Migrant Plants: Arts-Based Inquiry into Plant-Human Relations

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Abstract

This dissertation is a multi-layered exploration of the process of research and the creation of four main projects containing ten multimedia artworks. While probing plant-human and more-than-human relations in the context of colonization, I use arts-based participatory methodologies, acknowledging different ways of knowing and plant agency as well as critical plant studies. The context of the artworks originates in San Basilio de Palenque in the Caribbean area of Colombia. Following my own migration and the migration of plants, the final work is situated in Toronto, Canada, where I probe in-depth plant-human relations through the concept of migrant co-relations.

Keywords:
Art-Based Research-Creation; Etno-Botanics; Multimedia Arts; San Basilio De Palenque - Colombia; Critical Plant Studies; Botany; Plant History ; Contemporary Arts; Las Monas Forest - Costa Rica; Toronto – Canada; Plant-Based Art; Vegetal Imagery; Plant-Based Installation Art; Artistic Expressions of Plant-Human Relationships; Vegetal Geography; Otherness, Multispecies ethics.

Acknowledgements

To Cristina Lombana, my partner in life, my companion in the exploration of plants, and my mother, I dedicate this thesis, which was co-created with your energy and teachings in communities. Without you my fieldwork, writing, thinking and exploring would not have been possible. This dissertation is but a slice of the vital spaces you created for me, and absolutely a joint creative project. I hope this written reflection of our many hikes, trips, and conversations, resonates with care and *magia*. This work is dedicated to you with gratitude.

This dissertation is the result of a long and collaborative journey that continues to weave with care and heart. It thrives on the support and guidance of plants and communities in creating and writing all the pieces. Countless individuals have generously bestowed this work with warmth, care, love, and kindness, giving it a special and irreplaceable essence. I am forever grateful for the compassion, encouragement, wisdom, and support offered by so many wonderful people.

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your hugs, about magic, language and the complex idea of religiosity.
I think of you all daily.

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Decolonizarnos, decolonización - thank you for these ideas that inhabited my childhood memories when you used to visit our home every Sunday, Manuel Zapata Olivella. These terms resonate in my memory from your conversations with my mother and my grandfather, Hector Lombana. I remember my mother organizing, together with his wife Rosa, complete typewritten books with hard covers at home. It was the encyclopaedia of the Negritudes in Colombia, as Afro-Colombian studies were called in those years. Today, as I write this text, I visualize those books and yearn to rediscover those pages that shaped my childhood worlds. Will they still exist? What titles will they have within the great collection of texts by Master Zapata Olivella. You opened my heart to voices that emanate from this world, others belong to the next one, and a few from divine nature.

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My multimedia mind and way of working: A note to the reader

A flashing signal on the screen shows me where I am at and on what line. It makes me feel as if I'm right **there**; it reduces the distance between what I see around me and the world that the network opens up. Incredibly, there are as many possible online pathways as there are neural connections in the human brain and in the vast networks of roots reaching deep into the ground under us. The invention of the hyperlink may be the way that our age turns everything that can be imagined into one great rhizome.

Concentration and dedication to a single task have been long cherished ideals of modern education: staying still, sitting quietly, and remaining in one space. Multimedia entanglements[1] break with this logic, offering us simultaneous points of encounter where identities and understanding co-arise out of relationships (a ubiquity, traditionally reserved for the gods). I have chosen to work in a way that mirrors most closely how my mind operates: following the impulse of multiple paths opening up simultaneously.

I try to make sense of these journeys within my artistic practice, supported by theoretical reflections that illuminate my creative activities. I invite readers to make their way through the text in this dissertation in the order that makes sense to them, whatever that may be. Above all, I invite them to follow multiple paths, and multiple directions and to allow their intuition and reasoning and their own needs to co-create new thoughts and connections.

This dissertation is written with chapters organized by colour: first (in green font), the artworks are presented digitally; second (in red font), there are stories of encounters (with people, plants, situations and spirits). These stories narrate the events and memories that triggered the creation of the work. Third (in blue font), there is a description of the creation of the work and a reflection on it. This

[1] My multimedia art form creations.

includes the contextualization of my practice, the encounter with multiple theories surrounding and nurturing the work where concepts become my own through the development of my methodology. An artistic praxis, starting with my curiosity and some ideas that evolved and emerged through the process and practice of creating and exhibiting in a public space.

I follow endless configurations of theoretical reframing, open-ended, forging paths[2].

The writing of this thesis is experimental, as is my multimedia practice, and its purpose is to find an alternative approach while remaining grounded in artmaking and community practices. Its structure resembles multidirectional moving images and sound installations. It reflects my way of thinking while creating non-linear possibilities of living, seeing, and doing.

Using hyperlinks, the works are shared digitally, as video documentation of installations, online non-fiction experimental narratives, short art films, super 8mm and 16mm transfers and photographic assemblages. Some works have many components, particularly if they take the form of installations, while others are self-contained units, for instance, a videotape or 16mm film. All these works have been shown in galleries, cinema festivals, cultural centres, and public spaces. In regards to the online presentations of installations, I have tried to keep the impact and embodiment that interactive works demand. There will be gaps that I have tried to fill in by rethinking the use of online interactivity from a performative perspective, fragmenting the information, and allowing for the sounds and segments to be reframed and remixed by the viewer to create their own combinations.

This thesis is by no means an endpoint but rather a moment for a pause where I can contemplate new paths ahead.

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[2] See Borges's vision of "forking paths" *caminos que se bifurcan,* in the short story *"*The Garden of Forking Paths" (Borges, 1944).

Introduction

The dissertation rethinks and reframes research and creation projects I have developed in the Spanish Caribbean of Colombia in San Basilio de Palenque and other surrounding areas. More recently, I have expanded these projects into Costa Rica and Toronto from 2013 to the present. These projects explore plant-human and more-than-human relations in the context of colonization, using participatory methodologies and acknowledging different ways of knowing/being and plant agency.
The central emphasis of my dissertation lies in the arts-based, embodied, and collaborative dimensions of my work, diverging from the conventional approach of presenting an extensively analytical argument often found in traditional text-based theses. Rather than adhering strictly to text-based conventions, my research takes a dynamic and creative trajectory, delving into the realms of artistic expression, embodied experiences, and collaborative endeavors. By embracing arts-based methodologies, I strive to unlock new avenues of understanding and communication, transcending the limitations of conventional academic discourse. Through various artistic mediums such as visual arts, performance, and perhaps even immersive installations, I aim to encapsulate the essence of these complex relationships and convey their nuances in ways that words alone cannot capture.

While this dissertation is about plants, its story began not with them but in communities and with spirits. It is an extension of my practice as a socially-engaged artist in the creation of moving images and contemporary visual arts work; it operates as an interdisciplinary inquiry that cuts across different fields, such as education and cultural production. It asks questions of ‘ethnobotany’ and ‘anthropology’ in the creation of independent art.

The project embraces artistic forms and expressions in order to explore, understand, represent, and challenge accepted definitions and concepts. It also utilizes visual and oral interviewing methods by ‘weaving’ stories drawn from different ways of knowing and art practices. Each work here presented leads to another as a continuation of an exploration conceptually and aesthetically representing my own deepening understanding of and representation of plant-human relations.

Using these methods, the dissertation explores, documents and re-creates ecologies that take shape between plants and people, and between plants and other multi-species interrelationships, based on the idea of plants as political allies (Berliner Festpiele, n.d.). It re-centres the significance of plants in shaping resistance in the formation of territories of 'freedom.' Consequently, the thesis becomes a testing ground for the usefulness of arts-based methodologies. It aims to understand and re-write living knowledges in marginalized cultures - from the arts and with the arts.

The dissertation is informed by the region's history of colonialism and resistance, reframed within an arts-based methodology to understand from a decolonial perspective 'migrated plants' or plants that have been appropriated as technologies for territorial and population control (PTCT population and territorial control technology). Some plants were transplanted by those in a position of power in order to support the process of colonization, but some of these plants have become allies for those in a subaltern position, helping to create new forms of resistance.

Most of these plants are incorrectly called 'weeds' (*malezas*), that is, plants not suitable for the commercial market, and most have become invasive species in the new land where they were moved because of the lack of local species to balance their environment. Other 'migrated plants' are edible, medicinal, and ceremonial plants that open doors into spiritual and ancestral spaces.

In the exploration of Migrated Plants, especially those suitable for controlling or transforming territories appropriated by those in a position of power to control a population and land, I created a body of work entitled "*Panama Project (since 2012)*," which was both a visual artwork and my MFA thesis. The "Panama Project*"* explored how the plant *Sacharum Spontanuem* became *Paja Canalera* when it was moved by the U.S. Army from Vietnam to Panama during the time of the Vietnam war. The plant was used as a living barrier to control the areas of the Panama Canal, where the army had built the largest military base outside of U.S. territory. It included the School of the Americas, also known as the School of the Assassins, where the worst violators of human rights in the Americas were trained, including nearly a dozen Latin American dictators.

In a series of works created in San Basilio de Palenque, Colombia, in the context of the Spanish Caribbean, I explored Migrated Plants as political allies (2014-2020). Plant-human and multi-species spiritual relationships supported the transformation of the territory into a land of 'freedom' and the creation of the first Palenque (Quilombo). There, enslaved Africans who had been able to run away from their enslavers founded one of the first free territories in the Americas with the help of medicinal, edible and ceremonial plants they brought from Africa hidden inside their hair.

As a multimedia artist, my methodology draws upon research on many levels, from the poetic to the social and political, and finally to diverse technical considerations. Most of my long-term research-creation projects are developed in marginalized communities where I have deep family connections or where I have worked for years as an arts facilitator. Personal artistic projects are the result of living within the community for many years and developing an understanding of the social and political internal dynamics.

In order to understand the multi-layered complexity of these communities and habitats, I have designed different approaches according to the circumstances. My research is a combination of my artistic practice and fieldwork research that has achieved substantial results in areas where there was little public information and a great deal of speculation. The creation of video and sound installations has allowed me to engage multiple viewers at the same time. The works are open-ended and can be expanded as new research brings new information to the fore.

My work process honours knowledge coming from the body, its rhythms, and its visceral politics. This means opening to altered states of consciousness, the land, the more-than-human. It's based on the knowledge that arises out of relationships, embodied and lived. It is not an entitlement.

In this sense, my approach seeks to disrupt anthropological ideas of 'the other'. I am not on the outside looking in, analysing and compiling data about people I am not connected to. Rather, my project starts with the people and the connections between them and others. I am always part of that connection, never in the role of detached observer promulgated in the social sciences. My hope is that

this will undermine the unequal power relations, which I cannot deny or ignore, that have structured so much anthropological research.

My arts-based research reaches back to my first encounters with the community and forward to the processing and editing of visual and audio material, delving into new aesthetic and technical solutions during the mounting of the exhibition. This process highlights the way that fieldwork, theoretical research, artistic creation, and exhibition nurture each other in a constantly flowing stream of feedback and reinvention. The processes of research and creation are equally important. It is a nonlinear exchange of multiple information strands to produce knowledge that resembles one giant rhizome.

The chapters of the dissertation represent the different threads used to weave the fabric of the dissertation.

Where is San Basilio de Palenque? Voices from the community will guide the reader to the town. Through a short story I narrate how I lived part of my childhood in the magical town of Palenque, and how I heard Palenque stories while living in Cartagena. These stories were told by my mother, her historian friends and women community leaders. During my childhood, my 'aunts' were creating a method of investigation of the collective memory aimed at reconstructing lost histories. This work helped Palenque to be declared by UNESCO: Oral and Intangible Heritage of Humanity, in recognition of the richness and complexity of its traditions.

In 2013, I received an invitation to go back to the community to give a series of media workshops. It was a moment that marked my return to the community, but also and more importantly for me, the opportunity to discover different ways of knowing.

In order to contextualize my investigations in San Basilio de Palenque in relation to my artistic work, the two first chapters describe two works, *Bajareke (Adobe)* (chapter 1) and *Mala Hierba (Weeds)* (chapter 2), both created in 2014, in the early years of my Ph.D.[3] These chapters include stories that animate subsequent encounters and elaborate on the process (methodology), the

[3] I completed the HPR ethical review for my work in Palenque before starting these projects in 2014.

ethics, and connections to other thinkers or theories in their creation. *Bajareke* (Adobe) is an interactive video and sound installation that highlights how spirituality is present in everything in Palenque. It centres on the loss of traditions in the name of so-called modernity.

Mala Hierba (Weeds) formally explores the traditional hair braid designs and semiotically layered resistant knowledge of the *Cimarronaje*[4] as well as the use of medicinal plants to nourish and heal the land, the body, and the soul. Text, images and audio field recordings are featured in this installation. Visual and audio practices are used to research the history and imprints of biopolitical control. In this work, I seek to evoke ancestral memories of the land through poetry and metaphor.

These two installations shape the theoretical and visual bases for *Estera* (Chapter 3), a more complex series of works where I explore the plant-human and more-than-human relations. "*Estera (Mat 1)"* is a dual-screen super 8mm film. "*Estera (Mat 2)"* is a nonfiction online platform that gathers a series of visual and oral material into an interactive narrative. The third work "Zoom IN to the plants and Zoom OUT with the stories*",* is a three-screen video installation created in collaboration with youth and elder healers. It explores the memories of medicinal plants, most of them of African origin, that grow wild in the streets, sidewalks and patios in Palenque. And lastly "Mats in Motion*"* is a video, film and audio installation forming a sculptural space that gathers memories of the plants alongside the present-day stories of displacement and violence in Colombia.

With-Living: Migrant Co-relations, Toronto (Chapter 4) reflects on the exhibit installed in a mall in Toronto. It marked an essential point of culmination, or I could say point of beginning. It represents a different way of working in plant-human relations through plant-based research and creation explorations in which my long-term interest and ethics of working with and in communities

[4] Dr. Clara Inés Guerrero (Guerrero, 1998b), definition: Marronage appears with the first enslaved Africans who arrived in the Americas. The quest for freedom was the essential motive for the social conflicts between Africans and their descendants and the authorities and their descendants with the colonial authorities and the slave owners. The individual process of *cimarronaje* begins at the moment when rebellion settles in the heart and head of any enslaved African or Creole with sufficient force for him to make the decision, at first, to flee and, later, to rise up in rebellion with others as a collective act that becomes political. In official documentation, they are generally referred to as "cimarrones", and as "huidos y alzados", specifically, when they built palenques as an organized response to the slave system. Runaways or *huidos* were slaves who had been away from their usual places for between two and ten days, and those who had been away for more than two weeks were "cimarrones".

meet the personal and the political in constant metamorphosis. The final work explores in-depth plant-human relations through the concept of migrant co-relations following my own migration and that of plants.

I invited immigrant friends to share their reflections and stories of their interactions with plants that have been meaningful in their lives and brought them back home to Toronto. The work aims to re-narrate plants as protagonists that shape human history. Consequently, *With - living: migrant co-relations. Toronto* exhibits plants, soil, bacteria, and migration stories (and their relationship). I name all of these relations the symbio-politics of resistance, the resistance of living bodies, plants and organisms.

The piece is deeply personal, it is a funeral ritual to my mother, my main supporter in life but also collaborator in all the pieces narrated in the first chapters. This piece became a kind of *Lumbalú to* my mother.

This dissertation draws from four major sources:

- **My multimedia productions.** Hyperlinks collect multi-sensual memories and their extensions in the form of audio-visual memory. More than five years of video, photography, films, and sound material is part of this project, exploring historical and oral narratives and information that I perceive through my senses.
- **My praxis.** The thesis will offer stories of my process interwoven with the ideas/theories I connect with. These stories narrate sense-driven encounters and are interwoven with theories (notes from conversations, films, printed sources, and a bibliography referring to the different topics).
- **A dialogue rethinking multiple symbolic spaces of Palenque in the first chapters:** This text is made up of my experiences and encounters in Palenque, starting from my feeling of

Palenque today (2013-). Interwoven are the narratives from Clara Inés Guerrero,[5] which are deep storytelling's (social, cultural analysis and even films) she wrote and created about Palenque between 1980-1990. As well I will include memories of the Palenque I heard about from Guerrero and my mother and remembered from childhood. The writing of this text has opened the opportunity for a renewed dialogue with Clara Inés through short voice messages and text. A "Reconstruction of multiple symbolic spaces of Palenque*",* as she described it, is a compendium of reactions and new connections from my comments and questions. A re-relating with the place, it is both a personal and political rethinking of Palenque and plant-human and more-than-human relations, and the memories threaded throughout the complete dissertation text.

- **The personal crosses the political and the political is personal.** Following my own migration and that of plants, I develop the idea of migrant co-relations. Plants move; but also, they are moved by birds, pollinators, wind and other forces while being central in the climate in crisis; plants are moved by people, but also plants move us.

The archival and theoretical compilation has been carefully done. It is not intended to be exhaustive but rather selective. Tracking multiple sources with different interpretations is a must for any researcher. However, it is mainly based on my experience as an artist, approaching the sensory experiences with digital and analogue tools of image and sound to preserve encounters in Palenque. My process has plants and spirits as guides and allies who lead me toward different ways of knowing.

[5] Philosopher and Historian, Memorialist and writer. She belongs to the second generation of social researchers and historians that went to Palenque in the 1980s. She completed her doctoral thesis, "Palenque de San Basilio, a proposal for historical interpretation." Her work in Palenque, based on the recovery of history from the Consultation to the Collective Memory, laid the foundations for Ethno-Education and the arguments for the declaration by the UN (United Nations) of Palenque as Intangible Heritage place and culture of Humanity. Clara Inés has since nurtured radical efforts in Colombia organised by women integral to major social movements: reconciliation work with women from the conflict in Colombia.

Praxes between theory, making and creation

This dissertation is about sharing, making audible, seeable, and hearable that which has been excluded or rendered non-existent. It is a reading between the lines of my installation and media art practice. This text is a public space to explore the shifting and contradictory connections between aesthetics and politics, and to 'translate' knowledge gathered from others, using diverse multi-sensory and multimedia forms that I re-formed into academic texts.

I walk within the land, called in moments by plants to one corner of the plaza, to a sidewalk in front of Cassini's house. A sound draws me to the next block, to a house where Maria sits in her rocking chair; my friend Panama is passing by singing the news of the morning, and then three little pigs walk by with their large mom, searching until they find refuge. Such encounters internalize the full range of theory that I read, and then I engage with it, not by using a traditional academic methodology, but by ZOOMING into the sensory memory interwoven with memories implanted in the body, hearing the not-always-subtle voices of spirits and ZOOMING OUT from sources in such a way that they refuse to be normalized (contained within traditional definitions or frames of understanding) but become something else.

I describe the inner workings of a research-creation journey that revealed the dynamic roles plants and communities played in instigating a new formulation of contemporary art practice. Often, such encounters occur at the edge, where physical and aural reality meets other realms (sometimes unimaginable to us). The everyday and the unusual are intertwined here, sometimes bumping into one another to create a world ablaze with new possibilities. A border between the world we inhabit and the world that lies beyond our senses. Encounters generated through plants give us a perception of our own realities that otherwise would be impossible to grasp. Vegetal wisdom can lead us to spiritual domains that we might not otherwise be able to imagine or enter using other means. Plants can help us experience our surroundings more keenly and, as a result, access a broader realm of existence beyond our perceptions and/or consciousness. Rather than nature being something separate from the human

experience - something separate from ourselves– these encounters are an attempt to find an alignment between the things we perceive and those we don't.

Similarly, the chapter divisions are movable bridges that mark places where one set of ideas opens into another.

The chapters are organized in fragments, strata, and plateaus within a forest where the chronology of the realization of the works is a 'linear' path. It is chronological in the sense of time but also as a way to expose the fluidity of ideas and concepts, how one encounter triggers one idea while becoming the base for the next one. I invite the reader to enter and leave in their own way, following videos, hyperlinks, and the colours in the text. Choose your own path into it.

This method shows how unexpected entanglements become key to the writing of this text. Following these methods, making films, videos, writing or drawing might become parts of a complex art installation. All these parallel processes are related to my practice and are in this writing.

This text is about decolonization from within, through creative acts and artworks; it is about re-relating with ways of knowing that one is not necessarily entitled to within academic discourse and ethnographic traditions of praxis that structure the gathering of knowledge of 'others' and produce texts that conform to standards of a western European tradition.

With my research, my art practice and this dissertation, I am striving to tell stories through plants. I suggest that one can re-narrate plants as protagonists that shape human history, in a mutual shaping, *crianza mutua*[6] (mutual nurturing). Plants shape humans and humans shape plans in a kind of dialogical and reciprocal process.

[6] To expand on the idea of *Crianza Mutua* read *Mutual Nurturing* by Valiana Aguilar and Angel Ku (Aguilar & Ku, 202) (Barndt et al., 2023) *Now we use the expression "mutual nurturing" to describe the ability to learn from others' lived experiences and to allow ourselves to be mutually raised. This means learning from others in order to then continue on our path and in the struggles of our communities.*

Locating San Basilio de Palenque

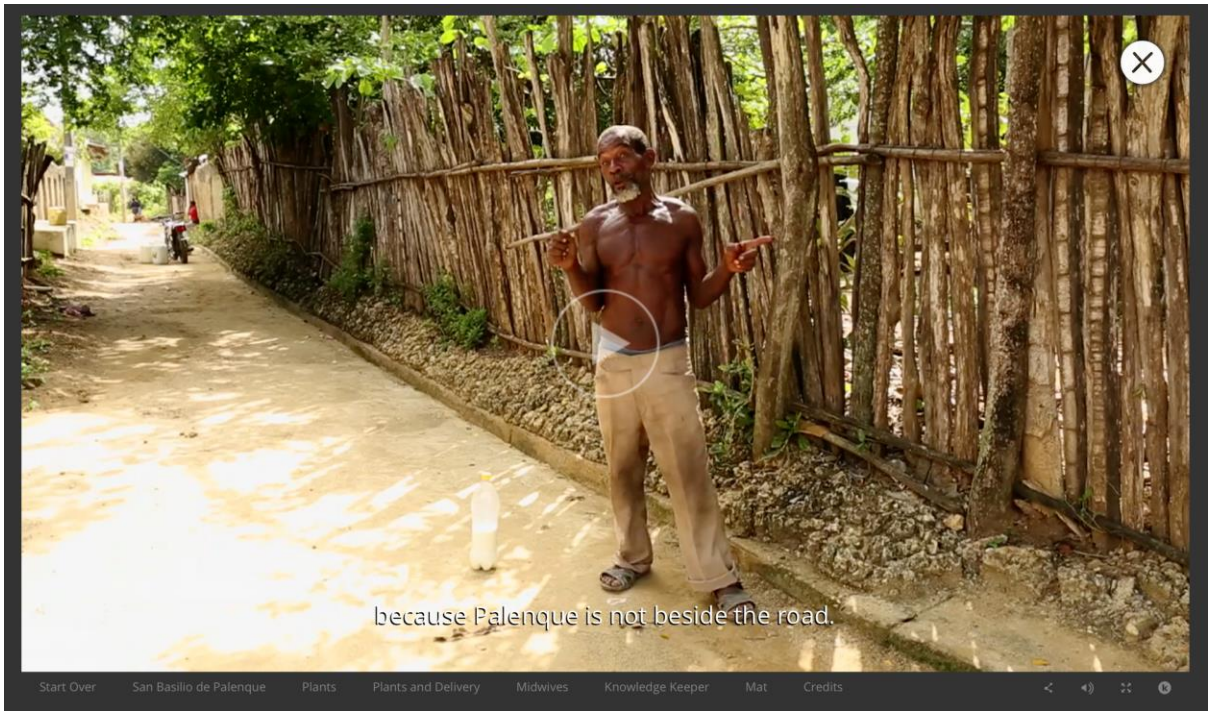
The village of Palenque de San Basilio has about 3,500 inhabitants and is located within the Caribbean region of Colombia, 40 minutes from Cartagena. Palenque de San Basilio was one of the walled communities called *palenques* (stockade or palisade), which were founded by escaped slaves as a refuge in the seventeenth century. Of the many palenques that existed in former times, only San Basilio has survived until the present day. Palenque de San Basilio has developed into a unique cultural space.

The Cultural Space of Palenque de San Basilio embodies different African roots and specific social, medical and religious practices, as well as musical and oral traditions. African knowledge and traditions are deeply rooted in daily life; some of these have even disappeared in Africa, but San Basilio de Palenque seems stuck in time. A rich syncretism of the African, the Catholic and also Indigenous traditions frames the magic-religious quality of everyday life in the community inside or outside of their territory.

In Palenque de San Basilio, a creole language, *Palenquero*, survives with linguistic roots in Ki-mbundo Ki-congo, used by Bantu groups that arrived in Colombia coming from the Congo and Angola. It is the only creole language in the Americas consisting of a lexical Spanish base with morpho-syntactic characteristics of African (Bantu) native languages. It constitutes a vital factor in reinforcing social cohesion among community members. In 2005, UNESCO proclaimed the town and their culture as Masterpiece of the Oral and Intangible Heritage of Humanity.

Travelling to San Basilio de Palenque[7]

El Barba Blanca *(Boxer,* Sixto Cabarcas Pomares)



If I am in *La Guajira,* and you ask me: where is Palenque? [8]
You take a *Brasilia* bus; it takes you to Cartagena.
From Cartagena, you take another bus; one of those that goes to Medellin.
Get off at *La Cruz del Viso*. There is a bridge that takes you to the entrance of Palenque.
(At "la Cruz del Viso" don't miss the food: arepas, fried plantains, fried pork…)
Palenque is not beside the road. You take a motorcycle for $3000 or $5000 pesos and they will take you for a 5-minute ride from the paved road to Palenque…

It is easy to go to Palenque.
Palenque is like a *Sancocho* (a traditional Colombian soup with everything on it); without yucca,[9] it is not *Sancocho,* and you can find it (visit from) everywhere you are in Colombia.

Conversation with El Barba Blanca, Palenque 2015

[7] The hyperlinks used in this section are part of estera.migratedplants.com . To activate the English subtitles, it is necessary to go and visit the online project in order, click on the word San Basilio de Palenque underneath the large image and then visit the three individual videos. (Gelis, 2016)
[8] http://estera.migratedplants.com/Medias/Videos/donde_barba.mp4
[9] As a way of saying you haven't been in Colombia if you don't visit Palenque.

Where could one go from Palenque?

***Raul Salas**, (Farmer, Cattle owner and linguist)*

You can go to [10]*San Cayetano.*
If you go for the straight road, it will take you two hours, because it has many detours. If you take *Jonás* road, it will take you one-hour walking or by horse.
To *San Pablo,* by horse, it can also take you two hours.
To *Malagana*, it can be 30 or 45 minutes.
Nearby is the *Gambote* river (pointing to the North); the hill *Toro* (pointing to the South)*;* On the other side we have the hill V*ereda* (pointing east)*;*

Conversation with Raúl Casas, Palenque 2015

[10] http://estera.migratedplants.com/Medias/Videos/palenque_raul.mp4

When Palenque was Established…
Rafael Cassiani Cassiani *(farmer and musician)*

When Benkos[11] was coming[12] this way, he reached The *Gambote* river, and he followed it. At some point, he ordered the group to stop.
*"*We, the men, will go and scout*"*. When they came back, Benkos said: "We will go upstream and the women will go on the other side*"*.
And they crossed the river, pregnant women, women with babies. Everybody. Then they rested.

When they reached *Sincerín,* the group said: *"*We can build the town here", Benkos said "NO. it is too close to the river and children will drown.
Let's go further…"

When they reached *Malagana*, at the crossroad, the group said: "Here it is*!"*
Benkos said: "NO, let's go up that hill, over there". They went up, clearing the wild vegetation; they were ahead, and the kids were behind. When they reached the portal *Bernardo Salvaroque* now called *Plan Parejo,* Benkos said "Let's rest,".

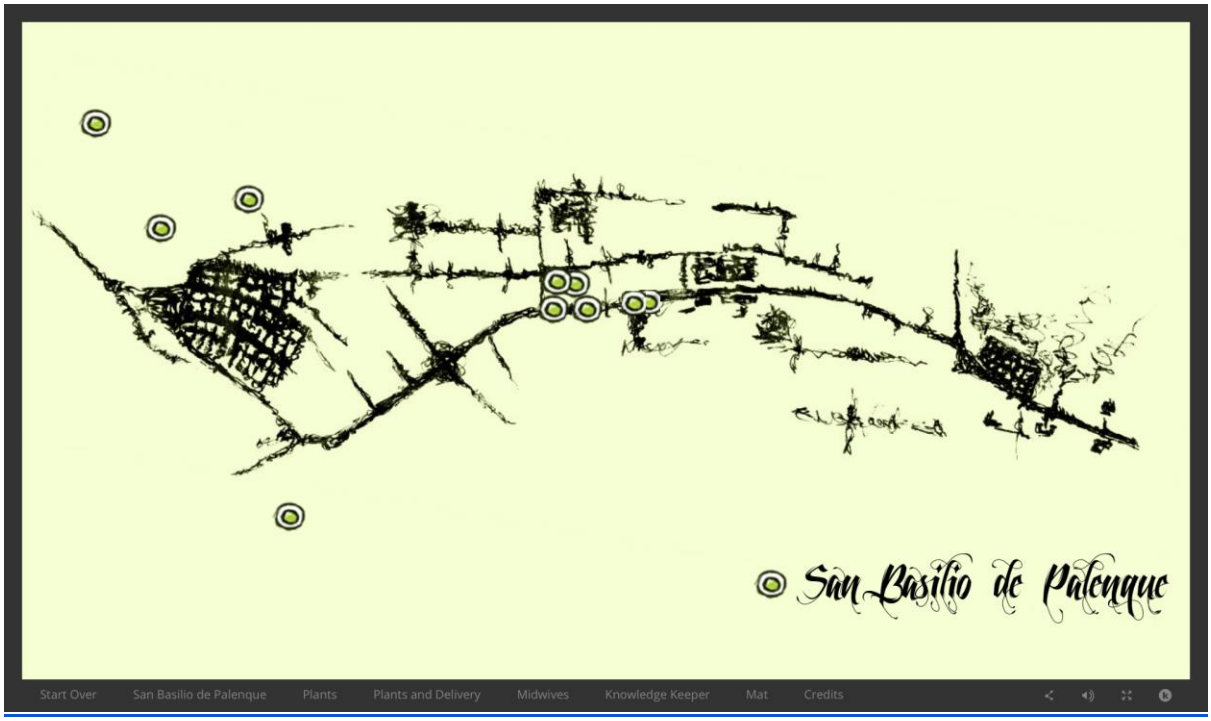
After passing the hill, he said: "Look up there; that is the right place*"*.
Because he was the leader, everybody obeyed him. They continued…

When they arrived at the square, where the statue of Benkos is nowadays, he said: "Here we can build our home*!"*.
They started clearing the land and building houses. They fenced the town with sticks (*palos*), and that is why it is called *Palenque.*

[11] In Clara Inés Guererro's words: "Benkos Bioho is remembered in the Palenquero memory as the great Maroon, the founder of palenques, the guide that leads to freedom. It is usual to find him in the stories of the grandparents, in the children's stories, in the songs and especially in the history told by the palenqueros". (Guerrero, 1998b, p. 15)
[12] http://estera.migratedplants.com/Medias/Videos/palenque_cassiani.mp4

Conversation with Rafael Cassiani, Palenque 2015

Locating[13] San Basilio de Palenque



By clicking on the circles on the map, you can activate short video clips about each place:

The Cemetery

The Church

Noni plant

Toronjil plant

Arnica

Acacia plant in front of Panamá's house

The 'plant of truth and lies'

Cassiani's Patio

Matimbá tree with Manuel

Matimbá tree with Alejandro

… going to la Bonga

[13] http://estera.migratedplants.com/#mapa

San Basilio de Palenque in Context

San Basilio de Palenque is part of Equinoctial America[14], a broader region that I have been studying for years. Starting in the sixteenth century and continuing until the mid-eighteenth century, the Americas received the single largest migration of human beings ever seen: the trade in enslaved Africans. Analysis of the number of people sold in African ports and transferred against their will to the Americas ranges from a lower threshold of 12 million up to 20 million (Sandoval, 1627; Bethell, 1970; Wallerstein, 1980; Bennassar, 1986; De la Serna, 2004).

According to the researcher Aníbal Quijano, the formation of the Americas marked the beginning of a "new global model of power": that of capitalism that was colonial/modern and Eurocentric (Quijano, 2000, p. 862). "America was constituted as the first space/time of a new model of power of global vocation, and both in this way and by it became the first identity of modernity" (Quijano, 2000, p.862). The first major differentiator between conquerors and conquered was the idea of race:

> … that is, a supposedly different biological structure that placed some in a natural situation of inferiority in relation to the others (...) The idea of race, in its modern sense, has no known history before America (...) In other words, race and racial identity were established as instruments of basic social classification of the population. (Quijano 2000, p.779)

This racial distribution of work within colonial/modern capitalism affected the lives of millions of enslaved Africans in the Americas. The colonial administration of power stripped them of their "human condition" (Arendt, 1958), determined that their "lives mattered less than others" (Butler, 2004), and reduced them to thex status of goods[15].

[14] http://migratedplants.com/text_hyperlinks/images/equinoctial_america.jpg

[15] The massive and forced displacement of people, the heart of the transatlantic trade since the early sixteenth century, came before the governmentality that Michel Foucault situated in the eighteenth century (Foucault, 1976). The transformation of the market referred to by the author (from the market as a place of justice to the market as a place of non-intervention by the state) dispenses with the precedent of the creation of America revolving around a market based on human trafficking.

San Basilio de Palenque has been a subject of many studies due to its rich history and traditions, and its importance to Afro American and to the Afro-diasporic. Several academic sources have explored various aspects of San Basilio de Palenque, shedding light on its African heritage, cultural identity, and community empowerment from many perspectives and under many methodologies (Arcos Dr. 1913; Escalante, 1954; Arrazola, 1970; Delgado, 1972; Friedemann, 1993, 1995, 2008; Friedemann & Cross, 1979; Friedemann, & Patiño, 1983; Guerrero, 1991, 1993, 1996, 1998, 2014; Maglia & Schwegler, 2012; Villegas, 2012; Jackson, 2015; Zerner, 2017; Hanchard, 2018; Brilmyer & Turits, 2018; Megenney, 2019; Cassiani, 2020; and many others). This thesis does not pretend to be a linguistic, historical or anthropological investigation, although it is the result of encounters and daily exchanges in the streets, patios and kitchens. It is Palenque through the plants, the stream, spirits, and palenqueros, and many years of learning about edible and medicinal plants, cooking, natural birth and midwives' practices and dances.

I have participated in the community's ceremonies (funeral rituals, chants, spiritual beliefs), have hosted workshops, and walked or travelled through the different regions that surround the town, the farms, the mountains and the woods. Through all these years, the encounters and intimate friendships have allowed me to feel at home, sharing time and knowledge with people who consider me part of their family. My relationship with the town goes beyond my community art or artistic practice. It is a fundamental part of my life.

Palenque is central to my artistic practice: I've been living with, loving, learning from, working in solidarity, learning the many histories of, promoting, sharing resources with, standing up with, and celebrating Palenque and Palenqueros in their constant struggle for a better life and autonomy. In my nomadic life I have carried the memories and stories, and even the plants of Palenque into my new homes in Costa Rica and Toronto, and those formative experiences continue to shape my work in Canada and in other countries I am invited to, or where plants moved me.

Chapter One:

Bajareke / Adobe

Bajareke/Adobe. Dual-Channel Interactive Video Installation. By Alexandra Gelis (2014), working with Programming: Hector Centeno.

Bajareke, video documentation[16]

Description of the video installation

Bajareke/Adobe is an interactive video and sound installation that uses analog and digital technology and programming to recreate my encounter with Matilde when she sang the *Leko*[17] to her house. I use two video projectors, an old analogue radio and an old record player to activate six videos that can be "tuned-up" and played by the viewer, using its dials.

The work shows Matilde visiting what is left of the house where she lived for 50 years, an old adobe structure with a roof made of dried-out palm trees, in other words, made from clay, earth and plants. A new housing policy in San Basilio is in effect and people are being forced to move to new brick houses. Matilde fears that she will eventually get cancer in her new brick house. For people in San

[16] https://vimeo.com/176959763

[17] *Leko*: During Lumbalú, the keening, ululating sound of women's screams fill the night, mixing with the yelps of bullfrogs. This wailing, known as Leko, is an essential part of *Lumbalú*. Some people say that *Leko* is the Palenquero way of crying. It is the vocalization of grief: grief is not hidden.

Basilio everything has an *anima*; plants, animals and houses have *anima*. In this video, she awakens the house's anima with her songs of memories, singing in order to create what they call a sound tunnel where the dead can leave the world of the living and say good-bye for the last time, with the last song.

Cuento del Encuentro (My Story of an Encounter)

These days the traces left on yellow soil roads, which were always stamped with small and large footprints, are now erased by the wheels of construction machines that leave wrinkled and uneven marks. "Modernity has come to Palenque," people would say. Similarly, they would whisper the same sentence when Pambelé[18] brought electric light to the town. Now so-called Modernity has come with a new industrial clamour and new building materials. The landscape has been transformed; the streets are filled with mountains of bricks. On each block, two or three houses have their mountain waiting. Perhaps we could name this temporary landscape: the punishment of the condemned house.

A sign of the cursed house.

The last two days, between the burial and the second night of the funeral ritual of maestro Varo (Evaristo Marquez), felt long and intense. Tonight, is the third night of the *Lumbalú*[19] and yesterday's *Leko* still reverberates within my skin. We finished the workshop[20] and all of our obligations early today in order to prepare for tonight. We left and took all the equipment back to my place with two of the young participants in the radio workshops. There was the well-known drummer, Benicio Torres as well as Yeraldine Casseres Cassiani, who dreams to do radio again, and myself.

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[18] Electric light reached Palenque in the hands of a great boxer in the 80s, not because of the state. In 1974 Antonio Cervantes "Kid Pambelé" became boxing world champion; Pambelé brought Palenque to the world's eyes, and light to the town.

[19] *Lumbalú* is a funeral rite which accompanies the anima so it can detach itself from this world, and move beyond it. The Afro-Colombian community of Palenque primarily practices ancestral traditions and worships the souls, and the rituals associated with death are, in some way, the embodiment of their spiritual beliefs and practices. For more on this topic read Schwegler (1996), Friedemann & Cross (1979), Friedemann (1983), Guerrero (1991, 1998b), and new contributions to the study of Lumbalú and its music, including the making of scores by the Palenquero musician on his thesis for a music degree in process Benkos Miranda Hernández.

[20] Workshops are collaborative meetings for exchanging knowledge, where I offer some camera knowledge and other communication tools. It is an example of what I call a ***Co-Lab*** (collaborative experiential laboratory) that will be discussed at great length later in the dissertation.

On the way, in the distance, I heard a woman singing the tone of the *Leko*. They must have started early on the third night, I thought. We were far away from the Marquez house and I could hear the sounds! We kept on walking when suddenly a Caterpillar tractor passed by in front of one of the few adobe houses still standing. I felt the impulse to pull out my camera to record it.

Why did I turn the camera on? Was it the *Leko*? Was it my sensibility or was I instructed by the *Leko*? Was it a reaction against the machine in front of the house, in a new Palenque**,** filled with construction tractors[21] moving on the unpaved roads? I turned on the camera, Yaneth stepped into the frame and an elder, a grandmother standing by, called out to me:

> Take the picture now because tomorrow you won't be able to. I am taking down the palm leaves from the roof to save them. This is my house, or what is left of my house. This is my house and it is yours, too. I am Reina Matilde Hernandez. Tomorrow it all will be on the ground; this will be its last night.

She invited me to come in her *posá* (house) and then started singing:

> When I look at it, I get so nostalgic. This is the last recording. Goodbye, my palm tree house. I don't want them to tear it down. Nieve Caceres made it for me; 50 years have gone by. I long for my house here in Palenque, my house of earth that breathes.

She continued singing to the house, walking through what used to be the bedrooms and the living room while picking more of the palm leaves.

> There is no more Guava wood in Palenque. I don't want a cement house; I want my adobe house. This is the last recording. This is the last time that I am seeing my house, the last photo. Modernity came: look, take a look at it. It's all gone now…eh…eh...eeeee!

As she continued singing, similar to the Lumbalus of the night before, I recognized the Leko. Benicio tells her, *"*it is going to hurt a lot. They are gone, the adobe houses are finished. Surely after 50 years, you must have a nostalgic hangover!!*"*

As she sang, she gathered the old palm leaves and the Guayaba wood to save them.

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[21] "Modernity is arriving in Palenque" echoed through the streets as sleek cars and machinery traversed the roads. In the upper town, an oil company conducted explorations, raising concerns among the community. Thankfully, their search yielded no findings, and they departed, leaving behind promises of reconstruction, including the church. The unfortunate truth remains that in Colombia, it is widely recognized that the discovery of oil often results in the displacement or loss of lives among the affected population.

> Anyone who comes, comes to take a portrait of the house. I'm taking down the palm because I'm getting one of the new houses. The cement houses are hot, they give you cancer, but modernity is here and the new generations want modern houses. Not palm houses, even though the wood is better and more solid. But I won't give them my kitchen of palm leaves, that I won't take down.

Cuento de Mi Práctica **(The Story of my Praxis)**

In 2013, I went to Palenque to oversee the creation of *Aloito Pio*, a community radio station I mentioned earlier. My video installation *Bajareke* started as a response to an encounter with Matilde, a woman who is one of the *cantadoras* (singers) of the *Lumbalú*[22] funeral ritual. The singing relies heavily on various percussion instruments, and the songs of death tend to be dominated by vocal performances laced with sorrow, love, and hope.

During the time of *Lumbalú*, *leko*, or wailing, fills the night.

The encounter with Matilde, the research and the creation of *Bajareke,* helped me to understand that the community's spirituality is present at every moment, in all things both human and more-than-human (including plants and spirits of nature beyond the simplistic Eurocentric concept of animism). Meeting Matilde provided me with new meaning for the *Lumbalú* ritual as she was forging personal spiritual contact with her old house. When I met her, she was awakening the house's spirit with her songs of memories, singing the *Leko* in order to create a path or sound tunnel through which the dead can pass, departing the world of the living and saying goodbye for the last time, carried by the final song in order to arrive at the world of the dead. *Bajareke* led me to understand the importance of ritual and magic as the essence of religious feeling that in Palenque is lived daily through the soul of things, of beings and their inter-relationship.

As I walked through the streets of San Basilio de Palenque between backhoe loaders and piles of bricks in front of *adobe* houses ready to be knocked down, words from a text of Koren on the description of the Wabi-sabi universe came to my mind: "Truth comes from the observation of nature." (Koren 2008, p. 24) This phrase echoes the notion that houses reflect the shape of one's

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[22] See extended definition in the hyperlink in the theoretical section of this chapter.

thoughts, memories, and dreams. I wondered how people born out of resistance to slavery respond to the loss of their traditions and how they resist colonization or modernization today, four centuries after having won their freedom. The sound of machines tearing down and building houses served as background noise, intertwining with a *Leko* that caught my attention.

My brief encounter with Matilde was 45 minutes long, during which I filmed a few videos. Following the encounter with Matilde, I became familiar with the idea of Wabi-sabi (Koran, 2008) a Japanese concept that refers to a willingness to accept the cyclical and organic processes of nature. This goes against Western ideals that emphasize progress and growth as necessary components of modern living, with nature seen merely as a resource.

The concept of material qualities in the traditional Japanese way of living (Wabi-sabi) includes the suggestion of a natural process—irregular, intimate, unpretentious, earthy, murky, and simple—as a base. The concept helped me understand the unevenness of the situation and the moment's deep level of intimacy: the unpretentious nature of Matilde's actions; her closeness to the land, the plants[23], the soil, and the earth: shadowy, deep, but also simple. As Guerrero[24] suggests how Palenque elder Don Manuel Pérez would describe it: "The earth has blood, the earth has nerves; he explains every part of the earth, our relationship with nature.*"*

Lumbalú

The complex funeral rituals and medical practices are evidence of the particular spiritual and cultural systems framing life and death in the Palenque community. In Palenque San Basilio, as in other African communities in the diaspora, death is the moment of the life cycle that has the greatest significance. In Palenque, the funerary ritual is called *Lumbalú*, where the prefix Kikongo lu, plus the Mbalu term, means 'memory, harvest, thought.' In Palenque *Baile muetto* or *Baile ri muetto* is

[23] Specifically, the palms on the roof, but also all other plants that composed the adobe material of the house, that make up a fundamental part of the wattle and daub, from its foundational structure. In retrospect, this work marks a fundamental point in my work on the plants-humans' relations; let's remember that since many of the plants in Palenque are of African origin, this adobe is very particular because it is a house made predominantly with migrated plants.

[24] Personal communication with Clara-Ines Guerrero, between 2018 to 2001.

performed for nine nights, from the first day when they bury the dead. *Lumbalú* is a way "to help the deceased to leave the world of the living peaceful and happy" (Friedmann & Patiño, 1983, p. 72), "if this is not done, the dead would not leave you in peace" (Schwegler, 1996, p. 661).

The *Lumbalú* is a collective funeral ritual in which women play a crucial role as they perform chants, specific dances, and play games around a circle. Musical expressions such as the *bullerengue sentado*, *son palenquero* or *son de negro*, and *rondas*, accompany not only funerals but many collective celebrations, such as baptisms, weddings and religious festivities as well as leisure activities.

To delve into the *Lumbalú* is to share the spirituality and the sacred memory of Palenque. The Palenquero cosmovision encompasses a unique amalgamation of spiritual practices and rituals that convey symbolic statements about social order and resistance. This syncretic fusion has thrived since the establishment of the town, drawing upon the ancestral spiritualities of Africa, the ancient mysticism of Indigenous peoples, and the enduring influence of the imposed Catholicism. The result is a profound spiritual worldview steeped in symbolism, encompassing rich meanings, intricate rituals and offerings, presence of saints and demons, and acknowledgment of ancestral origins rooted in Africa. This amalgamation finds vivid expression in the *Lumbalú*, in the holistic approach to health and disease in relation with nature, as well as in the practice of witchcraft and ethical behaviour. According to Clara Inés Guerrero:

> Freedom is in the memory of the maroons, their reason for being.
> Peace is the reason for being of the palenqueros. The African heritage of freedom is one of the most significant legacies in the history of the Americas. (Guerrero, 1998b, p. 1)

The sense of freedom is the driver and vital thread in Palenquera culture. Sacred memory and spirituality reflect the importance of this sense of freedom, which, in turn, gives way to dignity, as expressed in the ritual of death, and the knowledge to receive and accept it.

The reality of the worlds we live in, or the beyond, is neither good nor bad, in the Palenque world view. We exist in different atmospheres, parallel times and dimensions. During the *Lumbalú*,

the dead go from one dimension to another through a tunnel of sound. This passageway is created by the continuous wailing of *Lekos*, the singing of *bullerengue*, and the sound of the *pechiche* drum.

Upon hearing the chanting and drumming, the soul achieves detachment from this world. Moving out of this dimension and learning to live in another produces a restlessness that is only calmed by the safe presence of neighbours, family and other people who have already died, all of them gathered and waiting in the 'Palenque of the beyond.'

Spirituality in Palenque is complex; it is complex in form but also it has the tone of the forbidden. It embodies a syncretism that is lived and not spoken: Afro, Indigenous and Catholic spiritual knowledge that manifests in various ways through music, through Palenqueros way of moving in the town, through their funeral traditions but also through their way of playing in childhood.

Catholicism's veil imposes its silence. Spirituality in Palenque is something you don't ask for.

Alexandra: Tell me about Palenque by day and Palenque by night.

Solvay: *se dice lo que se tiene que decir y no se dice lo que no se tiene que decir*[25].

Palenque de día, una comunidad normal afrodescendiente.

Palenque de noche, está ligada a la religiosidad, a la Zanganería, a la brujería, a la sabiduría… de escuchar a los mayores para que no te suceda lo que no te debe suceder, escuchar que algunas horas no son tuyas sino de otros.

La Brujería está ligada a la sabiduría en términos de la transformación desde la oralidad, en que una persona puede ser en el día, pero no en la noche. Por la oralidad, por la ´transformación que puede suceder de doce en adelante… se puede ir volver a lugares en minutos, segundos y en horas.

(Translation of video clip above):

Solvay: What has to be said is said and what is not said is not said.

[25] https://vimeo.com/436232233/64d8c9bf8a

> Palenque in the day is a normal Afro-descendant community.
>
> Palenque at night is linked to religiosity, witchcraft (related to woman's practices), to *Zanganería* (men who practice witchcraft), and to wisdom.
>
> …Listen to the elders so that what should not happen does not happen to you; understand that some hours are not yours but belong to other beings.
>
> Witchcraft is linked to oral wisdom and transformation, in that a person can be one being in the day but not at night. Thanks to the power of the word, for the 'transformation that can happen from midnight onwards...' you can go back to places in minutes, seconds and hours.

Spirituality inhabits cultural expressions and is present in laws and regulations, rites and liturgies, philosophies and worldviews, objects, books and sacred acts. It guides the ethics of collective behaviour (Guerrero, 2014, p. 1).

This cosmovision has been considered animist[26] by academics (some use a wide definition of inclusion while others regard this as a discriminatory term (Tylor, 1958; Wagner, 1975; Hume 1976)), creating blindness on ideas of other knowledges, multispecies, multiverse and sentient beings towards possible inter-relations between places and other living beings and spirits (Mario Blaser Bird-David, 1999, Ingold, 2006; de la Cadena, 2010, 2019; Lyons, 2013; de Castro, 2015; Escobar, 2016, 2018; Whyte K, 2018; Kohn, 2013; Singh 2022 , among other).

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[26] Terms are also tools for colonialism. *Animism* is a problematic term derived from a simplistic Eurocentric point of view that tries to define ancestral traditions in which deep connections with nature coexist. Animism is a view that relies both on a telescope and a microscope, in which visions are built around western world views, leaving out everything outside of the lens. "A narrow-minded classification, when in reality we are facing practices that predate and inform the entire human species. It is from the connection with nature that living beings have learned to inhabit a living universe*". (Gelis - Guerrero (2018-2020))*
Important to note, I am referring here to the classical notion of animism from anthropological literature, where the term was used to characterize the world view of so-called primitive people. It referred to "strange people" who never grow up; animism was in fact a form of infantilism (Mbembe, 2015). There is a growing interest in revising this term, understanding that every human and more-than-human member be recognized for their existence and agency.
Mbembe also reminds us that anthropological literature, such as the work of Edward Tylor, who defined animism in the late 19th century, also implies that the so-called primitive people*, "*believed that things possessed soul and a consciousness, leading to the idea that primitive people were slaves to matter. That they had a hard time discriminating properly between living and non-living matter; persons, and things and objects, since they believe in a kind of universal animation of nature. Animism brings life to inert objects; with the belief that it's not just humans that enjoy life properties."

The acceptance of reality as that space between the beyond and the here is expressed in the daily presence of the souls in the houses. Communication with the world beyond is as natural as a dialogue with the animal and plant world; the messages are in all of nature. Everything leads to other dimensions, everything has its secret, and everything has meaning, both in the visible and invisible world.

Gilroy contends that African diasporic narratives are built on memories that cannot be expressed in Eurocentric terms: memories are stored until a means of translation can be developed (Gilroy, 1993). Perhaps it is contained in Matilde's chant of resistance for the dead, but also in the film captured and in the entire *Bajareke* project.

Aesthetic Decisions

An initial reflection that emerged during this work was on the meaning of "heritage[27]" in the West since the eighteenth century. Modernity has been associated with the destruction of the old and the exaltation of all things new. By contrast, the notion of beauty in the decay and wear of both the living and objects through time had been present in San Basilio de Palenque for many centuries. This idea became an important guide for my aesthetic and technical approaches to the installation. I was led to a mixture of digital and analog procedures and technologies and to embrace a non-linear narrative. I used an old radio and a record player, recalling a moment when these two technologies were introduced into Palenque as ambassadors of modernity. When I use the term "modern" or "modernity" I am referring to a local Palenque definition that registers "the modern" as being on "the right track" toward "progress". It implies social status, and is associated with whatever is new and trending, and is opposed to whatever is "established," "traditional" or even "classical."

For example, the invention of the record player, a "modern" device, required the accompaniment of an official historical memory, an archive carved into acetate. This ongoing project

[27] In Spanish *Patrimonio*, which has a deeper socio-historical meaning and implications..

of public memory occasioned new desires and hopes, even for street musicians in Palenque who might one day gain social and economic status by earning a recording contract[28].

Plants and food are also “recollection-objects”[29]. In the exhibition space of the installation, the audience can use the old radio to play a video that shows Matilde walking in between the walls of what was her house. Her former living room is now filled with hundreds of dry palm leaves, and she sings a song about how they were chosen, picked and dried more than fifty years ago. Her song, her house, and the plants that accompany her journey, show us what resistance is.

The aura and embodied presence of these objects might summon memories of past lives and ways of understanding, but they could also become unbearable reminders of the changes that are coming. On the other hand, the destruction of Matilde’s house and many others like hers, herald the beginning of dramatic changes in the community. My challenge as a multi-media artist is how to represent this tension.

Interactivity - images

Hansen remind us that It is not just that the interactivity of new media turns viewers into users; the image itself has become the body's process of perceiving it (Hansen, 2006). The body filters information in order to complete/create images. Images are not received as technical forms, as pure aesthetics or technical representations of “reality.” Images are co-created with an observer’s affect, sensations, and memory. And these embodied responses are a way of touching the body of the image, produced by a camera person, who is kneeling or craning, running or standing still. The camera person’s memory and intuitions are also part of the image; the image arrives from both sides of the camera. And it can invite viewers to become part of this back and forth, in order to co-create. In my

[28] San Basilio de Palenque is an iconic town in the music production of Afro-Colombian music, and once a year is the celebration of the *International drum festival,* which brings important musicians from different parts of the African continent.

[29] According to Laura Marks: "Recollection-objects become part of the mise-en-scene, where they appear as mute witnesses to a character's history" (Marks, 2007, p. 81).

installation work, I wanted to create a place where a stranger's body could move, interact, touch and be touched. It is the body of the viewer that animates each image. The images are not 'already there,' endlessly playing on a loop, they need to be called by their spectators. They need to be needed. To be in relation with the viewer.

As a result of some of this questioning, *Bajareke* appears as a video installation. The strategic decision to use the old radio and a record player is meant to reference my work supporting my colleagues and friends in the community to organize a community radio station. It also offers a comment on the apparent contradiction of maintaining old traditions in conversation with new technologies. The need for Palenque to have a radio station and my personal need to create this interactive piece with them is a way of recognizing the importance of being both heard and seen in communities that have historically been marginalized.

The search for the alchemical adobe house, for the singing, for the funeral wailing, is inseparable from my search through the camera, at the highest tension of the spiritual[30].

I recorded a series of short videos, some of Matilde singing to the house, others of her guiding me through what was left of the house. The series of short videos can recreate, not the complete and "real" event, but at least my fragmented version of it, by reaching into the discursive layers in which the encounter took place and then was recorded.

[30] Questions of form cannot be separated from the political conditions in which works are produced, its aesthetic, poetics and politics.

Esto me da mucho guayabo porque mi esposo me la hizo[31]*. Esta es la última foto. Mi esposo me hizo esta casa…Esta es la última foto.*

(Translation of video clip above):

This gives me a lot of grief because my husband made it for me. This is the last picture. My husband made this house for me… This is the last picture of it.

I approached Matilde at her invitation to enter the house with my camera. The videos remain as an archive of that encounter. I use the word archive in an expanded definition that goes further than the one typically used to describe European archives that tend to centralize the present, past and future of our human and other-than-human world within a narrow perspective. I am recalling Mbembe's idea of the importance of expanding the archive, creating an archive of the world at large, with an expanded critical reading that requires dialogue between various views and archives (Mbembe, 2015).

[31] https://vimeo.com/586447555/04492cb6c0

An audio-visual archive can offer a meaningful record of cultural knowledge in the temporal movement of history. It moves back and forth in time, ventilating changing memories and histories as an alternative to the erasure, silence, and amnesia of official archives. The amnesia of official archives, along with the biases and narrow voices of anthropologists, published academic papers, and ethnographic studies, has become a fundamental part of the community's self-definition discourse. Through my audio-visual material, I intend to dismantle the official record of the community and then search for ways to reconstitute different readings, sometimes through fiction, recalling myths, or rituals. In the case of *Bajareke*, it is an encounter with a personal ritual that opens up complex strata of stories, like the way adobe is used as a primary construction material. What else is written in these visual materials of the house?

One of the shots of the installation shows[32] the absence of the house, though it is an absence that calls out to its former life and marks its outlines. Even though the smells and textures of this place may be unfamiliar to many viewers, the film encourages us to engage with them. Viewers who themselves have lived in a palm house and have smelled the mud of the adobe will have a sensual experience engaging with the sensuous memories summoned by the film. The audio-visual medium becomes solely a means of access to an ultimately synesthetic or multisensory experience.

[32] https://vimeo.com/586449524/5103724271

> "History is inseparable from the earth *[terre],* struggle is underground *[sous terre],* and, If we want to grasp an event we must not show it," Deleuze says. "We must not pass along the event, but plunge into it, go through all the geological layers that are its internal history (and not simply a more or less distant past)." (Deleuze et al., 1989, p. 254-255)

The strata of history that has built up comes not just from the layers of soil mixed with plants and organic animal material, but also with the layers of stories that compose the body, that form the song and the singing, the senses.

Walking through the ruins of the house, I recorded for an hour looking for ghosts in the layers. "To grasp an event is to connect it to the silent layer of the earth that constitutes its true continuity" (Deleuze et al., 1989, p. 261).

There are no stories in these short videos, only ghosts of stories.

With my camera, I was looking for something less evidently visible, something that doesn't necessarily manifest itself. I filmed exclusively with a hand-held camera with an open wide angle first following Matilde's invitation to go into the house and her world, in her dwelling. With the rhythm of her voice I record her walking, singing and talking to the gentleman that was helping her. I finished our encounter with wide-angle shots of the remains of the house, capturing the pink walls and the Guava structural piece that once held the roof. I used a tripod, to have stability while opening space to the strata and spirit of the moment, to avoid erasing with my body vibration the subtle phenomena of the spirits of the place. I captured some shots of the house and the surroundings from different angles.

As I see it, the act of filming it is an act of becoming, dissolving the individual human into an event and finding form within the situated moment.

> *Una madera tan buena, aquí no hay una madera de Guayabo. Aquí en Palenque no se encuentra una madera de Guayabo… Adiós la casa de palma, adiós, mamá…* *Adios la casa de palma*[33]*, se acabo*
>
> (Translation of video clip above):
> Such a good wood; this is not Guayabo wood. Here in Palenque there is no Guayabo wood... Goodbye to the palm house, goodbye mom... Goodbye to the palm house; it's all over.

Next day[34], when I returned to the area, I noticed a couple of young people cleaning the house. I went in with my tripod and recorded them gathering the old palm leaves as they were inserted into a

[33] https://vimeo.com/586448399/5c02889a7e
[34] https://vimeo.com/587629543/74fde9e6aa

metal rod for easy transport. They had a very different relationship with the plant (palm leaves) than Matilde. The young woman was sweeping the floor. Matilde wasn't there. It felt like a different place!!

Nine days after the first meeting with Matilde, I went back to the house. Perhaps the visit was driven by the nine-night-long funeral ritual of the Lumbalu? I start shooting (with camera on a tripod) the empty space where the house was, next to the pile of bricks; in the back you can see the kitchen with a palm roof that survived. Three young people pass by and look at me with astonished faces as if to ask what am I recording in the emptiness?

I felt the need to record that blank space at such a close proximity[35]. I started to zoom in, searching among the layers of earth and pieces of old palms. The camera's focus is on a piece of adobe[36] that shows the layers of colour of the house: pink, white, and yellow, as the house tells us its moments. Suddenly, Matilde walks in, she comes out of the plants, crosses the camera frame and looks at me for a few seconds which seems like an eternity.

This was the last time I saw her. The following year I went back to visit her at the new house. I wanted to show her what I had edited and the idea of the installation. I wanted to ask for her approval

[35] https://vimeo.com/586449121/29685e1277
[36] That is alive and breathes.

and see if she might suggest changes. Instead, I received the sad news that she had died a few months after the house was knocked down.

In the final installation, six videos are activated frame-by-frame when radio knobs are moved. There is no linear narrative, but rather one dictated by the decision of the viewer as they play the videos. The past is not something that can be kept in order or in place, even though there was a logic to my editing of the video and the design of the installation space. In the first video, Matilde sings *Leko* to her house as she dances and bids farewell to the soul of the house, to the soul of the old palms of the roof and the hard guava wood that can no longer be obtained in the village. A second video shows a Caterpillar[37] backhoe loader passing in front of the house, roofless and doorless, while a young couple talks and flirts. The third video shows a frontal view of the house, with a pile of bricks on one side announcing the arrival of new houses; the structure has neither a palm roof nor doors. A second scene shows only the walls, and the final scene shows the empty lot where the house used to be. A final video is made from a low angle, close to the ground, providing a close-up and focuses on the *Bajareke* debris. This close-up reveals the history of building materials, the plant fibres, and mud mixed with cow manure. In the background, out of focus, we see Matilde walking from behind in slow motion. She walks out from the bushes of her yard, turns around, and, staring at the *Bajareke*, she again turns her back to the viewer, once again facing her bushes. Here is Matilde, walking backward in order to go forward, so she can look behind and see where she has been. Matilde refuses to "move forward." Instead, she walks backward and very nearly retraces her steps, reminiscent of when the dead are carried in a coffin to the cemetery with their feet in front. In the procession to the cemetery, all of the twists and turns necessary to position the dead with their feet outward are performed, thus preventing them from returning home and losing their way in the afterlife. This idea was shared by the gentleman Tibe with the researcher Clara Inés Guerrero, who in turn shared it with me after seeing my work. This is a good moment to remember that the *Lumbalú* is performed to “help the deceased to leave the world of the living peaceful and happy" (Friedemann & Roselli, 1983, p.71) the ritual must

[37] Yellow machine that has become part of the Palenquero landscape in recent years

be fully performed because "if this is not done, the dead would not leave you in peace" (Schwegler, 1996, p. 78).

To the spinning of an old record player, Matilde continues singing, bringing back reminiscences of her old palm house as if the house had a soul like the soul of her husband, who built her the house 50 years ago. She bids farewell to their traditions and resigns herself to what "modernity" is bringing. The speed of Matilde's song changes as the speed of the turntable varies, evoking the analogue era of large radios and wooden turntables that inhabited the old house. Matilde herself moves to the real-time distortions produced by the slow 15 rpm to the fast 45 rpm turning around time and memories.

Perhaps what is most compelling about the house, and is reflected in the chanting of Matilde, are the relationships among humans, more-than-humans, and other actors that permeate and haunt the adobe walls of this spectacular ruin.

What is *Lumbalú,* and the relationship between the singing, the *Leko,* the spirit, the houses, the palm, and the *Guayabo* wood from the Guava hard trees? How does one interact with them? The ritual draws on other ways of knowing, ways that drive us to not always comfortable places. In this process, it is important to not-know, to not understand, to not think even, but to feel. It is a call to re-relate with different ways of being; this is part of decolonizing knowledge, it is about the redistribution of different kinds of knowledge. Ngugi wa Thiong'o reminds us it means developing a perspective that allows us to see ourselves clearly, in relationship to ourselves as well as to other-selves in the universe, non-humans included (Thiong'o, 1986, p. 87).

Revisiting seven years later

The advent of the phonograph and radio marked a new era in Palenque's spatial reformation. Architectural design radically shifted, producing drastic changes in the relationships between its inhabitants. As I write this analysis, seven years have passed, and fewer people are gathering in their newly built houses owing at least in part to designs which were never made in accordance with the

community's daily activities. As a result of these constructions, designed with materials that do not effectively protect against the high temperatures and that refuse the use of the community's traditional materials, Palenque has a high number of elderly people who are in poor health, constituting the first population of high blood pressure sufferers.

The new houses are too hot; they were not designed for the heat in Palenque[38]. Matilde already knew this, so she accepted the new brick house without losing her patio and her open kitchen with a cool palm roof, which is, in fact, the heart of the house. Matilde's feelings about her house are an example of how collective memory changes and is shaped by a moment of encounter, by the dreams of an individual[39]. There is a continual loop that runs from the collective memory to the individual and then back again to the collective. The collective story, created out of elements held in common, is altered by an individual's singular experience. In my work, I wanted to draw from a deeply personal account in order to summon a shared memory.

As modernity upends the town, building the walls of houses with hot bricks and carving out holes for a non-functioning aqueduct, the words of the elderly who remember the importance of traditions become timely. Guerrero (personal interview, 2015) quotes Chainés:

> Land should not be paved because then it has no way to breathe. If the land cannot breathe, its heat will make us sick. The pavement must not be allowed; use rocks instead. Don't take that away from the land; don't close the houses because the heat will kill us and make us sick. It becomes a health problem.

This world view is about relationships and ways of being where every "thing" (including non-humans, humans, and the land) is a living entity; it is also how one relates to the world through multiple ways of knowing. For example, the palm leaves of a house become a roof of memories. Solvay (Gelis A. & Cáceres C. 2018) shared a story that reveals these ways of knowing:

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[38] The promise of modernity that arrived in Palenque in 2005 (paradoxically, a date that coincides with the town's declaration as Intangible Heritage of Humanity by UNESCO) has rapidly shown many problematic aspects of cultural and structural conservation, that risk losing the cherished status of Intangible Heritage of Humanity. The architectural component is crucial.

39 The process is cyclical in nature: the collective memory influences individuals, who, in turn, contribute to the shaping and reshaping of the collective memory through their personal experiences and perspectives. Moreover, individual dreams, particularly those inspired by heroic aspirations, return to the collective consciousness. Individual dreams of heroes are significant and influential in shaping the character and direction of the community at different points in time.

The old palms, the roofs of our memories

Las viejas palmas en los techos de nuestros recuerdos

> *Y si unas amigas persiguen al amigo por que se ha casado con una mujer que ellas no querían, no lo dejan dormir. …Y las palmas del techo sonaban como que se movían y movían en la noche, pero nadie entraba, esas eran mujeres queriendo perturbar nuestro sueño.* (Gelis A. & Cáceres C. 2018).
>
> Roughly translated: If a woman wants to get back at a man who has married a woman they don't like, they use witchcraft. The palm leaves of the roof move all night, disturbing the sleep of the couple, but there is no one there.

The Palenquero cosmovision includes a holistic way of thinking about 'land' in which "land" represents all of nature, and all relations are imbued with spirituality. Nature is conceived of as a vital space, not a source of wealth. Farmers, especially the older ones, plan their cultivation guided by moon cycles. Inputs and fertilizers have to be natural to avoid damage to the earth's soil, which is irreparable. Plants, as Kimmerer (2013) reminds us, transform light and provide food and medicine. There is a clear balance between land, the non-human and humans. Hence, medicine and agriculture are governed by the same embodied understandings of magical knowledge.

> Colonialism has been deeply harmful, not only to communities but also to the more-than-human. By removing Indigenous peoples from their territories — and thus, from their embedded relationships to place and to the other living beings of that place — colonial powers could then commodify land as property, and frame living beings as "natural resources" to be exploited. (Jimmy, E., & Andreotti, V. 2019. p. 88)

What happened to social groups that relied on deep relationships with the land-as-a-living-entity when they became uprooted by the power dynamics of colonialism?

Matilde's house became a place where collective memories could be summoned and gathered. But it is also a site of contestation and transition, as it could signal individual dreams of prosperity and greater social recognition or status. In this sense, Bachelard says that the "house is a privileged entity for a phenomenological analysis of the intimate values of a culture" (Bachelard, 1994, p. 3). Houses reflect

but also gather the shape of one's thoughts, memories, and dreams and its complexities. From the collective into the individual and back in a cycle of remembrance and desire.

The house in Palenque contains and reflects the Palenquero sentiment and way of being based on profound relationships with the earth, the environment, the spirits, and with the more-than-humans. The house is founded both in matter and spirit, it is an expression of the material and spiritual, a demonstration of the inseparable correlation between plants, humans and the spiritual realm.

Each aspect of the construction of the house recalls smells, colours, textures, plants, animals, waters, soil, mud, air, spirits, ancestors, and extended connections into various ways of knowing. The house doesn't just contain memories; it embodies memories.

The house recalls impressions that constantly remake the site. Memory is constantly reshaping, it reactivates connections between different parts that were active at some time, opening the ability to learn from the past.[40] The process of kneading mud for the walls, either in the stream or in the vicinity of the ranch, carries the essence, knowledge and complexity of each of these spaces. Transformation is not accomplished by tentative wading at the edge. The soil mixed with water and herb roots, branches or different plants creates a web in a reciprocal process to hold THE HOUSE. The soil will still be alive while being part of the house, and will also be a place for ants and other insects. Each living element brings life to one another. Kimmerer (2013, p. 399) reminds us that dead bodies, including the ancestors, build soil and so perpetuate the nutrient cycle that propels the living. Collecting the branches at specific times of the day to ensure strong and healthy wood is a ritual of respect and a petition to the plant, the animals, and the air around it. And thus, with the help of the different plants and their spirits, the walls of the new home are formed. When cutting the palm to cover the roof, permission is asked to ensure the branches provide good shelter and protection for many years.

[40] I recall Nikolay Kukushkin, a neuroscientist who stated, "A typical memory is really just a reactivation of connections between different parts of your brain that were active at some previous time" (Stockton, 2017, para. 3).

In order to understand the resilience of plants-humans and other-than-human assemblages, it is important to understand them as complex systems in which knowledge is stored and distributed while capable of self-generation, memory, and agency. The importance of this dialogue is key to the expansion of the field of architectural animism, which according to gardener and architect Eric Guibert "conceives of places—ecosystems—as beings with agency that we garden with to nurture and express their resilience. It is a useful ontology for ecological practice; this architectural animism is ontopolitical; it co-creates a common world" (Guibert, 2021, p.1). Perhaps it is a form of architectural animism that I felt in the breath of Matilde's *Bajareke* house that finally departed during her ceremony. The joint resilience of both, that had lived together for so long. Now it was time for a joint funeral ritual.

Plant-human relations inform my thinking about how the house itself performs cultural memory; an assemblage of collective and individual memories. The adobe house and palm roof architecture stand in stark contrast to the concrete-block construction that were introduced, along with dreams of permanence and modernity. Immersing oneself in the plant materials offered an entry point to learn more about the region and its material culture(s).

Every part of the house has the potential to reroute the relative strengths of all those connections. There is no one place or part of the house where memories are stored. In this respect, it functions like the brain with its shape-shifting plasticity. Memory is the system itself, in this case, it is the house itself.

The distribution of rooms in the house is built upon ancestral memory. The kitchen as the centre of the family and social dynamics is in the courtyard, where life takes place, where the food is cooked. It is a highly respected place where advice is given and listened to; grandfather and grandmothers talk, and gossip is shared. Stories are told remembering ancestors that include fresh memories of shared lived moments. *Historias de camino,* or tales of the path and of the stream, are told and retold, refreshed with recent personal adventures in a constant mix with the adventures of the Great marron Benkos Bioho and their stories of freedom.

The kitchen in the *Patio (*courtyard) is where the most important decisions are taken. Visitors are received, lunch is served and they eat in the hammock. The most necessary medicinal plants for the day are cultivated on the patio.

Ancestral love that becomes medicine infuses this space. Family members who are sick from mental health problems get cured in the *Patio*, not sent to a mental hospital. Clare Inés Guerrero reminds us in her short story "Palenque is a town where the mad are loved" (Guerrero,1996, p. 183-186), the insane are cured at home with love, curing an ancestral trauma. The sick family member is tied to a central tree in the *Patio*. They are fed and receive the love of the whole family, which gathers around them all the time; they are never alone, while the large tree supports and shelters him. The treatment of madness is engraved in the memory of Palenque in the customs and uses of traditional medicine grounded in relationships with plants

> For any Palenquero, life in the open air is fundamental; the open spaces, the patios, the street, the stream, the kitchen, and the terrace are the axes of their social relations and collective life. A closed room is not the most propitious space for healing the spirit. The enclosure is not suitable for people who have forgotten their reason for living in their freedom. The Palenques were formed as autonomous territories within the colonial administration, their autonomy a condition for existing in order to be known as free. This was in fact a way of accepting the condition of being a person, in general, with the right to organize and live as a human being. Perhaps in this characteristic, we can find Palenquero's tendency to live and heal in open spaces. Very few illnesses are cured in dormitories. (Guerrero, 1996, p.183)

Nowadays, it is common to have a kitchen inside the house after the main room, but it is used as an auxiliary. The real kitchen is still in the courtyard, a large kitchen to spend a lot of time together under the cool shade of the palm roof. The central space continues to be the patio, where the spirits talk to the living on the last night of Lumbalú when the sun meets the moon.

Bachelard (1994) describes the reading of images as “reverberating phenomenologically.” We cannot consider the house as an object, as phenomenologists look at the original shell even in the fortified complex castles, in which mysterious passages run under their walls. One can say that inanimate things take on a certain life when they are named: House, Mount, or Tree, wrote Uriel Cassiani Perez (Cassiani, 2020) as part of a collection of Palenqueros texts. He was writing about the deep need to name, which is also a question of knowing, and listening.

What name is already there, calling? What other voices need to be heard?

What name is already there, calling? What plants need to be heard?

This chapter establishes the animistic worldview of San Basilio de Palenque, understanding plants as living beings with agency, and of plant-human relations.

We move from *Bajareke* to *Mala Hierba*, a plant that indeed needs to be heard. But first, an interlude to reflect on the history and meaning of the movement of plants and power, a core thread thoughout this dissertation. It's important to locate my research within the context of the development of western science and notions of race, central to colonization and empire.

Plants and Power - Basilio de San Palenque

Migrant Plants move, they move memories, they transform and re-create land, and they move people, while they are themselves being moved around.[41]

Migrated Plants

Plants move, yes, but nothing acts alone, so how and with what other kinds of entities does a plant move?[42]

'Migrated plants' is the term I use to designate the transfer of seeds from their native environment to another, either by natural action (wind, water, animals) or by human intervention. Linked to the beginning of the history of humanity itself, this process occurred in Africa and Asia, where hunter-gatherer groups faced heavy rainy seasons and droughts. Moving to another region was often the only way to survive. We know from archaeological studies (Price & Gebauer, 1995; Trigger, 2003) that seasonal nomadism depended in part on a group's ability to domesticate plants. Thus, these

[41]Reflection on Migrant plants inspired on Line Marie Thorsen first lines of the introductory text for book an exhibition Moving plants. *Plants move, they move other things, they move people, and they are themselves being* moved around. (Thorsen et al., 2017, p. 12).

[42] Tsing asks while discussing the movement of the Itadori plant in Koichi Watanaba work (Thorsen et al., 2017).

early humans likely took with them the seeds that helped them make it to the next season. 25,000 years later, Neolithic farmers moved into Europe, [carrying] with them their crops, their livestock, and Middle Eastern weeds (Crosby, 1986, p. 150). The adaptation of seeds to diverse climates and soils, the intermixing that they underwent, and the determination of which plants grow best next to each other was a long and uncertain process whose surviving document is the very existence of the migrated plants.

While the category of migrated plants is broad and applies to all that have been moved from their 'native' environment[43], some of these plants go on to be further divided into 'crops' or 'weeds', depending on the socio-historical context. The dividing line between the two may be biological, but it is also cultural. This fine line separating one from the other is constantly redefined within communities.

For example, the case of migrated plants in San Basilio de Palenque, the context of the first sections of my field research, is a specific instance where it is possible to establish the proximity or

[43] "Since the 1990s a number of social scientists have linked native plant advocacy to anti-immigrant 'nativism'. We believe this to be a fundamentally misconstrued analogy and propose a different approach. Specifically, we rethink native plants as a discursive field (Foucault, 1976) in which multiple practices surrounding native plants, nativism in politics, and what we term 'botanical cosmopolitanism' can be understood within the same historically constituted frame of analysis. Rethinking native plants as a discursive field invites work at the margins of other investigations of colonialism, to see the complex and often unmarked ways that plants have been sorted out as 'native' or 'nonnative', what such a project of differentiation has meant, and the forms of power to which those practices have been linked. This approach allows us to make our broader call for 'botanical decolonization'." (Mastnak, Elyachar, & Boellstorff, 2014, p. 363).

"A settler colonialist dynamic of planting and displanting shaped the frameworks through which our contemporary notion of native plants is thought and enacted. It is only by disremembering this history that 'native plants' can be conflated with anti-immigrant nativism. The colonizing act of 'planting in' people and plants constituted a fateful distinction between the 'planted' and the 'native'. An example from southern Ontario would be the native pawpaw being displaced by the introduced apple. 'Planting in' plants meant cultivating them. Native plants, by implication, were uncultivated. In the imperial imaginary this distinction between cultivated and native plants was isomorphic with people as well. For example, Thomas Macaulay— an 'architect' of imperial Britain (Hall, 2012)—maintained that Indian "natives" were far behind the English in "intellectual cultivation" (Macaulay, 1866, page 269). "Nature", like the uncultivated native, was to be dominated by "culture". Such a "government of nature" found its metropolitan manifestation in botanic gardens. In botanic gardens, species collected overseas for scientific reasons could find their way to the metropole, for aesthetic and ideological benefit. In plantations, many of those same species fared ill; they were neither an object of scientific interest nor aesthetically pleasing badges of conquest. They were simply in the way of settlements and settlers' needs. Not planted, they became 'natives' and, as such, shared the fate of native peoples: they were deplanted" (Mastnak, Elyachar, & Boellstorff, 2014, p. 367).

blurred boundaries between "crops" and "weeds,"[44] as well as the presence of migrated plants as PTCT: Population and Territorial Control Technology. Plants that have been appropriated as Technologies for Territorial and Population Control.

The criterion of race, legitimizing the new model of global power in the sixteenth century, predicted a new order that would apply to another form of life that was not human– flora–and it would be introduced by modern botany starting in the eighteenth century:

> Eighteenth-century Europeans defined botany as "that branch of natural history that distinguishes the uses, characters, classes, orders, genera, and species of plants" and the botanist as an "enquirer into the nature and properties of vegetables [who] ought to direct his [sic] view principally towards the investigation of useful qualities" (Schiebinger, 2004, p. 6).

Botany was born with the purpose of identifying the "true nature" of plants. According to Linnaeus,[45] modern botany emerged in the seventeenth century thanks to the discoveries[46] of the sexual nature of plants by Camerarius, et al. (1899) and Sébastien Vaillant (1728). "Linnaeus' own use of the sexuality of plants to establish a new system of plant classification started in 1737" (Sigrist & Widmer, 2012, p. 6).

Two classifying orders, race and modern botany, together defined during a span of two centuries that some human lives were more valuable than others and that certain plants mattered more than others. Both classification systems produced hierarchies, placing "slaves" and "weeds" at the bottom of the pyramid, analogues in the living world[47].

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[44] http://migratedplants.com/text_hyperlinks/images/weeds_seeds.mp4
[45] Carl Linnaeus (1707-1778), considered the father of modern botany
[46] John Greyson's film *Proteus* (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=U-LOw6hc6h4) shows how the two classifications – of humans and of plants were interrelated
[47] This reflection was made by the art historian Paola Camargo González, who was my collaborator in fieldwork in 2013 and 2014 and who wrote a short text discussing my work entitled *Estera,* see chapter three with the same name.

> Botany does not deal with things that change with time or place, but with organisms that are imagined to be perennial and stable: that is, with fixed abstract forms that can be transformed into data. In this sense, Linnaean botany has nothing to do with biology. It is a form of biopolitics, and the only thing that matters in what we might call "imperial biopower" is how to turn diversity, local variation, and *qualia* into data (Lafuente & Valverde, 2004, p. 145).

Botany is directly linked to the topic of imperial biopower, which has been extensively studied (Gadgil. & Guha, 1995; Nieto, 2000; Pollan, 2001; Carney, 2001; Schiebinger, 2004; Lafuente & Valverde, 2004; Schiebinger & Swan, 2007; Beinart & Hughes, 2007; Carney & Rosomoff, 2011). In particular, Alfred Crosby argues that the presence of 'weeds' imported to the Americas is a result of the arrival of the Spanish colonizers beginning in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries. In his view, colonization was successful thanks to a virus (which decimated the population) and bovine animals (which ate the small native plants, clearing out an area), followed by the arrival of new weeds that quickly dispersed in such territories, as another form of invasion. However, he also speaks to the difficulty of ascertaining more about plants and weeds in this period. On the one hand, the conquerors were occupied in the search for gold for the crown and for themselves, and on the other, chroniclers who travelled with Cortés rarely noticed the presence of weeds or plants in general (Crosby, 1986). This perspective considers the colonists and explorers as active subjects in the movement of plants and seeds to the Americas, but it fails to ascribe agency to the enslaved peoples. My research starts with the hypothesis that the African population brought to the Americas as slaves transported seeds in their hair[48].

Migrated Plants and Empire

A comprehensive look at the literature on migrated plants and empire from the sixteenth century on reveals at least three schools of thought. The first privileges the role of the colonist in the transport of plants from Europe to the Americas: mainly European and Asian plants, both crops and weeds, which helped transform the territory (Crosby, 1972, 1986; Bourguet et al. 2001; MacLeod & Rehbock, 1988; Spary, 2000). A second privileges the role of the botanist, the scientist, and the illustrator in the

[48] The topic of the transport of seeds in their hair is addressed in the section "Moving seeds in their hair" of Chapter three Mala Hierba.

discovery and transfer of American plants to Europe (most of them drawn): the colonizers sent botanical expeditions to the Americas to bring back treasures from the "new world" (Frías Nuñez,1994; Gascoigne, 1998; Drayton, 2000; Regourd, 2000; Lafuente & Valverde, 2004; Nieto, 2000, 2013; Bleichmar, 2006, 2009). A third privileges the role of African people living in slavery and slaveholders as transporters of crops and medicinal plants to the Americas (Voeks & Rashford, 2013; Carney, 2001, 2013; Carney & Rosomoff, 2011; Gelis, 2014). Of these schools of thought, the first two[49] privilege the presence and voice of the colonizer or officials of the Empire, not only as victors, in terms of expansion and territorial or epistemological dominance, but, in the case of this study, as people who granted themselves power over the living realm. The third, however, is an alternative path that proposes the rescue of powers of agency and resistance in historically invisibilized subjects. My research follows this approach, which allows me to expand and problematize the relationship between plants and empire and plants as 'political allies' in the Americas. With this perspective, the voices and seeds of resistance may be included, as well as the question: What did the presence of migrant plants following the Spanish and Portuguese invasions imply in sixteenth-century Equinoctial America?

As previously mentioned, the migration of plants in Equinoctial America starting with the Spanish invasion in the sixteenth century is related to the biopolitics of the Empire. In addition to the obvious interest in commercializing plants via the implementation of monocultures (e.g. cane sugar from South Asia in Cuba, which radically transformed the landscape of the island), small plants holding little to no commercial interest managed to make their way from Africa and Asia to the "new continent." As part of the objectives of the Spanish Crown in the eighteenth century, the botanical expeditions sent to the Americas were responsible for cataloguing and making an inventory of the newly discovered flora. In this regard, it bears mentioning that "science and empire are cause and

[49] These analyses rarely include study of the voices of people living in subjugation, because, as stated by Walter Benjamin, history is written by the victors, and above all because the survival of their ancestral knowledge is undervalued even now. This is not to be seen as minor. Modern science and anthropology have constructed a power-knowledge that reduces African and indigenous knowledge of plants to the realm of the magic-religious. Each empire constructs an episteme, a worldview that legitimizes its place of domination; at the same time, each empire operates under the logic of acculturation, granting itself the power to remove and eliminate other epistemes to impose its own.

effect of one another: they are not identical; each determines and each is defined by the other" (Lafuente & Valverde, 2004). This is the dialectical relationship that I am establishing throughout my research.

One of the consequences of the Empire in the Americas is directly related to the production of a system of organization of nature, especially flora, which produced a hierarchy between plants. This is what Michael Pollan (2001) calls "grammar," which establishes which plants are productive and which are not, depending more on the whims of human beings than on the plants themselves. According to Pollan, "domesticated species" have managed to co-evolve with humans for thousands of years, as in the example of the perfect apple of our modern era shaped by the human desire for sweetness. Might it be possible to one day include the 'non-productive' plants and ill-named weeds in the category of *Desired Plants*?

Plants Transforming the Land - Knowledge of Plants and Power

Before the Spanish and Portuguese invasions of the fifteenth century, the Americas were a territory inhabited by hundreds of indigenous communities that possessed ancient knowledge of plants and the territory. During the sixteenth century, the colonists interested in medicine and amateur surgeons who came to the Americas learned about healing from the indigenous shamans and traditional knowledge holders. As reported by de Micheli-Serra (2001), there is documentation of the continued use of native medicinal plants by European doctors in sixteenth-century New Spain[50]. These plants and elixirs were soon exported to Spain from Peru, Mexico, and New Granada for the treatment of diseases such as syphilis. The colonisers' process of learning about indigenous medicinal knowledge in the sixteenth century took a drastic turn in the seventeenth century. With the increase of Africans, in conditions of slavery, arriving in the Americas, a new episteme of plants was added to the

[50] New Spain consisted of present-day Mexico, in addition to the present U.S. states of California, Nevada, Colorado, Utah, New Mexico, Arizona, Texas, Oregon, Washington, Florida, and parts of Idaho, Montana, Wyoming, Kansas, Oklahoma, and Louisiana. It also included the southwestern part of British Columbia of present-day Canada.

Spanish and indigenous body of knowledge. With the establishment of the Tribunal of the Holy Office in Cartagena de Indias[51], the knowledge of plants of the indigenous and Africans began to be persecuted and condemned. Evidence of this persecution in records of the time permits a view of the new knowledge challenging a complex power structure.

For anthropologist Inés Sosadias (1981), in Cartagena de Indias during the inquisition the blacks who were knowledgeable about plants and who had to face the Inquisition under charges of witchcraft and sorcery represented less of a danger to Catholic doctrine and more of a challenge to the social order imposed by the colonizers. For the Spanish and Portuguese at the time, it was unthinkable that a black person could be a doctor or healer. They needed to preserve the idea of racial superiority and at the same time strip the African people of their humanity, reducing them to the status of mere manpower. The colonizing enterprise fought to maintain its monopoly of knowledge about medicine because in doing so it assured control over human life, which it profited from. Far from recognizing other medicinal practices and sources of knowledge. In Europe, the witchhunt, which was responsible for the torture and death of tens of thousands of women, was used both to colonize women and to erase healers who used traditional plant medicines, decrying them as "primitive" or "backwards." In the "new world", associating the ancient knowledge of plants and healing medicines with demonic worship opened the door to the elimination and punishment of longstanding community practices and relationships.

The perspective of Sosadías on witchcraft runs counter to the theses of other researchers in the same period (Ceballos, 1995; Maya Restrepo, 1996), for whom this issue was directly related to a clash of mentalities, confined to the magical-religious sphere. This is in contrast to what was proposed by Sosadías: that which had heretofore been seen exclusively as part of a worldview was transferred to the field of science and biopower. The African healing knowledge was persecuted because it

[51] On November 30, 1610, the Tribunal of the Inquisition in Cartagena de Indias officially began its duties, continuing until the end of the Spanish colonial rule between 1810 and 1819.

constituted a power-knowledge about the living world, which largely derived from the ancient knowledge of plants. A black person who was enslaved but in possession of this knowledge challenged the hierarchy of colonial society.

The persecution and murder of the African and indigenous people knowledgeable about plants appeared not only in Cartagena but throughout colonial America. In both Lima and Cartagena, Inquisition Tribunal documents on the trials of witches, healers, and sorcerers from that time have been found (Ceballos, 1995; Rosas Navarro, 2010). The attention of the Tribunal in Cartagena was focused on exposing the paganism of the Africans (as well as indigenous peoples) and the danger of their spiritual crimes, in no way acknowledging their knowledge of the physical world. This partly explains the omission in the existing record on specific uses of plants found in African communities in the Americas and on effective disease cures in traditional African medicine. Rosas' thesis openly signals the transgressive nature of the black healers, knowledgeable about flora, but it does not go on to describe what kinds of plants could have been part of the *cimarrón*, or runaway slave, resistance. This point will be developed in Chapter Three "*Estera*: medicinal plants and resistance**"**.

However, just as there was persecution of knowledge, there was also insurrection in the colonial history of the Americas. In Cartagena, we find an emblematic case of this type of resistance. In her doctoral thesis, the historian Clara Inés Guerrero (1998b) located documents that related the case of Domingo Biohó (as he was known to the colonial authorities), or Benkos Biohó (as he was known to the Palenqueros). The great king of Arcabuco (from the Biohó region, nowadays Guinea Bissau in West Africa), he was taken to Cartagena in 1599. While enslaved, he managed to escape with his wife, two children, three other men, and three other women, settling between the mountains[52] and water[53] near Cartagena. According to Guerrero, after five years of struggle with the Crown, in 1605 he achieved peace for one year with Gerónimo de Suazo y Casasola, the governor of Cartagena. The black people who lived in Palenque managed to be treated with respect by the authorities; move freely

[52] http://migratedplants.com/text_hyperlinks/images/enlamontana.mp4
[53] http://migratedplants.com/text_hyperlinks/images/nadadores.mp4

throughout the zone, including Cartagena; and bear arms both inside and outside the city. This first peace agreement allowed them to lay the groundwork for what would a century later be Palenque de San Basilio, the first free town in the Americas. The recognition of the freedom of the Palenqueros was the result of the struggle of an entire people. Biohó was eventually killed, and other Palenquero captains were chased down and killed for over a century. The Crown finally made a deal with them in 1713 to avoid the uncontrolled growth of *palenques*, or villages of escaped slaves: it recognized their freedom with the condition that they not take in any more runaway slaves. In 1713, an agreement was finally signed, by which the Crown granted them freedom, territory, and autonomy, three basic needs to outline a sense of identity (Guerrero, 1998b).

While the case of Biohó is an example of resistance in seventeenth-century Cartagena, it is important to note that the use of plants in communities, as will be shown below, also constituted a complex and sophisticated way of resisting changes and situations that threatened their existence.

A few plants have been moved into San Basilio de Palenque; however, what are the other kinds of entities these plants are moving? These are plants that move people, beliefs, spirits, power, drums, and so on. Let's walk through Palenque's streets, patios, and cemetery in search of *Malas Hierbas* (weeds).

Chapter Two:

Mala Hierba

Migrated Plants have been appropriated as a form of resistance by those in a subjugated status in San Basilio de Palenque. (Gelis, 2014). These plants arrived in San Basilio de Palenque as a result of enslaved persons who escaped bondage with seeds hidden in their hair (Gelis A. & Cassiani. (2018-2020). The presence of these plants' sheds light on how the African diaspora in Latin America was consolidated following the migration of plants and seeds brought from Africa for traditional medicine, diet, and ritualistic purposes. These elements proved decisive in the formation of a new free territory.

In this chapter I develop the theory behind my praxis of building sonic elements into my installation work. This theoretical development will continue in the final chapter "With-living: Migrant Co-Relations. Toronto".

Mala Hierba. Interactive sound installation – six channel surround sound. By Alexandra Gelis (2015), with Program and sound design: Hector Centeno, Hair braiding design collaborator: Keli Maksud, Fieldwork – research support: Cristina Lombana and Paola Camargo.

Mala Hierba, video documentation[54]

Description of the video installation

`Mala Hierba is an immersive, interactive, sculptural sound installation that invites viewers to interact at multiple levels with the history of plants, people, culture and rituals of the town of San Basilio de Palenque. *Mala Hierba* recreates a "tunnel of sounds" used in the *Lumbalú*, a collective funeral ritual described in Chapter 1where the community performs chants, dance, and play games around a circle, along with musical expressions, such as the *Bullerengue Sentado, Son Palenquero* or *Son de Negro*, and *Rondas. Mala Hierba* formally explores the traditional braided hair designs in which African enslaved women hid seeds and mapped their escape routes. In the installation, the visitor walks through an abstracted map of the town made out of hair, soil and sound cables, along with 16 speakers spread throughout the space that resonate with different soundscapes of Palenque. Living plants mark places on the map, the cemetery, the house of a wise person, where a spirit dwells or spots where a plant of the same family is in the village. The visitor is invited to have a closer look at the medicinal plants by seeing and smelling the plants but also by getting to know about their

[54] https://vimeo.com/135068680

medicinal and healing properties and stories. By passing one's hand between the plant and the light that is positioned on top of each plant, a new set of sounds is triggered throughout the installation. Next to the wall is an old water pump; when it is pumped a screen on the wall shows text describing the plants and related local knowledge.

The installation is a visual representation of the semiotically layered knowledge and resistance of the *Cimarronaje* / marrons,[55]' and the use of medicinal plants to nourish and heal the body, the land, and the spirit. In addition, visual and audio techniques are used to research the history and imprint of biopolitics. Through poetry and metaphor, this work evokes embodied ancestral memories of the land, the ancestors, the non-living, the non-human elements in solidarity with different ways of being.

Cuento del Encuentro con Doña Ana

My Story of an Encounter with Abuela Ana

While filming in the main plaza, a passing horse distracts me and directs my gaze to Jose Javier Enrique Medina Moreno, known as Silvino, and his grandmother Doña Ana. Leaning on the arm of her grandson, Dona Ana picks up small branches in her path and carries them in her hand. She takes the branches, she smells them while her body remembers, and her face lights up, as though connecting to something familiar. She keeps walking.

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[55] **Cimarronaje:** *Where there is power there is resistance* Michel Foucault (Foucault, 1978) reminded us. *Cimarronaje* comes from the Latin-American Spanish word *cimarrón*: feral animal, fugitive, runaway. Related to African refugees who escaped slavery in the Americas and formed independent settlements. The first slave rebellion took place in Santo Domingo at the end of 1521 (Lucena Salmoral, 1996, pp. 9-10). The last ones occurred at the end of the 19th century in Cuba and Brazil, where slavery was belatedly abolished.
The resistance of *cimarronaje* appears with the first enslaved African who came to America. The individual strength of the *cimarronaje* begins at the time the rebellion settles in the heart and the head of any African or Creole enslaved that was under the power of the slavery and had the strength to make the decision to escape and, later this rebellion multiplies with others as a collective act that becomes political. *Cimarronaje* was above all an ideology of freedom, expressed by men and women who were brought to the Americas but never accepted to be slaves. It is important to understand the Afro-Colombian people as a people who never accepted slavery and always had freedom in their minds. They had external chains, but were mentally free.

She walks a long distance around the plaza, gathering other plants from the sidewalk, from a small vacant lot, from the sidewalk cracks, and from the unpaved road, as well as from the garden of one of the neighbouring houses. I walk over to talk to them.

I notice that the grandmother appears senile, but her senility does not impede her from collecting medicinal plants all around her town. What strikes me is the fact that even though she can't remember the use of the plants, the act of collecting them remains etched in the memory of her actions and body. I have seen countless people of all ages collecting plants in different parts of the world. Still, this particular instance is poignant for me because it points to the existence and power of another kind of memory, an embodied memory: that which is not necessarily a conscious process but that nevertheless lives inside us.

Doña Ana does not remember, but her body does, and she puts the branches in boiling water on the fire. While making a sitting bath (*baño de asiento*) of the plant mixture, her pregnant daughter sits down while her mother tells her to breathe, breathe deeply, and open up her legs.

I am reminded of Robin Wall Kimmerer (2013) talking about the sweetgrass:

> … Breathe it in and you start to remember things you didn't know you'd forgotten. (2013, p. 11).
>
> The image and the smell of this encounter are still vibrating in my skin, somehow, *I am learning over the years to speak fluent botany. A tongue that should not be mistaken for the language of plants. (*2013, p. 70)

The Installation

Doña Ana's knowledge, passed from generation to generation, is remembered in her body, one of the strongest means of holding and transmitting memory. Despite her senility, she still carries the references of the medicinal plants in her body, the ritual's connections as medicine and the sensuous or spiritual experiences that challenge any translation or order. Memory in her body challenges any colonial way of seeing medicine as it is known in western medication or treatment. The moment offers

a non-fetishizing form of looking, one that invites me to experience the plant and the ritual, entangled with the woman, not so much visually as through visceral contact.

While revisiting the film of this encounter, I find that the moment captured in the video suggests multiple perceptual forms that encode memory. In relation to time-image-space[56] in terms of cinema, it reveals a suspension of the moment charged with memories encoded in senses not just visual; it has to be understood culturally, and is site-specific, or, one can say, land-specific. Memories that are intentionally removed from dominant representations, according to Laura Marks (1994, p. 258), find their representation in the characteristic gaps of time-image cinema. Memories in Ana's senses are not just her memories but a deeper, cultural memory.

On a global scale nowadays, the relationship between humans, especially women, and plants seems to have initially thrived in home gardens. The case of Palenque centres in the *patio*[57], where a particularly feminine touch is not something that is isolated, but a constant presence throughout. The patio is the place where certain medicines are grown. But equally important are the medicinal plants gathered by the river that carry the "freshness" of the water to cure "hot" sickness. Similarly most of the wild (spontaneous) herbs grown on the roads or on "hot" or dry soil can help to cure sicknesses that are considered "cold".

I had often walked through those green patio spaces but had not seen them as more than a social gathering place. I did not label them as 'gardens' until much later. I had not been trained to understand any culture of gardening, (much less connected to any traditional natural medicine), especially in a village where narratives about medicine are usually shared around the small health centre or in the hands of some knowledgeable people working with dry medicinal plants (*sabedores*). My vision started changing with the encounter with Doña Ana. Days later, I went to Maestro Cassiani,

[56] This idea is building on what Deleuze et al. (1989) call 'time-image cinema'; he argues that in a revolutionary moment in history, it has become possible to make an autonomous image of time. I argue we are plunged into time but rather than crossing space we are very much grounded, rooted in place.
[57] *Patio* is a Spanish term to designate the backyard or sometimes even the front yard of the house. In this context the *Patio* is the central meeting place of the house, it centres on the kitchen, in the eating together, but is also the place where the family meets in times of celebration or when family support is important such as during funeral rituals.

who shared his *patio* with medicinal plants and his knowledge with my mother and me. That encounter became the centrepiece for the work *Estera* that I will explain in chapter 3.

The complex medicinal system, based on a cold-hot classification, reflects the entanglement between territory and the human body of its inhabitants. This temperature classification depends also on multiple and subtle relations between landscape, medicinal use, human and vegetation factors. As Carlos Alberto Vásquez Londoño explains: "The temperature of plants is conditioned by the temperature, humidity, water proximity and terrain of the places where this flora grows, as well as by its flavour and the temperature of diseases they heal and prevent" (Vásquez, 2012, p. viii).

In recent years, due to climate change, the local ecosystem is being affected, with potentially tragic effects. The warming of the land and the decrease of the river's flow is reducing the presence of certain plants. This scarcity affects the health of its inhabitants and contributes to the loss of that ancestral knowledge. Even if the plant exists, it no longer gets named. These traditions are mainly transmitted orally from grandparents to their children while walking through the territory. By not calling or naming the plants, they begin to disappear in the oblivion of the language.

Europeans named plants using scientific language that defines what was known; whatever was out of their hands remained unnamed. But in standard European languages there is not a word for the interaction of life and the complexities of each species in conjunction with many other ones, non-human, human and spirits. They are noun-based languages, treating objects as discrete, as opposed to verb-based Indigenous languages that reflect relations, connections, constantly changing processes, never fixed, but contingent on specific places and times. Traditional plant names contain medicines[58].

How is this cultural imaginary of climate change perceived by the Palenqueros and how does their worldview adapt to their changing environment?[59]

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[58] In a conversation with Maestro Cassiani, he taught me about the flower of *Solo un dia* or 'just one day': "You must ask for both to be cut and to be used. If the flower accepts, it will give you their medicine and cure; but if you don't ask, nothing will happen", it is essential to connect with their spirit.

[59] Echoing the visit I made one day with Manuel Perez Salinas to the creek looking for fresh medicinal plants. To his great surprise, he found a very low, almost dry creek in which we found no fresh medicinal plants, only

En transito hacia el más allá, la Ultima noche de Lumbalú de Varo- Evaristo Marquez-
The last night of the Lumbalú of Varo (**Evaristo Marquez)**

The "last night" arrives, the people are accompanying the soul in the final moment of the passage to the other side of the stream, to the world of the dead. The women, gathered in the hall, cry and pray together to the rhythm of the *Leko* while drinking coffee. They also dance to the dead, their bodies moving in cadence by a rhythm that is not celebratory. Outside from his seat, Master Cassiani raises his voice and reprimands one of the women "Margarita, that is not a dance step for the Dead". Outside, men play Dominoes, Parquet and drink ñeque[60] liquor. All of a sudden a circle of people gather outside on the street singing and shouting "*La Perra está*"[61]. These are the games of the dead, traditional singing circles practised by all community members since childhood.

"*Click clup clup clup clap*" "*A pila el arroz, a pila el arroz*[62]" they shout at the door of the house when they hear the sound of a metal basin with small stones that simulate the sound of the rice pillar[63].

"Click clup clup clup clap" "*plum plum plum plap*" The sound runs through the village. A woman carries the bowl accompanied by a group of men who are hitting the floor with sticks using them as a baton. One by one, they go through the houses that Master Varo visited, as if to retrace his steps.

At about 4 o'clock in the morning when the sun begins to rise and meets the departing moon, the altar is taken down. The photos are removed. The white cloth is folded and the tables underneath are revealed. The bricks are taken out of the living room one by one. As each brick is removed, the weight of loneliness fills the living room and everything is felt. The *Leko* is heard more intensely, until that moment the spirit was in the house.

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hot ones. Silently and thoughtfully he looked at every inch of its banks without finding anything. When I asked him some of the names of the fresh plants to be recorded in the video, the words were gone and only a couple he could babble, as if the dryness of the creek itself had taken them away.

[60] Ñeque is a local alcoholic drink made with sugar cane; bottles become medicinal bottles by filling them with medicinal plants. These bottles are also drunk during the evening festivities.

[61] With an open meaning flowing between the dog is here or the bitch is here.

[62] "To clean the Rice, to clean the Rice".

[63] The action of threshing the Rice, separating the grains from the chaff.

"Make way, get away from the doors - you don't want the spirit to stay with you, my friend," Elida whispers in my ear. The door between the two worlds opens. The soul is dismissed on its way across the stream to the world of the dead.

The elder sister of the deceased, Adriana Marquez and one of the last midwives in the village, sits most of the time in the *patio* (courtyard). In the courtyard she is accompanied by other women around a fire pit that remains alive and never extinguished for nine nights. There is always a plate of food for those who come to pay their condolences. Until that moment I was sitting in the living room, and something prompted me to go to the *patio*. As I make my way to the courtyard, Fredman comes to my side:

"Alexandra, I am writing a text about the Lumbalú ritual and I need these photos, please take them for me, they are very important for my text".

I hear Adriana's voice "Pedro don't worry, I'm fine and I'm with Maria your aunt, greetings", each message with a subtle change in the tone of her voice, "Pedro take care of the children, from here I take care of you, say hello to Maria".... The messages come in one by one. Messages from the world of the dead to the living.

I turn off my video camera, the audio recorder continues.

Cuento de Mi Práctica (The Story of my Praxis)

Turning on or off cameras

- Comments of the ethics of gathering knowledge-

I started my fieldwork without even knowing it. After many years, I went back to Palenque, and while looking for my childhood friend and elder companion who often took me to the stream to gather my favourite Palenque plants, the Monkey Pits, I arrived at the heart of Palenque. The funeral ritual of my old friend opened to me not just the most profound spiritual moment of Palenque. It also opened my sudden and unusually complete acceptance into a community that is always challenging for outsiders to penetrate.

> "We learn social forms by being thrown into surprising situations. Fieldwork 'immersion' works because we are forced to enter other ways of life—that is, to become social—before we have any idea what we are learning" (Tsing, 2013, p. 9).

Even though I lived in Colombia during a dangerous and violent period, funeral narratives seemed very distant; the funeral homes deal with the body and the commemoration. It seems that we have less and less time and space for ceremonies that celebrate a life. However, in the case of Varo's Lumbalú, the family and the community took over the funeral and dealt with the process as a collective ceremony. The body was present; it was danced, sung and celebrated in family with the community's support.

I did not know what I was being invited to.

It's important to know when to turn the camera on or off, but perhaps most important is what happens when we are off-camera. I learn best about a context by being immersed, by being within it. It takes time and commitment to recognize different ways of knowing and it requires understanding "not-knowing" as a generative space. You can't ask for knowledge; you have to earn it.

It's about space and time and is ultimately about relationships. This became clear to me in the following moment which required me to make ethical and aesthetic decisions.

Two days before my encounter with Matilde introduced in the last chapter *Bajarkeke*, and as I also mentioned earlier, I was invited to document in audio and video the *Lumbalú* of the master Evaristo Márquez, a well-known actor who worked with Marlon Brando in the film *Queimada*. I was asked by Henrique, maestro Varo's eldest son, a good friend of mine, and his family, to record the nine days and nights of the *Lumbalú*, a ceremony that had never before been recorded in the village[64]. Thanks to this experience, I was able to discern the spirituality of Matilde when I saw her singing alone in her house. I also was able to see and understand that these people's spirituality is present

[64] To see a reenactment of a Lumbalú see a series of films by Teresa Saldarriaga (1991) La Tía Cato, made as part of the series of workshops recovering the collective memory by Clara Inés Guerrero and Daniel Valencia.

every second, every moment, in all things both human and non-human. The importance of the patio was revealed to me on the ninth and last night of the Lumbalú.

From the moment I received the request from the family of the deceased to record the *Lumbalú*, I faced a number of very difficult questions about what to record and how. I recalled John Berger and Jean Mohr (Berger & Mohr, 1982) arguing that photography has nothing to do with reportage. Rather, it constitutes "'another way of telling", perhaps on the brink of a new language that expresses the aesthetics of feeling.

I also recalled the words of Manuel Pérez Salinas, a linguist and part of the new generation who knows about medicinal plants: "There is sacred knowledge that comes, knowledge that is earned and not asked for." (Salinas - Gelis 2018-2022) I reflected on the importance of traditional knowledge that is shared orally, reminding us that not all knowledge is textual, nor must it be documented. In Palenque, there are living traditions that must be experienced. The major difference between an oral tradition and a document is that an oral tradition changes as the society around it change[65]. It also has the possibility of being transformed in the moment of being passed down.

Traditions and resistance in sound

The drum, the music, the social organization, the funeral ritual, the medicinal plants–but also sound itself–are charged with the individual and collective memory of the Palenquero. The living memory of the enslaved is an expression of resistance, to be sure, but also a method and form of survival.

Sublimity, that is, the ineffable experience of beauty and greatness, is, like memory, generative of so many elements that give meaning to life, that it makes survival something more than mere life or even a simple clinging to life. Even within the horrendous conditions of slavery, enslaved

[65] While documents don't change physically, their interpretations do change over time. As in the case of treaties and, in fact, all laws.

people have been able to experience and create moments of beauty and agency, which Paul Gilroy terms the "enslaved sublime" (Gilroy, 1993). Such experiences individually produce desire, extending that life to the community, then the desire is transformed into the collective and again returns to the individual as constantly changing resistance. From this point, the sublime, and the aesthetics of sound thus plays a dual role, producing first individual memory into the social, and then reproducing the community in the repetition of the sound of the unspeakable. And so Gilroy (1993) concludes that

> Politics exists on a lower frequency where it is played, danced, and acted, as well as sung and sung about, because words, even words stretched by melisma[66] and supplemented or mutated by the screams which still index the conspicuous power of the *slave sublime*, will never be enough to communicate its unsayable claims to truth. (Gilroy, 1993, p. 37)

This resistance, and strength, to transform the temporal exchange of pain and memory into the sublime, is an exchange that makes possible novelty and innovation without the loss of the past. Clara Inés Guerrero (1998b) speaks to us of the myth of Benkos as an ancestral force and hero, who with his strength resisted and lives in the Palenquero memory of freedom–memory that lives in the drum, in the sound of the stream. Children, women and adults continue to bathe in the stream today carrying in their bodies the memory of the swimming strength of the great Benkos. It also inhabits the strength of the voice of young people who today play Hip Hop to the rhythm of the drum under the name of *Kombilesa Mi*, a musical group and young leaders of this new generation. At the house of *Kombiles,* young people gather to remember their stories in the Palenquero language, to sing and to feel proud of their social organization. Guerrero (1998b) reminds us of the importance of the individual hero that is transformed by changing the dreams of individuals and thus builds collective strength. The hero today in Palenque is a famous musician who travels, like *Kombilesa* or El Maestro Cassiani. But it is also the one who has a strong political voice full of resilience, such as Dorina Hernandez, the first palenquera Congresswoman who fights for the people from the Congress of the Republic of Colombia.

[66] A group of successive notes sung on a single syllable, especially in liturgical chant. An informal term for melisma is a vocal run.

Gilroy reminds us that the sublimity that is transmitted through musical traditions-or, more generally, through the memory that carries the sound- is nurtured by something that can never be called into presence in speech, lyric or any other form that is publicly accessible.

In the struggle for identity/sound in the 1980's in San Basilio de Palenque, a strong work of recovery of the Palenquera language began, with the help of Dorina Hernandez and Manuel Hernandez accompanied by a group of young people interested in the recovery of the language. In the Palenquera language, one can hear the pain of the enslaved and the history of their forced movement in the mixture of Spanish, Portuguese, English and old African languages.

The sound, the audible of the oral, marks the anarchic memory in the oral, and is enriched by the body of the individual and therefore the sense in which orality, in the Palenquero context, is established outside the conventional economy of language. The Palenquero speaks not only with sounds but with the body, with gestures, with the rhythm of walking through the streets of red earth that are charged with the living earth where the ancestors reside. Learning to speak Palenquero is not only learning their words, but it is also singing with the spirit of the Palenquero. And this is the foundation in the design of the sound installation *Mala Hierba*, where the visitor is invited to walk through the entanglement of the earth and the sounds of Palenque and its stories in the aroma of its medicinal plants.

The lament of the woman in the *Leko*, in the song of the *Bullerengue*, in the supplication of the singing and dancing of the *Baile Muetto*, in the melancholic sounds of the *Marímbula* in the quartet groups, in the explosive force of the *Mapalé*, or in the recent *Champeta* - these are neither repetitions nor revisions of the slave song. The meaning of the slave song remains inaccessible and unspeakable. But the sound of that pain, which is largely filled with the ‘noise’ of the silence, of not being able to say the pain, inhabits aesthetic forms that summon and reproduce identity and meaning in a community. This is how the sublime works with memory, inhabiting music, poetry, cuisine, social organizations, medicinal plants and ceremonial habits; therein lies the remarkable power of the sublime.

The Palenquero language has been recovered to a large extent, but it is not just in words. Language is inseparable from the place. It is in the sound that fills the *patios* of the houses, it is in graffiti on the wall, but it will never be enough to communicate the unspeakable claims to truth. That remains in the space where the sublime dwells.

The Sound installation

Mala Hierba was initially conceived as a three-channel video installation. The centerpiece would be the video recorded at the request of the family of the deceased, gathering valuable audiovisual material. Using that material from the *Lumbalú* would have been extremely simple.[67] For the family, the recording of those images was also a way to honour the memory of the great actor and put him in front of the camera once more. However, we know that the visual mode has exercised hegemony over other ways of remembering. In this regard, Susan Sontag (2003, p. 71) commented:

"The problem is not that people remember through photographs, but that they remember only the photographs. This remembering through photographs eclipses other forms of understanding and remembering."

I had to decide whether to privilege the profession of the deceased or give priority to the funeral ritual, a ritual that fundamentally revolves around sound. I ended up choosing the latter. The reason for this decision had to do with a very strong feeling I had while recording the ritual. On the

[67] The richness of the images is very enticing, as evidenced by the takes from the first day of the funeral: men and mainly women dancing around the fuchsia coffin, accompanied by *Niño* who prays for the departed souls, who, with their colourful skirts and face painted with bright colors dance and sing to the body to the rhythm of drums in the *canto e negro*, and the *Sexteto Tabalá*. Bodies contorted between drums, *ñeque* (sugarcane liquor), pain, and passion, framing the perfect representation of exotic otherness, characteristic of images taken out of context. As Somé states (Somé, 1997), "Our soul communicates things to us that the body translates as need, or want, or absence. So, we enter into ritual in order to respond to the call of the soul."

ninth night[68], when the sun meets the moon, the altar cloth is lowered, and the spirit passes to the other side. At that time, I was not familiar with this symbolism, but it was at that moment that I felt that I should turn off the camera, that not everything has to be shown. It was thus that the initial idea of a three-channel video installation turned into an installation of pure sound with eight channels of audio.

This eight-channel sound installation created a space that fosters a collective experience. Death in Palenque is not an isolated incident concerning only one family, but rather the community at large, as death is a social fact. It became crucial to me that the video installation takes into account that element of community. Reflecting on the fact that Palenque is a town that features the sounds of *Lumbalú*, in which all of its inhabitants participate; as well as knowing that everyday children play games that as adults they will share on the ninth and final night of the funeral, I decided to create a multi-channel sound installation that would navigate through space. Short stories focused on different neighbourhoods are mixed with ambient sounds from the town, the laughter of children, water from the stream, and women gathering medicinal plants in the streets. The piece recreates the way in which the funerary ritual and the plants brought from Africa are a fundamental part of the daily life of Palenque.

[68] After hours of music and dance on the first day of *Lumbalú*, the colorful coffin of the master Márquez is carried by a crowded procession to the cemetery located at the entrance of the town. Upon entering the cemetery, a great *Leko* song emanates from different corners of the cemetery: next to the graves of their loved ones, women sing to them while they await the newly deceased. The time of death of a person is also time to remember others who have passed away: it is a kind of door that opens to the world of the dead. After leaving the body, the eldest child returns home with the support of friends to "carry" the soul home where it will be for the next six nights of *Lumbalú* on an altar built with a white sheet, flowers, and photos of the deceased.
In fact, I did film for nine nights, but I choose not to use the film in a final installation. The Marquez family got many photographs and some parts of the video. Then in a meeting with his eldest son and wife months later, they told me that they trusted me and that I would know when it would be time for this material to be made public, or maybe not. Everything is in your heart they clearly stated.

Within the soundscape of the installation, visitors can activate different pieces as they walk by. In the same way, other sound narratives are activated by the visitor by passing his or her hand over medicinal plants planted in the installation space. The sound is designed so that when the space is walked through, a viewer never has the same experience twice.

Aesthetic Decisions

General view of *Mala Hierba*

While *Mala Hierba* is primarily a sound installation, it also features a sculptural component developed throughout two elements: medicinal plants and braids/maps/walking. The inclusion of each of these elements in the video installation was accompanied by reflections that were formal and, in turn, theoretical, revolving around the concepts of biopolitics *and territorial control technologies*[69]. It is in this way that when reviewing, for example, in the anthology by González (2008), the work of the artist Renée Green is profiled, based on some of the theoretical approaches of Michel Foucault. In her analysis, the author revisits the concept of genealogy to look at intersections between the politics of

[69] Within the concept of territorial control technologies (TCT), I include the deployment of migrated plants, i.e., plants that have been moved outside their native environment. Due to their characteristics as plants that are aggressive and even invasive outside their habitat, so-called "weeds" become elements especially suitable for controlling and/or transforming a territory. This exercise of power that uses migrated plants as TCT has been used both by those in a position of control as by those in a status of subjugation undergoing resistance.

colonialism and certain ways of upholding race discourses, discourses that have fuelled the construction of a certain kind of history and memory. For me, though, the issue of biopolitics goes beyond the mere analysis of control of the body and human time throughout history: it also includes the control of other forms of life, territory, and plants. Environmental history regarding medicinal plants evokes biopolitics. In the analyses of Foucault, "genealogy" as an analysis of dissent is thus situated within the articulation of the body and history. If we were to connect this with the relations of bodies within systems of power, through which they have been marked and dominated, we could apply the analysis to the presence of plants, and in particular, "weeds" (Crosby, 1986). Plants were used to prepare the arrival of the empire. but also, to control the population, as a system of power.

Consequently, *Mala Hierba* exhibits a body[70] and a plant (and their relationship) entirely imprinted by history and the process of history's control of the body and plants. The use of plants as a technology of control is developed in this piece, as well as the use of plants to resist and express freedom. The presence of weeds sheds light on how the African diaspora in Latin America was consolidated thanks to the migration of plants and seeds brought from Africa and used in traditional medicine, diet, and rituals. These elements proved to be decisive in the formation of a new free territory. The sound installation delves into Palenque's history through the study of its plants and the memories that reside in the biodiversity that grows wildly in and around the town. Many of these plants, commonly viewed by community outsiders as mere weeds, contain medicinal properties and magical qualities that people of Palenque have identified throughout the course of the area's history (Vásquez, 2012). In order to appreciate the strategic meaning of these plants, it is important to go back in time to when runaway slaves carried seeds in their hair for survival. Escape routes leading to the *palenques (*refuges for escaped slaves) were intricately braided into their hair, and runaway slaves also carried in their braids seeds that they would go on to plant once they reached the new territory (Cassiani & Gelis A., 2018-2020)[71]. Palenquero hairstyles are therefore a time-honoured medium for

[70] Through the braided hair but mainly the memories of bodies through the sound described above.

[71] During my conversations with maestro Rafael Cassini Cassini, a dear musician and farmer, he shared in various opportunities intriguing insights about the significance of braids in the hair as escape maps during the era of slavery. Cassiani: "the braids in the women guided Benkos and his allies to these lands".
One particular evening, while we stood at the entrance of his house around 7 o'clock, I remember Elida Cañate, meticulously crafting beautiful designs with blue colors on Solvay's head. As we chatted, Cassiani turned and

both transporting seeds and for transmitting resistant knowledge. The analysis of traditional hair braid designs as semiotically layered resistant knowledge of the Cimarronaje[72] is formally explored in *Mala Hierba*, as well as the use of medicinal plants to nourish and heal the body, the land, and the soul.

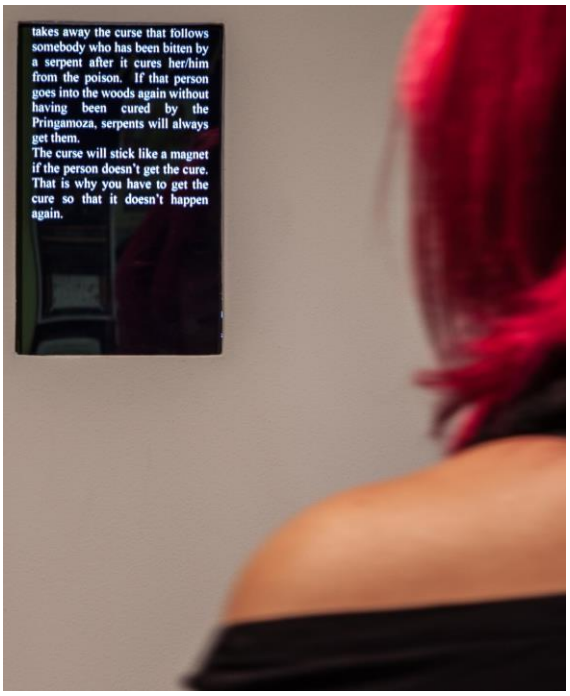
The second sculptural component of *Mala Hierba* presents an **aerial view map of San Basilio traced in braids**, as a cartography of resistance. The traditional medicine in Palenque is a history of resistance, but also an archive of ancestral knowledge. Carlos Alberto Vásquez Londoño (2012), in his book *Classification by Thermal Categories of Medicinal Plants in the Traditional Health System of the Afro-Colombian San Basilio de Palenque Community*, recorded the existence of 170 plants that grow around Palenque. Taking this research as a starting point, I selected 90 plants whose names I was able to translate from Palenquero or Spanish to English or find their species name in Latin. With this list of

said " Elida those little braided balls that you are weaving, down almost at the neck and on the sides of the head, that's where they hid the seeds".
Amidst the artistry of these braids, Cassini revealed a hidden history.

[72] Comes from the Latin-American Spanish word *cimarrón*: "feral animal, fugitive, runaway," referring to African refugees who escaped slavery in the Americas and formed independent settlements, such as Palenque.

90 plants I went to one of the largest greenhouses in Toronto, where my list was reduced to 10 that had been introduced to Canada. It is important to me to work with species that have been introduced to this country because I am aware of the danger of working with introduced species. These plants were a fundamental part of the sculptural component of the piece.

A crucial aspect of these medicinal plants, however, is their traditional use, what usefulness they possess, and what they cure. **A small video screen assembled on the wall displays a text with the "original" plant name in Spanish or Palenquero** and the respective Latin name for each of the 170 species, as well as a short explanation of their local medicinal use. This description occasionally included short stories that introduced the



magic-ritual component. The text was activated with an antique water pump. The mechanism was designed so that with each pump, instead of water, the video would emerge to the surface, moving frame by frame to the rhythm of the "extraction." The water pump appears to evoke water and its healing powers and strength; it also appears to remind us that knowledge is obtained through work. Pumping drop by drop until you get the full stream of water, in this case, reveals the knowledge of medicinal plants. The water pump as a device will appear again in the last chapter as part of the piece *Tropical Phytograms*, a segment of the installation *With-Living: Migrant co-relations. Toronto*.

From a storefront window into the sacred space of migrant plants

The piece was installed as part of Alucine Latin Media Festival in 2014 curated by Sinara Rozo and Mariuxi Zambrano on a commercial venue with a storefront window to a main street adapted as gallery space. The main window overlooked St. Clair Avenue, a predominantly immigrant area, which at the time of the installation, despite the devastating gentrification process, included many storefronts decorated with religious symbols such as the Virgin Mary and Mexican saints, and vibrant signs such as flower shops, convenience stores and mom and pop shops (among other traditional stores that cater to the Hispanic community). The venue of the installation gave me the ideal audience and context. The installation was in situ-designed according to the space but also the audience. Through the storefront window, a dark display case with a few spotlights invited the audience to peek in, the reflection blending city lights with the landscape of the installation and the whispering drums filtered through the slits in the glass to the outside.

The music brought people from the neighbourhood to interact with the work. Many visitors commented they were drawn to enter by the drum. The sound opens an important way to connect with the audience through the experience. As a sound artist, it is important for me to create a sensorial environment that leads to the creation of an emotional connection between the viewer and the piece through the use of evocative sounds. Sounds of the funeral *Lekos* and the *Cuarteto Tabalá* permeate the space and merge with the muffled sounds and murmurs of nearby conversations on the street's sidewalks; roosters waking up at dawn and the first motorcycles crossing the town taking the children to school. These sounds evoke vivid memories and experiences that everyone has

within their own life; all that is needed is to immerse oneself into the audio environment so that one can recall those experiences.

I intentionally chose to engage the community as much as possible; we had coffee and Caribbean sweets to share with visitors. The installation became a local gathering space for a short time - it served as a spot where people could gather and talk about their memories and the places that they had seen during their migrant journeys.

An active audience, visitors that do the work of walking around, interacting with the space and spending time on the work, is necessary in order to fully enjoy the experience and open their minds to new ways of thinking and feeling.

The installation is charged with symbolic content and political and historical information resulting from my lengthy research; living within the community experience is essential for me to share, discuss and engage with the audience. As background information, a drawing of the aerial view of San Basilio de Palenque and introductory text about the piece's political and historical context was on the first wall. Once inside the installation, the visitor encounters a series of "scenes" that are all tied together on the map of San Basilio:, the cemetery, the *Patio of Cassiani*, the house of Matilde, etc... Each place is made up of a node of plants and sonic devices, presents a sonic story about a specific moment in the forced migration process and resilience of the Palenquero that connects the daily life of people today in San Basilio. For example, two small seedlings of the trees[73] *Achote* and *Ají* are placed on the map where the Varo's Patio is. Once triggered by the visitor, the sound of the *Cuarteto Tabala* playing inside the *Patio* of Varo during his funeral represents the grief process and the African living memory. Another scene occurs in the *patio* of Cassiani, who walks us through his plants with Juan, his apprentice, while teaching us how to use herbs as medicine. We hear the sounds of everyday

[73] Palenqueros, like their Bantu ancestors, believe in the magical properties of trees and plants. Vegetation is crucial to ritual practices, with sacred trees being associated with funeral rites for certain sub-Saharan African peoples. Schwegler in his extended research on the Lumbalú ritual says "the unity between the visible and the invisible, between the living tribe and the ancestors who have died"; the spirits of the ancestors are thought to be found in the earth under the tree (Schwegler, 1996, ch. 1).

conversation between Matilde and her daughter Marta as they walk together in the streets, grabbing herbs on the sidewalk. In this scene, we recognize the palenquero's everyday life in Palenque and the many efforts and dedication to keep the memory of their ancestors alive.

This work provides a meditative space for the viewer, allowing them to enter an auditory journey that offers poetic representations of this community's history and contemporary identity.

The main intention of this project is to connect my practice as an artist and my research as a scholar in a way that can facilitate a conversation between the artist and the audience and open up new ways of understanding and experiencing art. My intent was to create a piece that portrayed the emotions of immigrants seeking a new start in their new country, so-called Canada.

Living plants were installed in the corners in between the bricks of the gallery space, evoking the spontaneous plants that grow in Palenque on sidewalks and cracks as living memories of resilience. They evoke the daily experience of foraging medicinal plants and internationalizing their use as medicines. The smells and textures of the plants were all part of the immersive experience, inviting the viewer to explore their own sensual experience based on their personal memories and cultural associations.

The experience of installing *Mala Hierba* in a non-traditional art setting opened up in me an immense interest to be more accessible and inclusive; and this continues with the last piece of the dissertation *With-living: Migrant co-relations. Toronto*, in which the work was installed in a mall in Toronto, Canada. This allowed me not only to share with a large public, but also to connect with the local community by offering the installation as a small workshop using medicinal herbs.

Methodology and theories in my practice

Seeds and resistance

The notion of the ***politics of plants*** encapsulates some ideas that I developed with Mala Hierba. Complicating even more the idea, I am proposing *Plants as political allies*[74].
Plants can be seen as allies and also as sites for small rituals of resistance and minor acts of opposition to external forces, national or international, within an analysis of power relations.
In what ways is the traditional knowledge of plants associated with historical forms of resistance against colonization?

The condition of being slave can change and is not permanent. This means that implicit resistance dwells within this condition. Carney and Rosomoff (2011) expound on the meaning of enslavement, where "Slavery signifies not only an appropriation of the body and its labour but also the knowledge and ideas held by enslaved human beings . . . This knowledge was crucial to the colonization of New World tropical lowlands" (Carney & Rosomoff, 2011, p. 30).

The knowledge of plants and territories that the Africans brought with them was used by colonizers, but secret knowledge about certain powerful plants was carefully guarded by the enslaved (Sosadias, 1981; Maya Restrepo, 1996; Rosas Navarro, 2010) throughout Equinoctial America. Not all of their knowledge was shared, nor did they docilely hand over what they had. There was great fear of their wisdom, which explains the frequent judgements in the form of *ordalías* ordered by the Holy Office of the Inquisition as well as banishment, floggings, and sentences of labour in churches, monasteries, and hospitals.[75] Slaveholders and people with power and control feared the knowledge that the slaves had about plants, magic, and healing the body, that is, about life itself. As this was

[74] I first heard this term used by Natasha Myers in a webinar with artist Zheng Bo, at the beginning of the lock down of the COVID 19 pandemic (Berliner Festspiele, n.d.).
[75] That they sent Africans to serve their sentences in hospitals and care for patients who arrived there, emphasizes the effectiveness of their medicine and the importance of their knowledge.

knowledge that ran counter to the dogmatic precepts of Spanish medicine and even its religious principles, the slaves were frequently accused of having entered into a pact with the devil.

When effective, the medicine of the slaves[76] conferred both economic and political power to the healers. They held this power not only within their own communities but also in the broader context. What would seem to be a merely ideological threat, then, was also economic and political. These traditional physicians earned high prestige by curing the physical and mental health of a population that was highly vulnerable and exploited, which threatened the order of the colonial power. The indigenous peoples also had their own medicine, but the healers from this population were not persecuted to the same extent, as the Spanish crown needed the money from the tribute they paid. The seventeenth-century Inquisition in Cartagena de Indias also condemned whites[77] who engaged in "superstitious" practices, although never with the intensity with which they went after the enslaved.

The slaves suffered from overcrowding from the first moment of their ocean voyage until they arrived at the Port of Cartagena, leading to the development of various epidemics and diseases such as scurvy, yaws (related to the bacterium that causes syphilis), leprosy, etc. These unsanitary conditions and epidemics made the slaves turn to their traditional medicine and explore new ones, as Spanish medicine was neither effective nor accessible to them. Slaves received treatment when they fell ill because they were seen as an expensive investment; however, when freed slaves or runaway slaves suffered from a disease or epidemic, they were left to their fate.

In his book *American Magical Plants*, José Pérez de Barradas (de Barradas, 1957) argues that there are two attitudes to disease: one that seeks to cure the pathophysiological part, and a second that

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[76] When I refer to the traditional medicine of the slaves, I refer to that practiced by them and standing in opposition to the officially sanctioned Spanish school of medicine, starkly different in their characteristics and methods. I refer to the medicine that cured not only the ailments of the body but also those used in rituals to heal the spirit. Read Maya Restrepo, A. (1996), analyzing the stories on The Archive of the Indies and the Tribunal of the Holy Office of the Inquisition in Cartagena on the case of de Mateo Arará healer great connoisseur of the power of plants and spirits. condemned by the inquisition in Cartagena, a good example of how the African medicinal plant knowledge it resists and also adapted to the new American land, spiritual and vegetal world and syncretism that wad happen with indigenous knowledge and spirituality. His knowledge of the power of plants and his very accurate diagnoses made him famous in the neighbouring haciendas/plantations of the city of Cartagena.

[77] One notorious case was of the white woman Lorenza de Acereto, convicted of attempting to kill her husband with the help of witches in Cartagena.

derives from supernatural causes and requires prayer as well as the intervention of someone with a religious magical gift.

The slaves brought with their medicine an entire body of tradition and experience in the African medical field, where sorcerers cured with prayers and plants, which is why their form of medicine was so heavily persecuted. The Archive of the Indies and the Tribunal of the Holy Office of the Inquisition in Cartagena are full of stories such as the case brought against Mateo Arará in 1651:

> Case of Mateo Arará, slave of Captain Juan de Heredia, accused of being a *mohán*,[78] or sorcerer. The first hearing was on September 26, 1651, in which he testified to knowing how to heal since he lived in his homeland and his knowledge of herbs came from his own head. He named some roots that he used for snakebite[79]. After four hearings, four priests decided that the case was one of an explicit pact with the devil. He was sentenced to serve in the Santo Domingo convent for ten years (R. de C. de F. 1638-55).

The Spanish knew that slaves cured with plants and prayers, but they also thought they could induce evil spells. This possibility represented a great danger to the Spanish, as slaves had the ability to kill or do harm to anyone. Traditional knowledge of plants could be a double-edged sword: in the forest, one finds both good plants that cure and evil plants that kill. Each plant's effect depends on how it is used.

The following is a clear statement from the first lines of *El Monte* (The Bush) by Lydia de Cabrera: "In the forests and weeds of Cuba reside the same ancestral deities as in the jungles of Africa, powerful spirits that today, just as in the days of slavery, are still most highly feared and revered, and whose benevolence or hostility continue to determine the successes or failures of the people" (de Cabrera, 1989, p. 19).

The Spanish and Portuguese colonizers were eager to learn the knowledge that the Indigenous peoples and the slaves held on medicinal plants[80] and also interested in the spirituality associated with

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[78] Guerrero (1998b): The story of Catalina Luango is a love story. Catalina was a very beautiful woman who fell in love with a *barburito*, a very common fish in those swamps. The *mohán*, the evil water spirit, had transformed himself into that fish. The *mohán* lived underwater in an upside-down *palenque* that was superimposed on the Palenquero world and a copy of it. It was the world of darkness and negativity. There, one walks backwards and eats food without salt. Family members mistreat those who have been led to the territory by the *mohán*, where the *Chimbumbe* underworld holds one under a spell. Her aunt Cato said: "Catalina was taken by the *Chimbumbe*, which can charm a person like the devil." (citing (Saldarriaga, 1991)).

[79] http://migratedplants.com/text_hyperlinks/images/botella_culebras.mp4

[80] Medicine in Cartagena de Indias in the 17th Century: Syncretism Between Two Cultures: The tradition

medicinal plants. Stories of miraculous cures that Indigenous people and slaves silently kept to themselves are found in chronicles of the Indies by Spanish soldiers and in physicians' field notes.

> The bourgeois in Saint Domingue characteristically remarked that though 'the Negroes treat themselves successfully in a large number of illnesses . . . most of them, especially the most skilled, guard the secret of their remedies.' A Dutch physician, Philippe Fermin, confirmed that the 'Negroes and Negresses in Surinam know the virtues of plants and offer cures that put to shame physicians coming from Europe . . . but,' he continued, 'I could never persuade them to instruct me.' James Grainger, on Saint Christopher's island, found a 'maroon negro' who cured lepers using an ingenious cure, but Grainger could not 'discover the secret of his art' (Schiebinger, 2004, p. 90).[81]

The traditional knowledge of plants associated with historical forms of resistance has a long history marked by various changes and interpretations, a history that has been impacted by different readings characterized by ignorance.[82] Before arriving at the case of Palenque and the transport of seeds in the Africans' hair for their survival and resistance, I would like to present an extended analysis of Londa Schiebinger and her analysis of how abortion was practiced among slaves as a form of political resistance centered on the use of the peacock flower.

In 1705, Maria Sibylla Merian (Mulder & van Delft, 2017)[83] published her magnificent *Metamorphosis insectorum Surinamensium*, an edition of 60 stunning copperplate engravings of the

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brought from Africa with its references to magic, health, and disease became syncretized with indigenous and Spanish knowledge when it arrived to the Americas. It was mainly enriched by indigenous medicine, according to historians of the Indies, as they shared similar characteristics at the conceptual level regarding the cause of disease, the use of plants and animals, etc. Taking into account the similarity of African and American ecosystems, it is very likely that they found some plants of the same species, although very likely from a different family, whose properties may have been alike. To this healing tradition was incorporated a series of prayers and incantations originating in the Iberian Peninsula, practiced by Castilian witches.
Healing procedures in the Cartagena de Indias of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries were intended to cure people of evil spirits, curses, and bodily and mental ailments. An efficient cure was based on the use of medicinal plants in combination with rituals that included prayers, gestures, animals, figurines, etc. Indigenous and African practice both featured oral suction of the affected part, the use of saliva, and the use of animals such as birds. According to Ruth Magali Rosas Navarro, the *Relaciones de Causas*, examined for cases of witchcraft and sorcery among black slaves in the inquisitorial courts of Lima and Cartagena de Indias, reveal a conflation of three distinct factors. Firstly, there is a blend between Catholicism and European superstition; secondly, the introduction of sorcery and witchcraft by Spaniards (wherein white witches were also persecuted across all American viceroyalties); thirdly, lingering beliefs with attendant rituals from African culture amongst black Africans combined with Andean worldviews giving rise to idiosyncratic practices exclusive to Indians (Rosas Navarro, 2010, p. 95).

[81] Londa Schiebinger commenting on : [Bourgeois], *Voyages*, 487. Fermin, *Traité des maladies*, preface. And James Grainger, *An Essay on the More Common West-India Diseases* (Grainger, 1802).

[82] In her book *Plants and Empire*, Schiebinger (Schiebinger, 2004) expanded the idea under the concept of agnotology—the study of culturally induced ignorance—with the peacock flower as one of her case studies. The plant itself moved easily into Europe from America, but the knowledge of its use as an abortifacient did not.

[83] A visionary of science, her observations and illustrations challenged the predominantly masculine scientific culture. She is well known for the work she published on the metamorphosis of caterpillars while other

exotic world of plants and insects of Surinam. Merian, who navigated "between art and science, between nature observation and artistic intention,"[84] spent two years working very closely with Indigenous people, collecting information on the banks of the Surinam River and in fields and forests of the sugar plantations.

In plate number 45, Merian reported that both Amerindians and African slaves used the seeds of a plant she identified as *flos pavonis,* peacock flower, as an abortifacient. Schiebinger has drawn attention to Merian's discovery, calling it a "highly political plant, deployed in the struggle against slavery throughout the eighteenth century by slave women[85] who used it to abort offspring who would otherwise be born into bondage" (Schiebinger 2004, p. 4). It is important to note that these abortions were carried out to avoid bringing more slave children into the world, even when these children were not the product of rape.

Moving seeds in their hair

Several theories by European academics have proposed that seed dispersal was implemented by colonists and men of science travelling to the Americas in the sixteenth and eighteenth centuries (Crosby, 1972, 1987; Alpern, 1992; Warman, 2003). African and American oral tradition, however, contains plenty of evidence that there was a dynamic movement and exchange of seeds by people on both continents before and after the colonization of the Americas. There are many accounts in Brazil and Colombia where this movement of seeds was facilitated by African slaves, particularly women, who used their hair as the secret conveyance. Important evidence of the movement of crops from the African continent to the Americas (Gelis A. & Cassiani, 2018-2020) sheds light on the dispersing of

naturalists were still discussing spontaneous generation—a theory that had been popular since the time of Aristotle.

[84] The poet von Goethe, who wrote a treatise on Merian's *Metamorphosis of Plant*s (von Goethe, 2009).

[85] For more information about Caribbean slave women's resistance and tactics for survival, see Jenny Sharpe's *Ghosts of Slavery: A Literary Archaeology of Black Women's Lives* (Sharpe, 2003).

non-native plants, including so-called weeds and medicinal plants. Women's efforts to transport rice in their hair were instrumental in securing the survival of their descendants in the plantations[86].

The black rice hypothesis, well documented by Carney (2001), focuses on the movement of rice as well as how Africans brought the technologies for its cultivation from Africa to the New World. Traders and slaves often carried plant stocks used for food or medicines with them from Africa. The history of rice in Brazil documented in the article "With Grains in Her Hair: Rice in Colonial Brazil" shows how this oral tradition is shared throughout different zones of Equinoctial America:

> "From Suriname to Cayenne and across the Amazon to the Brazilian states of Amapá, Pará, and Maranhão, an oral tradition claims that an African woman introduced rice by hiding grains in her hair. The precious seeds escaped detection and this, they explain, is how rice came to be planted" (Carney, 2001, p. 1).

I chose to take on the task of understanding the movement of not only rice but also medicinal plants and "weeds" as a deliberate attempt to secure the survival of the community. In my research in San Basilio de Palenque in Colombia, I discovered similar oral traditions regarding the dispersal of plants from the plantations to the free territories. Their oral narratives include the origins of crops but also, and most importantly for my research, the movement of medicinal plants for healing practices. Women living on plantations were allowed to walk rather freely amongst their surroundings, as they were not considered to be a danger. According to oral tradition[87], they would take advantage of these

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[86] Schiebinger, L. (2017) in her book "Secret cures of slaves: People, plants, and medicine in the eighteenth-century Atlantic world," talks about how perhaps slave ships, as well as the slaves themselves, brought medicinal and edible plants. She clearly presents this as a possibility, unlike other scholars. Carney and Rosomoff (2011) studied shipping records and pictorial evidence, showing how African slaves adapted their food staples in the American tropics, especially in the Caribbean. Judith Carney (2011) before in her work "Black Rice," utilized ethnographic evidence from West Africa to put forth the idea that women played a central role as the primary custodians of rice-growing skills and knowledge (rizi-cultural skills). Consequently, they were also the primary agents responsible for transferring this technological expertise across the Atlantic during the era of the Atlantic slave trade.

[87]While recording medicinal plants in Maestro Cassiani's *patio*, a charming and fashionable young woman named Cachaca enters and greets us with her braided hairstyle. Cassiani turns around, smiles, and says, "Look, it's because we keep remembering the routes." Then, he continues sharing information about the next plant, one of his favorites: *Malva pa' la preñ*a.
Curious, I ask, "What routes, maestro? it is a matter of pride and they look so beautiful"
Cassiani replies, "The women used to walk, go on walks around the haciendas, exploring the surroundings. They mapped rivers, lagoons, swamps, and mountains in their braids. After their walks, they would return with beautiful and intricate new hairstyles. In the evenings, just like Solvay and her daughters were doing yesterday, they would sit down and braid the paths to remember them. It was like a living map."
Oh! maestro a remember Raul (local expert in palenquero language) said the braids also made ideal hiding places for seeds, gold nuggets stolen while working mines, and even weapons. These were to help the runaway slaves to survive once they had found their way out. Cassiani & Gelis A. (2018-2020).

long walks to locate escape routes and then map them in their hair[88]. Through complicated designs, they would braid depictions of mountains, rivers, swamps, and valleys that would later guide the community in their escape to the *Cimarronaje*.

The intricate designs of their braids also served as containers in which runaway slaves would carry seeds that they would plant once they reached the new territory. One of the most popular designs was what is now called "el hundidito," a kind of pouch located at the end of the braid that could be hidden inside the hair. This is where the seeds would be hidden. Slaves were also forced to work in gold mines, and this braid design was useful for concealing a few gold nuggets.

The runaway slave legend that African Slaves used braids to trace and communicate escape routes is common to many areas of Equinoctial America is thus grounded in historical images such as the one of rice as a source of sustenance during the Middle Passage. What has been forgotten is the importance of the cultural need that coincided with this transfer. What happened to the healing practices which in Africa are a combination of the spiritual and physical?

> "Captains relied in no small part on African food surpluses to provision their human cargoes across the Middle Passage. They commonly believed that mortality rates improved when captives were given food to which they were accustomed" (Carney * Rosomoff, 2011, p. 75).

As important as food, there were also species appreciated for their medicinal and magical properties: plants that especially facilitated transatlantic commerce and survival of the human cargo.

The African Castor Bean, native to sub-Saharan Africa, is an example of a well-documented medicinal plant that helped lower mortality rates during the Middle Passage (read chapter 2, Carney, 2013). It also went on to become an important plantation commodity, the castor plant *(Ricinus communis).* This plant was frequently used by captains during the Middle Passage to keep the enslaved

[88]Nowadays in Palenque it is typical to find groups of young women talking while braiding each other's hair at sunset. While the designs have changed, the tradition continues. The evening is filling up with Champeta music, a mixture of the Afro-Colombian traditions with international and African music. Champeta is playing as central part of the sound scape of the escene, the lyrics are in a mix of spanish, palenquero language and an interpretation of a African language mimicking its sound.

Africans alive (Barbot, 1752). Due to overcrowding and highly unsanitary conditions, it became necessary to identify plants that would help control the epidemics on board and keep the slaves alive. The plant is a powerful purgative and could be used to treat skin ailments and head lice. In the 1670s, Jean Barbot noted that it was grown with extreme care in the garden of the commandant of the slave depot on Gorée Island, Senegal (Barbot, 1752, p. 31). As a commodity, the castor plant was used in lamp oil and was widely recorded by Europeans in plantations in Jamaica, Cuba, Dominican Republic, and Brazil[89] (Grime 1979; Kimber 1988; Watts 1987; Kupperman 1993; Carney & Rosomoff 2011). The plant is also used for religious purposes in Brazil, as documented in *Sacred Leaves of Candomblé*. In Cuba, it is a plant devoted to the orisha Obatalá, whose power helps cure diphtheria. It is also used for headaches and to avoid heat stroke by placing a leaf on the forehead (de Cabrera, 1989).

In San Basilio de Palenque, it is called *higuereta*. This plant grows wild, especially near cool areas such as streams. “Its leaves, along with feverfew, are warmed with oil from the American oil palm tree and placed on the abdomen to treat "inflammation" and "hot flashes" in the belly" (Vásquez, 2012, p. 161).

Another argument supporting the African heritage of flora in San Basilio de Palenque is the use of thermal classification of medicinal plants, native to the Bantu culture in West Africa:

> Villazaki (1955) and Conco (1972) recorded the use of thermal categories in the use of medicinal plants by the African Bantu culture, from which, according to Friedemann (1993), most Afro-Colombians descend. Among Afro-Colombians, hot-cold classification for medicinal plants has also been widely reported. In San Basilio de Palenque and other black communities, this categorization of plants also extends to disease and understanding of the human body (Losonzcy, 1993 and Ardón, 1996) (Vásquez, 2012, p. 3).

Velazquez (2012) compiled an extensive contemporary collection of medicinal plants in Palenque, focusing on their thermal properties, which are believed to impact the body's balance and overall health. These thermal properties are generally categorized as "hot," "warm," "neutral," "cool," and "cold." Walking the streets of Palenque offers a living overview of the diverse uses of plants and the rich traditions surrounding them. Everywhere one looks, plants grow wild, adorning sidewalks, filling the grooves of old houses, gracing yards, and flourishing in gardens.

[89] It continues to be planted in some parts of Brazil for the same purpose.

Many (migrated) plants found on the sidewalks, patios and the small stream served purposes besides the medicinal ones featured in this chapter or the roofs of adobe houses like in chapter 1 on *Bajareke*. Many of these plants are also used for creating everyday objects like mats used as rugs to sit on and sleep on during hot days. Let's go to gather some plants to weave a very special mat *Estera.*

Chapter Three:

Estera[90] (*Mat*): Medicinal Plants and Resistance

Children are the great treasure of Palenque. Constituting nearly 60%[91] of the population, community life largely revolves around them. This project arose from my research on medicinal plants, which are ever-present in the rituals surrounding the care of infants in San Basilio de Palenque. Knowledge about the plants accompanying childcare is far from stable; midwives are disappearing as young women prefer to pursue other trades and professions. While this knowledge is becoming diluted, some men inside and outside the community give it shelter within the traditional art of healing. While engaging the relationship between plant-human and more-than-human relations, art and environmental studies, I have looked for new ways to group and classify plants based on oral tradition and living memory. I have concurrently sought to bring these reflections into artistic production. And that is where the mat comes in: its fabric allowed me to integrate the roots, bark, and branches of some of the plants involved in childcare from the prelude to conception, pregnancy, delivery, and the months following birth. For an easier understanding of the project, I will explain in a short way four pieces which make up the series: *Estera - Mat (part 1)* a super 8mm dual-screen film; *Estera - Mat (part 2)*, a non-fiction web-based platform; *Zoom IN to the plants and Zoom OUT,* a two-screen video installation (in process), and *Mats in Motion*, an installation.

Estera helped me learn and expand on the idea of plants as important political allies in the fight against agnotology, which refers to the construction of ignorance due to colonization. Lorna Schiebinger (2005, p. 320) states that Agnotology "refocuses questions about 'how we know' to include questions about what we do not know, and why not." These questions have assisted me in analyzing the non-transfer of significant bodies of knowledge related to medicinal plants and

[90]What is an *estera?* An *estera*, or mat, is a rudimentary object, intended to cover the ground in warm climates and used as a bed, rug, cradle, or carpet. In this project, the mat is conventional in appearance only. Traditionally made with palm, it is here derived from the bark of Matimba, Mata Ratón, and Mauve, among others.
[91] Unofficial national but locally managed data indicates that there is no official local census mentioning the exact number of children in San Basilio de Palenque. The last census in Colombia was conducted in 2008.

traditional medicinal practices, as well as the decline in the art in the community of transforming these plants into handicrafts or utilitarian items. The traditional knowledge of making mats, for example, has been considerably lost in the community. However, when we gathered to make mats together with young people, children, and elders, I observed the transfer of valuable knowledge taking place. The loss of the mat-making tradition has resulted in a profound loss of knowledge about the plants, including traditional medicine. The act of making mats, spending time working with and transforming the plants, leads to the emergence of new questions and the activation of traditional knowledge. Walking and collecting plants in the wilderness also spark conversations about the plants and the individual relationships people have with them. For instance, Master Alejandro talked about his exile while engaging in such conversations. Weaving the mats, smelling the plants, and feeling their texture awaken new interests that trigger bodily memories, leading to further inquiries: "What plant is this? What is it used for? Where can I find it?"

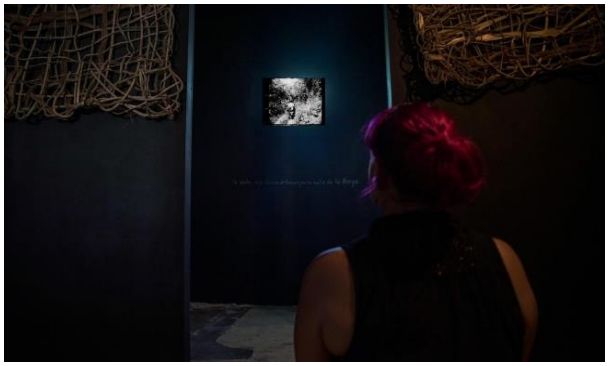
In this context, the process of making *Estera* becomes a tool for transferring essential bodies of knowledge about plants, medicinal plants, and handicraft traditions that has been culturally induced ignore.

Estera - Mat (part 1). Dual-Channel super 8mm film, features maestro Alejandro Herrera Reyes y Maestro Ambrosio Estera - Mat (part 1)

Through the hands of the mat maker Alejandro, a farmer and craftsman, and Ambrosio, a traditional healer, we participate in a multiple weaving: a weaving of the object which is a mat, the weaving of resistance, and the weaving of community relations.

Estera (Mat 2) is a nonfiction online platform that gathers a series of visual and oral materials into an interactive narrative. Estera - Mat (part 2)

Zoom IN to the plants and Zoom OUT with the stories is a two-screen video installation created in collaboration with youth and elder healers. It explores the memories of medicinal plants that grow wild in the streets, sidewalks and patios in Palenque. (ongoing project)



Mats in Motion is a video, film and audio installation forming a sculptural space that gathers memories of the plants alongside the present-day stories of displacement and violence in Colombia.

Part of the group exhibition Twilight *Zone. Other stories from the Caribbean.*
#16SRA Caribe. Caribbean Regional Art Salon- Colombia. Curated by La Usurpadora Proyectos e investigaciones Curatoriales, María Isabel Rueda and Mario A. Llanos.

Estera, or mat, is a rudimentary object intended to cover the ground in warm climates and used as a bed, rug, cradle, or carpet. In this documentary, the mat is conventional in appearance only. Traditionally made with palm, it is here derived from the bark of Matimba, Mata Ratón, and Mauve, among other materials.

Through the hands of the maestro Alejandro, farmer and craftsman, we partake in a double weave: of the object and of community relationships. While the master makes the mat with a combination of plants that I suggested and that we gathered together, I noticed his doubts about the resistance of these new materials. A grandmother washes clothes in a washtub only a few meters away, two other women prepare *caballitos* (papaya candies), a man peels cassava, music is playing, another craftsman observes the scene, and the police show up while children play nearby.

Cuento del Encuentro (My Story of an Encounter)

One day, during the radio workshops, craftsmanship became a relevant issue in the conversation. We recognized the need for more artisans in the town, so we decided to make a radio show to identify the still-alive artisans and to understand the lack of interest of the new generations in working with crafts and traditions. We went to La Bonguita, the northern part of Palenque, where displaced refugees, victims of paramilitary violence, live. They came from La Bonga, a nearby agricultural town with a rich tradition in the knowledge of medicinal plants.

I met Maestro Alejandro Herrera Reyes, a farmer and craftsman who carves beautiful wooden tools to mix papaya, coconut, yam and pigeon pea jams. The maestro Alejandro is one of Palenque's last traditional mat weavers and is also very generous with sharing his knowledge and techniques.

After our first encounter, I visited him several times. The more I saw him, the more I wanted to learn how to make a mat. One day I proposed to him to make a mat. I had been working with plants for years, until now, only photographing them, on film and video, within a respectful distance. I had yet to receive the call to work with their fibres, oils, aromas, etc.

Alexandra: Maestro Alejandro, what if we make a mat with medicinal plants? With those plants that support the conception process, the pregnancy, and the first years of a child's life?

Maestro Alejandro: But it will be an ugly and harsh *Estera*. Although on second thought, it will smell good and protect the spirit and body of the babies and all who lay down on it.

We went to collect the plants in the bush, and with the help of some of the youth, we video-recorded the gathering of the plants, and the stories that master Alejandro was telling. These stories would bring us to stories of others, a chain of collective knowledge from the past growing with the discovery of new plants, some of the medicinal and magical applications that will take people flying through the land to unknown regions of the self and geographic territories. The walk became a psycho-geographic exploration of unknown correlations and a discovery of how much we learned to think from plants.

I documented the making of the mats in La Bonguita for eight hours using video and super 8mm film. Youth, grandparents and children from the sector joined in, to make the mat, learn the techniques and listen to the stories about the plants we used to make the mat.

Many of the medicinal plants we use in making the mat are mixed in medicinal bottles. So I talked to the master healer Alejandro and asked him if we could make a medicinal bottle that would enhance the sexual strength of women and of men for procreation, a kind of natural fertility medicine. These concoctions are meant to be drinkable and are for adults. I filmed the making of the medicinal bottle for hours.

I noticed how the communal sharing of knowledge became celebrations and inspired the making of poetic fabulations[92] that would strengthen sharing and caring of all living beings.

Making *Estera* and the medicinal bottle

In close contact with plants, we constantly get exposed to unpredictable processes. Their polymorphous sharing of information encapsulated in their scents, textures, taste, colour, and shapes reorient our perceptions and actions. We cannot live unaffected by the presence of plants, nor would life exist without plants. Plants carry memories and can help us to predict or transform those memories into the potential capacities of imagining futures. They are allies and activators for multispecies recognition and interrelatedness. And we cannot leave aside the importance of spending time with plants, sitting with and feeling them, being open to giving and receiving with plants. Plants are essential in helping us remember both personal and collective stories. Robin Wall Kimmerer (2013) invites us to know the *wiingaashk* or sweetgrass[93]; as the first plant to grow on earth, she carries in her

[92] I used "Poetic fabulations" to refer to the creation of imaginative and creative stories or narratives that are inspired by communal sharing of knowledge. These stories are likely intended to evoke emotions, stimulate imagination, and strengthen the sense of connection and care for all living beings.

[93] Sweetgrass, a sacred plant for numerous indigenous nations, holds immense significance in their culture. It is considered as one of the four essential plants that hold spiritual value and are revered by their people. Apart from being used in various ceremonial practices, sweetgrass has been instrumental in creating beautiful baskets cherished by many.

fragrance the ancestral memory of Skywoman. “Breathe her scent, and you will start to remember things you didn’t know you’d forgotten. Our elders say that ceremonies are the way we ‘remember to remember’.” (Kimmerer, 2013, p.17). Robin Wall Kimmerer is Potawatomi indigenous woman, botanist and professor of plant ecology, she reminds us the importance of the sweetgrass in a culture in which the traditional knowledge of medicinal plants is getting lost while describing the complex relationship between humanity and nature. With deep respect for Indigenous wisdom Kimmerer use her poetic writing as tool to fight Agnotology in her community. Her text are a mixed of personal memories and teaching for elders that evoke memories into plants. She unwraps the weaving of sweetgrass as an action that triggers memories, as an embodied memory ceremony in the recovering of traditions.

The botanical realm emerges as a potent and unforeseen ally in the ongoing battle against Agnotology, orchestrating a harmonious symphony of resistance that reverberates through human consciousness. Within the very essence of plant aromas a profound alchemy unfolds. Here, the echoes of silenced stories, victims of erasure perpetuated by colonization, find a refuge for resurgence. In the heart of Palenque, where tradition and memory intertwine, the lamentable decline of artisanal mastery, particularly the intricate artistry of mat-making, is poignantly evident. These once revered crafts, imbued with generations of wisdom, are now cast into the shadow of modern pursuits, as the allure of musical stardom or the thrill of navigating bustling streets on motorcycles captivate the aspirations of the youth. Yet, the realm of traditional medicine, once a revered font of healing, grapples with an existential transformation. The towering citadel of the hospital reigns supreme in the new epoch, commanding the allegiance of emerging generations. The woman that use to go to the midwives these days are now tread the sterile corridors of medical institutions. In the midst of this complex narrative, the spectral departure of midwives heralds the vanishing of an entire tapestry of ancient wisdom. Their evanescent presence ushers away not only the echo of their healing prayers but also the sacred lore of medicinal flora that once thrived under their watchful care.

When we gathered to make the mat together with young people, children, and elders, I observed the transfer of valuable knowledge taking place. The loss of the mat-making tradition has resulted in a profound loss of knowledge about the plants, including traditional medicine.

The act of making mats, spending time working with and transforming the plants, leads to the emergence of new questions and the activation of traditional knowledge. Walking and collecting plants in the wilderness also spark conversations about the plants and the individual relationships people have with them. For instance, Master Alejandro talked about his exile while engaging in such conversations. Weaving the mats, smelling the plants, and feeling their texture awaken new interests that trigger bodily memories, leading to further inquiries: "What plant is this? What is it used for? Where can I find it?"

In this context, the process of making Estera becomes a tool for transferring essential bodies of knowledge about plants, medicinal plants, and handicraft traditions.
It’s in the walking between the bushes, in between the dirt roads, with soil on one's feet, walking with plants on one hand and running into people on the way also looking for the plants, that many memories were triggered. On a hot sunny day by the house of Master Alejandro near the children's park, we started weaving the mat together. Next day we made the medicinal bottle with Master traditional healer Ambrosio.

The story of the creation of the work and my practice

The mat offered new ways to group and classify plants based on living memory: its tissue allowed me to integrate roots, bark and branches of some of the plants involved in the care of children from the prelude of their conception, during pregnancy, in childbirth and in the months following the birth. The making of the mat is a magnet that gathers the whole community: Attracted by the cameras, the children came in groups and began to play ball around us. Intrigued by the different kind of branches, they approached to ask about the plants; a woman brings her punch bowl and sits next to it cutting the green papaya to make *Caballitos* (green papaya sweets); champeta sounds in three different houses all

around as a multi-channel sound piece. Sitting in the corner a man peels yucca, then the police arrive, and in silence, they take him away. A sepulchral silence covers the environment.

Nobody knows anything, nobody says anything!

Rumor has it that last night there were fights, and in response the police always go to *La Bonguita* where the displaced people are.

By threading the relationship between art-making and plant-human relations, I aimed to center on local knowledge and experiences. One of the objectives of my work is to restore plants to their biodiversity and to their historical and cultural context. This counters what the Linnaean classification system did, as it established a hierarchical system for organizing and categorizing living organisms based on their shared characteristics and evolutionary relationships. However, this system implies de-anthropologizing, delocalizing, and de-territorializing them.

As I walked through the streets, playing with the children and talking to the townswomen as they picked plants from the sidewalks, certain words of Clara Inés Guerrero came to my mind:

> In Palenque, the boys, girls, and elderly are a public good, and the mentally insane are beloved and treated as a collective responsibility of all. Nature is a living space, and culture is understood as the human expression of the ecosystem. (Guerrero, *Memoria de Libertad*, 1998a, p. 379)

Methodologically, the making of a mat function at various levels: one at the formal artistic and visual level through sculptural creation with the roots and branches of the plants, with traditional techniques taken as a base. There is even greater depth found through the making of the mat at the research level, facilitating dialogues not only with the craftsman but also with the community itself. Conversations take place about medicinal plants and their uses, related memories, and traditions. There are also several hours of silence woven through the conversation and work, allowing the collective unconscious to emerge with information taken from the encounter.

Estera: medicinal plants and resistance

From the experience of making the mat and the medicinal bottles, the following works which opened this chapter, emerged.

Estera **(Mat)** A two screen super 8 film. Through the hands of the mat maker Alejandro, farmer and craftsman, and Ambrosio, a traditional healer, we participate in a multiple weaving: a weaving of the object which is a mat, the weaving of resistance, and the weaving of community relations.

Estera: medicinal plants and resistance, an interactive online non-fiction piece that makes collective knowledge accessible (Lee, 2015), decolonizes a catalogue of medicinal plants, and is directly linked to the phenomenon of forced displacement of people in Colombia (Camargo, 2015). It centres on the case of the migrated medicinal and edible plants of San Basilio de Palenque in Colombia that were brought by slaves from Africa and were used to transform the territory into a land of "freedom".

This artistic project aimed to feature a decolonized catalogue of medicinal plants as well as a space to gather knowledge related to the Palenquero traditions, created in collaboration with palenquero youths (with some parts open to a larger audience to English speakers). With regard to my role as a researcher, the online platform also offers me a space to freely organize visual and oral material. The versatility of the medium allows me to create new readings and narratives through the making of different mobile and interactive juxtapositions.

I am not cataloguing but rather grouping the plants by the place they are growing, by people's stories, or by their medicinal characteristics. With my work revolving around the relationship between art and environmental studies, I have wanted to find new ways of grouping plants based on living memory, knowledge, and local experience. As stated above, one of the objectives is to revive the elements omitted by the Linnaeus classification scheme by introducing an approach that reinstates their sense of locality and territoriality. The methodology that I use comes from the field, from observing the land and the plants, and from working within the community.

Online non-fiction platform - Sections

The online platform presents a number of visual pieces in the form of videos (HD) and Super 8mm films, as well as Ambisonic[94] sound recordings of various soundscapes, traditional music, funeral rituals, and interviews with elders who use traditional knowledge in their practice. The structure is divided into six sections: the making of the *estera* on Super 8mm film, Map of San Basilio de Palenque, Plants, Plants and Delivery, Midwives, and Knowledge Keepers. To borrow a metaphor

[94] Ambisonics is a 360° surround sound, and is therefore ideal for immersive audio applications.

from biology, these links work in the style of a rhizome, spreading out roots and shoots of plants that stretch out in complex knots.

I. Intro: Super 8mm film

The intense and deep process of making the *estera* took around eight hours from the walk to collect the plants to its design and weaving. Wanting to obtain the closest documentation possible of the lived experience, I chose to document it through video, photographs, and even Ambisonic sound, thinking of its future effect on an audience inside a surround sound environment. The result was several hours of recording, almost in real-time and without any editing. I simultaneously recorded with Super 8mm film[95], ending up with a 3-minute reel with in-camera editing.

Upon departing Palenque, I sensed that I had successfully gathered material encapsulating a

[95] As a media artist, I am interested in the exploration of film as a medium, as a physical matter, and its differences with video as a digital medium.

profoundly intimate moment within the community. This intuition was solidified as I reviewed the captured video and sound materials. However, my optimism gave way to deep disappointment when I finally developed and played the Super 8mm film. Unintentionally, yet unequivocally, it echoed the legacy of anthropological films, laden with connotations of colonialism and imperialism. The Super 8mm film, as a medium, inherently carries the perspective of an anthropologist documenting communities through the lens of so-called salvage ethnography, utilizing a 16mm camera during the late nineteenth century.

Days before, I had similarly documented the preparation of a medicinal bottle with the master Alejandro in video, photography, and Ambisonic sound, as well as three minutes with Super 8mm film. The result was similar: very close with video and the same distance in the Super 8mm film.

In contemplating the intricate layers of my documentation process, I am reminded of Diana Taylor's (Taylor, 2003) insightful work on performance and cultural memory. Her exploration of the "archive" and the "repertoire" provides a thought-provoking lens through which to examine the dynamics at play. As I navigated the creation of *Estera* and the medicinal bottle preparation, I found myself straddling the tension between the "archive" – the realm of text-based knowledge and film – and the "repertoire" – the immersive, embodied engagement with plants and the sensory environment.

The very act of documenting the estera-making process through video, photographs, and Ambisonic sound somewhat reflects the "archive," encapsulating a trace of the lived experience. However, it's the "repertoire" that truly breathes life into these moments – the tactile connection with plants, the rhythmic motions of weaving, and the auditory symphony of the environment. This interplay between the tangible and the ephemeral, between the documented and the felt, underscores the complexity of human-plant relationships within the context of colonization. Intriguingly, my engagement with this tension between the "archive" and the "repertoire" sparks a fire of curiosity that propels me forward. As I delve deeper into my future work, I intend to excavate the notion of the "archive" more profoundly. I'm drawn to explore how the traditional repositories of knowledge, including text, found documents, scientific findings and film, intersect with and inform the more experiential dimensions of

the "repertoire." This exploration promises to unveil a richer understanding of the layers that shape our comprehension of plant-human interactions and shed light on the intricate threads connecting past and present.

With my interest in juxtaposing images and sounds to be able to read different narratives, I decided to create a two-channel film with the two documentaries. The sound component consists of soundscapes of the town, mixed with some *lekos*[96] of *lumbalú* and the sounds of the Virgin del Carmen procession. This two-channel film became the beginning of *Estera*, an introduction and pathway into the intimacy of the town and its traditions. In spite of my personal experience of feeling comfortable while working in Palenque, I am conscious of the distance that must necessarily be there, as I am not a Palenquera but rather an artist, researcher, and *guaruma* or *colorá*[97]. In spite of the time I've spent working in Palenque, I still have no answer for this uncomfortable distance. It is an ongoing process.

Yaniya Lee (2015) analyzes the use of my art-based methodology in *Estera* in her *What Matters is the Method*: *On Alexandra Gelis's Estera: Medicinal Plants and Resistance:*

> Gelis's research methods are nothing like those of traditional scientists. Working as an arts researcher within the academy allows her to apply alternative methodologies and formulate results in experimental forms. (Lee, 2015, p. 2)

In what ways do my perspective and style of work as an artist and researcher differ from the perspective and methodology of a scientist, anthropologist, or ethnographer? This is another ongoing and multi-layered question that I am trying to answer not only as an artist and researcher but also as a workshop facilitator. I mainly try to do so as a close friend to the community, however. As an artist, there is the production of a series of art pieces such as a video installation, sound pieces, films, short videos, and even an *Estera* as a major repository. As a researcher, the production and publishing of texts shine a light on the central inquiry not only for the community, but for a broader audience

[96] Known as the Palenquero form of crying in *lumbalú*.
[97] Foreigner or outsider in the Palenquero language.

outside of the community. As a friend of the community, I have produced a series of photographs for the sweet 15th birthday of a recently pregnant friend, taken advertising photographs and videos for the hair salon and traditional healers, and even taken family photos during a *lumbalú*. There are multiple forms of visual products and multiple audiences for them.

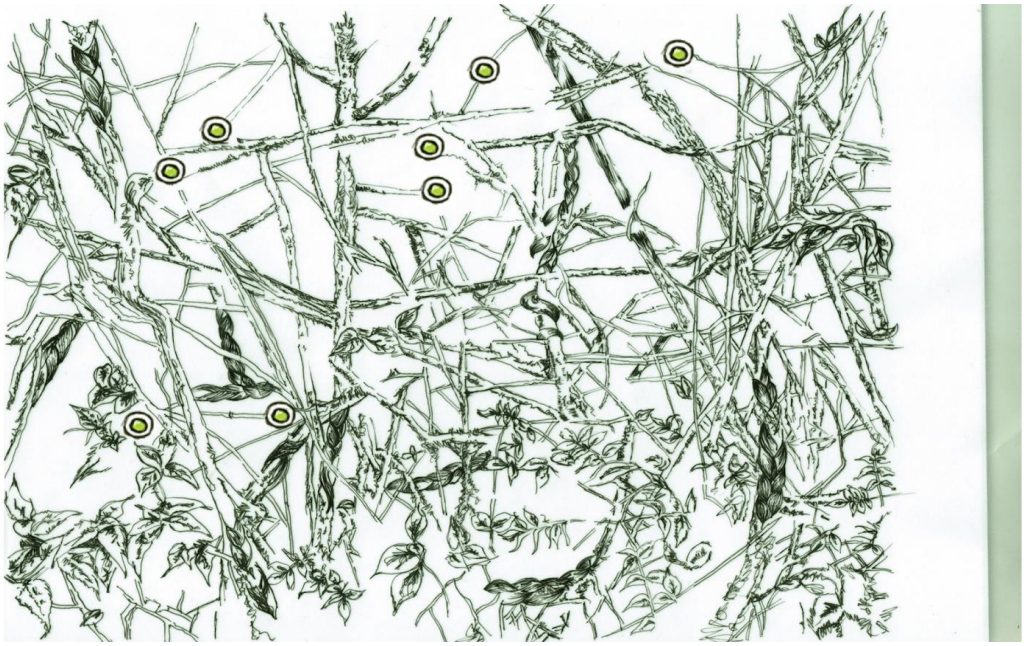
II. Map of San Basilio de Palenque

The second section is an aerial view of San Basilio de Palenque that serves as navigation space. Taken from my sound installation *Mala Hierba*– (Gelis, 2014), an aerial image is inspired by the memory of women walking through the town and collecting plants in the streets, sidewalks and patios.

The map (first introduced in chapter 2) offers the option, by clicking on the icons, to navigate through the town and observe its medicinal plants and their biodiverse contexts; long observational shots of individual plants in the streets allow the plants to be appreciated in their natural environment. Further clicks open to plant walks with town elders, an encounter with people sharing their experiences with the plants, the yards of some elders, etc. While the map lists the yards of houses where different types of medicinal plants grow, I have reflected extensively on Palenque as a place where they grow wildly in spaces such as sidewalks, roofs, riverbanks, and, of course, in the forest.

Here is a video of the experience of walking through the town, in this case with Paito.

III. Plants



A drawing I made on one of the walks in the countryside serves as a navigational system through the different plants. Each point leads to a particular plant. It is intended to be a catalog where the biodiversity around the plants is the fundamental aspect, but with the botanical names of Linnaeus nomenclature preserved to make their identification easier[98]. Each plant contains the following information:

[98] Aware of the contradiction, I am both critiquing and at the same time using Linnaeus's cataloguing system.

- Name in Palenquero
- Name in Spanish/English
- Common name in Africa
- Scientific name
- Uses in Palenque
- Uses in Africa

In the future, I will have a map that will trace each plant from Palenque back to Africa. I am using this as a way to identify the areas through which these plants passed on their journey to the Americas.

Each plant is also linked to a series of videos recorded all around the town that feature its uses, traditional stories or myths, the form of preparation, childhood memories linked to it, and fundamental traditional knowledge of it.

I dwell on the importance of traditional knowledge that comes orally, reminding us that not all knowledge is textual, nor must it be documented. In Palenque, there are living traditions that must be experienced. The major difference between an oral tradition and a document is that an oral tradition changes as the society around it changes. It also has the possibility of being transformed in the moment of being passed down.

IV. Plants and delivery

Plants and delivery aims to gather the traditional knowledge of midwives that is currently in danger of disappearing. Videos with a special focus on knowledge related to medicinal plants, special massages, and routines that pregnant women are supposed to follow.

V. Midwives

The Midwives section focuses on the stories of the last two midwives in San Basilio de

Palenque: Tomasa Reyes and Adriana Márquez[99]. The local traditions of midwives are disappearing in the town. A series of interviews in this section become important testimony, retracing the history of births in the community for more than 25 years. This archive of histories and the use of traditional knowledge is unique.

Tomasa Reyes lives across the street from the hospital. Although women no longer want to have their children with her assistance, this midwife is always seated in the front yard of her house surrounded by medicinal plants. She is always on the lookout for newly pregnant women on the way to their medical appointments and those who will give birth soon. Waiting for them in the doorway, she doles out advice and is occasionally invited by the physician on duty to be present in the operating room as well. Although she does not practice, Tomasa remains by the door of the hospital, and many mornings the physician on duty is with her. Tomasa's words are worrying and revealing: "I don't work any longer, in particular, because of the danger involved in these girls who get pregnant at a very young age and whose bodies are still not ready to give birth. Ah, no. I won't run that risk. It's very dangerous."

The clinic, the pharmacy, and their biopolitical and economic control have replaced the healing knowledge and ability of alternative procedures[100], as in the case of midwifery practices.

> Woman healers, wise women, and midwives were considered to be witches. They came to represent a threat to the new professional societies around which new expert knowledge was united and would soon be validated as scientific, such as medicine, which began to be organized as a guild in the sixteenth century (Starhawk 1997, p. 200-204)[101].

Midwives in San Basilio de Palenque must take courses in the hospital system, according to Tomasa. Not all are interested in studying, however, and they begin to abandon their midwifery practice. It is ironic that at a time when alternative movements of midwifery are being recovered and strengthened in many parts of the world, in small towns in Latin America, and specifically Palenque, these traditions are dying out, with the clinic becoming the only alternative for these communities.

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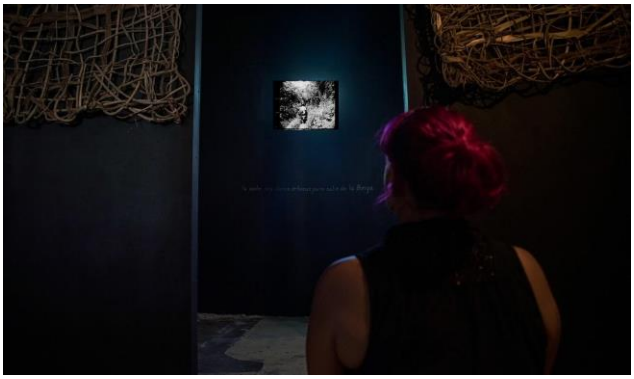
[99]Sadly, Adriana Marquez passed away in 2018 shortly after watching *Estera* on my computer in Palenque.
[100] Expand on Testo junkie, Preciado (2008)
[101] Starhawk Explored the intersection of magic, sex, and politics in her book, Dreaming the Dark.

VI. Knowledge keepers

This section aims to gather the stories and biographies of some of the elders of the community. Farmers, musicians, traditional healers, mourners, midwives, linguists of the Palenquero language, artisans: they are the primary transmitters and practitioners of both the traditional and new knowledge in the community. Most of them are elders and are quickly passing away, which is why I am making every effort to interview them and document their stories. This was the case of Siquito, the most knowledgeable traditional healer of the past several decades in the town. I had the honor of meeting him and documenting his stories in 2014, ten days before the elder would depart for the world of the dead.

This last section of the multimedia site is an example of how the research of *Estera: medicinal plants and resistance* brings past issues into the present.

Mats in Motion



Mats in Motion is a three screen video and sound installation. It shows three super 8mm film projections and ambisonic soundscapes of Palenque. The project is an extension of ***Estera (Mat)*** and includes the two screen Super 8 film, and 10 different mats surrounded by an immersive surround sound. Looking for new plants and their memories in the town, we created 10 mats based on: plants to help lower fever, plants that are good for colds, and plants that help frighten away bad energies and Zanganos (wicked male witches), among others. The sound of the installation gathers recordings of the conversations while making the mats, the different plants and their uses; it also reflects the current political situation in the country and is full of stories of forced displacement.

The installation entices the audience to listen to aural stories and to smell fresh plants, a journey into the senses of Palenque. While the multiple-screen video installation project privileges human voices, I try to get inside the more-than-human forms of life in telling stories with the plants, by weaving with the plants, by including the smells, by inviting the audience to walk bare feet or sit on the *Esteras.*

Making of the Esteras for ***Mats in Motion***

After making the first *Estera*, and considering the interest of the youth, I proposed to them to make a series of mats exploring the same idea. This opened the opportunity to practice what was learned in the experience of making the first mat, and to open up space to explore the interest and interpretations of the participants/collaborators. Here is an example of a few pieces that came out of the collective creation process and are part of the *Mats in Motion* installation, the pieces also work as a series entitled *Mats: Medicinal Plants, Care and Bio-resistances*. The mats are right now in a catalogue of a commercial gallery in Colombia that represents my work; the money from the sale of the mats is planned to be 40% for master Alejandro and his sister and the other sixty to pay for workshops on mats and medicinal plants to be held in *La Bonguita*, focusing on the plants that grow in *La Bonga*.

To take away the coldness
From the Series Mats: Medicinal Plants, Care and Bio-resistances

Made with the medicinal plants: Bejuco de Uñita, Contragavilana, Sordo Parao with Malva and Cadillo de Perro, Iraca.

Living - Life, for the evil eye
From the Series: Mats: Medicinal Plants, Care and Bio-resistances

Child's shields: Escobilla Blanca, Guaco Morado, Juan de la verdad,
Pata e Vaca Blanca, Balsamina, Bicho Platanito, Verbena, Iraca.

Windows: slow seeing
From the Series: Mats: Medicinal Plants, Care and Bio-resistances

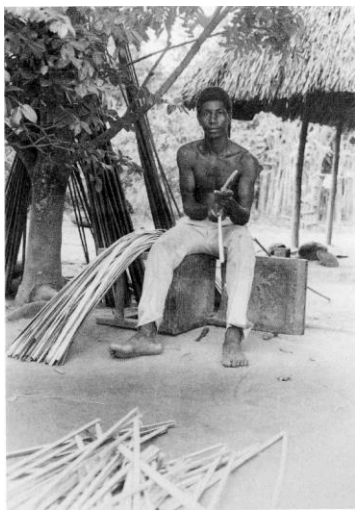
To protect the house: Bejuco Cadena, El jefe del Diablo, Matimbá o Mal Olo.

Windows: slow seeing, was made by maestro Alejandro. I asked. Alejandro, why do you make such small mats, are they for babies to lie on?

Master Alejandro: It is not for babies, but to cover the windows. If these mats are good for healing the body, those made with plants to take care of the house from bad energies and spirits will be very powerful.

Thus, were born the square mats with the exact size of the windows of the Palenquera house made in *bajareke* (abobe).

Collective memory is rooted in the body, in the territory as well as in the plants. Images that seem to be stuck in time.



As I write these lines, I come across a photograph by R. Schwarz from the book Schwegler (1996) *"Chi ma nkongo": ancestral language and ritual in El Palenque de San Basilio* that shows a man from the Bonga, sitting with Iraca palm branches in front of him, waiting to be woven. This image could easily be the master Alejandro, but also Juan, a young man from La Bonquita who today is learning to weave mats with us. Under the image, it says:

> "Mat weaving is a male activity. In the Palenque of the olden days, making mats to sleep on was one of the most developed economic activities (in La Bonga, this activity still has considerable economic importance). The mats are made from the iraca palm. One man is able to make one a day, but needs at least one to two days to prepare the raw material. (Schwegler, 1996, p. 255)

Plants and resistance today: La Bonguita. Displacement caused by the war in Colombia

> Palenque has woven its historical accounts with orality as the thread, writing as the stitches, and visuality as the design and symbol, similar to how populations that have acquired literacy have done. For three hundred years, the oral-visual realm transmitted, reproduced, and communicated history and culture in the Palenquero creole language, until modernity arrived in the late twentieth century, bringing public education, police inspection, a permanent parish priest, public health, trucks and unpaved roads, water, electricity, and now telephone service. (Guerrero 1998a, p. 380)

While working on *Estera*, I never sought to talk about displacement or about the internal war in Colombia. Displacement (and war) is a pain that is marked both in the territory and in the body of its inhabitants. Displacement is uprooting and leaves fractures; it is a phenomenon that takes over all the subjectivities of people. It is to lose the connection with your territory, your stories. And it is in the act of planting where resistance resides and grows.

Camargo (2015), who closely accompanied this research process, stated that

> *Estera* is directly linked to the phenomenon of forced migration of people in Colombia. The displacement of the residents of La Bonga is not an isolated incident in the recent history of the

> country. As can be inferred from the report of the National Center of Historical Memory (CNMH), since 2000 this phenomenon has worsened due to a confluence of factors related to macro social order.

On an outing to pick plants, Maestro Alejandro took us down a path that was close to his house. As we walked, he showed me plants, telling us that that path led to La Bonga[102], his place of birth and where he lived until 2001. That year, paramilitaries arrived in the community and gave all of the residents less than 24 hours to leave. Resolution No. 324 of July 2006[103] declared the district of La Bonga and its neighbouring zones an area of forced displacement.

My encounter with a craftsman who was a victim of forced displacement, an encounter in which *Estera* would originate, was by chance. At that moment of my research, I was looking for an answer to this question: How can one decolonize a catalogue of medicinal plants? I focused on the plants as a starting point to question the territory. It is interesting, however, that Camargo (2015) established a relationship between the displacement of people and the permanence of certain plants:

> Although Colombia has the world's highest rate of internal displacement, survivors of this phenomenon have in some cases been able to return to their land years later. When Alexandra asked the master why he had not returned to La Bonga, he answered: out of fear. The installation of fear in the bodies of all genders, ages, and backgrounds has been one of the most effective micropolitics of control of the paramilitaries in Colombia and of terrorism throughout the world. In spite of the paramilitary violence, the residents of La Bonga managed to maintain their link to their land, if partially, through certain plants and the name of their new town: La Bonguita. This case illustrates that home is not only the place where one lives but the land where one's roots are. (Camargo, 2015, p. 2)

In this case, and similar to my previous research, biopolitics appears at the center: research on migrated plants reveals territorial control technologies that lead to the phenomenon of the forced migration of persons. Lazzarato reminds us that

> Michel Foucault, through the concept of biopolitics, has stated since the seventies what today is becoming obvious: "life" and "the living" are the challenges of new political struggles and new economic strategies. (Lazzarato, 2000. P. 45)

In the case of La Bonguita in San Basilio de Palenque, as in the case of hundreds of territories throughout Colombia, "life" and "the living"—the lives of plants and people—unfold in the middle of

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[102] http://estera.migratedplants.com/Medias/Videos/labonga_camino.mp4

[103] See: http://mahates-bolivar.gov.co/apc-aa-files/66386432343332616634346237316563/resolucion-2014-04-07-007-levante-medida-cautelar.pdf

an unceasing armed conflict, where the sound of bullets has been a constant for seventy years.

As Guerrero (1998a) reminds us,

> Palenque was born from one of the essential conflicts of colonial society: master versus slave. The Palenque is the result of this conflict and in this origin is one of its signs of identity, because it was born as an act of rebellion against slavery. To achieve freedom, territory and recognition was its raison d'être and for this reason the great strategy of the maroons in the Montes de María. (Guerrero, 1998a, p. 225)

Palenque, as part of the country in a constant conflict that is Colombia, has also been strongly marked. In La Bonguita we see how the strength to achieve freedom is reborn today from the hands of women. I recalled the voice of Janeth, a displaced women leader of la Bonguita, who is always remembering their hope to return while stressing the importance of her plants, which she never leaves; they continue to be her political allies.

Camargo remarks:

> What makes this story of displacement different from other victim narratives has to do with what I call "an uprooting with roots." As he says in the La Bonga video, Alejandro visits his native village once or twice a week because he has crops there, a fact that surprised me. How could he be in a situation of displacement and at the same time still have crops in La Bonga? Here displacement impels a double movement: The bodies had to move and leave a territory (uprooting), but the roots of their crops continued to hold strong (rootedness), as a symbol of a home that the paramilitaries did not manage to destroy completely and to which the legitimate owners of the land could return, at least temporarily. (Camargo, 2015, p. 2)

The threat of indigenous knowledge of plants in colonization and slavery: The plant of lies and truth: Ordalía[104] in tradition

> . . . They had a plant right here: it was the plant of lies and truth. If a lie was suspected, they would give you that plant to chew and swallow. If the accusation was false, you would live; but if it was the truth, you would most certainly die[105]. Benkos gave her that plant, saying, come chew and swallow this here in front of me. His daughter took it from him, swallowed it, and, just like that Orika died.

The dialectical relationship between plants and people is complex and multi-layered. The first

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[104] *Ordalía* is the Spanish word for ordeal. Although I am aware of the contemporary definition of ordeal as *a difficult or painful experience*, I use the word in Spanish to refer to the historical meaning defined as *an ancient test of guilt or innocence by subjection of the accused to severe pain, survival of which was taken as divine proof of innocence.*

[105] http://estera.migratedplants.com/Medias/Videos/plantaverdadymentira.mp4

chapters of the dissertation reveal a history of exterminations, displacements, and resistance. In this section, I will use one of the plants brought to Palenque as an example of case study to understand the process of colonization that began centuries ago and that continues in new forms today. This plant is featured in my multimedia platform *Estera.*

Many plants are still used by humans, albeit secretly. Our sole knowledge of the properties of some of these powerful plants comes from oral tradition, a tradition that has suffered through the passing of time, leading to a kind of historical amnesia. In many cases, these plants exist only in the collective memories of those who have been forced to migrate and who refer to them as if they were still present. One such case is that of the *planta de la mentira y la verdad* (plant of lies and truth), of which there exists a vague memory in the population of Palenque. This plant originally comes from West Africa, where it continues to have a strong presence in the practices of local communities.

The history and stories of oral tradition resist being written down, undergo new interpretations according to cultural readings, and are retold from viewpoints of politics, race and power. In this section, I will focus on the search for a particular plant whose presence in the myth about the founding of San Basilio de Palenque is clear but that has gone on to be diminished in current collective memory. It should be noted that the plant is not known to exist in the town today. This plant, inhabiting the mythical and poetic realms as well as those of botany and medicine, provided the common thread linking my various experiences during my visit to Palenque in 2015: Does the plant of lies and truth really exist?[106] This elusive plant thus became a way for me to examine the historical process of cognitive imperialism.

One of the most persistent legends in the oral tradition of San Basilio de Palenque is the origin story of the famous community of rebel blacks in 1600, a story with King Benkos and his family as protagonists. This legend was recorded for the first time in 1911 by a certain Dr. Arcos (1913) under

[106] http://migratedplants.com/text_hyperlinks/images/Juan_preguntaplanta.mp4

the title "The King of Arcabuco"[107] in the Cartagena newspaper *El Porvenir*. These writings were part of a collection of oral traditions featuring legends and stories of the city that would go on to be published in three volumes under the title *History, Legends, and Traditions of Cartagena*. Nina S. de Friedemann[108] and Richard Cross, in their 1979 book *Ma Ngombe: Warriors and Herdsmen in Palenque*, state that the historian Camilo Delgado[109] used the pseudonym “Dr. Arcos” to write these legends based on oral tradition that challenged the limitations and rigidity of the Academy of History of that time (Friedemann & Cross, 1979). In the chapter titled “Slaves, Rebels, and the Legend of Arcos” in *Ma Ngombe*, I first came across the name of the plant of lies and truth: the Calabar bean.

According to the version of the legend written by Arcos, in 1600, the African king Domingo Biohó, or Benkos Biohó, his wife, Queen Wiwa, and their two children, Sando Biohó and Orika, a princess of eighteen years of age, were kidnapped for the slave trade and taken to Cartagena de Indias. Orika soon fell in love with the son of her new master, Captain Alonso de Campos. King Benkos Biohó organized a rebel uprising movement and escaped with a group of fugitives and his family. Armed with arquebuses[110] and arrows, they defended themselves from the Spanish soldiers who were trying to catch them and their dogs. They skirted bogs until they eventually found a piece of land, where they built their houses and barricaded the population behind wooden palisades. Francisco de Campos, a white man who had fought to "pacify Indians" by the sword in the New Kingdom of Granada and deputy chief of the expedition, was sent to attack the free territory and was then wounded and captured in Palenque. Queen Wiwa and her daughter, Orika, begged King Benkos Biohó to let them care for him. The two women cared for the Spanish man, and the passion that Orika felt for Francisco returned and became even greater. One night, Orika freed Francisco and fled with him. Pursued by the warriors of Palenque, they were captured and Francisco, wounded, died in her arms. Once she had returned to the fortressed town, Orika was subjected to the rigorous test administered by the sorcerer. The effects on Orika of a divine ritual concoction made of Calabar bean would make

[107] (1913: 89-100)
[108] The first generation of anthropologists to arrive to Palenque.
[109] Former member of the Historical Center of Cartagena, part of the National Academy of History.
[110] An arquebus is a form of long gun. An infantryman armed with an arquebus is called an arquebusier.

clear whether or not she was guilty of treason. "Drink the divine potion," said the sorcerer. Orika did so. As the atmosphere of the hut became permeated with the songs and dances of the blacks, Orika, lying on her bed, began to feel the verdict coursing through her. "'Guilty, guilty,' shouted the crowd when Orika died" (Friedemann & Cross, 1979, p. 29).

The mythical plant of lies and truth that the musical maestro Rafael Cassiani sings about is, according to Nina S. de Friedemann, who in turn cites Dr. Arcos, the Calabar bean, and the test that the sorcerer, her father, and the community forced Orika to undergo is called *ordalía,*[111] or trial by ordeal.

Calabar bean (also known as ordeal bean and Eseré nut) has various vernacular names in different parts of Africa: *ngongo* (Kikongo and Kiyombe), *ngonge* (Kikongo), *(o-)sogo* (Eviya), and *totolo* (Mwaka), among others. The plant is traditionally used in *ordalías* by tribes[112] in West Africa. It is important to note that it is also considered to be a medicinal plant in the rest of the African continent, widely used to cure skin eruptions, scabies, itching and peeling. It is also used as ophthalmic medicine; to cure tetanus; and in neuralgic, rheumatic, and other diseases.

In some parts of West Africa, the local plant was used to determine whether individuals were innocent or guilty of some serious misdemeanour or witchcraft. The name derives from the port of Calabar in an eastern province of Nigeria on Africa's West Coast, from where it was exported. It is Old Calabar and the vicinity of the Calabar River where the *Diary of Antera Duk*e was written from 1785 to 1788, providing the earliest evidence of the use of Calabar beans in *ordalías*. The diary of the missionary records the fear of witchcraft practices among the Efik people. Those accused of practising witchcraft were forced to "chop nut" (also known as chop-nup, a name used for an *ordalía* with Calabar beans), drinking a potion of Eseré seeds infused in water that was ordered by the elderly

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[111] An ordeal is a form of trial to determine guilt or innocence, where it is supposed that superhuman intelligence guides the proceedings and leads to the correct result. It consisted of trials mostly related to torture caused by fire, water, or the consumption of poisonous substances. Survivors and those who were little harmed were understood to be considered innocent by God.

[112] I am not referring to the Western idea of tribe but rather the different groups of people. In many parts of Africa, they proudly called their group of people their tribe: my people, my tribe.

community members and priests. If the accused vomited within half an hour he was considered innocent, but if he succumbed he was found guilty.

The accusations were brought against witchcraft practiced mainly by blood relatives, wives, or in-laws. This tradition is still practiced by many communities in West Africa.

With so many people dying from the *ordalías*, accusations of witchcraft became an important tool of control. “When a great man dies, unless of old age, his death is attributed to some secret enemy, and his wives, friends, and head slaves must purge themselves in that way. When the great Duke Ephraim, Eyamba's predecessor, died, nearly fifty persons were made to "chop nut," of whom above forty died (Waddell, 1863, p. 279).

The supposedly mythical plant of lies and truth, so wrapped in mystery amongst the Palenqueros, seems to be a living memory from Africa of a powerful plant that should be hidden, kept secret, destroyed, or remain under the custody of the knowledgeable elders of the community.

> The plant no longer exists, and no one has seen it firsthand. Those who had seen it were the elderly, and they didn’t show it to anyone. The elderly here had that distrust, believing that they couldn’t show it to anyone because then the listener would try it on them.[113]

In West Africa, “before the seed became an object of commerce, it was regarded by the natives with some mystery and was reluctantly shared with Europeans” (Flückiger and Hanbury, 1879, p. 191). The plant was destroyed wherever it was found, and only a few were preserved to supply seeds for judicial purposes (under the custody of the native chief). In 1859, “a missionary on the Old Calabar forwarded the plant to botany Professor Isaac Bayley Balfour of the University of Edinburgh, who would classify the ordeal bean as *Physostigma Venenosum* in 1860.” This serves as another example of how the Linnaeus classification system was a colonial tool that denied local sophisticated forms of knowledge.

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[113] Gelis, A. (2016), Canada - Colombia. Section. Cassiani: Plant of lies and truth.

One important contribution to the medicinal use of Calabar beans was by Dr. Justo Manuel Domínguez in Mexico, who in 1871 wrote a thesis based on experiments with the basic chemical component of the plant applied to animals. Despite his extensive research, he stated: "The plant that produces it is only known to us by the descriptions that we have of it" (Dominguez, 1871, p. 9). This plant had been traditionally under the control of the king, who kept the seeds in custody for judicial purposes, with any excess thrown into the river. This explains why it was so scarce in Europe and why even at that time the drug was expensive and virtually impossible to find in plant form. My attention was drawn by Dr. Domínguez's use of language that seemed poetic, even sensual (when read in Spanish), to describe the plant and its seeds[114] which had never been seen before. This style recalled that of Dr. Arcos, who, honouring another way of knowing, wrote down the myths and legends of Cartagena de Indias, relying on poetic narrative to escape the rigidity of the Academy of History and the European science of classification.

Ordalías, or judgments of God, which dispensed with verification methods, required the intervention of supernatural forces following their invocation and have been a constant in traditional cultures on all continents. These practices, most of which are highly steeped in religiosity, invoke divine power in the hope of a fair outcome. In many cultures, the *ordalías* were replaced by torture following the adoption of Roman law in the twelfth century. Today this legal institution, exercising control over the body and life, particularly those of women, is still widely practiced among the peoples of West Africa.

At a time when the world's attention is captured by entire displaced populations seeking refuge, it is important to remember that women in Africa continue to seek shelter in specialized camps when they are accused of practicing witchcraft in their communities. One example is the camp in

[114] http://migratedplants.com/text_hyperlinks/images/poetic_seed.mp4

Gambaga, Ghana,[115] shown in the documentary *The Witches of Gambaga* (Badoe, 2010). More than 3,000 Nigerians, most of them women, have fled from their communities, and hundreds of elderly people in Kenya are murdered every year, often by their own relatives, following accusations of witchcraft.

The persecution of witches in Europe and its colonies in the Americas, according to Starhawk (1982), was part of a process of eradicating folk knowledge and power. This stamping out was part of the consolidation of the expert and hegemonic knowledge and power necessary for the progressive introduction of global capitalism. Major changes occurred between the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, one of the most significant being the professionalization of trades and occupations. Whereas services were previously exchanged between friends and family, they now had to be paid for and carried out by a corporation or officially recognized specialist. Witches and heretics were thus accused of transmitting knowledge that was not officially recognized, which was then interpreted as the possession of demonic knowledge.

Migration is a complex and multiphasic phenomenon, encompassing human displacement through various means such as western colonialism, slavery, exile, displacement and immigration; along with the dislocation and transplantation of plant species, it is a significant area for exploration in the first chapters. In the final chapter, a crucial aspect of this multidirectional and critical journey incorporates my experience as a migrant coming from the Caribbean Global South to Toronto in the Global North. Along with memories, I bring seeds when I travel. For immigrants, exiles, and displaced

[115] *The Witches of Gambaga* is a documentary from Ghana, in West Africa, that tells the story of a camp in Gambaga, Ghana where women accused of practicing witchcraft find protection. More than 3,000 people, most of them women, live in these kinds of camps. Men accused of practicing witchcraft do not leave their villages because they own their houses. Women, however, must seek refuge because they are no longer the owners of the houses, they live in. The local chief welcomes women to the witch camps, charging them from day one. They must pay every month for their protection, all the while working for him in his fields. After many years, when the chief believes that the woman is cured of witchcraft, she is subjected to an *ordalía*. A chicken is slaughtered, and if the chicken is looking up toward the sky when it dies, the woman is considered to be cured. In order to leave, she must finally pay a large sum of money to the chief. If, instead, the chicken is looking down toward the ground when it dies, the woman remains condemned and must remain at the camp. Women today are accused if one of their children dies, if their husband dies, or if a neighbor dreamed that she was a witch, among other reasons.

people, plants can become political allies that help us to survive cultural and geographic changes and transform the new territories directly or indirectly. The contemporary story of migration and resistance to discrimination and inequality in Toronto also includes the history of plants' natural or forced migration and their presence in our lives.

Chapter Four:

With-living: Migrant Co-Relations. Toronto

In the first three chapters, I explained how I collaborate with communities based on ethical, aesthetic and conceptual values. I described creative processes generated by encounters with people and driven by plants within the complex relationships between plants and humans. In the last chapter, I hope to describe how these values are now applied in my collaborative work with the plant world through my most recent installation, central to my dissertation. The context also shifts from Palenque in Colombia to my current home base in Toronto, Canada, as people and plants move from one place to another. I acknowledge it is a long process that I am just starting to visualize within my skin, in my heart, and in my mind.

With-Living: Migrant Co-relations. Toronto (WL: MC)

With-Living: Migrant co-relations. Toronto. Immersive, interactive, sculptural sound and film installation. By Alexandra Gelis (2022), working with Programming: Hector Centeno.

With-Living: Migrant co-relations. Toronto. Video documentation[116]

Description of the video installation

With–living: migrant co-relations. Toronto, is an immersive, interactive, sculptural sound and film installation that invites viewers to interact at multiple levels with the complexities of symbiotic relations of the *Migrated Plants* focused on migrations to the city of Toronto. Stories of the entanglement between plants, people, soil, bacteria, cells, and fungus, reveal the symbiotic relations necessary for their existence.

Dedicated with much love to the memory of my mother, this is a *Lumbalú* for you, Cristina Lombana.

Thanks to all the plant lovers who collaborated in the research process, care of the plants and assembly of the piece. Thank you for trusting me with your plants and stories.

By Alexandra Gelis. 2022

[116] https://vimeo.com/723580221

Working along with:
Hector Centeno, and Riaz Mehmood – Programming.
Marinela Piedrahita – Plants expertise and care. Soil Food Web Lab technician
Lorena Salomé – Programming and technology assistant/support.
Ben Grossman – Sound advice/support.
Jorge Lozano – Conceptual advice.
Kate Nankervis, Alana Mercury – Production support.

Curated by Claudia Arana
Part of ArtworxsTO,
Cloverdale Common Cultural Hub at Cloverdale Mall. Toronto, 2022

Cuento del Encuentro entre la casa en Costa Rica y el apartamento en Toronto (My Story of an Encounter between my house in Costa Rica and my apartment in Toronto)

In the winter of 2022, we experienced the forces of nature with landslides caused by unstoppable rains and exploding thunder that shook mountains in the Pacific area of Costa Rica. Jaco, the little beach town near us, was flooded under metres of water with cars floating beside tree trunks. This year, winter was more threatening for many populations that live beside rivers and streams.
We live in a forest in a small house, close to a narrow creek that became a small river. As we approached our house after six months away, clean brown areas began to appear in the mountains that looked like wounds, or scratches, the sign of the water retracing, redesigning new forms, and creating new territories. We got home following a road that the changing river current had transformed. Only the broken wooden base of our bridge remained, and where there used to be a small island, we found a beautiful rocky beach. Catastrophes aside, it is ironic to say that we found beauty, looking back at us, as if there was an aesthetic purpose in this new order.

It is obvious that we humans are the cause of our own unhappiness with our insatiable beliefs and addiction to carbon and capital. To make our lives more comfortable, we have extracted resources that allow us to control our homes, and our environments. In order to maintain our colonial relations, we

have robbed ourselves and other beings of a longer existence on earth. This planet is (has been) a paradise where life exploded with great intensity, creating differentiations of multiple organic, non-organic and aesthetic dimensions.

Our closest neighbour is an engineer accused by townspeople of dangerously moving a river and changing the shape of the mountain. Now, he and the people in town pay for such an arrogant display of selfishness and his belief that he had the knowledge to modify the land in order to protect his house and have a better view. Can we live in harmony with the uncontrollable force of nature? Regardless of human destruction, nature is in constant movement and metamorphosis.

The road to our house is full of large and small tree trunks dragged by the rains from the high mountains, mixed with red mud and large and small rocks. We follow the trails of the machines clearing the pass on the riverbanks. The whole landscape has changed, and the river has been redirected again.

Casa Briana, our small house, was safe this time. But our Bougainvilleas of all colours, the Cacao tree, the Coffee tree, the Coca plant, the Guanabana tree, and herbs growing along the edge of the creek have been erased. All the herbs and saplings we planted a few months ago were taken away into the Pacific Ocean to create different combinations of life.

As Jorge and I walked along the paths next to the house over the uneven terrain with its many irregularities, our thoughts changed rapidly, perhaps replicating our irregular steps. Analyzing his steps and jumps, Jorge remarks:

> “As we walked on the rough surface trying to understand the new changes in the landscapes, my body felt it and my mind too. This unstable walking between stones, cut branches, new paths of the river, and small puddles makes us move differently, and as the days go by, one's body feels fitter and, to the same extent, one's head. Moving uncomfortably seems to sharpen the senses. Moving in different, random and unexpected ways, between quick steps and jumps and between slippery segments, sharpens the hearing, stiffens the legs, and the head becomes clearer"[117].

[117] Conversation with Dr. Jorge Lozano, Dec 2, 2022. Las Monas, Jaco. Costa Rica.

Could we say that the landscape has been greatly altered, and this has changed the life around us? Our lives are now capable of generating new ways of feeling, seeing and doing.

As the landscape has been drastically altered, so have the waters, the animal, and plant worlds. The trees are resplendent with greenery from the rain; the dirt roads are all covered with vines that are beginning to bloom. One of the Mexican sunflowers grew impressively, creating a sort of arch at the house's entrance; I had never seen those gigantic flowers growing on one side of the branch, forming a perfect arch. Very exceptional indeed! Furthermore, large trees fell, while many others are clinging to a couple of roots in the ground. Broken trees and branches are everywhere, some still floating down the river. At a glance, one can see that the great vegetal spheres have been strongly affected. It can be seen, but it can also be felt, heard and smelled, just as our bodies, senses, mind, skin, and muscles feel affected by this drastic change of movement due to the "unstable" landscape. Monica Gagliano (2018) reminds us in *Thus Spoke the Plant* that plants have some of our same senses plus the ability to detect electromagnetic fields, sounds, and low-voltage. Can it be said that plants have also been strongly impacted during this extreme weather and strong rains within their complex perception systems in different ways and not only in their physical structure?

In November, 2021, Cristina Lombana, my mother and great collaborator, passed away after spending years dancing with cancer (to this dance/struggle, we will return later in this chapter) and I must return, alone, in the middle of the cold winter to my apartment in Toronto. I returned to a house I felt was not stable, in which I did not understand how to move; my body didn’t seem to fit, and my life was fading away. I find the plants in my house also altered and broken, but yet very active, ready, and very much alive. Entering my Toronto apartment after my mother's death was similar to the feeling of the destruction around the house in Costa Rica. Moreover, the plants felt it, too; they glowed differently, they gave off different smells, they moved more than ever, and I heard them more than usual.

Suzanne Simard reminds us, in the Foreword for *Thus Spoke the Plant*, that just as plants have unique abilities to interact with the world, so too have we:

> "Not just our five senses, but also our spirit. And, chances are, while walking in nature, they are more aligned than before you stepped outside. Your mind calms, your heart fills, your soul is soothed, and your body feels vibrantly alive. You feel whole, more connected inside, and more attuned to the world. You feel the power to act in your own life and to help craft a more evolved society, one that is connected and attuned to itself and to nature." (Galiano, 2018, Foreword)

Back at my apartment in Toronto, my senses, my body, and my spirit felt protected and, above all, cared for. The sounds of the *Curuba* Vine leaves swaying in the breeze; even though all the windows are closed during the winter days, the sight of deep yellow soothes my soul. The smell of the *Ruda* (Rue), the *Eucalyptus*, and all the different Geraniums[118], mixed with the humid soil (thanks to the artificial humidifier). Tenderness emanates from the Banana plant. The breath of oxygen, medicinal aromas and love that rushes into my lungs, the feel of soft leaves of the Cuban Oregano, and coffee leaves as they brush my skin. The taste of delicious Lemon leaves and the *Limoncillo* herb on my lips. Care and compassion fill me when I drink tea from the leaves of the mother plant, the Coca bush.

I was entering a personal and very real funeral ritual for my mother, part of my process of mourning.

Cuento de Mi Práctica, Desde Casa **(The Story of my Praxis, From Home)**

I write *with* plants and about relationships with plants. The closer I get, intimate with the plants in what I might call home, the more personal my writing becomes. The intimacy and closeness of being at home changed my perspective of plants into a more profound relationship in which imagination is an essential ingredient. It is an idea of imagination that brings up the feeling of [being], one cannot explore something that does not yet exist or is not yet known unless one can imagine that it

[118] Coconut Geranium, *Pelargonium grossularioides*, with its Coconut tropical scent fills the house. Citrosa Geranium, 'Mosquito Fighter' *Pelargonium 'Citrosa,'* which claims to keep mosquitoes, black flies and other biting insects at bay, and fill the house with citronella aromas when it needs water. They carry the scent of memories of being with grandma cleaning the floor.

is possible. Creation and imagination are incredible ways to explore and meet the world. We are here not only to know because to know means one has already resolved certain questions. Allowing and acknowledging "not knowing" creates an open space where possibilities, and solutions, can arrive. Communication happens through encounters without the visual, auditory, vocal or other cues humans normally associate with interactive communication. Rupert Sheldrake (1991) commented:

> "Knowledge gained through experience of plants and animals is not an inferior substitute for proper scientific knowledge: it is the real thing. Direct experience is the only way to build up an understanding that is not only intellectual but intuitive and practical, involving the senses and the heart as well as the rational mind." (Sheldrake, 1991, p. 213)

With-living: Migrant Co-relations. Toronto (WL: MC) marks a different relationship and my way of working within the collaborative process with plants, framed by care.

For years I have been "tracking plants"; they guided and helped me thrive in different countries and communities. Plants made me travel. From the areas of the Panamá Canal;[119] San Basilio de Palenque in Colombia;[120] Bogota in Colombia and Italy;[121] Ethiopia, to the Roman Walls in Rome and many other places. Plants have led me to work and collaborate with traditional healers, farmers, and communities. And now, I'm being taken back home.

My mother got Cancer. As a response, I made a large body of work in collaboration with her entitled "Doing and undoing: poems from within[122]". I relied on the support of the medicinal plants I was studying (explained in the first chapters) and also from what I learned while travelling and looking for new plants. Plants were teaching and holding my hands on these paths.

When my mom called me saying she had breast cancer, I was shocked and fell mute. I told her we would do it together and that plants are with us. Even though plants were not central and visible in our "Doing and Undoing" artwork, they were holding different moments as we co-created the piece.

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[119] See *Corredor* since 2006
[120] See *Estera: Medicinal plants and Resistance*.
[121] See CERCA-VIVA espacios espinosos / dispersiones alelopáticas, CERCA-VIVA thorny spaces / allelopathic dispersions
[122] https://alexandragelis.com/portfolio/doing-and-undoing-poems-from-within/

My mother had to take three extracts of fruits and vegetables three times a day. This was the basis of the Microstructured Waters treatment of Dr. Elsy de Marrugo, our great friend. Plants supported her body, and she went through chemotherapy almost without symptoms. The process of getting the vegetables kept our minds busy and connected them more and more with plants curing her body and our souls. A vital company.

In constant movement - Migration

My next response was to connect my interest in migration with Migrated Plants. I will reflect on it in the following pages.

Time passed, my mom passed, and back at home in Toronto I became stuck deeply in my sorrow. My new work became a *Lumbalú* to my mom. *One handful of soil has more than seven thousand million microorganisms, the same as the number of humans on the whole planet Earth.*[123] Are we still going to tell stories just from the human perspective? Can we talk about the current situation and history of migration into Toronto, one of the largest multicultural cities in the world, through plants, soil, fungus, and water?

My response to this question took the form of an art installation: From February 16 to May 30, 2022, *With-living: migrant co-relations* was exhibited and curated by Claudia Arana as part of a year-long project under the umbrella of ArtworxTO in their Hub West in The East Mall, Etobicoke in Toronto.

As described in the introduction to this chapter, *With - living: migrant co-relations, Toronto* installation represents the semiotically layered resistant and fluid knowledge implied in plant migration, as well as the implementation of medicinal plants to nourish and heal the body, the land, the spirit, the non-living,[124] and the non-human elements in solidarity with different ways of being. The

[123]Fernando Garcia a Mexican organic agricultural consultant, in the video *Soil is Alive* (Barndt & Gelis, 2019).
[124] Including rock, water, sand, glass, weather, climate, and natural events such as rockfalls or earthquakes.

work aims to re-narrate plants as protagonists that shape human history. Consequently, *With - living: migrant co-relations. Toronto* exhibits plants, soil, bacteria, and migration stories (and their relationship). I name all of these relations the symbio-politics of resistance, the resistance of living bodies, including humans, plants and organisms.

"With – living" refers to the Greek words defining symbiosis**.** While primarily a sound installation, *With - living: migrant co-relations, Toronto* features a sculptural component developed through four elements: medicinal plants mixed with braids/soil/hair/ creating a large drawing made from *migrated plants,*[125] and a film created with plants. The installation formally explores the traditional hair braid designs within which enslaved African women hid their seeds and through which they mapped their routes of escape to San Basilio de Palenque in Colombia, as described earlier in Chapter 2, *Mala Hierba* (Weeds).

By going through the installation, the visitor walks through a series of shapes (roads and roots) made with soil, hair and sound cables. Thirty-two speakers spread throughout the space resonate with a series of soundscapes resulting from my research of plants and seeds brought by immigrants to the city of Toronto. The visitor is invited to have a closer look at some living medicinal plants by seeing and smelling them and getting to know about their medicinal and healing properties and stories. A new set of sounds throughout the installation is triggered by passing one's hand between the plant and the light illuminating the plant, sounds connected to the story of the plants. Next to the wall is an old water pump; when it is pumped, a screen on the wall shows a 16mm film made with phytograms of the different plants and contains some plant-specific knowledge.

[125] 'Migrated plants,' as I mentioned before, are how I designate the transfer of seeds from their native environment to another, either by natural action (wind, water, animals) or by human intervention. The idea of plants as *political allies (*read chapter two, plants as political allies) is central to my concept of *Migrated Plants.* In this research-creation interactive installation, I explore the idea of (PTTPC) Plants that have been appropriated as Technologies for Territorial and Population Control. Plants transplanted by those in a position of power to colonize (see my *Corridor* series) but that also become allies of those in a subordinate position as a form of resistance (see *Estera*, *plants and resistance* series). This investigation takes into account the fundamental autonomous behaviour of the *Migrated Plants.*

A book in the corner of the installation invites visitors to leave their own stories. Transparent pages are for tracing plant leaves; matte pages are for writing stories. There is also a chair where visitors can sit and feel and hear the vibration of the soundscapes in their bodies. The installation is accessible, with spaces for visitors in wheelchairs and chairs with vibrations for hearing-impaired visitors.

Aesthetic Decisions and conceptual explorations

Curuba - covid - migration stories - plants

Curuba: Self-sows readily - *se auto-siembran en mi camino y al caminar*

The coronavirus pandemic transformed our apartment into a small garden that became a compelling universe, offering a comforting sense of place. Plants offer a sense of community, and their growth extends an invitation to enter into different kinds of relationships and knowing.

During the COVID-19 epidemic, as a survival tactic, I would meet virtually every morning to exercise with my mother and friends in Colombia, the United States, Argentina, Chile and Mexico. Every so often, a new friend would join us. The morning exercise became a frame to talk, dream, cry together, and share stories from many feminist perspectives.

Life was filled with fear and uncertainty during the pandemic, and months turned into indeterminate now. The fear and uncertainty made us realize how much the pandemic intensified dominant forms of domination and exclusion. As a group, we were all racialized, and most of us were immigrants who had experienced discrimination and knew how hard it was for our communities to cope with it.

As always, plants, care, food and health became a central part of these encounters. Food sovereignty, the right to good health and to cure ourselves, self-healing, and self-creation, emerged from necro-biopolitical questions about who lives and who dies. An important question posed was: Don’t we really have the right to care for ourselves, heal ourselves, and access medicinal plants?

We started to share recipes for growing food and medicine at home. Our screens and houses were filled with lentils, sunflowers and arugula sprouts, while our balconies became seedbeds. The advent

of the Coronavirus pandemic has led to a significant transformation in our living spaces, turning our apartments into miniature gardens that have effectively become an all-encompassing universe for us. This shift has provided us with a comforting sense of place amidst uncertain times and highlights the importance of creating welcoming environments within confined spaces during periods of crisis. The homes we voluntarily transformed into prison sites for self-reflection and emancipation.

We lived in a fragmented time, dislocated like our lives, memories and routines. But plants kept growing; they never stopped and offered us living examples of transformation. My mother, who had a program on Instagram for indie Latin American music (Cris Lombana Live), began to make a new program called *La Terraza de Cris*, sharing tips for planting and having a healthy garden at home. The endless properties and combination of those properties became an artistic practice filled with stories of histories and memories (see the film *TOgather TOgether*[126], a work-in-process that gathers our daily conversations during the first COVID lockdown).

One day after the exercise routine, we were deep in conversation when the *Curuba* plant hanging from my apartment's ceiling suddenly dropped, bouncing twice on the wooden floor.

"Jorge had an accident!" I told them without thinking twice.

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[126] "TO Gather TOgether" is a work-in-progress that continues to develop constructive dialogues and new forms of sharing knowledge about alternative medicines, the control of our bodies, food sovereignty, discrimination, immigration, border closings, inequalities, who lives and who must die.
The women participants are visual artists, social workers, nurses, radio announcers, filmmakers, activists, and an Afro-Colombian social leader. They are women of all races and cultural backgrounds with specific concerns rooted in their work with their communities.

These recordings form a research database transforming into condensed artworks for a larger project. To manage the substantial material, I've opted to create small videos, intending to spark discussions within our communities. Topics include communal sharing, new praxis, self-administration of medicinal and magic plants, abortion, political power, body autonomy, and non-hierarchical relations with men. Our group continues to meet, welcoming new members while some have departed. I'm actively editing and working on the material, aligning production and post-production efforts.

This work has been highly challenging and sometimes painful due to the devastating effects of COVID on our lives. We have experienced personal losses, with one woman losing her father and another her husband. COVID also affected members of my family, including my grandmother. The archive is continuously growing, demanding constant attention and processing. Classifying the material around various issues and events requires continuous re-analysis from different perspectives and consideration of aesthetics. As working women, we have faced discrimination, and the pandemic has made us more vulnerable. As an artist and filmmaker, I grappled with ethical issues when depicting private moments and conversations. How do we cope with the global stress of this situation and imagine a future amidst these challenges?

They all looked confused and asked me, "Are you insane?

“No, he just fell on his roller skates.”

“How do you know?”

"The sound of the *Curuba* falling. The plant showed me Jorge falling on his skates in the street.", I said-

A few minutes later, my phone rang.

"Alexandra Gelis?"

"Yes," -I said.

"Jorge Lozano just had an accident on his roller skates. I am the doctor of the ambulance. I will take him to the hospital to have his hand checked. He told me to call you."

Everyone was speechless as they listened to the conversation.

When Jorge described his fall, it was as I had visualized it when the *Curuba* plant fell and bounced twice on the floor. He twisted two fingers out of the joint.

The *Curuba* has been with us for many years. Jorge has an extraordinary relationship with it. When the plant needs water, he told me that the plant sends him messages through smells. He is often in the bedroom, on the other side of the house, when he receives these chemical messages.

Plants come into our lives, manifest themselves and accompany us along our paths.

The *Curuba,* or Passiflora Tarminiana, is a species of passionfruit Jorge planted using seeds that he brought back home from Colombia more than ten years ago. We have different kinds of passion fruit plants that fill our house with tropical colours when they bloom—purple, green, sometimes pink and with yellow strokes. Nothing fills my heart with joy more than coming home after a long trip more than seeing the passion fruit flowers welcoming me home. Strangely the *Curuba* has

never flowered, but it grows and spreads its intertwined stems, hanging from a piece of carved wood in layers and layers of leaves and thin branches reminiscent of miniature rainforest vines.

This *Curuba* has moved with us from house to house and constantly struggles to survive, and even though it is not the prettiest plant, it is still with us. It often approaches death; Jorge trims it drastically, and then it recovers.

The *Curuba* was already part of my life. I spent some years of my childhood in Bogota, and in the courtyard of the house, we had a roof covered with *Curuba* vines. I remember going under the ceiling in the mornings to caress its elongated and soft hairy yellow fruits. I still remember their aroma; I feel a happiness that brings back those years to my memory. I used to make *Curuba* juice in milk; what an exquisite taste, a hybrid of passion fruit and peaches! Some countries call it banana passion fruit because of its resemblance to small, straight bananas.

Plants come into our lives, manifest themselves and accompany us along long paths—into our lives in a kind of mindedness.[127]

Self-sows readily, *se auto-siembren*

(as many plant care instructions say)

This series of personal reflections and stories of my interactions with plants that happened at my apartment are the starting point of the *With-Living* piece. I invited immigrant friends to share their reflections and stories of their interactions with plants that have been meaningful in their lives and brought them back home to Toronto, and that is the central point of the oral component of the installation. Plants that, despite being different from us or maybe not totally different, influence human life in multiple ways. All these stories capture a special kind of knowledge about plants that spectacularly manifested itself. This kind of knowledge is widespread not just in my life; one finds

[127] Read Ryan et al. (2022) (*The mind of plants: Narratives of vegetal intelligence*), to expand on the author's use of this term.

stories about it in many Indigenous or tribal traditions and contemporary conversations on plants studies (Kimmerer, 2013; Deloria, 2006b;[128] Ryan et al., 2022)

Vine Deloria commented that

> "The wind blows about the seeds of the plants until they reach the place where they will grow best, where the action of the sun and the presence of moisture are most favourable to them, and there they take root and grow. All living creatures and all plants benefit from something. It is the same with human beings; there is some place which is best adapted to each". (Deloria, 2006b)

I argue that they also make us move them, carry them with us, in one's pockets or suitcases. They are compelling complex relationships of mutual support and benefit: If we connect with them or get the call of the plant, we will be able to build a deeper relationship. Our relationship with the plant will be more complex and possibly more rewarding than a simply utilitarian one. The act of maintaining these plants in our lives is an act of reciprocity.[129] If we take good care of our plants, they may return the favour by treating us.

Plants in my apartment that were given to me by other migrant friends became symbols of resilience; these plants helped them to connect positively with their surroundings and with nature and helped me to connect and understand the cycles of life. Plants are conduits between Earth, Sky, Water, and Land just as they are bridges between us and the land.[130]

Plants' adaptations are special features that help them to make the most of the surrounding area and adapt in many ways to be able to survive or even thrive in their environments. Some adaptations involve mutations that can require generations. The evolutionary process makes hundreds of adaptations that vary dramatically in shape, size, colour, texture, taste and even smell. Some have

[128] Read chapter five, *The Land and the Cosmos* (Deloria, 2006c).
[129] Kimmerer (2013, p. 32) talks extensively on ideas of reciprocity. Just to mention a few: Weave a web of giving and taking with the land; giving and taking on a mutual flourishing. Soil, fungus, tree, squirrel, boy—all are the beneficiaries of reciprocity. Wisdom on reciprocity.
[130] Expanded on Kimmerer (2015, p. 127) on *Thanksgiving Address* honoring reciprocity with the living world.

big leaves for photosynthesis, others use water in the air to absorb sunlight, while others have special underground roots that allow them to survive for long periods of time without sun or water.[131]

The complex relationship between plants and humans extends far back into our joint evolutionary history. For instance, skulls of ancient hominids reflect the nature of the plant species they ate, while more recently, the domestication of plants led us to a dramatic cultural shift from hunter-gatherer to agricultural societies. Plant adaptations and human needs evolved together as both tried to survive. Kimmerer (2013, p. 216) reminds us that in some Native languages the term for plants can be translated as "those who take care of us",[132] and if people are attentive to the way plants adapt to situations and environments, we could borrow solutions to survive. "The plants adapt, the people adopt."[133]

Humans have also taken advantage of toxins produced by plants as part of the complex shift in the chemical structure of plants in order to defend themselves against other species, which we have learned to use as medicine. I argue that in the complex relationships between plants and humans, a new category should be created, in which plants and humans rely on each other in the process of adaptation. And maybe it should be a verb rather than a noun to reflect an ever-evolving relationship and process of mutual growth.

Humans also take advantage of the complex shift in this chemical structure of plants in their process of adaptation or defence against other organisms, producing toxins, which humans have learned to repurpose for our own beneficial or therapeutic purposes,[134] or use as medicine.

I offer a story that shows how plants and humans rely on each other in the process of adaptation drawing from a recent experience with an Eucalyptus plant receiving medicine and care.

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[131] Read on the morphological and physiological adaptations, and changes in ecological behaviour. Shukla et al. (2018) (*Plant adaptation strategies in changing environment*).
[132] This shows how verb-based languages reflect more about process and relationships, not things that are fixed and static.
[133] See Kimmerer (2013, p. 213) expanding on plants' adaptation with the example of the beloved Cattail plant in Marshes Canada.
[134] To read about the complexities of plants chemistry, plants chemical messages in plants, see the Foreword by Dennis McKenna in Ryan et al. (2022).

Eucalyptus

January 1st marked the end of a dysphoric year and the beginning of 2022. I was supposed to be under the care and love of my friends, supporting my grief. Instead, I was alone in my apartment. Well, I thought I was alone. It was my third day suffering with COVID, the worst experience of solitude and disconnection in my life. Everything was heavy, and I couldn't breathe. I coughed in perpetual intervals, like a solo drum of sharp pains. The lack of sounds in the house made my sense of smell stronger. The fragrance of the pink Geranium travelling from the living room to my bed reminded me it was watering time. My chest felt hard and extremely tight. I was choking because of a lack of oxygen.

Still, I got up and started my ritual of watering the plants one by one, ensuring that each one would receive the necessary nourishment. Some require several buckets, like the Coca or the Banana plants; the cactus requires only a few drops, and others need to be submerged for about 30 seconds. Watering plants is a kind of collective experimental dance of movements, smells and shades of green. A dance where my body connects with each plant. When I was feeling the shortest breaths, I reached the Eucalyptus and watered it with as much water as it liked, and more than twenty of its leaves fell down immediately. I got scared. She had been "happily" overgrowing during the previous months, and suddenly one of the branches was almost leafless. I started to talk to her, as if she were human, apologizing, maybe I gave her too much water, or perhaps she was dry due to the lack of humidity in the winter? The falling leaves released their sharp, minty, woody and refreshing scent, and suddenly I started to breathe easier, and as the smell went deeper into my lungs, I had a moment of release, of absolute lightness. As I inhaled more of the scent, I felt better and could breathe again. I thought that the Eucalyptus was within me, filling my lungs with her perfume like she was watering me. With great relief and deep wonderment, I understood that plants adapt and transform themselves to new situations as humans do in many ways and that when we live together, we learn to care for each other.
Gracias!

This reminds me of Deloria's words "We often hear traditional people say that they must bring a gift when they harvest wild plants, that they must ask permission when cutting trees or take birch bark, and reach agreement with any plant to be harvested for a ceremony." (Deloria, 2006a, p. 128)

Inclusive plant-human relationships are accompanied by obligations of responsibility, solidarity, and care, reminders of our delicate interdependence. It is a constant and daily work where I respond to the smell of the Eucalyptus that alerts me when it wants water or when its physical changes signal nutrient depletion. In return, the plant responds by giving me its medicine. This constant work of gratitude echoes two fundamental concepts of Haudenosaunee Indigenous knowledge: the "Thanksgiving Address" a ritual of naming and thanking all elements that sustain life, and the "Three Sisters",[135] the companion planting of maize, squash and beans. A mutual relationship in which plants rely on us for their well-being as much as we rely on them is poetically demonstrated by this practice.[136]

Components of the installation

In the above, I have revealed the origins of the ideas shaping the installation. In this section, I will offer detailed descriptions and reflections on all the components.

Living Plants

What do plants tell us about our surroundings, our lives and the time we live in?

As immigrants, what can plants tell us about our land of origin by being in close contact with their life cycle—growth, blossoming and decay? Coming from the notion that all forms of life are interdependent and inextricably interconnected, can we speak of a social symbiosis that is the result of immigration? And how is this symbiosis happening at a molecular level? The vegetal sphere is an essential narrator of histories, including human history.

Do plants/gardens reflect society, and what place do they have in human systems of meaning, cultural life, discursive framing and philosophical meaning? Do plants represent a good life? Are plant growing practices a way to look at ourselves, living collectively with other living organisms, all

[135] Read the beautifully written chapter "Picking Sweetgrass, The Three Sisters" (Kimmerer, 2013).
[136] Natives of Oaxaca, Mexico, use a practice called *Tlayapan*.

inhabiting a proliferation of differences, movement and chaos? Is it precisely in these tensions between nature/plants and both human and non-human co-belongings that multiple worlds manifest themselves?

Insulin: the first medicinal moss ball - (Click to listen to the stereo version[137] of the story, mixing soundscape and verbal story, one example of the stories shared in the exhibit by moving one's hand over the plant)

A year ago, in Cartagena, my grandmother called me into her room. She told me her blood sugar was high and her mouth was very dry.

"Please, go to the backyard and prepare an infusion. Take 4 small leaves of insulin and 3 of oregano, let it sit for 10 minutes and bring it to me."
I took the tea up to her room. She drank it, and within a few minutes, she measured her blood sugar level, which had gone down drastically. My *Yaya*, my *Abuelita*, made me think of my friends in Toronto who suffer from diabetes. I asked my cousin Hector, the plant expert in the family, to help me cut a few pieces of the plant, wrap them tightly, and bring them back home.

I planted them in a mixture of moss, different soils, hair, volcanic rocks, and lots of care in Toronto. A very autonomous system emerged and spontaneous plants also grew. And thus, my first medicinal moss ball was born.

[137] http://migratedplants.com/text_hyperlinks/images/insulin.mp3

Insulin, the first medicinal moss ball

More than thirty living plants are part of the installation space. All the plants have been brought from somewhere. I call them “migrated plants." I combined plants that immigrant friends in Tkaronto, so-called Toronto, lent me for the exhibition, with plants that I grew in my apartment from seeds brought into the country to recreate the tropical biodiversity of the territories where we grew up in Colombia and Venezuela.

Each of the plants I had in my house is full of stories, an archive of memories of movement, displacement, and change within the different places I have lived and travelled to. When I transport the seeds from their place of origin to another place, I feel I take with me stories of that place, a bit of its scent, soil and history.

The Coca plant and Coffee from Colombia; the Rue from Ethiopia (where it saved my life); the philosophical Peyote from Mexico; the San Pedro magical cactus from Peru, and several colourful corn seeds from different places in Mexico, Peru and Colombia. The ones from Mexico and Canada are part of an exchange of seeds and knowledge through the Legacies Project (an intercultural and collective project on food sovereignty I have co-directed) www.earthtotables.org).

Like us, plants experience radical transformations when travelling from one place to another. I have seen "my" migrated plants change with time; like me, they have experienced dislocations, inclinations and redirections living in this new territory and cultural climate. Slowly we metamorphosize. We become different and hybrid and start to develop new kinds of relationships and forms of communication. There is a meeting of new perspectives. Plants become living companions that teach us a new language and forms of sensing, perceiving and feeling.

To complement my own collection of migrated plants, I invited friends who have experienced migration to donate seeds or a plant and to record significant stories of their relationship with their plants. To my surprise, many of them brought their beloved grown plants to my care.

For most of my friends (and plant people in general) their relationship with plants is primarily affective; plants make them feel less lonely; others remind them of their home in the morning, in the sun, by the ocean. And, like me, they fill their spaces with plants to duplicate their world of origin. I included many different plants at the exhibition: Banana, Perilla, Pomegranate, Lemon, Coffee, Mango, Dates Palm, Bougainvillea, Walking Iris, Hibiscus, Cuban Oregano, Insulin, Castor Bean, Soursop, Dandelion, Mother of Thousand, Rue, Peyote, San Pedro, Coca, South American Tobacco, Cassava, Calendula, Epazote, Taro, Limoncillo, small plants from the tropics, many different kinds of Moss and spontaneous plants that came with the Moss. And, of course, the soil.

Installation design
Braiding paths of resilience

The installation *With - living: Migrant Co-relations* represents the semiotically-layered resistant and fluid knowledge implied in migration. The design of the space pays homage to the most bloody migratory process in the recent history of humankind, the movement of enslaved humans from Africa to the Americas. The work calls for the strength and resilience of our ancestors in the middle passage who crossed the Atlantic into an unknown land and transformed it.

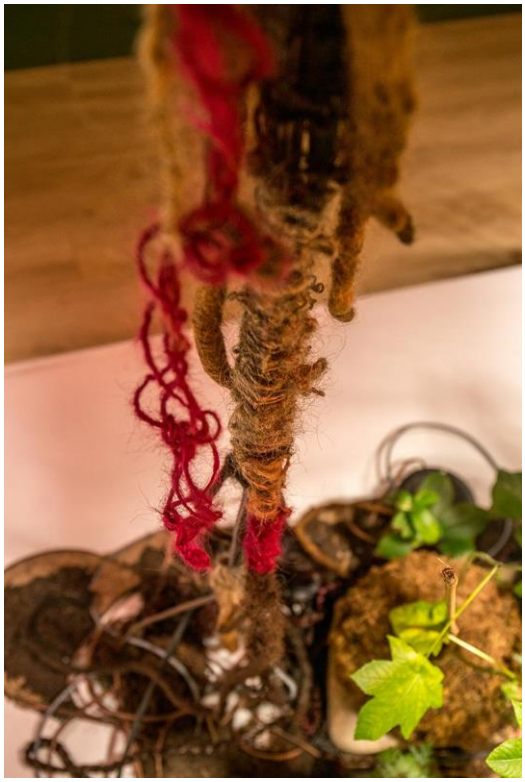
1Sculptural arrangements created with braided human hair mixed with soil, sound cables and speakers creating a path that simulates plants roots

Using traditional hair braid designs, as noted above, enslaved African women hid their seeds and mapped their escape routes to San Basilio de Palenque in Colombia. The formal sculptural exploration of the installation is the continuation of my work with *Mala Hierba* (see chapter 2). Hair is braided, twisted, and shaped into sculptural arrangements. Memory is encoded in the braids. Hairstyling becomes a tactile and embodied way that knowledge is passed between generations by demonstration.

I created paths made with soil, sound cables and human hair donated for the installation. I made a call, and people gave me hair of different lengths; some strands were very short, and I learned how to weave them into yarn to crochet the path. Different colours and textures of human hair recall

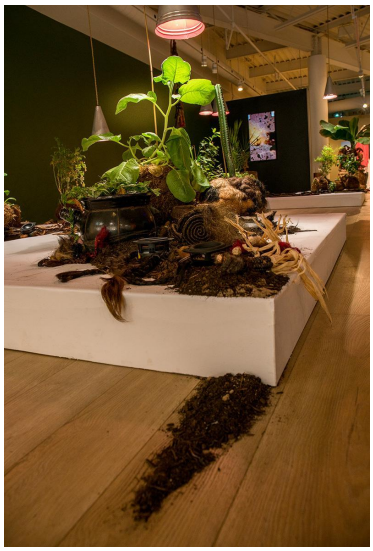
individuals' diverse identities, expressions and emotions. The heterogeneous mix of hair colours and textures reflect the diversity of origins and cultures that characterize the city of Toronto.

The individuals who came forward to offer me their hair became a deep support both emotionally and spiritually. Hair carries so much strength. The hair and the materials I used to create the installation have many different meanings. I experienced this hair as a symbol of unity and connection, a metaphor represented by the intricate weaving into a tapestry of yarn and braids. On a personal level, my pink hair has a predominant presence in the designs; by integrating the fibres of my hair with the hair of others, I feel connected to the people who have helped me get through the challenging experience of my mother's death. The hair was also a symbol of my mother's presence, representing what she lost when she suffered with cancer.



In the centre of the installation, there is a sculptural weaving of braids that falls from the ceiling. It is made up of the hair of the people closest to me, including my brother's dreadlocks.

I used human hair to make the moss[138] ball that serves as living pots for the plants. Human hair combined with compost is a good fertilizer for plants, as it will break down and release nutrients into the soil. A strand of hair contains up to 14 different elements, including gold, so it can supply trace minerals to plants. Hair breaks down slowly; it can take up to two years to decompose. Nitrogen levels are high, making them 'green' when composted. Hair also contains oxygen, carbon, hydrogen and sulphur and works great as mulch. Because of its structure, hair lets water into the soil, while at the same time it blocks evaporation, keeping the soil moist. Like all mulches, the hair also keeps the soil cooler.[139]

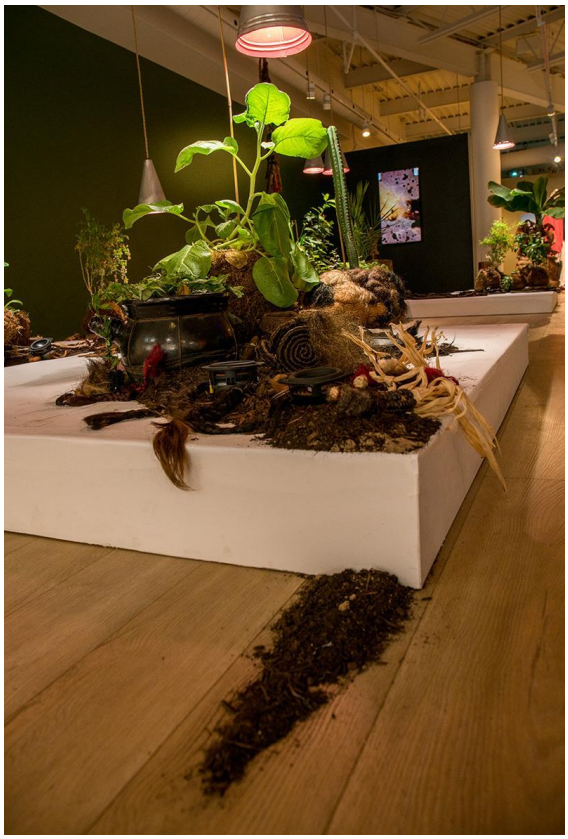


[138] To create a plant pot that could be mobile and alive, I started looking at options and found the centuries-old form of Japanese garden art known as Kokedamas. Kokedama (Japanese for "moss ball") comes from the traditional practice of exhibiting the exposed root ball of a bonsai specimen on a plate to highlight its elegant root system. Kokedama houseplants are known for offering some of the best 'Fresh Air' plants available. They help dissolve dangerous chemicals in the air, such as benzene, and transform carbon dioxide into oxygen. Making the moss balls became a vital way of sharing knowledge and being together. Marinela Piedrahita remembers:
“ When Ale asked me to help her to assemble the moss balls, it was a fascinating process and new learning for me. We were looking to make round ones, but it didn't work out that way; each plant dictated the size depending on its roots, and they were too big for us to make perfect circles. We had to respect each of their shapes and adjust them to the particular aesthetics of each one of them.

As we worked together, we shared stories and got to know each other because the first time I met her was when I visited the plants with my microscope. So as we prepared the soil and tied the moss balls, we realized how many things we had in common. Our affection and appreciation for the plants were enriched by sharing the shapes, textures, needs and expectations of each of them. To our joy, many sprouted ferns from the moss they were made with”. Piedrahita - Gelis (2022-2023)
[139] Read Rahman, Md & Kabir, Kazi & Ferdous, Zannatul. (2016). Jeliazkov (Zheljazkov) et al. (2008).

Welcoming section: Coca plant, Tobacco, Peyote, San Pedro, and Corn

A wooden platform serves as the base for the intricate design of roots, hair, cables and plants grouped in five sections.

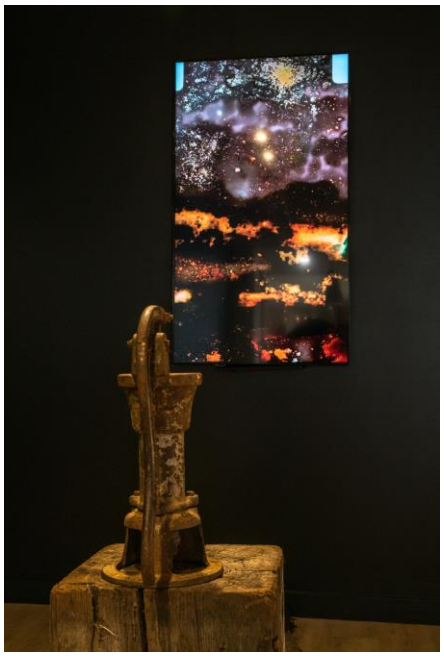


The first section, that welcomes the visitors, is the spiritual and healing one with a Coca plant, Tobacco, Peyote, a very special San Pedro I brought from Perú[140], and Corn. When this section is activated, the visitor is transported to the nights of Lumbalú with the sound of Leko filling the installation[141]. The sound was recorded in a Lumbalú in San Baslio de Palenque (read Chapter one, *Bajareke).* The ancestors' voices are at the entrance guarding it with their spirits. Just as in San Basilio de Palenque, where the Cemetery in which the ancestors reside is at the entrance, they receive the visitors, but they can also filter them. On a personal level, it is a way of honouring the *Lumbalú* made in Palenque for my mom when she passed. The community honoured her, including an unique *Lumbalú* part of the Drum festival that was online. During the COVID pandemic years, the funeral ceremonies in Palenque were small and transmitted by Internet or social media to family members outside of the city.

[140] In Peru I went to visit Mama Maria in Pisac, a healer, a woman who facilitates spiritual encounters oriented by plants. She was not at home, but her daughter welcomed us. Mama Maria left us a necklace with a small piece of ayahuasca and a small San Pedro cactus.
San Pedro grows in the Andes Mountains, and has been a spiritual and medicinal companion of many Indigenous nations for more than 3000 years .
I cut the small cactus into three parts to bring it to Canada. The Ayahuasca refused to grow in Canada but the cactus started to grow right away. Now I have four San Pedros growing at home that I received from the daughter of Mama Maria in Peru. Every time I water them, Mama Maria's presence and the tall mountains come to my mind. While I am still waiting to meet her.

[141] http://migratedplants.com/text_hyperlinks/images/1spiritualwelcoming.mp3

The installation is site specific, designed for the public who visit the mall on a daily basis. It is designed to be fully accessible for different physical and mental abilities. The base platform is placed in the space so that people in wheelchairs can walk around it and activate the piece. It is also accessible for people with hearing impairments, since when the wooden platform or the chair is touched, the audio component is transmitted to the visitor.



Tropical Phytograms

In the back, next to the wall, there is an old water pump in front of a vertical TV screen displaying a second interactive piece entitled *Tropical Phytograms*. By pumping the iron machine, the visitor controls a video of a 16mm film made with phytograms of the different plants of the exhibit and mineral pigments. The stills hold plant-specific knowledge, such as complexities and poetics between the chemistry of plants, soil and sunlight.

When the visitor activates the pump, the speed and sound of the film change; controlled by the action, it reenacts the traditional use of the water pump. By pumping the machine,[142] more than 5000 stills are revealed in sequence. If the system is not activated, the film will run frame by frame.

[142] This use of the pump builds on my first use of it in *Mala Hierba*, to transmit scientific information, while the use in Migrated Plants is more aesthetic, abstract and affective - reflecting the other ways of knowing I've been exploring.

The 16mm film[143] was made with the plants mentioned in the soundscapes of the installation. The Phytograms[144] were created by exposing 16mm film overlaid with plants and dried for hours in direct sunlight. The film is also hand-painted with plant-based colours creating abstract layers, and evoking the molecular view of plants and soil cells, the microbiota. On top of the abstractions, there are also some animations of drawings made by me, which can be seen frame by frame on the film.

I have a fascination with microbial footage that started with the films made by Lynn Margulis when she was developing her ideas about endosymbiosis,[145] which I understood at the time as the merging of forms to create new ones. A few years ago, I started making Phytograms with plants that grow around my neighbourhood and some organic pigments. The Phytograms became part of my process of looking for new ways of being with plants through seeing, hearing and sensing. The growth and survival of plants is based on sunlight and chemical signals (glucomate sending calcium signals through the plants to signal danger), which create a Phytogram but also require time, time for sunlight exposure and then waiting for an active chemical reaction.

Phytograms in process: Plants on 16mm film

[143] http://migratedplants.com/text_hyperlinks/images/tropical_phytogram.mp4

[144] To understand Phytograms read Doing (2020), also watch his films. He is well known as an expert on Phytograms on film stock. For years he made a long research that spread to the community through in persoon and online workshops.

[145] For Margulis (1998), it's the interaction of bacteria living inside plants and animals that push evolution.

How can we live in the time of plants? It can be a prolonged time or a swift time. Humidity, temperature, and light have an effect on Phytograms. Low light produces high-contrast but highly detailed images. Direct sunlight creates high contrast but flattens images.[146]

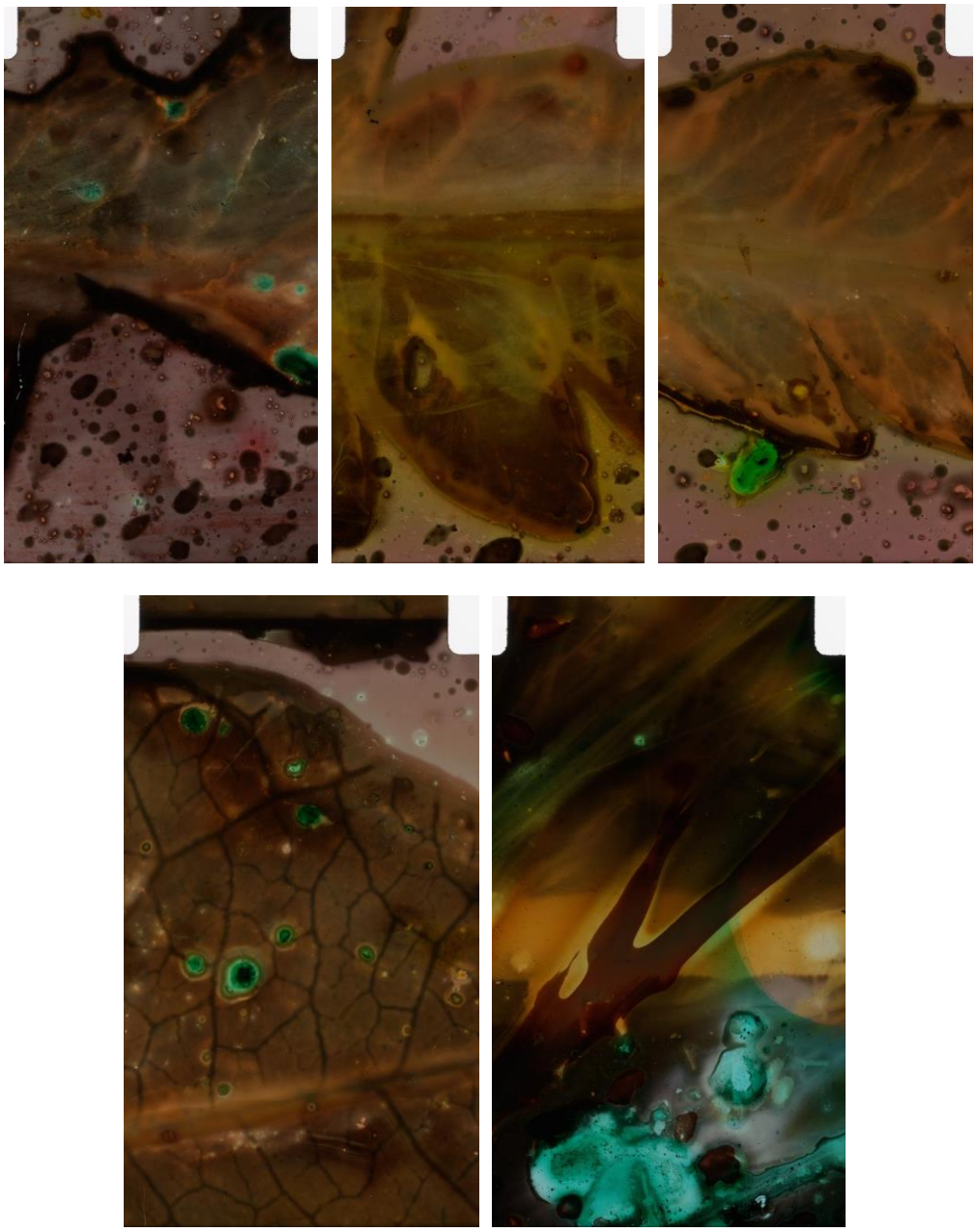
Including Phytograms in the installation became a natural response to understanding the materiality of film and the different layers of my work with plants. The installation then became an assemblage of living organisms, film and sound. By including Phytograms, I intended to envision and practice new approaches to images in which complex ecological relations are set in motion between soil, air, water, human, and bacteria turning into media. In Doing's own words: "Human and nonhuman media collide and combine within phytographic practice, opening up a shared space between people and plants." (Doing, 2020, p. 34).

It's hard for me to describe what is happening between the plants, the sun, the light, the time, and the chemistry. It's not easy to put into words and perhaps it's not necessary. It was more important to find the poetics of this living assemblage within the installation than disembodied scientific objectivity. I decided to create a dialogue between both threads - the western scientific explanation and the metaphorical or spiritual one. Assemblages tied to becoming and metamorphosis. It was more about sensing, feeling and creating networks.

With the Phytograms in the installation, I learned that accessing the knowledge contained in the evocative and spontaneous images of the Phytograms requires work from the audience; they need an open heart and an open mind. The images are stunning and attract the eye quickly; going in depth requires the viewer to immerse themselves in the colours and shapes.[147] Children visitors created fantastic stories of cells living in aquatic spaces. Young audiences were attracted to using them as a beautiful background for selfies; many let themselves go deeper into their imagination and saw them

[146] For more detail description on the results and process of research read Doing (2020, p. 31-32).
[147] In Spanish I would say , *Convertirse en uno solo con el color y las formas*, kind of becoming one with them, with their colours and shapes.

as mutating living organisms. Visitors with a more scientific perspective wondered if the images were captured with a microscope or telescope or perhaps a real-time camera showing what is inside the plants or the trunk that serves as the base of the water pump that triggered the speed of the film.



Frame by frame animation on film with more than 5.000 stills

Poetics in microscopic and chemical fluctuations

One of the plants at home was dying, and my Colombian friend, Marinela Piedrahita, a Soil Food Web Lab technician who became part of the project team, came to my apartment with her microscope and offered this observation:

> "When I entered your apartment, I was stunned to meet all those tropical plants and memories of the landscapes with them. Usually, the soil used for house plants is sterile soil. I was surprised. It was fascinating to find life other than bacteria in your plants (the Coca plant and another one). We found a Nematode Feeding bacteria, Fungi, Amoebae and bacteria, of course. They were all found in minute quantities, but they were present. How did those microorganisms get into the soil? No doubt they moved through us, perhaps through other plants they shared with her, or came into the leaves Alexandra collected in the park, near the lake or in a forest."

We made some recordings, and I was amazed by the amount of movement and life that occurred in a few soil grains. By that time, I was making Phytograms on 16mm film at home with the plants, and I was struck by how similar the recordings of the soil under the microscope were to the images of the plants, the sunlight chemistry reflected on the celluloid. Although Phytograms are the product of chemical reactions of 16mm footage, I could not stop imagining these chemical interactions as part of a larger process of the making of living assemblages. The chemical reaction on films of the Phytograms never stops changing and increases with time. The constant movement and changes in both compelled me to include the Phytograms stills in the installation to show these connections that are in constant metamorphosis.

Soil is alive

Soil in this work has multiple meanings. Soil is of micro and macro importance, a site of living that also refers to the territory. Most plants cannot live without soil, so it is an intrinsic component, and the shapes of soil in the installation resemble maps and geographical locations. I used a different kind of soil to nourish the plants, but also for aesthetic reasons, to have a variety of colours and textures.

There are many stories that soils can tell about the past, the present and the future. There is also a material memory associated with soils, the memory of troubled relationships with belonging and un-belonging. Perhaps it can teach us about human movement. This memory can be both disturbing

and stimulating at the same time. By encouraging a rethinking of the relationship between humans and soil as ecological belongings, I aim to bring together the sense of belonging and ecological thinking through alternative narratives that may nurture an alternative conception of justice beyond human rights towards environment and living and non-living things. I hope it invites soil curiosity.

In the Earth to Tables Legacies project (earthtotables.org) that I co-direct with Deborah Barndt and Lauren Baker, we explored these deeper understandings of the soil. Collaborator Rick Hill offered a Haudenosaunee perspective:

> "When you think about the Earth, the soil, it's nothing more than everything that lived before all the plants, the birds, the animals, the trees, the bushes, and people, my ancestors put into the ground. They become the soil, they give life to the soil. This is why our people say there's a spirit in everything, there's a spirit in the ground, in the stone, in the tree, a spirit in the animals. Because it's that spirit that makes the Earth come alive."
>
> Rick Hill[148]

In-between Vibrations: Sound

When you walk into the installation, you see a mixture of cables, speakers, soil, human hair and plants that resemble the fungal network, that is below the ground, that sustains us and reveals the intricacies of a tree's communication system. One can feel and hear the mixing of sound vibrations in space and through the body.

The sound in this installation attempts to recreate the complexities in the entanglement of plant-human co-relations. Thirty-two speakers positioned throughout the space reverberate, playing a mixture of soundscapes and stories[149] told by immigrant friends.

Based on my research about the transport of plants and seeds brought by immigrants to the city of Toronto, the installation revolves around issues of movement, human and non-human cognition, multiplicity, diversity, and the richness of sharing a common world through the recognition of differences.

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[148]Tuscarora historian, artist and knowledge keeper, and collaborator in the Earth to Tables Legacies Project Earth to tables, C (2021, July 8). *Soil Is Alive* (Barndt & Gelis, 2019).

[149] Oral Stories and soundscapes are centered on the plants, not on the humans. The work intends to de-center anthropocentric views.

This multichannel sound constellation is activated by interactivity through several cameras that detect audience movement. As the visitor passes her hand below the light source (a grow light) that hangs above the plants, two different types of sounds are activated. The first and central one is playing on speakers distributed in between the plants with soundscapes recorded in the place of origin of each plant. At the same time, whispering voices can be heard in a corner inviting the visitor to sit in a chair. Hanging vertically from the ceiling, a strong unidirectional speaker beams stories of my immigrant friends. The feeling is one of travelling through the body, flesh, and resonating in the bones. A transducer[150] situated underneath the seat transmits a second sound that includes the recorded soundscapes of where the plants live today, the balcony on the apartment building, living room or patio. The visitor's body becomes the place where all the sounds are mixed, and the visitor experiences a sonic/corporeal transmission of information.[151]

I use the transducers to expand the experience, thinking of people with hearing impairments, who, by sitting on the chair or placing their hands on the platform that supports the whole installation, can enjoy the sound component via its fundamental principle of embodied vibrations.

The design of all my art installation responds to the exhibit space as well as to the cultural and sociopolitical situations of other places. This version of the installation is a response to the mall and its audience, but also to the moment we were living. I used recordings made in the last months of summer after the first year of COVID pandemic. It was a time in which the interconnectedness of species and spaces was made more visible.

[150] A transducer is a device that takes electrical energy and transforms it into the kinetic energy of sound. The energy causes vibrations that are transmitted through the wooden surface of the chair, the complete chair becomes a speaker.
[151] The sound is very complex, and it reacts and moves in the space according to the acoustic due to the design of the space and building materials. The mall was a highly complex one. Most of the soundscape I had planned for the installation had to be redesigned in situ and adapted to the reality of a metal ceiling that makes a bouncing sound everywhere. With the installation at the mall, I learned to be open to having enough time and an open mind to work the sound in situ. Even bodies absorb the sound, so a piece needs to be programmed for the day of the opening in which hundreds of bodies absorb the sound, but it also should work on a day with a couple of visitors. In my installation plan, now one, I am reserving at least a week just to adapt the sound design to the space.

I was interested in leaving memory traces and sense impressions by creating an intimate and embodied sound experience that would trigger conceptual curiosity about the heard, the unheard and the invisible realities. I am interested in exploring and understanding sound before it becomes audible. I use transducers hoping to trace the path of a sound and its metamorphosis from silence to audible signal.[152]

What comes before the voices and soundscapes we hear?

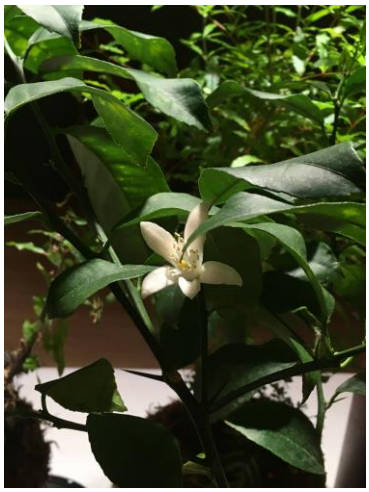
We hear people living and moving through plants; we listen to accents and intimate moments. These stories are attached to and conjure landscapes, at least two landscapes: both the origins and the new destinations of plants and people, a symbiosis of plants, land, spirits, humans and the more-than-human. Sounds become spaces, sometimes spaces that have not taken place yet.

Traces that cannot be described but are felt. Traces coated with vibrations that turn into memories, and sensorial traces that turn graphic philosophical imprints into conceptual drawings. Languages are superimposed upon functions of the sensory creating an entanglement of intimate, complex and multiple relations with the unknown.

Beside the chair is what looks like an official library book, a green, leather-bound book. Each visitor is invited to write or draw two pages of the book. One is transparent for drawing, and the other is for writing stories about the writer's relations with plants or narratives inspired by the work. The transparent page can serve to copy falling leaves from the plants and draw a plant by looking at it. By joining the pages, the textual part and the drawings complement each other as a single narrative. The act of drawing/writing in the book and sharing diverse stories prompts a turn to counter-archival thoughts and knowledge produced by the immigrant experiences, pointing to the ongoing resistance of immigrants dealing with discrimination and emancipation. This counter-archive book becomes a container of stories of other immigrants visiting the mall. Stories that will never be part of the official archive of the city.

[152] In Spanish I say *interesada en el trazo de la metamorfosis del sonido que va desde el silencio al convertirse en audible*. The closest idea I could find is the idea of becoming in English.

Bougainvillea Flower



Lemon Flower

Hibiscus Flower

The sound component is as important to me as the plants, as the storytelling and soundscapes play a very important role in situating perceptions and contextualizing the migrated plants. Nonverbal sound is powerful in many ways. It cannot be reduced to mere signification. The perception or connection with sound differs from culture to culture, just as with the other senses, and we had visitors from many contexts and cultures in the exhibition space.

For many visitors, the sound was primarily an information medium. For others, sound can also be ambient and textural, creating a feeling of embodied experience. These sounds pose questions about "representing the unrepresentable," offering a doorway to other senses, other realms of experience and memory. The With-living installation is a space for all the senses.[153]

The audience was welcomed into the space with the morning sounds of the tropics: crickets chirping at dawn, roosters crowing, the first birds waking up, and with them, a few footsteps are heard in the distance. Then the first motorcycle passes through the village. More crickets and more roosters. These morning sounds have the power to transport people into their memories. The mixed soundscapes[154] take them on a journey through rains in Vietnam, a coffee plantation in Colombia,

[153] There is a vast literature on multisensory perceptions. This exhibition has made me interested in exploring more about the field in my future work.
[154] The soundscapes are recordings made by the contributors of the plants, by me or by sound contributors I have invited and are in the places where the plant is coming from.

rivers in Venezuela, oceans in the Caribbean and oceans during sunset in the south of Italy. All these sounds are mixed with ritual moments in San Basilio de Palenque and the sounds of the tobacco smoking rituals in that town.

I feared a negative response from the plants due to the conditions of the exhibition site, a shopping mall with no windows, poor ventilation during the coldest winter months, high temperatures in the heaters and subsequent lack of humidity. I feared that the plants would wilt and never bloom.[155] On the contrary, the plants grew a lot during the first two weeks; many flowered faster than at home. The Lemon bloomed, as did the Bougainvillea and the Hibiscus.

According to studies of plant sound responses, emission, and detection, plants are capable of detecting acoustic vibrations and frequency. They respond to frequencies in a similar range to the ones they emit, resulting in behavioural changes (Gagliano et al., 2012). Building on Galiano and Mancuso's studies, I wonder if the plants reacted to the soundscapes of their land of origin and if these familiar frequencies helped their growth? Is there a relation between the frequency of the emission of sounds from a particular plant or animal species in the recordings and their growth pattern? And on their subsequent behaviour in a given environment? Are plants that react to specific frequencies able to adapt to new environments with new soundscapes? Or, on the contrary, can the growth pattern be controlled by sounding the signature frequency of the competitor species plant or animals?[156] All these questions have taken me into a new field of "plant bioacoustics."[157]

[155] Marinela Piedrahita remember that moment and she says: "One of the significant challenges we had was to move the plants in the middle of winter, plants and seeds that were already adapted to the conditions of their new home, and to move them to a hostile and cold environment in the middle of a mall and keep them alive". (M. Piedrahita, personal communications, 2022-2023)

[156] Read Gagliano et al. (2012). My interest lies now in how sound can be used to understand the future growth of the so-called invasive species. I hope to create work in this area in the near future.

[157] Expanding on Plant Bioacoustics read: (Gagliano, 2012; Gagliano et al., 2012; ten Cate, 2012; Bailey et al., 2013; Simpson, 2012), among others.

A *Lumbalú*, a funeral ritual for my mother

Sound is crucial in With-Living on various levels, from the conception and research to the production and reception of meanings. With-living is a *Lumbalú* for my mother, my personal Lumbalú[158] in her honour. *A Lumbalú* is a collective farewell of the deceased in which, through sound, the spirit is helped to travel from the world of the living to the world of the afterlife. The singing is usually performed by a group of friends and family. Clara Inés Guerrero, and one of my mother's best friends, poetically reminds us in her writing on Lumbalú:

> "By hearing (music, chantings), the soul achieves detachment from this world. Leaving this dimension and learning to dwell in the afterlife produces an uneasiness that is only calmed by the safe presence of neighbours, relatives and fellow countrymen dead from all times who are gathered waiting in the Palenque of the afterlife".[159]

For my ritual, I invited my closest friends and extended the invitation to immigrants' friends. With their voices, stories, plants, hair, light, and moving images, I created a ritual that accompanied me in my grief and became the installation. My mom *was* music; her essence was sound. All her life, she supported independent musicians in Latin America and initiated a radio show during the COVID pandemic and her cancer treatment. @CrisLombanaLive[160].

Making ceramics with my mother while at the hospital. Designing the lamp shapes options for the grow lights

[158] Read chapter two: *Bahareke* which expands on the Lumbalú ritual explanations.
[159] "Por el oído el ánima logra el desprendimiento de este mundo. El salir de esta dimensión y aprender a habitar en el más allá, produce un desasosiego que solo se calma con la segura presencia de los vecinos, familiares y paisanos muertos en todos los tiempos que están reunidos esperando en el Palenque del más allá. " (Guerrero, 1998b, p. 187)

[160] https://www.instagram.com/crislombanalive/

Ceramics made with Soursop leaves[161]

Ceramic using Papaya leaves[162]

There were many emotionally difficult months learning to say goodbye to my mother. She had been sick for a long time,[163] and while her health was deteriorating, we worked together on ideas for the exhibition. Using WhatsApp while she was at the hospital, she taught me to understand clay and to make ceramics for the installation. Today I can say she was helping me to set up my space and life to process my personal grief, with the support of plants.

One of the ways sound is used in funerals is through vocalization or the utterance of mournful cries and other emotional sounds. In With-Living, I included a layer of *Lekos* (the Palenquero way of crying) from San Basilio de Palenque to evoke powerful spiritual feelings, healing and solace that honours my mom's important presence in the Palenquero women's lives[164] and in my own. In addition to vocalization, in the *Lumbalú*, people use drums to express their emotions. We hear layers of drums played by her Palenquero musician friends accompanied by *Quitiplas* percussive rhythms. The *Quitiplas* is an Afro-Venezuelan instrument made from bamboo plants brought from the Cacao fields

[161] Every morning the Guanabana (Soursop) plant gave us their leaves for a tea for mom as part of her cancer treatment

[162] Photograph taken by my mother on WhatsApp while she was teaching from her bed at the hospital ceramics.

[163] See my series of work *Doing and Undoing poems from within*, made in collaboration with my mother Cristina Lombana, during the cancer treatment.

[164] Now I am working on a feature film. We will start filming in Palenque with a feminist view of a local myth, *Plant of truth and lies: in search of feminism in the South.*

in Chuao, Venezuela. The sound of the drums helps create a solemn atmosphere at the funeral, symbolizing the final journey of the soul of the deceased going through the world of spirit to their final destination. Ritual plants and herbs are situated at the installation entrance to acknowledge a spiritual world.

More than an art exhibition in a mall

The work acts on a multi-sensory level. It is not a greenhouse nor a garden, nor a park. It is an installation, a contemporary art piece in a shopping mall, a mall that suddenly smells of wet soil, illuminated by different shades of green and forest sounds and voices that provoke new sensations that did not exist in that space. A mall transformed by the presence of plants in the middle of a harsh winter becomes the centre of unknown encounters to share memories and form communities. Let's remember that malls nowadays also serve as community centres, where many people come to feel less alone.

At the exhibition, many of the visitors (who are also immigrants) found themselves talking to others, sharing knowledge of plants and their medicinal and edible properties and remembering stories of the plants and their uses in the place of origin. The exhibition becomes a bio-social and political conversation network that breaks down the barriers separating people in this so-called developed country.

Like the soil that plays multiple roles in the creation of all forms of life, this exhibition was intentionally created with superimposed layers of meaning. Care was given equally to the aesthetic and conceptual concerns in the making of this piece. I offered my ongoing dedication to the plants as well as my ongoing dedication to the people working in the exhibition space to nurture the plants. Every day became an opportunity to nurture new relations and new stories, which was one of the most important objectives that I had in mind: to create community and share knowledge around plants, and

to offer a place for memories to be tapped, taking into consideration personal immigrant experiences to develop aesthetic, social and political connections.

Collective care and support were fundamental when we were setting up the piece for two weeks before the opening. My closest friends supported every step and experienced the magic that working with plants brings, witnessing the transformation of space. It was a community effort.
To facilitate the process of moving the plants from my apartment and adapting them to the gallery, I spent two weeks preparing the site. I made technological connections and designed the distribution of soil, cables and plants. The main idea was to be with them for the first two weeks as they adapted to the new space and take notes of their reactions. With my assistant and plant expert, Marinela Piedrahita, we recorded changes. We wrote instructions for the day-to-day care of the plants, including the amount of water and intensity of watering required for each one. To ensure the wellness of each plant and the conservation[165] of the piece, working on instructions of plant care was a long and detailed process, and I needed to train others to take care of the plants while I was away..

Human beings are highly sensitive and respond to low-frequency vibrations, but do plants also? Many conversations in the exhibition space centred on how plants respond to stimuli. They grew very fast and well. The plants were nurtured with love, attention and constant care. Do plants respond to the low frequency emitted from a motherly touch, like the affectionate vibrations that we enjoy during infancy?

During three months in the space we held talks and guided tours, but most importantly, the installation became a centre of exchange of seeds and plants not only with those who worked on the piece but among visitors, mostly immigrants. The insulin plant that I brought from my grandmother's garden in Colombia was one of the highlights that received the most attention. Several times a week, people

[165] The exhibition was maintained by a group of people working for the event, as with any other art exhibition. By seeing the complexity of the work and understanding the importance of the conservation, Claudia Arana, the curator of the exhibition, generated a consultation process with conservator Dr. del Fresno. Since then, we have started a series of conversations about relationships and the implementation of networks of care as a fundamental part of the conservation process. These conversations led to participation in a symposium in which we explained the idea of the piece as a *Community-based installation,* a term we coined together. The presentation was named With-Living: Migrant Co-relations, Toronto as part of the symposium Sustaining Art (https://congresshub.uk/event/dacbres-sustaining-art-2022/): People, Practice, Planet in Contemporary Art Conservation. November 2022. Dundee, Scotland. DJCAD University of Dundee.

came to ask me for one of their cuttings to take home to help their beloved ones or themselves with diabetes.[166] The exhibit transformed into a natural pharmacy.

The plants were watered daily, and this ritual became a fundamental part of the exhibition, not something to hide, but on the contrary, a moment in which we invited visitors to participate. It was an opportunity for them to become aware of the importance of all the elements and their balance. Children especially enjoyed helping while asking the name of the plants and enjoying their smells. The plants emit a strong scent when watered as if they were saying “thank you”!

The fact that the installation allowed for the natural life cycle of the plants to occur,[167] including death and reproduction, could be interpreted as an acceptance of the impermanence and natural processes of life. Some plants were filled with insects, many flowered, and the great banana plant died within months to make way for its offspring

Some individuals may have viewed the death of the plants as a negative reflection on the care given to the installation, or even as a failure. However, this perspective ignores the natural cycle of growth and decay that all living things experience. By allowing for these natural processes to occur, the installation may have been emphasizing the importance of accepting the inevitability of change and the importance of embracing the beauty of impermanence. It could also be seen as a reminder of the interconnectedness of all living things and the influence that the environment and other organisms have on each other.

Among the usual visitors, many were elders from different parts of the tropics who were farmers in their countries of origin. Day after day, they visited the plants and gave us tips for care and remedies to control insects eating the flowers. This display of knowledge reminds us how much

[166] It is important to remember that diabetes is one of the most common illnesses among migrant and indigenous populations due to poor or inadequate nutrition.

[167] The conservation document of the plants mentioned in bold and red letters: *Please do not take the debris, dry leaves or prune the plants*. This was the most challenging part to deal with because people tend to pick off the dead leaves and not accept that the dying is natural. natural life cycle of the plant, while many might have seen it as a definitive death, a lack of care, etc.

expertise in agroecological crops we have in Canada that is wasted. Thousands of migrants are sought only for labour and are not even asked about their knowledge of plants.

Plants are not only places of passage between different worlds but also a destination: a home for individuals or for groups of individuals from different times and places, cultures and traditions.There are individual plants in each story, like in an orchestral migration symphony, but yet all stories resonate in a way that reminds us of our deep connection to others (humans and nonhumans) and inspire us to dream of a different migration future for all.

Final Notes

The *With-Living: Migrant Co-relations. Toronto* exhibit marked an essential point of culmination for me, personally, and in my ongoing exploration of plant-human relations. The conceptualization, creation, mounting and giving to the public opened multiple new wide paths in my long process of understanding or, better yet, opening up more questions around plant-human relations as an assemblage tied to becoming and metamorphosis.

I have learned that plants and gardens in our tiny apartments reflect society, framing complex philosophical meanings. Garden practices are an excellent way to situate ourselves between individual and collective efforts, inhabiting a proliferation of differences that is always in movement, including with other living organisms. The interaction with-in plants, soil, bacteria, and fungus creates a comfortable space to share and talk about difficult topics, such as migration. The smell of the Rue, the happiness that produces the different greens of the Banana plants, and the bright colours of the Trinitarian (Veranera) flowers seem to transform the complex mental spaces of visitors full of pain and segregation into areas where these difficult conversations can be opened with a smile.

This exhibition allowed me to offer different publics my theory of plants as political allies helping to transform territories that I work on. As I explained in chapters two and three, in *Mala Hierba* and *Estera*, African plants in San Basilio de Palenque helped to form a territory of resistance. Similarly,

the plants collected and nurtured for the installation transformed my apartment into a safe place, bringing back memories of my happy sunny tropics in Venezuela, Colombia and Panama.

Plants are protagonists supporting and collaborating in the re-narration of human history. It is precisely in this fluid co-belonging between the vegetal sphere and the human and non-human, that multiple worlds manifest, in this case, based on resilience

Chapter Five:

Synthesis, Questions and Future Directions

The research and writing that supports my reflections on *Bahareque, Mala Hierba, Estera: Medicinal Plants and Resistance* and *With-Living: Migrant Co-relations* has given me a unique opportunity to enhance my understanding of the relationship between my artistic practice and theory. At the beginning of the research, I talked about Environmental history to frame my inquiry; however, it limited my working methodology and conceptual approach. On one hand, "environment" often becomes the passive and distant context for human action. In my work, I search for an entangled intimacy where plants-human relations question and disrupt easy assumptions that position environment as separate from humans and other living beings. On the other hand, as an artist working with collectives and communities, I found that "History" is hard to access However it is possible to create artistic works that probe and represent memory, ancient practices, and storytelling, with the inclusion of non-human actors into the narrative, while acknowledging different ways of knowing and modes of being.

On a conceptual level, I have emphasized a few main ideas and terms underpinning my research: artistic practice; non-humans as leading actors; different ways of knowing; biopolitics; and migrant plants as technologies for territorial and population control. Cutting across these concepts are significant considerations about the boundaries between life and death and the relationship between what we call magic and ritual. However, it would be unwise to say that my artistic practice has helped hone my conceptual tools alone. Dialogue with the work of thinkers from various disciplines has contributed to rethinking my work and methodology, its "how" and "why" within the sphere of ethics as central to my work. The theory comes after intuition and decisions I made during my fieldwork--helping me understand with greater clarity my actions, my goals, my life and practice. I want to be emphatic and completely honest: theory refines my artistic practice from the conceptual and methodological planes, but it comes after being WITHIN plants and communities: amid deserts or jungles of extreme humidity or constant rainfalls, in many cities across different continents, working

collectively with communities for several years to strengthen continuity. In all these other places where life has taken me, the tools that have always been with me from beginning to the end are my intuition and my commitment to acknowledge differences and learn. Without methodical thinking from a creative artistic perspective, these intuitions and new knowledge would merely remain in silence outside my consciousness.

Future Projects

Closing my Ph.D. research with this dissertation is also a new opening in my work, building on many of the questions raised in the last few years. To expand my main methodological, ethical, artistic and conceptual questions, I have initiated four new projects, ***A voz de Radio*** a feature film in San Basilio de Palenque, ***A dress for the Mangrove: The Enea goes out to the Carnival*** a project developed in Colombia based on the Enea (the Canadian Cattail) as "invasive" plant putting in danger the Mangrove land; and ***Migrant Superpositions: Convertirse En***[168] based on the Cattail as native species in dialogue with the Phargmite or Common Reed as an invasive plant in the family parks of Toronto and wetlands of Ontario where there are attempts to control it by using glyphosate. ***Dis-location Thoughts: Walking on the Vacilón River*** delves into the concept of living in a bio-symbiotic relationship with plants. The project was born out of my walks on the Vacilón River in Costa Rica, where walking on uneven terrain with non-uniform rocks and moody land inspired the concept of walking on rough paths. Walking on rough paths stimulates the brain and can lead to new ideas and perspectives by removing individuals from their usual routines and environments. The project includes collecting plants, processing them into paper, and recording soundscapes.

These projects have in common my interest in plants as political allies and the political implications of plant life and their movements, whether it be due to power, control, or economic reasons. My experience as a constant immigrant in a state of displacement has shaped my perception

[168] The work will be on the exhibition *Americanity and Other Experiences of Belonging* curated by Analays Alvarez and Colette Laliberte, at Onsite Gallery from June 14, 2023 to December 09, 2023

of native/non-native relations not only in plants but also in humans. Displaced () between and rooted in diverse territories, altered in my flesh, in my physical appearance and also psychologically in a profound way. I have seen my work expanding towards a deeper work with and in communities, focused on plants-human relations, and opening spaces for a conversation on the importance of bio-symbiotic relationships with all beings within a surrounding area. By highlighting the ways in which plants and humans can coexist in mutually beneficial ways, I hope to encourage a deeper appreciation for the interconnectedness of all living beings. Through the presentation of my work, I am inviting viewers to question and consider the ways in which they too can foster bio-symbiotic relationships with the world. Below I elaborate on each of the four new projects.

A Voz de Radio

The plant of truth and lies: in search of feminism in the South

I am interested in exploring feminisms in Palenque and finding new ways to tell stories through a collaborative docu-fiction project. I have defined the Plant of Truth and Lies as a feminist creation story and seek to use it as a central narrator in the film.

In 2015, I reached out to an ongoing collaborator and Colombian filmmaker Jorge Lozano, to expand the visual component of my research and to produce a full-length film that combines non-fiction and fictional elements in the search for the plant of truth and lies.

My work in San Basilio de Palenque has been greatly inspired by Clara Ines Guerrero, a historian who provided the methodological foundations for my work in Palenque. Together we are interested in exploring technology as a tool of knowledge and a means to understand the magical thinking that is the basis of Palanquero ancestral knowledge. I invite her to collaborate with me in hosting workshops focusing on memory, technology, and deep discussions on what feminism means today in Palenque. Together, we hope to connect with the ancestral knowledge that forms the basis and support of the Palenquero identity and explore how feminism can be a tool for empowerment in the community.

The project seeks to explore new ways of storytelling and to highlight the complexities of feminism in Palenque, ultimately contributing to a deeper understanding of the intersection between

culture, history, social justice and plants as central narrators of history.

Plants and local street vendor Panamá are the guides in our story — he is a partially sighted musician and local street vendor. His morning songs get the news out early[169]: He acts as a modern-day town crier, announcing the morning news as he sells his wares. Throughout the day, he visits old friends, serenading them with musical cries and opening doors to Palenque's rich cultural history. Later, Juan joins the search on his motorcycle, becoming the city's radio in the afternoons. Together, they search for the plant of truth and lies, a symbol of feminist resistance in Palenque and the plant that Benkos Bioho used to kill his daughter, Orika.

Through video workshops and collaborative work with a group of women, many of whom were participants in our first radio workshops in the village, we begin to dismantle the highly problematic myth. Dorina Hernández, one of the leaders not only of the community but now of the country (as a Senator), will be a main collaborator and the person that will guide many of the conversations. Also, Clara inés Guerrero, a historian, will be working in the group and the workshops to enrich the experience; essential to remember, in the 80's she facilitated a series of theatre workshops to work on the compilation of the Palenquero history.

Latin American feminist voices invite us to take off the heavily designed suit[170] that has served as a frame from which our thinking has been generated. They invite us to enter from the very seams of the heavy and invisible suit to weave new relationships.

The feminist invitation leads us to a dislocation and where it is necessary to get out of oneself (Cadahia & Carrasco-Conde, 2020).

Through conversations, workshops, and collaborative work with the community, I hope to propose a dislocation in which the plant becomes the position of enunciation, shifting the focus onto plants as the place from which the new enunciations will emerge.

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[169] http://migratedplants.com/text_hyperlinks/images/panama.mp4

[170] "the heavily designed suit" is a metaphor to refer to the dominant cultural, social, and political frameworks that shape our thinking and behavior. These frameworks are often based on patriarchal, sexist, and discriminatory norms that limit the full expression of women's rights and agency. By inviting us to take off this "suit," Latin American feminist voices are calling for a critical reflection on the power structures and ideologies that underpin our social reality, and for the creation of new and more inclusive ways of thinking and relating to one another. The metaphorical language of the "suit" suggests that these frameworks are not only external but also internalized and embodied, requiring a radical transformation of our selves and our social practices.

A Dress for the Mangrove: The Enea goes out to the Carnival

This work comes from expanding on the idea of the plant as a place that invites us to dislocate from our ways of naming and perceiving plants by complexifying the idea of native/non-native and invasive plants.

This project is an art-collaboration between the master craftsman Rodrigo Acosta Noriega, who works with natural fibres of the Colombia Caribbean region and myself as the artist. Based on the plant *Enea* (Typha, known as cattail in Canada), the project is in the Via Isla de Salamanca National Park in the Department of Magdalena in Colombia. *Enea* is known in the area as an "invasive plant" and contributes to the spread of forest fires in the Mangrove lands, endangering the ecosystem's balance. The project has the support of Colombian National Parks, and it aims to support an environmental restoration program the organization is developing in the area. Formally, the project seeks to produce a hybrid piece between traditional fabric-making and wearable technologies to create a costume used in an in situ performance in the territory (Mangrove and surrounding populations). The complex ecologies formed between plants and people and between plants and their multi-species interrelationships, ancestral knowledge, medicinal practices and rituals are fundamental. Through the Enea plant, we will consider the local knowledge of the plant as a meeting place, where the questions are formulated. This entanglement of knowledge, plants, and people will become a costume, which will serve as a prototype to hopefully be appropriated by the

community and be incorporated annually in Salamanca Park's dance group representation in the Barranquilla Carnival. **A dress for the Mangrove: The Enea goes out to the Carnival** has the potential to become sustainable over time by helping control Enea's spread, opening up economic possibilities for the main collaborator of the project, the artisan Mr. Rodrigo, and in turn for the community.

The work invites us to establish dialogues with the multiple ways of being a plant: The plant that is cooked, a plant to which a poem is written, a plant we listen to and smell, a plant that can cure us as a medicine. It is an invitation to the community to visit the *Enea* as a plant that they see and live with daily; in this new encounter, they experience the plant as a place of dislocation provoking a permanent questioning. *Dislocación* in Spanish implies a place (location), a point of break of a place, or a displacement. Geologically, it refers to a change of direction, horizontally, of a layer or seam, perhaps a crack or movement of a tectonic plate. On the other hand, In English, it implies a negative effect on how something works, a situation in which a person or thing, such as an industry or economy, is no longer working in the usual way or place. I am interested in the definition of the Cambridge Dictionary as an injury in which the ends of two connected bones separate,[171] so a radical break is much needed. In this case, a new encounter can happen between the community and the plant at this point or moment of fracture. It is in these unknown places where questions form cracks, a glitch In the system of colonial ideas of human power over plants we have been attached to it. Within these cracks new ideas are seeded, new ways of knowing based on more horizontal relations. In this way the Enea is transformed into a suit, a dress made with its fibres for the Carnival- Barranquilla.

A dress for the Mangrove: The Enea goes out to the Carnival is a project I am proposing from home in the Colombian Caribbean area. While waiting for some funding, surprisingly, came first one we could say is the counterpart: a project from my other home Toronto. **Migrant Superpositions: Convertirse En** is a project that will give me the knowledge and experience that comes from the land and its people to nourish the Dress for the Mangrove. By getting to know the Cattail, a beloved local plant, I hope to shed light on the migrated plant Enea as non-native plant in Colombia.

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[171] Cambridge Dictionary

Migrant Superpositions: Convertirse En

To open up the conversation from both the Global South and the Global North, I am working on *Migrant Superpositions: Convertirse En* based on the Cattail (Typha, known in Colombia as Enea) a native species in Ontario. This project represents an opportunity to explore the ecological and cultural significance of this plant. The project is informed by ongoing ecological restoration initiatives and aims to contribute to the control of the non-local Phragmites plant, which threatens the survival of cattail lands.

Supported by Musagetes Arts Foundation and rare Charitable Research Reserve with the guidance of Elwood Jimmy, I have access to cattail land that is under study. Cattail is a protected plant in the country. The project is informed by rare's ongoing ecological restoration initiatives and aims to contribute to the control of the non-local Phragmites plant, which threatens the survival of cattail lands. The use of animals to eat the plant, the introduction of moss, and many other new methods to avoid the use of glyphosate are experimental techniques being employed to address this issue, which are a testament to the creative problem-solving that is possible when working in harmony with the environment. The experience of working with cattail on the land is not only enriching the installation conceptually but also reinforcing the importance of the ecological and cultural value of native plants and to support the movement to ban glyphosate, an herbicide that is harmful to both humans and the environment.

I am interested in collaborations and dialogue with other artists and disciplines; as part of the six months exhibition at Onsite Gallery there will be an activation of the installation on July 29, 2023, entitled **Becoming and Moving**.

Becoming and moving is a plant-based movement improvisation in response to the installation. The work is a collaboration between dancer and choreographer Victoria Mata[172], artist/designer Maxyne Baker[173], and myself. It explores themes of migration, discrimination, transformation, and the control

[172] Victoria Mata Venezuelan-Canadian settler in T'Koronto. Poly-lingual choreographer, dance artist and activist with a background in expressive arts therapy.
[173] Maxyne Baker is a Canadian Cinematic Storyteller who expresses herself in fibre, cloth and haberdashery.

of both humans and plants and raises questions about human control over life in the vegetal and ecological spheres.

The movement improvisation incorporates components of the installation, such as mechanical sounds mixed with a soundscape that highlights two spaces: recordings of nature portraying biodiversity and sounds of highways. The wearable piece created in collaboration with Baker is made with fibres from the Phragmites plant mixed with Cattail plant fibres. This inter-relation of movement, plants, and people become a costume that challenges ideas of the local and the foreign.

Becoming and moving relates to plants as the position of enunciation, a meeting place in which questions and answers can be formulated through movement. It conveys the concept that plants are not just passive objects but rather active participants in the creative process and that their perspectives and movements can inform and shape the overall work.

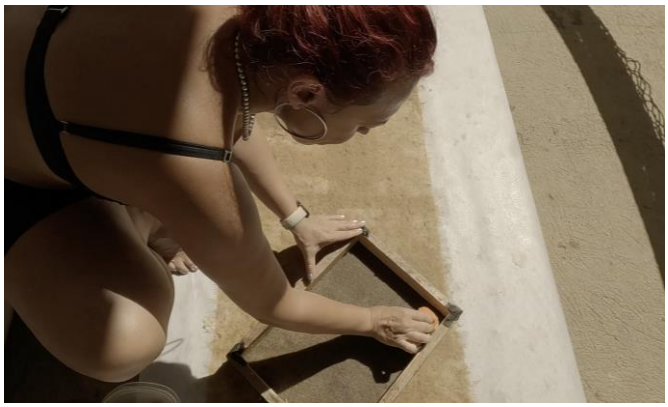
Both of these works**, A dress for the Mangrove: The Enea goes out to the Carnival** and **Migrant Superpositions: Convertirse En**, bring up the following questions:
How can the biological and ethnobotanical knowledge of the Enea as a native plant in Colombia and the sacred Cattail plant in Canada can be used to work with the communities living with the Enea in the Mangroves land of Parque Salamanca? How could a research-creation project based on Enea's relation as a native species cohabiting with the Phragmites be developed and nourished with another project based on the same Enea and non-native species?

Dis-location thoughts: walking on the Rio el Vacilón

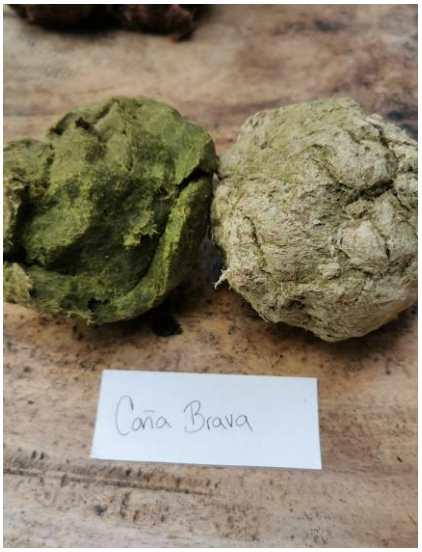
The journey to Costa Rica began with a heavy heart due to the loss of my mother and stepdaughter. As a guide and anchor, I've explored and understood territories through the communities I work with. But this time, I had no guides, and Costa Rica was an unfamiliar territory with new flora and fauna.

Without any theoretical frameworks, I decided to approach the terrain, the river waters, the constant rain, the wind, and the blue butterfly that greeted me every morning. And then, I look at the plants. What if I approached the plant as the position of enunciation, shifting the focus onto plants as the place from which the connection and I hope understanding of the new territory will come.

In search of dislocating my place, I began to fracture my own preconceptions and dislocate in search of plants as a



place of enunciation. Through their smell, colors, and textures, I conducted a series of experiments and dialogues with the context and surrounding plants as my allies.



I began to make walks through the Vacilon River collecting plants all around the river that is now dry during the summer season. I also was looking for specific plants' calls - some fallen, some growing abundantly, covering the bush in front of the house, and others cut to control their growth. Costa Rica was no longer an unfamiliar territory, and the plants became my guide to understanding this new land. I started making paper with the different plants. After three months I went back to the river and lay down the 10 metres of paper, resulting from the process of following the paths of my initial walks.

Writing with plants

The weather is an assertive host, it always lets you know that it's around. It can be cruel and unforgiving. When I follow the river bank (which is dry in the summertime) it is now flowing, due to last winter's storms and heavy rainfall. In response, many plants have appeared to provide cover for these tender and vulnerable root systems. They are helping out their tree comrades, they are providing nutrients and shade. It's still my old habit to see these other plants as separate from the trees as if the jungle was made out of distinct pieces, isolated moments that can be cut out by language. Perhaps it would be more accurate to say that the jungle is a body and that parts of this body are busy doing the necessary work of repair.

After the passing of my mother and our beloved Bree, life and, I might say, their spirit took us to distant Costa Rica. We have been building a little house at the base of a mountain and by the river where untamed creatures roam freely in the dense rainforest; one can hear them and smell them, especially during the dark nights or the new moon when all the living is going out to hunt.

I've come here to Costa Rica to find a new way of being with plants. I like to wait with the plants, to live in the time of plants. It can be a very slow time or a very fast time, but everything is in flux, in motion. I am learning how to move in a new way, the plants are teaching me. But it's hard to describe what is happening, it's hard to put into words. It seems that words are part of what I need to learn to let go of, in order to open the door to this new life with plants. I spend hours on the trails here without words. It's true that the plants are communicating, but they don't communicate with subjects and predicates, with verbs and nouns. Instead, they are calling me to be part of this world, and to refuse the separation that I usually summon with language. They are calling me away from my isolation, my safety, my fears, so that I can become part of the jungle.

I've started a new project here. I've been gathering plants, or parts of plants. I ask their permission and they signal understanding. From these plants I've begun a long process of making paper. There are hours of boiling and mashing and cutting and grinding. At last, I can bring out this paper, these flags, these sheets, and hang them out to dry. When I was here last year it was very difficult to get the paper, or anything else (clothes, cameras, skin) to dry; the humidity is more than one hundred percent. But the beach is only a few minutes away, and there is another ecosystem at work there. It's very sunny and very dry, so what used to take hours or even days can now transpire in minutes.

For most of my life I have converted my experience into language, to words, often on film. But now it was necessary to engage in a manual process, to work with my hands, in order to feel the plants touching me, in order to become part of their understanding. We entered into a dialogue without words. It is hard to describe this quality of touching. But where there used to be words on a page, now the marks have slowly disappeared, and what is left is the page itself. It is the plants once again, which are the fundamental ground, the starting place, the arena where we can come together.

I am working in deep collaboration with the plants to allow the expression of another to come forward. It's only by understanding someone or something else, that I can gain an understanding of my own process, of this person I name as myself.

I can't say how exactly, but this work feels the same in my body as the work I do with communities. I am working with an overlooked and ignored part of this place, it is part of the "background." The beginning of each research is to grant attention to situations that have not been given attention, and to allow the people, the plants, the components of that situation to express themselves. My role is to bring tools so that experience can be converted into new forms of expression. The aim is always to heal. To find another way to touch the wounds and transform them into new ways of seeing and living.

Appendix

Plants stories part of With- living: MIgrant co-relations and some reflections.

Sofia Ledesma, a second-generation Mexican immigrant and anthropology student, was part of the group of people in charge of the guided tours of the exhibition for three months and keeping the plants alive. Sofia was the central person who deeply connected with the plants. She got the call from the plants. With great care, love and a lot of listening, Sofia nurtured them more than keeping the plants alive and served as a bridge between the exhibition's visitors, their memories and stories and the plants.

Here are her thoughts on the exhibition.

With - Living Migrant Co-Relations. Toronto
A Reflection by Sofia Flores-Ledesma

I think taking care of plants is a wholly grounding experience - to be attentive to growth, changes, environment, and a miniature ecosystem is something that requires full, present attention. I found myself learning about what the plants responded well to and what they disliked, about which insects could harm their fresh leaves and which would cause no harm, about their flowering and phases. Every day I hoped for their best health and new growth, remaining attentive to their moisture and even whispering words of reassurance to the seeds who had travelled so far to be here.

Through this process, the symbiotic relationship I fostered with the plants reminded me of the importance of taking care, both mentally through identifying connections through the long and short histories of people and plants, and physically through protecting them. It is so easy to forget that the plants that inhabit and once dominated this earth are allowing us air to breathe and an ephemeral beauty to behold. Some, like the insulin plant featured in *With*, are even allowing for the better health of humans. We harvest their fruits, even going as far as to develop methods of modifying them to give us the optimal result (for example, the long and deeply integral domestication of maize by Indigenous peoples and its journey to becoming the corn we know today). Conversely, we as humans who cohabit

this earth have long fostered a bond with these and many other plants, raising them from seed to stalk. Some people also love them and do everything in our power to keep them happy, with house plants and gardens serving as examples of sites of care and love, and remembrance of our need to nurture the natural.

This all, to me, highlights the importance of reconnecting with earth on the level of plants - having compassion and connection for flora reminds us of our duty to protect the natural world at a time when it is being sacrificed for the short-term convenience of few. From pollinators to fertilizers, water to sunlight, roots to hands, we are a community who must graciously and lovingly defend one another for the sake of all past, present and future living things to come.

"Alexandra [Gelis] draws upon her own experiences as an immigrant as well as the curiosity of a scientist, the observational skills of a plant lover, the aesthetic sensibility of a visual artist, the ingenuity of a tech geek, the listening skills of a gatherer of stories," says Gelis's PhD supervisor and professor emerita at the Faculty of Environment and Urban Change Deborah Barndt. (Burdi, 2022)

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