land meets oceans and seas—no other borders required. Take a pencil and mark the place you were born on the map. Or, if you prefer, you can touch the place with your finger. Next, mark or touch the place where you live now. Then, mark or touch the place (or places) where your parents were born. And finally, mark or touch the place(s) where your grandparents were born.

[INSERT FIG 1.]

Now, draw or trace the journeys taken between these points. Pay attention to the thoughts and memories that pop in and out of your mind as your hand moves across the page. Perhaps you can see other routes drawn alongside your own, left behind by someone else who has held this book in their hands. Perhaps other routes will be added to yours in the future. Maybe, right now, somewhere, someone else is tracing lines on a book just like this one, evoking different thoughts and memories for themselves. Of all the routes that have been or can be traced, we know that some will be short, others will be long. Some will spread out far and wide, others will turn back on themselves, move in circles, or spirals, or make zig-zagging shapes. The routes you draw will be different from somebody else's—different from ours, as ours are different from each other's.

Variations of this activity may be found within the Museo Migrante (MuMi), a travelling 'pop-up' exhibition constructed by, with, and for indigenous and *campesino* communities in collaboration with Voces Mesoamericanas—Acción con Pueblos Migrantes, an NGO based in San Cristóbal, Chiapas,

Mexico that was established in 2011 to help defend the rights of indigenous and migrant populations.[1] As a project of Voces, MuMi is designed to make visible the knotted roots and complex consequences of domestic and international migration by creating spaces for communities to share, hear, and explore the stories of people who migrate—and of people impacted by the migrations of others. In MuMi, mapping activities like the one described above are usually carried out in groups, or by different visitors passing through over a period of time, and using maps of different reaches and scales. During these activities, as the lines drawn by different people layer over and intersect each other, they make visible points of connection between people and the routes that they trace. The annotated maps that emerge through these collective engagements reveal, among other things, that everyone has some history or experience of migration. In doing so, they highlight a core structuring ethos of MuMi: that migrations are at the origin of all societies, of every population, of every nation-state.

The purpose of MuMi is to deepen understandings of the social, political, and economic reasons for which people migrate—and particularly of how those factors relate to colonial and capitalist violence, both historical and ongoing. In this sense, MuMi is—just as all museums are—a political educational project. Unlike most museums, including those grand institutions that narrate the 'official' history of Mexico, MuMi questions rather than venerates the popular imaginary of the nation. Against the assertive expertise of the traditional museum, MuMi posits that the knowledge about indigenous, *campesino*, migrant and other communities marginalised by the state must come from within those same communities—it cannot be dictated from above, or from without. Moreover, in providing a forum for reflection, expression, and dialogue, MuMi facilitates processes through which the exclusionary policies and narratives of the state may be actively contested and alternative, dignifying knowledges may be asserted.

In this chapter, we explain the politics and principles that inform MuMi, and outline how it practically operates. We examine the ways in which the project usefully disrupts the dominant ideas about museums and the roles they play in creating and disseminating knowledge about the Mexican nation state and the people who live within or journey through its borders. Alongside, we continue to guide you through some of the other activities that visitors might encounter at MuMi—although we note that, as an itinerant museum co-constructed with the communities it visits, its contents and contours are always changing. We want to emphasise that it is neither our purpose nor our place here to relate, translate, or present the knowledge produced and shared within MuMi by its participant visitors, although we provide links and references for readers to explore such projects directly. Rather, we intend to explain the epistemological stance of MuMi, which necessarily entails an experiential approach. For that reason, we cannot simply present our analyses to you, but also must demonstrate—within the limitations of the printed page—how interaction, affect, and elicitations of personal reflections can open up spaces for forms of knowledge-making that are, potentially, anti-colonial. In the spirit of MuMi, we

believe that there is no way to make this point other than by inviting your creative input and engagement.

**MuMi: background, origins and purpose**

Chiapas is the southernmost state in Mexico, a gateway to Central America that shares a land border with Guatemala. For decades, this territory has been a site of passage and destination for thousands of migrants trying to reach the United States, as well as a place of origin and return for thousands of *chiapanecos*. Migration is a significant factor of life here, but it is not the only complexity encountered in a region shaped by painful histories of violence and by rich traditions of resistance.

Almost three decades ago, on January 1, 1994, all of Mexico and much of the world turned their gaze to Chiapas as the armed uprising of the Zapatista Army of National Liberation (EZLN) began. The date was not incidental: the EZLN entered the towns of San Cristóbal de Las Casas, Ocosingo, Altamirano, and Las Margaritas in order to restate and reclaim their rights on the same day that the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) came into force—a neo-colonial (Nkrumah 1965) accord that would have devastating impact on agrarian and indigenous communities across Mexico (Guiterrez 1998, 144). The EZLN action was a declaration of war on the Mexican state; a demand for justice and dignity made by and for indigenous communities that the nation-state had excluded, dispossessed, and abused for hundreds of years. The subsequent EZLN campaign and repressive state responses to it—both of which continue today—provoked significant social, political, and economic changes across the region, and especially during the 1990s, as Chiapas in general and San Cristóbal in particular became internationally renowned sites of anti-capitalist and anti-colonial struggle.[2]

In addition to this complex context of resistance and autonomy, against a backdrop of government repression and its continuing assimilationist policy agenda, other crises of the 1990s-2000s saw increasing pressures to migrate begin to spread throughout the region. First, due to a combination of contamination from industrial pesticides and periods of extreme weather, the land became unable to provide crops enough for families to live self-sufficiently (Guiterrez 1998). At the same time, coffee and other commercial crops started to lose market value—another consequence of 'free trade' pacts. The worsening precariousness of rural life had far-reaching impacts on communities, damaging health, nutrition, jobs, education, and the environment. Once again, indigenous and peasant communities were being prevented by the state from forging dignified, autonomous lives within their own territories. We regard and speak of the migrations that result from these dynamics as 'forced migrations'.

Second, as options narrowed for people to remain in their communities, new demands for cheap labour began to appear in national and international industries. Subsequently, and continuing over the past decade, people from southern communities began to find work elsewhere, primarily in masonry and construction (in costal resorts and urban areas where demand is driven by tourism and business sectors),

in industrial agricultural production (concentrated in the northwest of the country), and in domestic and care work (both within and beyond Mexico's borders) (Ledón Pereyra 2013). These are, not coincidentally, jobs in poorly regulated, low-paid, insecure sectors that are also devalued socially as low-status, 'unskilled' labour.

Third, the expansion of the drugs trade across Mexico and the catastrophic US-Mexico 'War on Drugs' policies that it ostensibly prompted have exacerbated insecurity and increased the militarised surveillance of already-marginalised people. Corruption is endemic throughout state agencies, and there is little oversight over military excursions made in the name of countering *narcotráfico*. At a low estimate, since 2006, over 289000 people have been killed and a further 70000 disappeared during and because of the 'War on Drugs' to date. As of September 2020, nearly 39000 unidentified bodies had passed through mortuaries in Mexico in just 14 years (Tzuc and Turati 2020). It is likely that many of them were people who had migrated.

Due to the particular ways in which colonialism, neoliberal capitalism, racism, and patriarchy have been rooted and expressed in Mexico, a complex and layered network of intersecting oppressions—along class, ethnic, linguistic, cultural, gender, and generational lines—has embedded and exacerbated these three interconnected crises. Consequently, migratory flows from, to, and through Chiapas are marked by widespread labour exploitation, human trafficking, violence, disappearances, and death. It is within this context that MuMi emerged and exists as a project that seeks to defend and promote the rights of all migrants, and to establish the possibilities of *buen vivir* (living well) and, relatedly, *buen migrar* (migrating well). *Buen vivir* is a concept popularised by indigenous and social leaders and used widely across Latin America, with different and changing contextual emphases and nuances. It is not akin to the Western concepts of 'wellbeing' or 'the good life'. It is a rejection of colonialism, patriarchy, and capitalism, being instead an affective, spiritual, intellectual, and political stance that regards nature and society as indivisible, values plurality, and upholds principles of reciprocity, communalism, redistribution, and equity (Chuji, Rengifo, and Gudynas 2019).

These aspirations persist, despite the painful realities we have described here, because indigenous, *campesino,* and migrant populations in Chiapas continue to engage in multiple and varied forms of resilience, adaptation, and survival that are driven by love for their families and communities, and the desire for better lives forged on their own terms. This is why, even though MuMi aims to make visible the structural and social forces that threaten communities' wellbeing, it above all strives to highlight the dreams, hopes, and levity that also endure here, amid dignified struggle and networks of solidarity; between young people eager to reshape their presents and futures and women 'putting themselves on the line for each other'.[3]

*Developing MuMi*

The rest of this section is written from the perspective of Deya, who is a staff member of Voces Mesoamericanos and has played an integral role in establishing MuMi. Here, 'we' refers to all those people who, like Deya, have been practically involved in the development of the project over the past decade. MuMi emerged at the beginning of 2012, growing out of Voces' work with young people and the aims described above. Initially, we framed our activities as situated within a *Casa de Cultura* (Cultural Centre), where we held painting, filmmaking, radio, theatre, and music workshops. The questions addressed in these activities included: How have we experienced migration in our communities? What do I like or dislike about those experiences? How does my family experience the absence of our loved ones who are migrating? What are my dreams for the present and the future? We soon realised that the work created by the young workshop participants could be presented, with their agreement, on street stages or at public events held in San Cristóbal, or in the communities. Their artistic and creative work often presented nuanced and thoughtful accounts of migration, as many had experienced migration themselves, or within their families.

Our decision to create an exhibition—and later, a travelling museum—from these works was based on our recognition that doing so was not only an act of sharing stories, but also of publicly valuing and dignifying migrant and indigenous experiences. This naming and framing is a repudiation of the traditional museum form, as we explain in more detail below. From that point, MuMi developed a dual purpose. First, MuMi aims to ensure that people from the communities are reflected in the stories it holds; that they can recognise themselves in the plays, songs, photos, and other creative works that are seen or created within its spaces. Being able to see oneself in the narratives presented by a museum provokes self-recognition and appreciation of who we are. In that sense, we believe it gives us strength for exercising and defending our human rights and creates foundations for political organization endowed with identity and cultural significance. MuMi's second purpose is to encourage deeper understanding of the causes, experiences and impacts of migration particularly in those who hold negative views of migrants. We aim to engage visitors' hearts, minds, and creative capacities in the hope that the experience will engender reflection, empathy, and solidarity—dismantling feelings of contempt, hatred, and racism that are fuelled by xenophobic and colonial constructions of 'the other' and capitalist frameworks of 'deservingness'. Of course, this is a very difficult task: we are not only trying to 'raise awareness', but to raise consciousness. That is to say, we intend not only to change what people know and think about migration but also to encourage them to actions that will cause a radical, tangible socio-cultural shift towards a more just and equitable future for all (Freire 2021 [1965]).

These dual aims inform where and how MuMi functions. From the outset, it has been designed for interaction within public space, hence our first community iterations included both an exhibition of photographs and narrative texts written in indigenous languages, and a portable stage with a microphone and speakers, set up to facilitate dialogues between community members and to host performances of music, video, and theatre created in Voces workshops.[4] We call these forms MuMi Gallery and MuMi

Live Stage. MuMi Live Stage is the heart of our project, as it is where we can most clearly and collectively reflect on present experiences and future possibilities of migration. The creative workshops we hold with young people for Live Stage are not intended to teach formal artistic skills, but to encourage expression and remind people that they have the right to that expression and that it is valuable. Our pedagogical approach is informed by our insights that laughter, fun, and cooperative play are useful tools for dismantling fears of making mistakes and for forging friendships, alliances, and complicities. That, in turn, helps participants to develop their own strength of voice and listen as others express their own. In the midst of violence and precarity, it can feel risky to invest in, and to express hopes and aspirations. Yet it is imperative to do so if we are to challenge dominant realities and create robust and sustainable alternatives. Art is an important vehicle to that end, as a realm of imagination, however, in which possibilities can be explored, (re)constructed, and effectively given life. That is why we emphasize that the creative and reflective process is more important than the 'final' works that appear on stage. Within the workshops, we discuss community challenges, our migratory contexts, the rights of native peoples, gender equality, identity and diversity, education, work, sexuality, and the environment, among many others. Proposals concerning what 'thing' to create come from the group; MuMi provides the support for individuals to choose the medium to work with—theatre, graffiti, radio, music.

From the same principles of creativity and collaboration that inform Live Stage, a third form of MuMi was born: Interactive MuMi, which describes smaller creative activities placed within the gallery space, designed to elicit reflections—and potentially dialogical responses—from all who visit it. This approach is in keeping with our knowledge that imaginative and playful processes are productive, educative tools with radical potential. Paper dolls, for example, allow people of all ages to narrate and display their stories and/or their dreams as migrant women. We invite visitors to write or draw their visions of dignified migration on square sheets of paper, which they fold into the shape of flying birds, to be strung over MuMi or be carried away by their makers. There are spaces for people to add other messages, poems, postcards, and narratives to the museum frame—which is sometimes a fence, often a line of rope, occasionally a wall. They can trace their migration histories on giant maps—just as we invited you to do at the start of this text. Throughout the space, we also distribute printed informational materials and colourful stickers asserting migrants' rights. This is a conscious and political move: to spatially and aesthetically integrate information about fundamental, legally protected human rights within a forum that, at its heart, asserts the worth, humanity, and dignity of peoples repeatedly excluded by the state.

*Rethinking the 'curatorial' (or how we do what we do)*

No one at Voces had formally studied museums when we began building MuMi. In fact, we had not heard the word 'curation' until MuMi was already a few years old, and even now rarely use it in relation to our work. This is not a repudiation of curatorial knowledge *per se*, but rather a recognition that the common, formal conceptualisation of 'curation' is out of sync with our participant-led, iterative approach. In establishing the space, we followed our intuition, writing short narratives based on what had been said in workshops or in the testimonies of the people with whom we have worked over the years. We identified four concepts that captured the physical and symbolic spaces of migration: Origin—we are here; Transit—we walk the road; Destination—we are there; and Return—we are back. Within and around these four pillars we have at times added and adjusted sections on specific themes relevant to communities: Women in Migration, Migrant Children and Youth, Missing Migrants, and the MuMi of Agricultural Day Labourers, for example.

Each of the four sections is illustrated by a set of images (sometimes only a selection, if space is limited) that were chosen by Voces staff and young workshop participants from a photographic archive that was established in 2009. Knitted and woven ornaments made by craftspeople from the region round out our 'collection'. Over time, we have reduced the infrastructural elements needed to erect the museum, or to demark its space: we began with large wooden boxes that doubled as a stage and held a wealth of material but soon found it was difficult and impractical to transport such heavy items from place to place. Now, we carry a roll of rope and wooden clothespins, creating 'clotheslines' for hanging photos and canvases printed with narratives. We are adaptable to the spaces we encounter and assemble MuMi as a collective, we Voces staff and community members together. The only guideline is that there are four sections, and each features a specific set of photos. How they are ordered and arranged beyond that is up to the community to decide. Those decisions change the nuances and emphases of stories told. We dare say that there have never been two iterations of MuMi the same. MuMi Live Stage is even more unpredictable, changing depending on who, or what, is standing on it: a youth group presentation; a single speaker; pre-recorded music or podcasts; sometimes theatre, perhaps graffiti. Interactive MuMi is similarly modified by location, timing, community, in terms of how activities are set out, and how they end up changing the space. Some people participate a little, others a lot, and others again not at all, which we do not take to mean that they are not engaging their hearts, minds, or senses.

MuMi honours migration in its form as well as its content: it exists only as it moves; is dynamic, itinerant, fluid, adaptable. It travels in a suitcase and comes to life at the hands of the communities that welcome it, wherever it arrives, be it in a park, school, town square, day labourers' field, pedestrian crossing, hotel lobby, soccer field, meeting room, or anywhere else.[5] Its presence not only responds to, but also changes these spaces, and in different ways. Through association, it can draw attention to, or underscore, the importance of a specific place to the community, for example dignifying day labourers through its presence in the fields that they work. Through juxtaposition, it can make visible notable absences or exclusions, for example by interrupting or intruding into town squares in tourism 'hot

spots', challenging passers-by to rethink popular constructions and imaginaries of indigenous and *campesino* cultures. In each case, MuMi expresses a political commitment to recount lives that are usually not counted, and to name rights that people have been denied. At heart, then, MuMi is a popular pedagogical exercise that positions all people as political subjects with the capacity for action and transformation.

Es en el camino de la creación donde nos compartimos

y donde construimos vínculos,

donde se despiertan las habilidades en uno mismo

que no sabíamos que existían;

es en los talleres donde aparece

la posibilidad de hacer algo juntos y juntas,

y en un mundo que apuesta por el individualismo,

este ejercicio se vuelve revolucionario

Deyanira Clériga Morales, reflection on Indigenous Youth Meeting, December 2019

Author's translation:

It is on the path of creativity that we share

and where we build connections,

where skills are awakened in each of us

that we did not know existed;

It is in the workshops that we see

the possibility of doing something together,

and in a world that wagers on individualism,

this exercise becomes revolutionary

Before we turn to consider how MuMi works against the grain of dominant representational strategies in the 'national museum' context, we invite you to pause and—in the spirit of MuMi Interactive—to consider your own hopes and dreams about what a just, dignified migration would look like, or entail. Begin by taking a square of paper—and it must be square—and writing down or illustrating those

thoughts. Under what conditions would you migrate? What would the journey be like? Who is with you? What is your destination, and what do you hope to do there? Next, we are going to give life to these ideas, aspirations, and dreams by folding the paper into a *pajarito*, a little bird. This can be tricky, so we encourage you to take your time and move slowly through the process, following the guide below.

[FIGURE 2]

At MuMi, we hang up these birds around and over the top of the spaces we are using, with visitor-participants adding to the flock of flying birds as time goes on, changing its contours by expressing their ideas, hopes, and dreams. You can hang up your *pajarito* by a thread, or string. Or perhaps it will perch on your desk, or by your bed, or sit in someone else's house, if you choose to give it away. You may keep it for a few hours, days, or years; unfold it and remake it into another creature or shape; recycle it into something else. Wherever it is, and for however long, it is an artefact of, and informed by MuMi; formed of, and by, you. Situating and valuing the visitor-participant as a creator of knowledge—rather than as the subject about whom things can be known, or the receiver of such 'expertise'—is an important way in which MuMi works against the grain of dominant museological framings in Mexico.

**De/re constructing the museum**

> The successful settler colonies 'tame' a variety of wildernesses, end up establishing independent nations, effectively repress, co-opt, and extinguish indigenous alterities, and productively manage ethnic diversity. By the end of this trajectory, they claim to be no longer settler colonial (they are putatively 'settled' and 'postcolonial' . . . Settler colonialism thus covers its tracks and operates towards its self-supersession . . . [and] justifies its operation on the basis of the expectation of its future demise. (Veracini 2011, 1)

800 km north of Chiapas, in Mexico City, the doors of the monumental National Museum of Anthropology (MNA, *Museo Nacional de Antropología*) sit in the shadow of a huge tricolour flag that bellows in the wind. The MNA in its current location and guise opened in 1964, but its roots lie in the Museo Nacional, founded in 1825 by order of the first president of Mexico, Guadalupe Victoria, following the war of independence from Spain. Varied and eclectic private collections—extensive 'cabinets of curiosity' amassed by wealthy 'explorer' elites—contributed the initial collection of the Museo Nacional, which from the outset was designed to repudiate 'Indianness' and 'Spanishness' alike in asserting the supremacy of a new, *mestizo*, 'imaginary Mexico' (Valkimes 2001, 21). In the newly

settler colonial context, Indigenous peoples who had been brutally subjugated by the colonial Spanish were reframed by political and intellectual elites as a 'problem that had to be addressed . . . with the aim of achieving ethnic unity and the homogenization of a national society, a country where all individuals belonged to one and the same race (Cárdenas Carrión 2017, 88, translated from Spanish[6]). Thus, newly subjugating projects and polices were pursued in order to 'force the barbarians to incorporate to regular societies' (Lorenzo de Zavala quoted in Valkimes 2001, 21) or to 'lift them out of their misery, repress their vices' (Bishop Abad y Queipo, quoted in Valkimes 2001, 21). Later generations of Mexican elites seeking to distinguish themselves from the new spectral threats—both internal and external—more fully embraced the 'mythohistory' of *mestizaje*, framing warrior Aztecs as 'the first Mexicans' but continuing to exalt national homogenisation by locating mestizo identity as the core of modern Mexican identity (Alonso 2004). Such mythologising was used to both justify and obscure the realities of the state-sponsored violence throughout the twentieth century (Paz 1972, Fuentes 1973), and beyond.

Such shifting nationalist ideologies have also shaped the contents and contours of the Museo Nacional, and related scholarly fields, since its founding. Nineteenth-century archaeologists dismissed 'Indian' discoveries as contemptable but hailed the ruins of ancient Aztec and Mayan civilisations as 'masterpieces' worthy of conservation and study (Valkimes 2001, 23). Ethnologists meanwhile played important, multi-faceted roles in the intertwined (acknowledged) nationalist incorporation and (unacknowledged) nationalist mythologisation projects: their production of 'knowledge' about indigenous populations facilitated and contributed to state-led 'civilisation' projects that—in turn—provided justification for the same scholars to 'salvage' through documentation cultures 'disappearing' due to those very projects (Cárdenas Carrión 2017; Kirshenblatt-Gimblett 2004). Their ability to create, deposit, and showcase knowledge about indigenous peoples (within the museum, university, or public intellectual life) further reinforces the supremacy of the settler-coloniser: only they have the power to *know*, categorise and explain a necessarily 'primitive' other regarded as incapable of even knowing itself (Echavez See 2018, 50).

*Out of time at the museum*

In its current iteration, the MNA presents the state-approved history of 'pre-Columbian' Mexico, spread over 45,000 square meters and split between two levels. The ground floor is dedicated to archaeology, the first floor to ethnography, as it has been since 1964. These broad categories display—in the order of suggested visitor route—first the artefacts and uncovered monuments of ancient history and second, upstairs, the more recently documented ephemera of communities that live within the borders of the nation-state. Divided neatly into geographical regions, if not always discreet epochs, the sections are framed as stepping stones towards a popular imaginary of modern Mexico—and of modern Mexicans—

that at first glance appears absent from the museum itself. There is no diorama of a city apartment, for example, to match the life-size model *habitación* of tojolwinik'otik (tojolabal) people as they ostensibly live in Chiapas today. There, sticky labels on twist-topped jars, a woven plastic shopping bag, and a print on the wall—of the Virgin Mary backed by a Mexican flag—are among the few modern objects situating the tojolwinik'otik in the now. Here, there are no scenes of city-dwellers attending church, or of leisure time spent in bars or on football pitches; of domestic workers napping on the early cross-town bus; of workers in factories or on building sites. There are, however, displays of worship in rural Chiapas, where mannequins kneel in traditional dress, and of agricultural workers farming coffee with rudimentary wooden tools. Under photos of smiling children sit a painted wooden truck toy and woven ELZN combatant dolls, armed with twigs for rifles.

Nearby, another display addresses the Zapatista movement more directly, with photos of meetings and marches alongside radical 1990s publications and an iconic balaclava. A map inside the same glass-fronted case is entitled 'Indigenous resistance in 1670' and shows where 'English enclaves' butted against 'Territories controlled by Mayan rebels'. Below the map hang prints of two 1869 scenes—painted in the contemporary European style—depicting events from an indigenous/agrarian uprising, and the military's suppression of it. On the wall outside this curious cabinet—which narrates 330 years in just 12 objects, 6 photos—a panel of interpretive text reads: 'A long struggle for territory'. The text is written as if it concerns other people, elsewhere, not those of the nation interpolated by the museum's title.

Officially, this is the museum of 'pre-Colombian' times, framed in MNA's own promotional materials as looking to the past. It is 'in charge of the safekeeping of Mexico's indigenous legacy . . . a symbol of national identity and a mentor for generations in search of their cultural origins'. They remind visitors that 'all pieces that belonged to postcolonial times' were relocated to the *Museo Nacional de Historia* in 1940 (MNA, n.d.)—a justification for why MNA does not include the artefacts and implements of the conquistadors or their descendants, or those of the settler colonialists that followed their lead. But Mexico's past and present cannot be so neatly divided, and the ethnographic collection cannot obscure its intertwined roots; cannot airbrush evidence of the present from its depictions of an only apparent past—even as it refuses to show the diverse and migratory realities, shaped by neoliberal capitalism and legacies of colonialism alike, of the peoples it claims to depict. The will to archive, Derrida reminds us, is also a will to forget (1995). The 'postcolonial'—read settler-colonial—is a present absence across the MNA, everywhere felt as the gaze that frames each cabinet, diorama, and text. Here, the indigenous communities of Chiapas and the country as a whole—a population of over 17 million people; one in six citizens of the nation-state—are seen through settler colonial eyes. The 'problem' Mexico's indigenous population continues to pose to the nation-state and MNA curators alike is that they are still living, obstinately refusing to be 'legacies' and 'origins' alone. Their persistence means that, at MNA, they must be written about in the present tense, in Spanish, an official language of the nation-state, and

translated into English, the language of tourists, investors, and free trade partners. These displays are not for speakers of Tojolabal or other Mayan languages that, as of 2003, are also 'official' languages of Mexico.[7] Despite an 'updating' overhaul of the displays in 2000, the new ethnographic exhibits continue to 'distance indigenous people from modernity and locate them on the rural fringes of the nation' with 'mestizos' still assumed to 'represent the bulk of museum visitors' (Alonso 200, 478). The interpretive texts are authoritative and detached in tone, linguistically constructing archetypal, anachronistic others: 'the tojolabal woman' is not 'us'—at least not as we are now. One large text panel reads, in an English translation presented alongside the Spanish text:

> The difficult situation that the Tojolabales are living has provoked that the woman's economic participation is more and more active. The agriculture, traditionally performed by men, is now a feminine activity since the husband has to leave the community in order to find a job in the cities. Woman has gained importance in the sale of crafts and frequently constitutes the main support of the family. This change of position within the domestic unit has implied a greater participation in the social and political scope; as consequence, the women's organisations, with diverse goals, have multiplied. [sic]

The text euphemistically skirts around dynamics and challenges that MuMi addresses. This text is, however, wrapped up in contradictions, hinting at changing realities and only obliquely acknowledging migrations (albeit only of men), even while the surrounding dioramas assertively lock the referenced people in space and time. At MuMi, in stark contrast, the complexities of the present are acknowledged and explored, not through didactic texts, but by inviting visitor-participants to co-create different knowledges about their lives, by drawing on and out their own experiences, hopes, and fears, and by naming the exploitations, marginalisations, and abuses committed or facilitated by the state as a root cause of the 'difficult situation' they face. MuMi does not amass an archive, but neither is its will to forget.

**Reclaiming 'museological' knowledge**

> We have to be okay with being on the move. We have to abandon the seductions of belonging and settling. We have to roll the dice for the riskier yet deeper pleasures of the rhythm of the temporary shelter in a world overwhelmingly but not totally devoted to the habits of accumulation by dispossession. (Echavez See 2018, 22)

Currently, thousands of people are migrating from, to, and across Chiapas, fulfilling roles, frequently in exploitative conditions, that are vital to the Mexican economy and to the sustenance of the global capitalist system. These moves are having profound impacts on peoples' lives—of those who migrate, and those who do not. The purpose of MuMi is to create spaces in which all peoples impacted by

migration—many of whom are indigenous—can narrate their own realities and share and co-create their aims, hopes, and strategies for building better futures. It assertively claims the title 'museum' because it is a space in which people (of various nations who live within the Mexican state) learn about their histories, cultures, cosmologies, ideologies, and politics by sharing them. Its central protagonists are not named heroes or unnamed archetypes calcified in glass cases, frozen in time, but are an ever-changing cast of all those who contribute to it. Its objects are not fetishized but are intended to be played with, made and remade, just as our lives are always transforming, being reinvented and rebuilt. MuMi is, like all museums, a political, pedagogical, artistic tool. It functions by occupying public space and is intended to shape social realities: to dignify and reaffirm that migration is the origin of all human—and non-human—societies; to assert that migrating is a right, and that not migrating is also a right; to stake create and instil conditions for people to experience *buen vivir* and *buen mirgrar*.

Of course, those are the aspirations of MuMi, and they are deeply challenging ones, not always met. We recognise that it is imperative to adopt a critical and reflective stance as MuMi continues to develop—the project is just a few years old and is always evolving. MuMi, as an initiative of Voces, is faced with the same funding and resource limitations as all NGOs working under neoliberal capitalism, in which the pursuit of a politics that questions foundational narratives and structures of the nation-state is rarely regarded by financiers as a 'funding priority'. The challenge is always to work within those constraints. One point of necessary reflection has been to recognize and acknowledge that many of the original images and texts featured within MuMi did not originate with community members themselves, and continue to be co-productions forged with Voces staff and volunteers. As the project continues, more opportunities for feedback and collaboration will arise, and the content of the museum will change as a result—as it has already done. Evaluating and adapting MuMi with participant visitors is imperative, recognising that Voces staff—including those who are from Mexico but not themselves members of the communities in which they work, like Deya, or volunteers and visiting academics, especially those from the Global North, like Siobhán—arrive with gazes and values different from those of MuMi visitors and participants, which is itself a hugely diverse pool.

As MuMi develops, and travels, more co-curatorial methodologies can be integrated into its activities, with the aim of deepening communities' sense of ownership and voice over exhibition content. There must be scope, too, for debate within the spaces that make up and grow around MuMi. Affective responses—such as anger, disillusionment, or resentment—can be as productive as feelings of connection and empowerment, but so too must there be openness for disagreement and rejection of ideas. It is the prerogative of the national museum to homogenise; it is the role of MuMi to celebrate plurality. What the former seeks to calcify in time, to assert as definitive and knowable, MuMi embraces as necessarily changing and fleeting; shaped by perspective. There will and should not be an end point in which the representational choices of MuMi are deemed 'complete'. That is the nature of an ongoing and productive conversation about new realities that we may together create.

## Continuing to work against the grain

In writing this chapter, we have invited you to (re)consider the ways in which knowledge may be produced in a museum. We explained first how MuMi functions, and then considered the MNA, the most-visited museum in Mexico, in relation to it—purposefully not the other way around. It has not been our intention to convey knowledge *about* the diverse populations who live in Chiapas, be they indigenous, migrant, *campesino*, all or none of those categories. Rather, we have sought to work against the grain of norms perpetuated within gilded national institutions to demonstrate how creative activity, co-production, and affective reflection can elicit new ways of thinking/dreaming/knowing, in particular about migration and the potential for *buen vivir* and *buen migrar*. If you accepted our invitation, you may consider yourself a co-author of this chapter: its pages are incomplete without your input, but likewise we recognise that your contributions cannot be captured and tethered to these pages. Nonetheless, we consider the knowledge generated as invaluable. We close by inviting you again to think with us—over and through the distances of time and space between us—about how place, emotion, and experience inform our ways of knowing and thinking about the world, and our desires for justice and dignity for all who inhabit it.

Take a piece of card, approximately 15 cm x 10 cm. On one side, draw or otherwise create an image based on what you have learned, or thought about, through co-creating this chapter with us. Perhaps you will print out and attach an image from your computer, or use a photo or magazine clipping.[8] On the other side, divide the space into two halves: one for an address and one for a message. Write whatever you want, to whoever you choose, and tell them about the image on the reverse. In posting your postcard, you will be keeping this conversation ongoing, opening up new spaces for sharing, reflecting, and learning wherever it lands.

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[1] For more information about Voces Mesoamericanas, see: https://vocesmesoamericanas.org/somos/.
[2] San Cristóbal is now a city of contrasts due to the tourist boom of the last two decades, including 'revolutionary tourism', and related processes of gentrification that is exacerbating various inequalities—including along racial, ethnic, and class lines—and contributing to the folklorisation of indigenous peoples.
[3] This is a translation from the Spanish 'las mujeres que se acuerpan', which conveys a more profound meaning. The verb *acuerpar*—used widely in feminist struggles—means literally and symbolically 'to put the body to be with the other'. 'Putting the body…' can be understood in many ways, for example, during street demonstrations, to cover yourself or others from the blows of the police weapons, but also to empathise or cry with a friend, to take care of the family, to support someone in the middle of a crisis. In this context, another translation could be: 'women who put themselves to helping each other, sustaining themselves and transforming life'.
[4] For a video depicting an early MuMi space, see: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fGcBYQFbxwY.
[5] MuMi primarily travels to rural communities and cities in Chiapas, but it has also been set up occasionally in other Mexican states (Sonora, Tijuana, Puebla, Mexico City, Tlaxcala) and more recently in other countries (Guatemala, the United States, the United Kingdom and Brazil). It will continue travelling and being modified and remade in new contexts.
[6] The original text reads: 'El "indio vivo" se convirtió en un problema que debía ser atendido como una cuestión política prioritaria con el objetivo de lograr la unidad étnica y la homogeneización de la sociedad nacional, un país donde todos los individuos pertenecieran a una única y misma raza.'
[7] In 2003, the General Law of Linguistic Rights of the Indigenous Peoples was approved by the Mexican Congress, which recognizes 68 indigenous languages as 'national languages' alongside Spanish. Previously, and deriving from the 1917 Constitution, indigenous peoples had the right to 'preserve and enrich their languages'.
[8] For inspiration, or to use a postcard created by Voces, see here: https://www.globalgrace.net/post/para-volvernos-a-encontrar.