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# **The Maltese cactus: an autoethnography of the colonization of desire**

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## Abstract

This article presents an autoethnographic account of an encounter between two men – a Mexican scholar and a British artist – who met in Malta, to examine how post-colonialism influences the seemingly personal experience of erotic desire. The author, a man of indigenous descent, explores how his erotic attraction interweaved with powerful dynamics that were the product of the other man's European cultural background. He problematizes this attraction by reflecting on the white ethnocentrism that colored his partner-seeking process. This autoethnography analyzes how European colonialism in Mexico affected not only language and religion, but also the deceptively intimate aspect of erotic desire.

Key words: whiteness, language, British, Mexican, Latino, gay, indigenous, post-colonialism.

## **Introduction**

In 2011 I attended a conference in Malta on social science research, where I presented a comparative study on inter-generational relationships amongst gay men. At the time, I was based in Mexico, and attending that conference involved a 17-hour flight. It was an expensive trip for a self-funded scholar, but I had decided that it was a worthwhile trip. That was my first visit to Malta, but it would not be the last. I came back in subsequent years to present my work at that same event. The conference was of good quality; I published an article from that conference paper, and it was a great networking opportunity. I would like to say that my motivations for returning to the conference in subsequent years were exclusively academic, but

I would be lying. In 2011 I also met Richard<sup>1</sup>, and it is fair to say that he was the reason I came back to Malta over and over. My interest in him became so intense that an invitation from him would have been enough for me to leave my academic position in Mexico, move to Malta, and give our relationship a chance. I would like to say that my interest in him was based exclusively on his personal qualities, but I would be lying again. He was a remarkable person: kind, honest, environmentally-friendly, ethical, vegetarian, compassionate, and had many other qualities I value. He was also a white, blue-eyed, blond, middle-aged, articulate, and well-educated British man. It is fair to say that these were the reasons I would come back to him, over and over.

On my second year attending the conference, Richard invited me to stay at his house. For a whole week I would come back after a day of workshops and presentations to a house with a ceramic plaque next to the front door saying: ‘Welcome to Cactus House’. This plaque made a reference to the multiple cactuses he had in pots in his back garden. What Richard called ‘cactus’ I had known all my life as ‘nopal’. The cactus or nopal is a symbol that represents a quintessential aspect of Mexican culture. This symbol, along with my relationship with Richard, serves as a departure point in this autoethnography to analyze dynamics between my indigeneity and his whiteness, and the way Eurocentric views shaped this interethnic relationship, which was founded on a supposedly intimate aspect of our lives: our erotic desire.

Understood as ‘narratives of self’, autoethnographies are “highly personalized accounts that draw upon the experience of the author/researcher for the purposes of extending sociological understanding” (Sparkes 21). This autoethnography aims to explore how having grown up in Mexico, a former Spanish colony, contributed to the construction of my idea of the erotic and what it means to be desirable. This is a personal narrative that illustrates an

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<sup>1</sup> Pseudonym

aspect of Mexican culture and shows how culture informs my subjectivity. It invites responses from other people with whom this narrative might resonate. This autoethnographic approach relies on the complexity of my authorial voice as a ‘native expert’: as an indigenous scholar who has very recently come to the realization of this indigeneity. I write from my colonized ‘self’ as I write in English for an English-speaking readership, when my first language is Spanish. I write as an ‘insider’ of a (colonized) Mexican culture where I lived for 32 years and as an ‘outsider’, yet I have made the UK, and more specifically Scotland, my home. Ellis, Adams, and Bochner explain that “once at the service of the (white, masculine, heterosexual, middle/upper-class, Christian, able-bodied) ethnographer, indigenous/native ethnographers now work to construct their own personal and cultural stories” (278). This is both a personal and a cultural story that considers the self in inextricable relationship with the social and the cultural. In a similar way that Weiss discusses sex play and social power, I argue that “desire is forged in the crucible of history, community, and nation” (219). My desire for Richard was not only a merely personal, private, and individual experience but also a manifestation of my culturally-inflected feelings. As Cherríe Moraga writes, “it is frightening to acknowledge that I have internalized a racism and classism, where the object of oppression is not only someone outside my skin, but the someone inside my skin” (25). However, this autoethnography differs from Weiss’ work in the sense that it looks beyond sexual practices. Desire is conceived, here, in a much broader sense; along the lines of Audre Lorde’s understanding of the erotic (Lorde). For her, the erotic is a source of liberating, creative, and informing power. This power, says Lorde, has been suppressed repeatedly at various levels by other social forces that limit it and distort it, equating it to sexual intercourse or pornography. Especially in oppressed groups, this distortion becomes an impediment to seeing the erotic as the force that allows individuals to see themselves as connected beings, who are able to create richer and more complex narratives. This will be

observable in the way that I handle desire in this autoethnography; rather than focusing on the physicality of sexual activity, in this work the erotic focuses on feelings and meanings surrounding my relationship with Richard. While the customs and practices of desire of gay men have been portrayed in research in ways that often involve sexual encounters with strangers hidden in the dark (Andersen and Blosnich; Balthasar, Jeannin and Dubois-Arber; Boulton et al.), the erotic within here – within me – comes as the metaphor of “the kernel within herself” that Lorde mentions in her work, where the erotic is an energy that strengthens and empowers her experiences. Comparably, the erotic made me reclaim a more intimate, constructive, self-revealing relationship with the man that features in this text, even if desiring him and loving him implied the reproduction of the classist and racist values that oppressed me at the same time that they made me thrive.

In the essay that follows, I offer an autoethnography that reflects on my experience with Richard and the complexities of everyday performance of identity that emerged for me as our friendship grew. Using my unexpected encounter with the presence of nopales, cactus, a symbol of my post-colonial self, in his garden as a starting point, I reflect on the similarities between his garden and my grandmother's, the shifting senses of familiarity and difference that combined with legacies of colonialism to shape my desire for him in self-deprecating ways, as well as how our erotic friendship paradoxically allowed me to value aspects of my Mexican identity and body I had previously tried to overcome. I conclude the essay with a section that makes sense of this experience by explicating the ways the autoethnography exemplifies patterns and possibilities in gay men of color's sense of self and their relationships with white men.

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‘The Flower Tree’

We will pass away.

I, Netzahualcoyotl, say, enjoy!

Do we really live on earth?

Ohuaya, ohuaya.

Not forever on earth,  
only a brief time here!

Even jades fracture;  
even gold ruptures,  
even quetzal plumes tear:

Not forever on earth:  
only a brief time here!

Ohuaya, ohuaya.

Netzahualcoyotl

warrior, poet, and ruler of the city-state of Texcoco in pre-Hispanic Mexico (in Curl)

\*

### **An encounter with an unexpected symbol of my post-colonial self**

*AUTHOR: –Your garden reminds me my grandmother’s garden. –*

*RICHARD<sup>2</sup>: –Oh really? –*

*–Yes, absolutely; she loves trees, plants, and flowers.*

*She used to have many plants in her garden,*

*some of them directly in the ground,*

*some of them in pots. This garden is very similar. –*

*–Even with the cactuses? –*

*–Especially with the cactuses!*

*The cactus is a symbol of Mexico,*

*I can’t think of a more appropriate symbol to represent my country.*

*She was very happy every season when the cactuses bloomed*

*and huge and impressive red flowers decorated the corner.*

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<sup>2</sup> Richard was contacted about the intention of publishing this article at an early stage of the writing and gave his consent to pursue its publication.

*Can I go upstairs?—*

*—Sure, you can.*

*Oh, that's interesting!*

*I wouldn't've imagined*

*that this garden reminded you of your grandmother's!—*

*—Wow, this is a beautiful terrace!*

*And I see it has direct access to the bedroom. —*

*—Actually,*

*that door in the terrace was the original entrance to the bedroom;*

*there was no access to the first floor from inside the house. —*

*— So, to go to the bedroom you had to exit and go via the garden? —*

*— Yes!*

*The spiral stair in the living room was added later*

*to get access to the bedroom. It wasn't practical*

*to go to the toilet in the middle of the night through these stairs;*

*imagine going outside during the winter, or if it's raining. —*

*—I can imagine...*

*but now you have a beautiful terrace*

*just outside the bedroom, this is so great, Richard!*

*Oh, and the sun is very warm here! —*

*—Just be careful, the floor is green, it's humid and slippery. —*

*—Oh, look at these fruits, these are ready to eat! — (Figure 1)*

*—Do you eat them? —*

*—Yes, of course,*

*we can just cut them, peel them, and eat them straightaway  
or you can make delicious flavored water.*

*It's so refreshing, and colorful; I love the purple. –*

*–You have to teach me! –*

*–So, what do you do with these fruits if you don't eat them? –*

*–Nothing. They just get dry in the plant and die. –*

*–Oh, that's a waste! Definitely, I have to teach you then. –*



Figure 1. Picture taken during the fruit collection.

*–Yes, there are more cactuses on the roof,  
the fruits are ripe and bigger.*

*You can go upstairs if you want. –*

*–Using this ladder? –*

*–Yeah, I just cover the first steps to stop the cats getting on the roof,*

*but you can climb, just be careful. –*

*–Okay. It's easy, perhaps going down will be more difficult.*

*Wow! The sun is fantastic over here! –*



While going up to the roof, I could not avoid noticing that his house and other houses around looked very similar to the Mexican houses where I lived: imperfect, old, cracked walls, with clothes hanging out to dry on the roof. The city looked old, almost decadent, as if it were to be consumed by the forces of nature. Those were my thoughts whilst observing the surroundings of that Maltese neighborhood.

*–Oh, you look so tiny from here.*

*I need to take a picture of you.*

*Smile, my beautiful host.*

*You're gorgeous. –*

*– I'm not –*

*– Of course you are!*

*Another one, smile again.*

*One more, now closer, golden man. –*

*–No, not closer. –*

*–Yes, I'm going in with the zoom –*

*–Nooo!–.*

He said 'no' with a falsetto tone that sounded more like a plea than a prohibition. I was on top of his house but, just by being with him, I felt on top of the world. I wanted to have a clear recollection of that moment, the picture as evidence, as if by capturing his image in a portrait I could capture that feeling forever. I had put Richard on a pedestal because of his physical appearance, to my eyes his hair shone without the necessity of the sunlight, and with that face of fine features, I would have been proud of being photographed. I was surprised when I noticed his disbelief when I said he was gorgeous. He seemed embarrassed and incredulous. How could he be incredulous? Did not he see his own beauty? He lowered

his face and laughed nervously. Still reluctant, he looked at the camera and, benevolently, gave me a timid smile.

After noticing his shyness, I thought of the possible imperfections he might not like to be captured by the shot: his hair was receding and there were wrinkles around his eyes. But even if hair is something I love and view as a symbol of beauty, I was forgiving with my dear Richard because he still had another key aspect that elevated him to a superlative category: eyes that sometimes looked Cambridge blue, other times baby blue. But ultimately, baldness and wrinkles apart, he would always have the main characteristic that would make him beautiful in my eyes: he would always have his whiteness. By virtue of him being white, I could turn a blind eye to any ‘flaws’ that he might have seen in his body. But me, by virtue of being a mixture of ethnicities, with my uninteresting brown eyes, and my dark skin, what would I have to offer him? Throughout my life, I would experience the pain of looking at myself in the mirror. I would feel the pity of believing nobody would look at me with desire. I would feel underserving of being looked at erotically and Richard’s reaction to my appreciation of his beauty had started to question my understanding of what attractive was.

*–Oh! The table looks cozy from here. –*

*–The pasta is almost ready. –*

*–Really? So fast, well, I’ll come down and help you set the table. –*

*–Be careful. –*

While I was going downstairs I realized where that familiarity with the house came from; the plants in their colorful and differently sized pots, the exterior stairs, the cracks on the walls, the different heights in the rooms’ ceilings, all those qualities gave me the impression of being in a house that was not built by an architect but by someone who had no perfect sense of proportions and measures. My grandmother’s house was built in that way, using naïve plans that resulted in a house with some inconveniences product of the lack of

measurements. We adapted to them and these did not represent a problem because that seemed to be normal. I used to duck while going downstairs because my grandfather miscalculated the height of the steps and the roof was too low. I had the same experience at Richard's house; entering and exiting the dining room involved lowering my head, otherwise my face would hit the bricks.

My mother and I lived at my grandmother's house for a few years. Her wild garden was a mixture of plants, fruit trees, vines, ivy, grasses, and cactuses; it was an organic, unplanned, and beautiful garden that gave the house a sense of rural atmosphere in the middle of the city. Her house was humble and cozy, with rooms built in different periods and decorated in different styles. This house became a source of shame when I was studying at secondary school and I started visiting some friends' houses, which apparently were designed professionally. I remember my surprise when I realized that, in one of my friends' houses, all the rooms were contained under the same unit; there was no need to go outside to go to the toilet, their bedrooms were all on the same floor, everything seemed well-organized, and the gardens well-manicured. As I visited other houses, I realized that mine was the one that seemed to be different. When I was 17, a friend of mine came by surprise to congratulate me for my birthday. She knocked at the door, and although she was a close friend, I never invited her to come in. We stayed outside, inside her car, talking for a long while because I was ashamed of showing her where I lived. I felt embarrassed about the house's imperfections. As I revisit these memories with the perspective of time, I reflect on how my grandmother left rural Mexico and moved to the capital city; she changed location, but she carried her rural Mexico with her and built a house based on the culture she knew. All of these memories were running through my head as a daydream while I was trying to maintain a conversation with my dear Richard.

*–I'll help you with the plates. –*

*–Would you like some wine? –*

*–Yeah, I certainly could go for some wine,*

*I’m not a connoisseur but I like wine; red, white, and rosé. –*

*–Please bring the glasses. –*

*–Sure. We need some napkins too. –*

*–Here I have the forks. –*

*–What is this candle for? –*

*–Look. –*

*–Oh, you put it under the stock pot,*

*oh; it’s like a fondue machine,*

*to keep the food warm. Beautiful!*

*Oh Richard, I’m so lucky to be here!*

*Having a delicious lunch in this lovely yard. –*

Picture me sitting in front of a man who I admired and desired. Two chairs around a circular table with a marble surface, two plates, two glasses, two forks and two napkins. A weak flame heating the soup, the sun streaming from the roof. The more cliché the scene, the more I enjoyed it.

When I participated in a workshop for critical storytellers, the instructor used to tell me that my stories were all about stereotyped ideas of romance, just like this beautiful dinner, a commonplace of pseudo-romantic stories. I remembered his opinions about my stories and smiled because this time it was not just on paper; I wanted to shout that those scenes happen in real life too! I had become the leading character of one of my stories; it was such a perfect moment, such a perfect atmosphere that I relied on noticing all the imperfections of the island, of the house, of his body, of my body to believe it was real.

*–You are so lucky,*

*the weather wasn't so nice last week;  
it was cold and rainy,  
impossible to have lunch outside,  
but today we can...*

*Now I'm really curious about the cactus, you have to show me. –*

*–Of course, I'll show you; we called them 'nopales',  
they are present in our everyday food;  
you haven't tasted real Mexican food until you've tasted them.*

*You also need to taste the flavored water made from the cactus fruits' juice!–*

I did not know much about the presence of cactus in Mexican food but it was something he was interested in, so I wanted to impress him. It was one thing I could share, something nobody had shared with him before, and I felt that would make me special. With that in mind, and although I had never cut cactus before, we went to the garden and I took the thorny cactus fruits with my bare hands and started cutting them.

*–Do you need gloves for that?–*

*–No, I can do it without them. –*

*–But how do you avoid the spines? –*

*–Just put your fingers at the base  
and gently turn the fruit in a semi-circle,  
as they are mature, they fall easily. –*

*–I see, okay, I'll go to the roof  
for the other ones that are already on the ground.*

*And what about the leaves?–*

*–Just cut them with the same technique. –*

*–Look at this one I cut. –*

*–Oh, that leaf is too big, try to cut the smaller ones.–*

*–I think we have enough fruits. –*

*–By the way what do you call them in English? –*

*–Prickly pears. –*

*–Pricky pears? –*

*–P R I C K L Y P E A R S. What do you call them in Spanish?–*

*–Tunas–*

*– ‘Tiunas?’ –*

*–No, not ‘tiunas’, but t u n a s .–*

*–How do you spell it?–*

*–T-U-N-A-S. –*

*–Oh, like tuna fish. –*

*–Oh, exactly, like tuna fish.*

*And the leaves are called ‘nopales’.*

*I’d say that this is the most authentic Mexican food;*

*it doesn’t recognize class, season, or geography.–*

It was ironic to cross the Atlantic to get a full immersion in European culture and instead find myself digging for deep roots of my infancy, nationality, and ancestry. As I write this essay, I reflect on how those seven days living with Richard made me believe that I could be in a relationship with one of those white men I had fantasized about. I wanted Richard to fall in love with me the same way I had fallen in love with him. At the time of this encounter with him, I realized that Richard had opened a window for me, a window of possibility. I believed that I could not only travel to Europe but also live in Europe, and more secretly, that I could *be* European. In ‘Black skins, white masks’, Frantz Fanon writes that colonization

leaves a deep footprint on the person who comes from the colonized country. Thus, I refused to recognize my indigenous roots as consequence of systematic racism that segregates indigenous people in Mexico (Castillo). I refused to see those aspects that made me a Mestizo-Mexican and embraced an identity of a Mexican whose abstract hypothetical optimum was informed by a western standard. I could feel how every act of kindness Richard was doing for me contributed to his individuality and, simultaneously, contributed to my idealization of his whiteness.

Years after the episode I narrate in this paper, I moved to Britain to pursue a doctorate and although the academic aspect was important, other aspects played a part in the decision to live abroad too, notably the opportunity to live closer to the ‘white beauties’ I had admired and desired. I wanted that opportunity, regardless if it meant speaking a language at which I was not proficient, being away from my family, and putting aside my cultural heritage in order to absorb European cultures. Amaya writes, “Much of this work is on the self, and relates to how we think of ourselves and the things we learn to do in order to fit better” (194). Although this might represent an onerous task for many people who move to a foreign country, for me, that work was a relief, as I had found myself rejecting many aspects of *my* Mexican culture. One of the things I first realized when I started to meet new people in Europe was that, far from putting it aside, my cultural heritage became more prominent. While in Mexico City my nationality was completely inconspicuous, in every European country I visited, my nationality was one of the favorite themes of conversation in social situations. That prominence allowed me to engage in a deep and reflexive quest about what being Mexican meant to me.

Europeans conquered not only the territory, not only the religious beliefs, not only the language, but also the erotic desire. They implanted the conception of a god and virgins to adore; divinities with their whiteness as the ideal of purity and the ultimate representation of

‘the good’ (Sigal). For me, the effects of colonization often manifest themselves in the form of self-shame. Many years ago, I dated a clever guy with whom I had a powerful, intimate, and sexual connection. He proposed what, in theory, sounded like a very attractive life project: moving in together, travelling, having a shared life. It was a flattering proposal, but he was more serious about me than I was about him, and I never really understood why. I gradually stopped answering his calls. When he noticed that I was losing interest, he asked me directly why it was. I gave him a vague response that I do not even remember, yet I remember him well. I remember him because I always wondered whether I was less interested in him because he was dark-skinned and dark-haired, and his facial features made him look pretty much like myself, like the body and face that have caused me to feel shame. This echoes Smith, Morales, and Han’s research findings about how gay men seem to believe that ‘Black men are good for sex but not to build a relationship with’ (395), although that echo transposes their racism into my internalized racism. There was a period when I was single for years, during which I used to claim that nobody was interested in me. It would have been more accurate to say that nobody with the characteristics of the golden gods that I valued most was interested in me. A guy with indigenous characteristics would always be uninteresting to me due to a ludicrous comparison with a white man. To what extent can partner selection based on physical appearance be called sexual discrimination or just matter of personal preference? Callander, Holt, and Newman engage with gay men’s narratives of their online dating experiences to explore that question. If it can be called discrimination in the form of sexual racism, it sometimes comes *from* a position of privileged whiteness *towards* minority groups. However, discrimination can also occur *from* minority group members *towards* their fellows. The level of sophistication of this cultural preference is such that I did not have to consciously make any decisions to desire Richard. With his physical features, Richard symbolized desire itself. Since my self-perception would not help me see



my self-worth, I would do whatever possible to overcome my ‘otherness’. My efforts to deal with the language barrier were part of my performance as that outsider who strived to be part of the dominant culture. Revisiting Fanon’s elaborations on the desire for the other’s whiteness, I felt that a relationship with Richard would help me to become a white man: he would ‘civilize’ (Fanon 63) my indigenous body, and he would prove with his love that I deserved to be one of them.

Back to that scene of the cactus harvest in Malta, there I was, on a picturesque Mediterranean island, explaining to my desired lover about a traditional Mexican food with which I was not so familiar.

*–The big Aztec city of Tenochtitlan,  
which is now Mexico City downtown,  
was built on the lake; not around the lake, but on the lake.  
Mythology tells that Huitzilopochtli,  
god and son of Coatlicue, the Mother Earth,  
was betrayed by his cousin Copil who wanted to destroy the dynasty.  
Copil was dramatically arrested, beheaded,  
and his heart was thrown to the lake,  
but it was transformed into a stone,  
which became the first foundational stone of Tenochtitlan,  
and from that stone born the primordial tree: the nopal.  
Its fruits have the shape of the warriors’ hearts: the tunas (Florescano).–*

*–So, the nopal is quintessentially Mexican.–*

*–Yes, and it’s everywhere.*

*Within the country you can find certain food which is regional;  
just people from the north eat it,*

*or just people from the south,  
but nopales are eaten everywhere.  
Some dishes are seasonal;  
we eat them during certain festivities  
and we know for instance that 'chiles en nogada' are typical  
of the celebrations of independence day,  
but it's an expensive dish.  
It involves a lot of specific ingredients difficult to get and afford,  
so it could be considered a posh dish.  
But nopales transcend all these barriers,  
you can find them on the humblest tables,  
as well as on wealthy people's tables;  
from the northern state of Chihuahua  
to the southern one of Oaxaca;  
they're consumed in rural areas as well as in big cities,  
you can eat them during the hopeful days of January  
and the summarizing days of December. –*

*–That's fascinating!*

*I wonder why they don't have an international interpretation  
in the restaurant industry–*

“You’re more Mexican than the nopal” is an expression used to strongly affirm that something or someone shows undoubtedly the characteristics of Mexican identity. The sentence often has negative connotations. “Being more Mexican than the nopal” implies that the something or someone to some extent could be, initially, considered foreign – especially from a place where people’s white skin, fair hair, light-colored eyes, and unfamiliar language

reveal an allegedly elevated status – but after quick assessment it is evidenced that the presumed foreign origin is implausible. The nopal symbolizes Mexican indigeneity as an undeniable quality. For example, a person dyeing their hair blond could be described as: ‘they want to be blond but they’re more Mexican than the nopal’. In that case, it was me; regardless of being in a remote island, struggling to speak English, and aspiring to be Richard’s boyfriend, I was (am) more Mexican than the nopal. Smith, Morales, and Han write that men of color seem to have little choice when it comes to constructing their identity; ethnicity seems to put the individual in a position in which ethnicity becomes impossible to avoid (Smith, Morales and Han 394). My nationality, skin color, and language felt to me to be limiting factors; I wanted to escape my cultural background and strived to re-construct *my own* identity (DeLeon), although I did not know what that identity would be.

*–So, how do you cook them?–*

*–Well, you have to take the spines out with a knife.–*

I saw several times in my life how indigenous people sold their farm produce in the street market: seeds, herbs, vegetables. Among them, nopales were one of the most popular agricultural goods. With a small knife, their dark fingers cut with great ability and accurate precision; in a question of seconds a nopal full of spines was completely cleaned. The merchants would then give them to my mother, and she would pay a small sum. Although I had seen this action being performed before, I never did it myself. I had participated in these traditions as an observer. ‘No me gustan los nopales’ – ‘I don’t like nopales’ – I used to tell my mother to avoid eating them during our meals. I can count with my dark fingers the number of times I have eaten nopales in my whole life. However, in Malta, I needed to be an expert because Richard was interested in them.

*– And what do you do afterwards?–*

*–You can dice them or cut them in julienne.*

*Although the most authentic one is to leave it as a whole,  
just do four cuts in the leaf and you call it 'nopal en manita'. –*

*–Which means 'in hand'–*

*–Exactly...*

*How do you know what 'en manita' means? –*

*–I had a Spanish boyfriend,  
so I understand a bit of Spanish. –*

*–Well, the shape evokes a hand,  
and that's why we call it like that.*

*You just cook it on the grill,  
but that option could be too much for a beginner,  
I'm going to teach you a British-friendly option. –*

*–What does that mean? –*

*–It means that I'm going to stew them in water,  
with salt and oregano to reduce the viscosity;  
sometimes it's not so pleasant,  
especially if you haven't tried them before. –*

I was not sure of what I was saying. I had serious doubts about the way of cooking them, but I tried to sound convincing. This kind of cactus is especially viscous; that is an essential characteristic of it. It would not be a cactus if it were not viscous. And I was teaching the way to cook them to reduce this essential quality and appeal to Richard's assumed palate.

*–How do you know when they're ready? –*

*–You'll see how the color changes.*

*From a bright green to a more olive green.*

*When they are olive green, they're ready. –*

Fortunately, the process worked. Many years of seeing Mexican people cooking them made me an indirect learner.

*–These are ready to eat, just let me clarify them,  
do you have a grid?–*

*–A grid?–*

*–Yes, a grid, to eliminate the water.–*

*–Oh, you mean a colander, use this one. –*

*–A colander, that's right, I'm sorry.*

*Let me taste just one.*

*They're ready!*

*You can eat them now.–*

*–And what's next in the process? –*

*–The process is finished,  
this is the way we eat them.*

*We can combine them with some cheese.*

*Unfortunately, we don't have tortillas to make some tacos,  
but they are nice this way.–*

*–Oh, I like them, these are really good!*

*You know what?*

*We'll bring them with us*

*to the dinner we were invited to and will use them as a starter.–*

*–Seriously?*

*I'm not sure about this, what if they don't like them? –*

*–Of course they'll like them; these are really good!–*

*–Are you sure?*

*I think this is a very local dish.*

*I'm not sure that this is of an international standard. –*

With that phrase I realized that the story of my life has to do with the necessity to fit into my ideals; my ideals of what is worldly; *my* ideals of what is desirable, acceptable; *my* ideals of what is classy, of what is refined. And some of these ideals speak about a person who performs a character who is far from my cultural background. I had been staging a performance that would help me become who I wanted to be; in Goffman's terms, I was showing 'face'. Showing a face implies the performance of a specific quality or group of qualities that could have been attributed or ascribed to the individual or that were assumed voluntarily. In this case, with my British host I was performing Mexican, while my entire life I had tried to perform whiteness. This performance is similar to the external part of the self, what Jackson explains as the part of identity that society recognizes – and the individual assumes – as a 'social self'. I was trying to enhance the self (Giddens), trying to modify and improve the current self in order to achieve the aspired ideal. Being invited to a dinner with a friend of Richard made me feel I was becoming 'one of them'. Richard, however, wanted to bring the dish we had just prepared; the nopales that I had managed to avoid my entire life were now about to give away my Mexicanidad. I had wanted to escape my culture but my culture had followed me or I had embodied it.

*–This is a brilliant idea.*

*I'm texting my friend to say we're bringing a Mexican starter,*

*this will be perfect with the drinks.*

*Oh, wait a minute, you know what?*

*If we add some frappe ice  
to the fresh water you prepared with the prickly pears,  
we can mix it with some vodka or maybe tequila,  
and it will become a fancy cocktail!–*

*–Oh Richard, this sounds fantastic!*

*This sounds like a perfect combination,*

*I wasn't sure about the nopales,*

*but the cocktails sound amazing!–*

As we arrived at his friend's house, the first thing I noticed was the artwork on the walls. There were several paintings that evoked the colorful style of David Hockney. They depicted houses and desert landscapes full of cactuses<sup>3</sup>. They were painted by a renowned American artist who had found inspiration in the northern lands of Mexico. I felt that all those symbols, of a country I had neglected, were unexpectedly appearing again and again. The nopal, as “el árbol de sacrificio – the tree of sacrifice” (Alberro) seemed to emerge to torment me. At the time, I did not know what to make of the experience. While Richard was engaged in conversation with his friend, I was contemplating him eating the nopales with some cheese and crackers until he left the plate empty. He was really into the Mexican snacks. And I was completely into him eating the Mexican snacks. His friend drank a couple of purple-colored ‘tuna’ cocktails, and I could not believe my pride for having contributed to the party with something I had hardly considered a reason to be proud. If there was still something Richard could do to make me love him more, that night he did it. How could I not like the person who liked one of the most quintessential representations of my culture? How could not I love the person who immediately loved what took me more than 30 years to

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<sup>3</sup> Richard read a previous version of this manuscript and suggested adding this episode not originally included in the piece. The author agreed that the suggested content, which featured another representation of the cactuses, would be an important contribution.

appreciate? How could not I love him if he seemed to like me ‘in spite of’ me being Mexican? Through the symbolic union of the fresh water I prepared and the cocktail idea Richard had, I experienced a feeling I had not experienced before. I felt that our worlds had been united in a mutual appreciation of their differences.

The following day, the academic conference that brought me to Malta had finished, and Richard came to pick me up from the conference venue. The view of his green car parked in the shadow and he in the interior waiting for me was something that made me feel loved.

*–Hello gorgeous, were you waiting for too long? –*

*–No, no, no, I just arrived. –*

*–I insist that there’s no need to bring me to the conference*

*and then pick me up,*

*I could’ve taken the bus,*

*I don’t want to be a nuisance! –*

*–You’re not a nuisance!*

*Buses are impossible, you have no idea;*

*and I’m happy to do it. You’re my guest!*

*So, how was your talk? –*

*–It was fantastic,*

*I felt proud of myself;*

*I delivered it well. –*

*–Of course! You even practiced your pronunciation:*

*hid, shunned, roam, irreconcilable, homogeneous. –*

*–Oh, yeah, H-O-M-O-G-E-N-E-O-U-S,*

*that was a difficult one. Better now, right?*

*Thank you for your help;*



*I couldn't have done it without my coach. –*

One of my main concerns was to speak clearly at the conference, and for that reason I had asked Richard to teach me ‘the British way’ to pronounce certain words I would find particularly challenging during my presentation. Diedrich Westermann explained in the context of European colonization in Africa that one of the most troubling aspects for outsiders is the use of language. Once colonization occurs, the knowledge of the foreign-mainstream language becomes imperative for native people, at least at a functional level, until the foreign language is not imposed anymore, but auto-imposed; natives want to learn it, and it causes a rupture with the aboriginal roots. When a person from a colonized country has been educated in the European traditions and eventually leaves their country to travel to the country where these traditions came from, they will strive to meet the required standards regarding the mastery of the tongue spoken in the host country (256-62). Otherwise, they will face a feeling of inadequacy. On the contrary, people who appreciate and establish a dialogue through the elegance of the words supply themselves with a source of symbolic power (Bourdieu).

In this light, I could say that Mexico illustrates this phenomenon in a striking fashion; Mexico has been colonized in different ways. The Spanish conquest is evident in, among other aspects of our lives, the language we speak, the religion we profess, and the family names we have. A different type of conquest is by the United States. Their influence is evident in the music we listen to, in the brands we buy, in the names Mexicans give to their babies, in the language we aspire to speak, in the interdependence of our economies, and in the political affairs that cause heated debates. In her work “Speaking in Tongues”, Gloria Anzaldúa writes: “The schools we attended... did not give us the skills for writing nor the confidence that we were correct in using our class and ethnic languages...” (163). This is the type of colonialism that my grandmother and her parents experienced in Mexico, as they

would have been taught only Spanish at school (if they had the chance to go to school); their native Otomí was relegated to oral practice at their house, and by the time we realized what colonialism has done to us, it was already lost.

*–Did you meet the speaker you were waiting for?–*

*–No, it’s a pity I couldn’t attend his talk;*

*I was chairing a session while he was presenting his research. –*

*–Oh, that’s too bad. –*

*–But you know what?*

*A professor who was listening to my talk*

*was really interested in my paper,*

*and he wants to write something in collaboration with me!–*

*–Wow, that sounds fabulous! Your networking actually worked,*

*I’m glad!–*

*–Thanks! I’m so happy too!*

*This is the perfect closure for the conference.*

*What about you?*

*What did you do today?–*

*–Well, I went to the council office to track the process of my ID card,*

*I went back home, did the laundry, studied the oboe;*

*the modern one, I gave the baroque oboe a rest.*

*I experimented with the cactus in a different recipe,*

*I took a nap, and then just came for you. –*

*–Wait, wait, wait,*

*did you experiment with the cactus?*

*But there were no more cactus. –*

*–I cut more today. –*

*–Seriously?–*

*–Yeah, by the way,*

*do you have some spines in your hands? –*

*–No, not a single one. –*

I had several, but I did not want to acknowledge it. I wanted to be perfect for him.

*–How do you manage to do it?*

*My hands are full of spines!*

*I guess you're an authentic Mexican!–*

*–I guess so. –*

A self-appraising smile curled my lips. With almost seven million indigenous people living in Mexico (INEGI) and with the long history of the Aztec, Olmec, Zapotec, Mayan, and a long list of cultures inhabiting Mexico long before the Spanish arrival, indigeneity runs in our blood. And even though my features immediately reveal this background, I realized I was not interested in admitting that this is part of who I am. My last name speaks about a Spanish influence, my body speaks about a Pre-Hispanic history, and my identity speaks about a man who used to – but tries his best now not to – look down on his indigenous background, valuing all the European traditions, whatever they are. My grandmother used to teach me words, phrases, and expressions in Otomí. The Otomíes occupied an area that extends from the central highlands in central Mexico to the great coastal plain of Veracruz in the Gulf of Mexico (Galinier). This was the indigenous language my grandmother, her mother, and her grandmother spoke. We were an Otomí family of ancient lineage. I used to learn the expressions; I used to enjoy speaking the few phrases I knew. I am now sad that I did not inquire more about it. I am sad that the public education system in Mexico encourages

us to learn foreign languages – mainly English – but does not make space to learn any of the 89 indigenous tongues (Castillo). I am sad that when my grandmother died – the last person who spoke the language in our family – a crucial part of our history died with her.

The internalized concept of being Mexican is a devalued product of colonization. Octavio Paz, in his *Labyrinth of Solitude* (Paz and Stanton), described the Mexican as ruptured, violated, minimized, degraded, and with ambivalent feelings towards the feminine. I observe a quality of liminality in what being Mexican is nowadays, as a consequence of what Appiah calls the influence of the culture consumption of western-style education: objects are informed both by ancient traditions as well as by the global requirements to fit in a western society. Knowing that my grandmother had indigenous roots, it was evident that I had them too, but somehow I thought that she, and not me, was the one with this background. Castillo writes:

Currently, the [Mexican] law prohibits discrimination and the official government policy does not promote the deculturation of indigenous people; however, they face daily practices that denigrate them, because these are founded on an ideology that differentiate mestizos and indigenous as opposed categories and, by virtue of this, establishes ‘The geographical, political, social and ethnic maps with which we conceive the reality of Mexico and the population that inhabits it’ (Navarrete 2008: 7). In turn, the indigenous peoples have internalized these values and believe that it is better to break with their past, which represents poverty and ignorance according to the acculturating vision, and try to assimilate to blend with the majority. (33)

Fanon explains how black men born in the Americas experience a feeling of being less black than black men in Africa, less black and closer to white, therefore in a subjectively more privileged position than their folks in Africa – the ‘real’ Blacks. In similar circumstances; with my western-styled-Mexican education, with my ill-equipped English and my travels, I believed I had symbolically stepped out of my indigeneity. I abandoned all these indigenous roots expressed in Otomí and constructed a persona with a proficient command of

Spanish. I was proficient enough to work in academia, and then I tried to move into what Pierre Bourdieu describes as the “linguistic market”: a symbolic place where language becomes a symbol of power and provides – or denies – access to restricted areas governed by the currency of speech. Linguistic competence in the indigenous Mexican language or in the Spanish language would never have granted me access to pursue a doctorate in the UK. I also felt that my indigenous features were another aspect that would not afford me a space in this culture. I therefore concluded that disposing of both the language and physical features was something I should do, as if my appearance and my recollections of my vivid conversations with my grandmother could be disposable. Paradoxically, the opposite process occurred during my experience with my British host. Knowing that we had nothing in common in terms of ethnic origins or language, somehow I thought that being with him, talking with him, and being his boyfriend would enhance my persona. Being with him would make me psychologically whiter in Fanon’s terms and would increase my language as symbolic capital in Bourdieu’s conceptual frame.

*–But how did you prepare the cactus, Richard? –*

*–It was very simple, I just put some flour,  
and as they are sticky  
I didn’t need egg to bread them,  
so I put them in hot oil,  
and then fried them. –*

*–I can’t picture you cooking nopales!*

*Seriously? –*

*–Of course, and they are really good!*

*The experiment went alright, you have to try them. –*

*–I can’t wait!*

*A British guy in Malta reinterpreting the Mexican nopales.*

*Unbelievable! –*

I could not be less than astonished when I saw him so enthusiastic about something that I disregarded; my eyes popped in disbelief, and from my disdain appeared a small trace of pride. At the time, I thought I adored Richard because he represented whiteness with all the qualities I would never have, but perhaps what made this man so special was the fact that he made me feel proud of something that I had secretly rejected for years. Perhaps I loved him because he motivated a reconciliation with my perceptions about what being Mexican represents to me.

*–I'm going to take another route home,  
you'll see the countryside. –*

*–Buses are not on time.*

*The roads are curvy and don't seem planned,  
their lines are not parallel,  
it's full of cactuses,  
and you find some holes in the road  
because these are not well repaired; I feel at home! –*

*–I'm glad you feel at home. –*

*–This is totally unexpected, Richard!*

*The more I see Malta the more I find it similar to the rural Mexico. –*

The more I know you, the more I fall in love with you. The more I love you, the more I fear my inadequacy. Will you think I am crazy? Is it too soon to tell you? But if not now, when? After all, as Netzahualcoyotl said: 'I'm only a brief time here'. Today at dinner time will be the right moment to ask if you want to be my boyfriend. Those were my thoughts while we were on our way home on that Maltese road.

\*

### **Making sense of this experience**

When I started writing this autoethnography years ago, I imagined that my role as a researcher on Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, and Queer (LGBTQ) lives would come to the fore and I would write more on these matters. However, the intercultural and interethnic aspects of this autoethnography manifested themselves through my writing in an organic way. I experienced what Smith, Morales and Han (394) describe as the centrality of race in identity construction: race and ethnicity dominated my reflections during and after this encounter with Richard and made sense when looked at in the light of post-colonialism as a powerful cultural force that plays a part in the seemingly personal process of desire. I have been living in the UK for six years now, and I enjoy living here; I have an academic job, and I work as a mental health professional. The physical distance that separates me from Mexico has given me a different perspective on these racial issues; living abroad helped me to think outside my culture and see more clearly the ways in which colonization has impacted my life. I have become more interested in my Mexican roots and I have been trying to answer the question: what does it mean to be Mexican to me? In this autoethnography, I intended to illustrate how post-colonialism has left a deep footprint in me but also to invite responses from others who might have had similar experiences. The essay highlights the fact that my ideas of what is considered 'beautiful' were not fully *my* ideas. In the same way that Cherríe Moraga writes 'the real battle with such oppression, for all of us, begins under the skin' (25), my battle was lost early on in my adolescence and continued being a lost battle after regarding my reflection in the mirror and seeing nothing but disgust shaped by oppressive colonial forces. As I write this, I feel the shame of reflecting on the significance that the three 'serious' relationships I have had in my life have been with white men. As much as I wanted

it to be, Richard was not one of these relationships. Our relationship was contained to the times I visited Malta, and those times were incredibly meaningful for me and to some extent to him. I do not think that I would ever be able to truly convey in a way that you, the reader, can meaningfully understand the feelings of intimacy, hope, and happiness I felt when I was with him and the immense sadness I felt when it became clear that the relationship would never develop into what I wanted it to be. Given that colonialism is the topic I chose – or the topic that showed itself to me while writing this – you might ask to what extent those feelings were tainted by my preference for white men. You would be right to ask that question, as this is something I had asked myself. An answer to that question would be that his race both was and was not important. It was important because I was mesmerized by how beautiful he was in my eyes, and that facilitated our encounter; but that is only a partial answer. His race was also unimportant because all the other qualities that made me love him transcended the body, and what is left now is the affect, what he made me feel. What I remember is the way I felt when I was with him.

A question that has reverberated in my mind after analyzing these affects under the lens of colonialism is: “To what extent can we, as individuals, be held responsible for the effects of such powerful forces and the derivative concepts of racism and ethnocentrism that depart from them?” Hiram Pérez writes, “Gay men of color participate in these contradictions but do not emerge unscathed. The desires comprising the cosmopolitan gay male subject in fact reinscribe oppressive racial hierarchies while enjoining gay men of color to both authenticate and celebrate those desires and the sexual cultures they organize” (105). As I write from the perspective of my colonized self with a certain level of awareness of how the processes of colonization work, can I still say that I loved Richard, or would it be more appropriate to say that I loved what his race represented for me? If the latter is the case, my awareness of the racial, ethnic, and cultural issues underpinning this relationship would



provide me, at least theoretically, with the skills to do something about it, perhaps to resist the domination. But how would this look in practice? How to resist the strong desire that would drive me to cross the Atlantic in a 17-hour flight just to see him? How does one resist the power of feeling in love? Although the genuineness of these affects – due to their colonial provenance – might be put into question, I want to say that still, nowadays, years after the last time our bodies made love, thinking of him makes me smile with the nostalgia you might feel when remembering an episode of life that made you immensely happy. This recollection, with its affect archived in my memory for posterity, resonates with what Stephanie Nelson writes in her work “Intersections of Eros and Ethnography”: “What I do want to explore is how we might speak about these ways of communication as shared cultural knowledge, and find words to write about the ways that our bodies make love and knowledge and culture together” (Nelson 2). My relationship with Richard produced culture and knowledge and love together. It produced knowledge in the sense that I was able to better understand the forms of oppression that hundreds of years of colonization in Mexico had imposed upon my desire. It produced culture in the sense that our respective lives brought a mixture of conversations, arts, cuisines, customs, and ideas to our encounters; Richard was living in Malta and was showing me all the landmarks around the archipelago and the historic notions of Maltese people, but he was not originally from Malta. I was teaching him some Spanish, but I was not from Spain. I was performing my best version of what I understood as quintessentially Mexican cuisine. I had never performed the role of a Mexican master chef, but for that particular encounter I did. I had never been made aware of my indigenous roots; my family never mentioned this as a possibility, but through that encounter, these aspects of my life took central stage. In this way, the relationship produced *us*.

In his work on the concept of creative-relational inquiry, Jonathan Wyatt writes about how relating to other people, objects, spaces, time, and other circumstances produces subjects

in continuous movement (Wyatt). The relationship between Richard and me – and the fact that he is from England, I am from Mexico, and we met in Malta; and the fact that he is a musician, and I am a scholar, and we come from our respective social classes; and the fact that his surroundings reminded me of my childhood; and the fact that I was in a state of elation, and his response to that elation – all those circumstances produced a specific encounter that would have been very different if one or two elements changed. Both Richard and I were transformed through the process of relating to each other and that relating produced *us*. Our way of *relating* preceded us (Wyatt). Our way of *relating* led us to erotic and romantic intimacy that challenged and debunked, if only temporarily, the often overpowering force of colonization. Our erotic encounters both tore apart and revealed my colonized ideas of beauty.

This autoethnography is important because, although the racialized undertones can be unpacked when put under an analytic lens, my relationship with Richard, however brief, highlighted at the same time that it erased a history of colonization. While it seems that he wanted to learn about my culture, culture was only a vehicle to learn about me and connect with me. Paradoxically, although I wanted to be more like him – European – what I learned was a way of being in which I could see him without the constraints of categories such as race and ethnicity. As I wrote earlier, I would often look at my own body with disgust, but it was impossible for me to feel disgust with my body while it was precisely my body that would be the provider of such pleasure; it was impossible not to feel beautiful, admired, and adored when he was clearly enjoying as much as I was the entanglement of our bodies. It was through our – perceived – ardent way of giving ourselves to each other that I started to believe that my dark-skinned body and my indigenous features were also beautiful and attractive and desirable. As Stephanie Nelson writes, “Eros insists and persists, and through acknowledgement of the often embodied and impassioned nature of the field relationships,

new ways of knowing and new motivations for change may yet arise” (Nelson 19). This relationship with Richard might have been initially impregnated with racial connotations, but it was the relationship itself that challenged the core of whatever racial qualities colored our relationship and we could understand “the self by the detour of the comprehension of the other” (Rabinow, Bellah and Bourdieu xxix).

I conclude by saying that my goals with this essay are modest in the sense that the dialogical aspects of my exchanges with Richard aim to illustrate the mundane aspects of our everyday performances of identity and how we, as two individuals, carried our own historical backgrounds without being fully conscious of them. How could we be fully conscious of the myriad of ways in which colonialism and other cultural forces impacted our lives? This autoethnography suggests that individuals may struggle to battle the everyday encounters with performances of racial discrimination and self-depreciation, even when we are aware of them. However, it also suggests that intimacy provides an opportunity to bring people together in acts that defy the powerful forces of colonialism and racism. The image of disgust I used to see when looking in the mirror has been a presence in my life – sometimes stronger, sometimes weaker – but I must tell you that it was near to impossible to feel any sense of self-depreciation while making love with Richard. I can tell by the long-lasting feelings of appreciation, tenderness, and intimacy that emerged from those encounters in which our skin color would have been most evident because there was nothing that covered us, nothing to hide the contrast of our bodies while entering each other, and yet, those moments were when I felt most connected to him.

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