

DECOLONIZING KNOWLEDGE, ART AND AESTHETICS
THROUGH VITAL SPIRITUAL-POLITICAL MAKINGS
WITH THE ECOSYSTEMS IN WHICH WE LIVE

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Most of the world is connected to histories of knowledge, art, and aesthetics that have been kept out of hegemonic world history, sometimes museumized and at the same time misunderstood. Histories and practices of knowledge that are interwoven with other relational capabilities, other spiritual-political practices. Practices that involve eccentric metaphysical musings on how reality is constituted.

Through my artistic practice, I seek to evoke stories, practices, learnings, and feeling-thinking with and from the symbiotic beings and ecosystems that are part of my autohistoria. By this I mean the lessons inherited from the Amazonian Andes, those learned in the coastal desert valleys of Lima-Callao, and the rooting I have taken on the wide banks of the Danube River in Vienna. Overall, I mean all the local ecosystems I have inhabited which have materially shaped the communities to which I belong and to which I feel an affective and political bond. Something that is at the center of the self-determination struggles in Latin America for which many indigenous communities fight, even if it so often costs them their lives.

Now, as we know, decolonizing knowledge from a structural perspective means counteracting the effects of the colonial project, its systems and its institutions. Similarly, for art this means dismantling the centralization of a hegemonic art system and its structures that are based on capitalist colonial power relations.

But in addition to what needs to be transformed, decolonizing knowledge and art also has to do with the ability to identify the everyday moments and spaces in which other realities take place. The everyday practices in which hierarchical power is contested and in which we liberate ourselves, regenerate, and activate alternative realities.

Having said that, in my research I work with methods that emerge from what shapes my experience in the world. I have long been inspired by the work of authors such as Gloria Anzaldúa, José María Arguedas, Victoria Santa Cruz, César Calvo, or Felipe Guamán Poma de Ayala, authors who criticize power structures departing from the experiences that inform their world. As Espinoza Miñoso reminds us, we need to produce and make visible in

a broad way our own interpretation of the world, as a priority task for the processes of decolonization. a task that must be accompanied by processes of recovery of the traditions of knowledge that in *Abya Yala*¹ have resisted the onslaught of coloniality, as well as those that from other geographies and from critical positions have contributed to the production of epistemological fractures (Espinoza Miñoso 2014, 8, my translation). (Fig. 1)



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Abya Yala is one of many precolonial names used to describe the land of the Americas. The name *Abya Yala* comes from the language of the indigenous Kuna people of present-day Panama and Colombia. Literally translated, it means “land in full maturity” or “land of life”. The use of the name *Abya Yala* expresses a political critique to the colonial histories behind the terms “America”, “Latin America” or “New World”.

→ Fig. 1:
 Imayna Caceres, *Dicotyledon: shoots, sprouts, bilateral simmetries, asymmetries, folds, movements, languages in which life manifests itself*, 2022, watercolor on paper. *Life forms*, 2022, clay sculptures, exhibition view, exhibition “Learning from plants, stones and water. Counterstories of Earthbeings amid global crisis”, 2022, SOHO STUDIOS, Vienna. Photo: Marisel Bongola. Courtesy of the artist.

In that sense, I consider as part of my research methods realms in which we experience knowledge beyond that which is officially sanctioned: exploring feelings, emotions, affectivity, empathy, joy, sadness, anger, depression and anxiety. Reflecting critically, misunderstanding. Belonging and not, attempting to connect with others, failing. Paying attention to how life forms, events, and phenomena behave in my surroundings. Opening up to the lessons that come in dreams, visions, and worlds beyond. Feeling-thinking with the subconscious, the darkness, the night, and the underground. Submerging myself in water, and listening to its many songs. Engaging with shamanic knowledge, dialoguing with the world of spirits, with modes of consciousness that consider the impact of cosmological events. Reading, writing stories, poems, and songs. Remembering and analyzing the common myths and stories my great-grandmother told to my mother in their village. Developing relationships with non-human entities and phenomena in the ecosystems I have inhabited in Peru and Austria. Caring work and experiencing the exhaustion that comes from bringing life into the world. Caring for plants, animals, and other earth beings. Repairing, fixing, cleaning, detangling, sewing, cooking, eating, tasting, digesting. Working with flavors, colors, tastes that made me and are part of my history. Dancing while reading and writing to reggaeton, dembow, cumbia, or chicha. Working with diasporic aesthetics and art in the decolonial ecofeminist Latin American collectives of Vienna. Drawing, painting, kneading, sculpting, knotting with non-human corporealities such as pigments, textiles, or clay, writing, speculating from the

→ Fig. 2:

Imayna Caceres, *Core relationalities, Cacti and Beans*, 2020, watercolor on paper, 21 × 15 cm, part of the series *The plant that is conscious in me. A continuous thread from the first forms of life, and the learnings of all the species that precede us and are present in every part of ourselves. Personal-collective diasporic learnings that manifest in dreams, visions, and in our collective political doings, contributing to maintain a sense of connectedness and of belonging amidst the unrootedness of non-citizenship and migration. Learning from the neighbouring bodies of water, plants, lichen, soils that make us, and tuning to a consciousness beyond the structures of accumulation and exploitation*, 2022. Photo: Imayna Caceres. Courtesy of the artist.

intuitive, and paying attention to what emerges from the weaving and knotting of all these life experiences. Hegemonic anthropocentric history has rarely included the events experienced by non-humans, their problems, achievements and tribulations. It assumed that only humans had intelligence, reason, historical agency, desire for transformation and action, and that no other life form was capable of producing science, art or technology. However, recent scientific research increasingly suggests that reason and intelligence are the expressions of a capacity common to all living things: to evaluate, through their senses, the conditions that allow them to continue living, to pursue a good and pleasurable life, and to make the best choices for doing so. These are not exclusively human qualities, but a characteristic of life itself. (Fig. 2)



Thus, the basic concepts of all our learnings have to do with the efforts of other beings to survive in thousands of ecosystems, hence perceiving, knowing, and surviving are connected. Moreover, as symbiotic beings, the very possibility of our existence is connected to the actions and choices of other beings. To trace the thread of the earliest life forms is to follow the path of each new capacity that was formed according to the environmental circumstances of our ancestors: the first beings that grouped like cells, that developed symmetrically, that developed a heart and a brain, that developed taste, touch, sight, smell, skin, blood, bones, or hearts. Every effort and every achievement are recorded in the khipu of our DNA as active or inactive capacity, and this tells a more complete history of knowledge.

This epistemic ancestry could help us realize how “artistic materials” could as well be seen as collaborating corporeal matters. Thus, working artistically with the bodies and knowledge of other beings could create a ritual space that would explain why many artists report experiencing meditative states while working. And help us better grasp the notion of the shaman-artist (Anzaldúa 2015, 33), who is able to channel states of connection with the multiple realities that exist. Similarly, recognizing that animals

and plants also have a desire to survive the ongoing multiple crises, and that they can take action and organize themselves, might lead us to recognize their participation in history and their potential role in the future. Moreover, what if not recognizing these relationalities as part of ourselves operates as a kind of fracture that renders us disconnected and exploitable? What if freeing ourselves from the attribution of the human species as the only one capable of generating knowledge opens us towards desired futures? (Fig. 3)



→ Fig. 3:
 Imayna Caceres, *Musa x Paradisaca*.
*Arts, performance, fashion first devised
 by the non-human*, 2022, 70 × 100 cm.
 Photo: Imayna Caceres. Courtesy of
 the artist.

We live within systems of dispossession and structures of accumulation whose colonial, rationalist, progressive, and ecocidal effects threaten life (Demos 2020, 1). However, these have always coexisted with dissident ways of life, with openings, cracks, spaces of resistance, and oblivion (Espinoza Miñoso and Maldonado-Torres 2016, 11, my translation). Ways of life that have survived crises, wars, conflicts and that enable the regeneration of social movements through a connection with vitality. I have experienced this vitality in coming together to protest, in collective ritual offerings, and in dancing together with other non-citizen compañeras in Vienna. a transformative power of communal celebration that engages a critique of structural power relations, bodily wisdom, and sociohistorical relationships with non-human entities and phenomena. These forms of world-making bring about different perspectives on knowledge, and remind us the potential of the arts (for a historical distinction between art and arts, see Sonderegger 2019, 273). They remind us why, for many peoples, art, ritual, and collective healing have been considered synonymous, as spiritual-political practices that revolve around reciprocity and gratitude. By spiritual-political, I mean here a practical and caring relationship with a materiality or ecosystem (local and cosmic) that is practiced out of necessity. a care for relationships with what keeps us alive, which is the basic condition for our existence. In my experience, collective ri-

→ Fig. 4:
 Imayna Caceres, *Communal Technologies*, 2022, detail, offering on textile of stones, coca leaves, wool, shells, beans, grains, wayruro, beads, palo Santo, agua de florida, 600 × 150 cm, exhibition “Learning from plants, stones and water. Counterstories of Earthbeings amid global crisis”, 2022, SOHO STUDIOS, Vienna. Photo: Marisel Bongola. Courtesy of the artist.

tuals are practices that help us access the potentialities that inhabit the materiality/energy of other living beings. The ritual offering, even more so when activated collectively, is a political technology of reciprocity and connection with other species and worlds. a tool to question hegemonic structures, fetishist processes of alienation, and to confront the orders that have led us to the current anthropogenic crisis. But also, a way of creating community, and a political rethinking in practice of the ways in which we want to live (Caceres et al. 2023, 81). (Fig. 4).



As with offerings, the knowledge of dancing is maintained as a celebration of valuable practices that is common in group gatherings throughout Latin America. Through dancing, we recall a large vocabulary of movements that revolve around the retelling of experiences: celebrating joy, romance, satire, sadness, our relationships with the earth, or surviving despite oppression. Being present in one’s body, dancing together communally creates a mode of enjoyment and intimacy that opens spaces for other relationalities. Through dancing, we can directly feel the wisdom of our bodies about its spiritual material needs and how they can be met through movement. Dancing manifests itself as a fundamental vital impulse that becomes visible in the movement of the body. As an appreciation of the knowledge acquired and experienced in everyday life through the body. Something that can be seen, for example, in the traditional dances of Peru where the steps imitate the working of the land, sowing, harvesting, as well as the movements of rivers, snakes, deer or birds. Likewise, several of the Afro-descendant dances practiced in Latin America, focus on the movements of the belly, torso, hips, and ass.

All the basal, which returns to the earth, as arts that go through the body and are not only felt but also digested. The joyful and skillful movements of these parts of the body were considered grotesque and barbaric by colonial “civilizing” accounts but have always been highly valued by the people who keep them alive.

Well-guarded knowledge about how everything sounds, sings, or dances, as life is made of frequencies and vibrations. We

are as we move, and we are made of all these genres, which are worlds and “dancing is a way of collecting and transferring practical learning” (Santa Cruz interviewed by Feldman 2006, 67). Every breath is rhythm, and “through re-encountering internal rhythm, and through the knowledge of the flavor of rhythm, it is possible to acquire unity, organically” (Santa Cruz 2004, 59).

Sound, even more when it has a manifested purpose, reconfigures us. This happens in the case of many Amazonian communities whose knowledge of spiritual healing is realized through song. As a knowledge of the power of sound and rhythm, of tones, frequencies, resonances, silence (and of darkness and the night) to transform material reality. (Fig. 5)



→ Fig.5:
Dancing round on the day of indigenous resistance. Organized by our collective *Antikoloniale Interventionen in Wien* on October 12, 2021. Photo: Marisel Bongola. Courtesy of the collective.

Our diasporic catalog of dance movements from *Abya Yala* is imbued with the knowledge about sound as vibration that materializes in our bodies and as generating energy that heals us. These dances are practical philosophies of rhythm and sound that connect us to our inner selves and to the cosmos. They are body-based knowledge that contributes to maintaining an invested relationship with the whole of the cosmos. As practices of reciprocity that sustain an awareness of our radical interdependence, where the artistic is spiritual, social, functional, and worldly, intertwined with all spheres of life.

FINAL KNOTTINGS

My experiences in politically employing our knowledge from back home in Latin American collectives in Vienna have shown me the potential of these artistic methods in practice. As well as how we are interwoven by multiple histories and by cosmopolitical knowledge about community life that is not only human.

As a diasporic aesthetic knowledge that expresses political gratitude to the ecosystems that make us and that understands that the relationships we recognize, sustains our being in the world. What would be taught in our systems of education if knowledge was approached with the final aim of being in community with each

other and caring for our wellbeing? How do we approach knowledge in such a way that it contributes to creating community?

The work of decolonizing knowledge implies access to a vital force that manifests itself in many ways. Politically, it means complementing critical positions towards oppressive structures with a vitality that unites us, that is far from harmonic but lives in the chaos, the unexpected, and in the forces that pull between weaving us and dividing us. It means recognizing the power of the vitality that resides within us to transform everything, whereby every action and movement we make literally transforms us, recognizing alternative ways of living, doing, feeling and thinking, of relating to history, the future, and to our desires for transformation, for *sabor y gozo* (“flavor and enjoyment”), and good living. Dissident ways of life that produce microtransformations within what is a constant and challenging mutual work of care, as practices that contribute to rethinking how we want to live and to confront the orders that have brought us to the current crisis.

It is my experience that within the arts lies enormous wisdom. If what we understand as art is a language and a function of life, the ways in which life communicates, then feeling and thinking through art allows us to approach other ontological aspects that are part of the struggles of social structures and conflicts. In the face of the various socio-ecological crises of our time, we urgently need practices and methods that set in motion alternative ways of generating knowledge. It is my experience that a grounded approach to the different arts can contribute to decentering the human and to the project of decolonizing knowledge.

It is possible for the arts to help us reconnect with vital knowledges and ancestral technologies, not in the sense of romanticizing pre-modern eras, but to connect with schools of thought where art contributes to collective healing. Art can be an extension of our symbiocity, whereby we are constantly exposed to the effects of other corporealities. An extension where we are crossed by the effects of other lives in our own bodies. Art affects us sensorially, aesthetically, and affectively. It reminds us that learning and creation take place in the whole body, in the skin, in the guts, and always with others. Acknowledging this inheritance and exchange maintains an awareness of our radical interdependence and contributes to our aims towards social and ontological justice.

In rituals, we grow Pachacamic roots with those who inhabit us, acknowledging the work of the beings and entities that create our ecosystems. We activate memories of continuous presents as we move to the rhythm of sounds that heal and organize us. Embroidering our bodies with songsrepair.

In the cosmic fabric in which we sing, more than human technologies weave our worlds. Everything dreams, speaks, and learns. Everything works with full awareness of its labor: Water moves, shaping matter, pulling and breaking time,

becoming gas clouds and soaking planets. Celestial rivers dance in serpentine movements through galaxies. Mountains summon water from above and below, harvesting liquid pathways that sustain life. Our great-grandmother plants feed on nourishing air and starlight. Fungi devour ancestral darkness, controlling the flow of matter and energy underground. Flowers become colorful soil that feeds the microcosmos.

Together, we eat and know the care of earth and water. We learn from lichens and rocks about the stories of our ancestors. We learn from the wind about loss and the invisible forces that move things. We learn from the fire about transformation and the warmth that can emerge from destruction. Together, we pulse in a dance of collaboration, chaos, crisis, and survival.

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