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plants as agents of decoloniality in curatorial and pedagogical processes

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Abstract

The Vegetal Curator looks at plants as agents of decoloniality through curatorial and pedagogical processes. This thesis consists of three chapters that work around the question: How can plants be approached as agents and companions in processes of decoloniality within artistic, curatorial, and pedagogical practices?

My practice as a curator and art educator, and my larger aim to decolonize as a way to promote social and environmental justice, serve as a starting point for this research. With anecdotes on work experiences, I reflect on the possibilities and outcomes of taking vegetal characteristics as methods for teaching and curating. Through historical and theoretical research, I contextualize these ideas further. With the addition of exercises that integrate the addressed methods, I invite the reader to join and practice these vegetal qualities in activities.

The first chapter focuses on the role plants play in coloniality and their possible agency in decolonial processes by looking at colonial systems in the past and present and proposing how the characteristics of plants can support ideas of decolonizing. Sections of experimental writing take the perspective of the nutmeg tree and form an option of the suggested vegetal approach. The second chapter looks at how art functions as a vehicle for decolonial processes while allowing a central role for plants. I analyze six selected case studies and relate each to a method with decolonial potential. Together these methods form a toolbelt of imaginative, relational, and caring modes to practice decoloniality in companionship with plants. With an anecdote from my practice, I reflect on the potential of the method and then share an exercise that the reader is invited to activate. The third and last chapter asks how curatorial practice can take inspiration from plants to support processes of decoloniality. Characteristics of plants serve as a call to formulate points of attention that build and improve curatorial work with vegetal qualities.

Working through the three chapters, *The Vegetal Curator* moves from speculation to theory, from case study to method and exercise, and from experience to a call. All of these form elements of my hybrid practice, which aims to move away from human exceptionalism and collaborate with plants to develop alternative ways of being in the world.

Keywords: pedagogy, curating, plants, vegetal, decoloniality, exercises, storytelling, listening, imagination, sensory, reciprocity, queering

Index

Introduction

"It is easier to imagine the end of the world than the end of capitalism," state Zizek and Jameson.[1] Their quote illustrates how challenging it is to "stay with the trouble",[2] as Donna Haraway calls it. Staying with the trouble, she says, means "finding a rich wallow in multispecies muddles."[3] Inviting an interdependent collective life, fluid, relational, based on coexistence and collaboration. Change takes imagination, often in the form of art, as Ursula K. le Guin told us: "We live in capitalism, its power seems inescapable—but then, so did the divine right of kings. Any human power can be resisted and changed by human beings. Resistance and change often begin in art."[4] *The Vegetal Curator* thinks with plants and artworks activated by exercises to find courage, inspiration and materials to imagine multispecies muddles, stay with the trouble and decolonize.

I approach plants as agents and witnesses of decoloniality—not as tools but as teachers and companions in unlearning coloniality and relearning forms of storytelling, listening, imagination, reciprocating, and queering.

Where a worldview of modernity worked on understanding through classification and categories, a way to now unlearn this is by relating to things themselves, in manners that exceed the categories which reduced them. I advocate for a move from rationality to relationality. Within this relationality, it is crucial to understand social issues in their environmental context and vice versa. In a similar vein, colonial histories, and coloniality as such, function as engines of racial and environmental violence entangled with the all-encompassing crises of the capitalocene.[5] My ongoing research focuses on the discrepancy between glorified national narratives of exploration and discovery and the apocalyptic reality of coloniality. As a Dutch person, I focus particularly on the Netherlands and its colonial activities in the Southeast

1. Quote attributed to both Slavoj Zizek and Fredric Jameson.
2. The trouble is referring to the increasing and overwhelming crises of our current age, often described within the concept of the Anthropocene.
3. Donna Haraway, "Tentacular Thinking: Anthropocene, Capitalocene, Chthulucene," in *Staying with the Trouble: Making Kin in the Chthulucene*, 2016, p. 1.
4. Ursula K. Le Guin, "The National Book Foundation Medal for Distinguished Contribution to American Letters acceptance speech [video]," 20-11-2014, https://www.ursulakleguin.com/nbf-medal
5. I prefer using capitalocene coined by Jason W. Moore over the more common term Anthropocene because capitalocene does not group all humans into one category but points out more specifically what systems and kind of behaviors have caused our current situation of climate and environmental crises. Austin Roberts, "Jason W. Moore: The Capitalocene, World-Ecology, and Planetary Justice [podcast]," in *EcoCiv 22*, 21-09-2019, https://ecociv.org/podcast/episode-22-jason-w-moore/

Asian archipelago known today as Indonesia. In my research, I connect the climate emergency to this longer historical cycle of colonial violence against humans and nonhumans alike.

In my search for a way to approach this intricate subject matter, I found brilliant, supportive, and generous allies in vegetal life. Plants allow for the most generous variety of approaches to relate to them; for humans, plants can be beautiful, bring shade, have intriguing designs, offer relaxation, and many plants provide useful materials, fuel, foods, and medicine.[6] These specific qualities are simultaneously central to the reasons why plants are implicated with colonialism. Our human lives are thoroughly entangled with those of plants; our histories have been written according to our lifestyles, livelihoods, production, trade and global relations. Even though the perspective of plants is not considered, they play a central role in the movements, choices, options, interests and courses of this history. As much as plants have influenced us, they also are marked by our behaviors and carry our stories.[7] While plants have such a different way of being in the world, they can show us alternative ways of being in the world through their involvement and the necessity of our relations.

To grant plants the position of ally, it is important to attribute them agency and move away from seeing them as a passive backdrop. Plants are an active agent in their environment, responding and communicating to the things going on around them like light, sound, color, touch, and chemicals. For their survival they are constantly active in relation to their surroundings; by increasing the brightness of their flowers when they detect pollinators, growing in directions of nutrients, sharing provisions, or producing poisons to ward off danger and signal intruders to their kin. They can thus be considered intelligent when we understand this concept as responding to and learning from the environment, making decisions based on experience, and participating in communication with other plants, fungal networks, and animals. Their communication in relation to humans is unobtrusive and subtle; they don't speak their teachings but embody things we can learn from them, leaving the choice to us. This allows us to learn about ourselves in ways that are cared for, safe, and sheltered.

Plants do not only communicate and learn, but they make the environment; plants have built the earth, and they continuously produce environments: making earth, vegetation, landscape, attracting water,

6. Apart from their oxygen that is crucial to our survival.
7. Not just the dominant ones.

and all other life to coexist in their worldings. Moreover, it is not only their direct environment that plants are in touch with. They may seem very static, but through relations with the elements and (human) animals, their offspring embark on the most adventurous travels through wind, oceans, furs, stomachs, beaks, and many human infrastructures. The form of plant agency I want to further in relation to coloniality is the speculation writer Michael Pollan argues by asking what if plants are in charge, using (human) animals to move, spread, multiply and flourish?[8] By using sweetness, beauty, and intoxication, their control is established, revealing the global appeal and demand for vegetable products in colonial ventures like tobacco, cacao, opium, tea, coffee, and sugar. As the first multinational in history, the Vereenigde Oostindische Compagnie (or Dutch East India Company, shortened to VOC) introduces consumerism and early capitalism by claiming monopolies on trade and working with stakeholders. The persistent and expanding demand for these products created the need for large scale production and distribution networks to transport these affordable addictive substances worldwide by using slave labor in vast monoculture plantations.[9]

In the modern/colonial hierarchy, the white male is positioned on the top of the pyramid and ruled and profited from all beings below him, extracting other peoples and plants alike. It is this conception, constructed by the person on top of the ranking, that sets the limit to the agency of plants in coloniality and positions them as witnesses of violence. Plants are both victims and instruments of this violence; by the erasure of existing lands, livelihoods, and ecosystems, and through enclosures, and creating places of enforced slavery.[10] Bringing uprooted and adjusted crops in monocultures together with displaced, abused and enslaved people, created the legacy of inequality that still is part of our "civilized" societies today.

One might say attributing certain characteristics, like being creative, generous, or adventurous, to plants is a form of anthropomorphizing. I believe, however, it is important in dismantling human exceptionalism to open up how we understand words and behaviors and include the possibility of non-humans showing similar traits, and not be too anthropocentric in claiming vocabulary. Imagination is needed to understand the concept of an adventure also in ways that do not include typically

8. Michael Pollan, *Botany of Desire*, 2002.
9. Also underpaying their staff increased corruption and illegal activity within the already inhumane and violent business.
10. Shela Sheikh and Ros Gray in conversation with Martin Clark, "The Botanical Mind: The Coloniality of Planting, [podcast]," *Camden Art Centre*, 31-07-2020, https://www.botanicalmind.online/podcasts/the-coloniality-of-planting

human actions. Using these words for plants is an attribution of agency rather than a naive anthropomorphism.

The Vegetal Curator is a title that invites characteristics of plants into curatorial practices. In this thesis for the master's degree in Visual Cultures, Curating and Contemporary Art, I work to integrate the possibility of collaborating with plants as part of my practice as a curator and art educator. I understand plants as occupying a central place in colonial violence—both as agents and targets. Reflecting, learning, and working with plants, I endeavor here to formulate ways in which this alliance supports decolonial processes of environmental and social justice within my work.

My central research question for this thesis is: **How can plants be approached as agents and companions in processes of decoloniality within artistic, curatorial, and pedagogical practices?** To answer this question, I have developed methods inspired by artworks and characteristics of plants and integrated these into my practice as an art teacher and curator. In this thesis, I use anecdotes to reflect on these experiences and contextualize this with history. From these reflections, I have distilled exercises that translate and activate ideas into actions by integrating them in my life, and invite the reader to pause from reading and join. Lastly, I use a method inspired by the format of a manifesto: listing ideas and speculating, as an invitation to change and dialogue.

Following this introduction, the thesis starts off with an initiating exercise in conscious breathing. This bodily reflex—crucial to human life—serves as a starting point to acknowledge the vital necessity of exchange with plants, laying a foundation for further reading, thinking, and doing. The first chapter, *Plants and (de)coloniality*, has a theoretical and historical focus and works around the question: **What role do plants play in coloniality, and what agency could they take in decolonial processes?** Using literature as source material, this chapter builds an understanding of colonial history and how these colonial practices are continued into the present. Through understanding the field of botany in its historical context, as inherently connected to the colonial project, writings by Shela Sheikh and Ros Gray, among others, further contextualize the role of plants in this violent endeavor. Some events take the viewpoint of vegetal life, reviewing these historical narratives by exploring a plant's perspective. Subsequently, the potential of plants in decoloniality is substantiated by various theorists, moving from decentering the human to inviting a holistic view that entangles human and vegetal worlds.

Building on what I consider to be an essential role of visual art in the endeavor of decolonizing, the second chapter, *Art as ground for transformation*, uses artworks as case studies for the question: **How does art function as a vehicle for transformative, decolonial processes, while allowing a central role for plants?** This chapter starts with a discussion on the qualities of artists that support transformative processes through researching, transforming, and communicating critical perspectives. Next, I introduce case studies: *Notes on Nutmeg* by myself and a clove boat by an anonymous maker, *Rijsttafel: The Flamboyant Table* by Elia Nurvista, *The Imaginary Museum of the Amazon* by SubSonora, *Plant it* by Amenta Abioto and Alberta Poon, *Lungs of Flowers* by Arvo Leo, and *Pteridophilia I* by Zheng Bo. All works are selected for their emphatic relation to vegetal life and include specific approaches with decolonial potential. Each plant or ecosystem that is central to the work—nutmeg, clove, rice, the amazon, houseplants, cannabis, and ferns—is introduced by a short biography. Subsequently, the artwork is described and contextualized within the perspective of decolonial thought and practice. From each work, one method—sensory learning, storytelling, listening, imagining, reciprocating, and queering—is distilled, then contextualized with an anecdote, and activated by an exercise.[11] Together these methods form a toolbelt of imaginative, relational, and caring modes to practice decoloniality in companionship with plants. The anecdotes illustrate effects and (un)learning moments initiated by the methods as a process of decolonizing. Additional exercises invite readers to practice and further this process.

In the third and last chapter, *Vegetal Curating*, I work through the question: **How can a curatorial practice take inspiration from plants as a way to support processes of decoloniality?**
After a short reflection on curatorial work as a practice rooted in power relations, I propose to investigate the position of projects in relation to colonial implications. This analysis is divided into questions about the what, who, and how of modernity, coloniality, and the colonial difference.[12] The chapter continues with a call for vegetal curating. The gifts of plants, inspired on writings by botanist Robin Wall Kimmerer, serve as a starting point. I imagine and speculate these gifts to be(come) characteristics of curatorial work, returning to the root of the word

11. I understand queering as an option or means to move away from binary gender construction, accepting fluidity, complexity, and moving away from categories.
12. The colonial difference refers to how coloniality is strongly based on creating a difference between the colonizer and the colonized. It foregrounds the global impact of the modern/colonial system that silenced whole worlds and histories by systems of (post)modernity and Western civilization. Decoloniality aims to undo this colonial difference and strives for "ethical life on and with earth." Rolando Vázquez, "Precedence, Earth and the Anthropocene: Decolonizing Design," *Design Philosophy Papers*, 2017, p. 78.

"curator" as caregiver. This section moves between abstract ideas and practical actions that can be integrated in physical spaces, work relations, and day-to-day decisions.

The Vegetal Curator combines theory with practice, curating and speculating. This thesis does not look to explore the depths of one specific topic but looks for relations in different fields, a variety of flavors, and tries to offer plenitude; biodiversity, more is more. Exploring relations between reading, thinking, and doing forms a red thread through project and practice. *The Vegetal Curator* can be read from start to end, or explored according to interest in topic, format or gusto. Using the index or browsing through the work you will recognize the layout chosen to communicate its content. *The Vegetal Curator* takes visual culture and education as its home base; even though some botanical gardens work with curators, it is not about curating plants themselves, nor gardening. *The Vegetal Curator* is not a manual on decolonizing or for taking care of plants and doesn't focus on curating solely. It is not motionless, nor necessarily vegan.

A life-threatening event caused by climate change about ten years ago has greatly impacted my motivation to be involved with environmental issues. The aim of my work is to build a practice that promotes social and environmental justice, although issues of systemic racism or destruction of my immediate environment by powerful multinationals are not issues that have directly impacted me. However, my starting point for this work is very privileged; being able to make time to study in a master's program and work through these issues is something that is not available for all people. Learning about the causes and consequences of climate crises, and finding alternative paths, equally, is something many people do not have the time or mental space to work on. Furthermore, I want to acknowledge that parts of this thesis are inspired by indigenous scholars whose lands remain colonized. As a white, able-bodied European citizen, I have been able to study without paying tuition. I enjoy the freedom to travel and the social welfare systems of the Netherlands and Finland. I have not experienced racism, and I benefit from being white in a white supremacist society. Nonetheless, I experience discrimination as a woman in the patriarchal Dutch culture, but this allows me still to enjoy the overall prosperity and infrastructure of the Netherlands, benefiting from the colonial wealth of the nation. My aim is to be(come) an ally to those more immediately affected; this project is part of my development to learn and practice.

Breathing exercise

The very act of respiration equals being alive and is dependent and facilitated by plants.[13] Developing a consciousness about this exchange of CO2 and oxygen reminds us that this collaboration is at the core of our being. Our human bodies are multi-species communities; less than half of our cells are human, and especially the health of our skin and intestines is a collaboration with other microbial life. Plants, however, are cellular and their plant bodies consist of plant cells only, always reproducing more of themselves. Making us humans, in comparison, more alien. As oxygen is always produced by plants, we breathe in their output. Taking in a percentage of about 21 percent and returning 16 percent oxygen with a supplement of 4 percent carbon dioxide.[14]

"... breathing is what allows for a passage from vegetative life to spiritual life. Thanks to the vegetal world, I could not only begin living again but also continue thinking." [15]

- Luce Irigaray

13. All multicellular creatures consume oxygen, however, manners of consuming—one example is breathing— can differ per species.
14. Doug Johnson, "The Chemical Composition of Exhaled Air From Human Lungs," *Sciencing*, 26-04-2018, https://sciencing.com/chemical-composition-exhaled-air-human-lungs-11795.html
15. Luce Irigaray, *Through Vegetal Being*, 2016, p. 22.

To create more awareness and acceptance of this crucial process determining our being, I would like to invite you to consciously acknowledge the exchange and collaboration between plants and human animals and spend some time focusing awareness on your breathing through the lungs.[16]

1 Find a nearby plant; you can take a small potted plant, and set it in front of you or place yourself in front of a plant. Then find a comfortable seat of choice, straighten your back and relax your shoulders. Position your hands where they feel comfortable.

2 Take a deep breath in and empty your lungs when you breathe out to relax your body and let go of any tensions.

3 On your next deep breath in, look at the plant and acknowledge their production of oxygen.

4 On your breath out, create awareness of your consumption; while returning air, your body has used some of its content to keep your own systems running.

5 With another conscious and deep breath, visualize oxygen coming from the bottoms of the plant's leaves or needles.

6 Your breath out returns CO2 to the plant, which they need to survive and photosynthesize; acknowledge your breath out as a contribution to the plant.

16. However, a part of our intake of oxygen happens through the skin, which can be seen as a more vegetal way of breathing. See Michael Marder in *Through Vegetal Being*, 2016, p. 131.

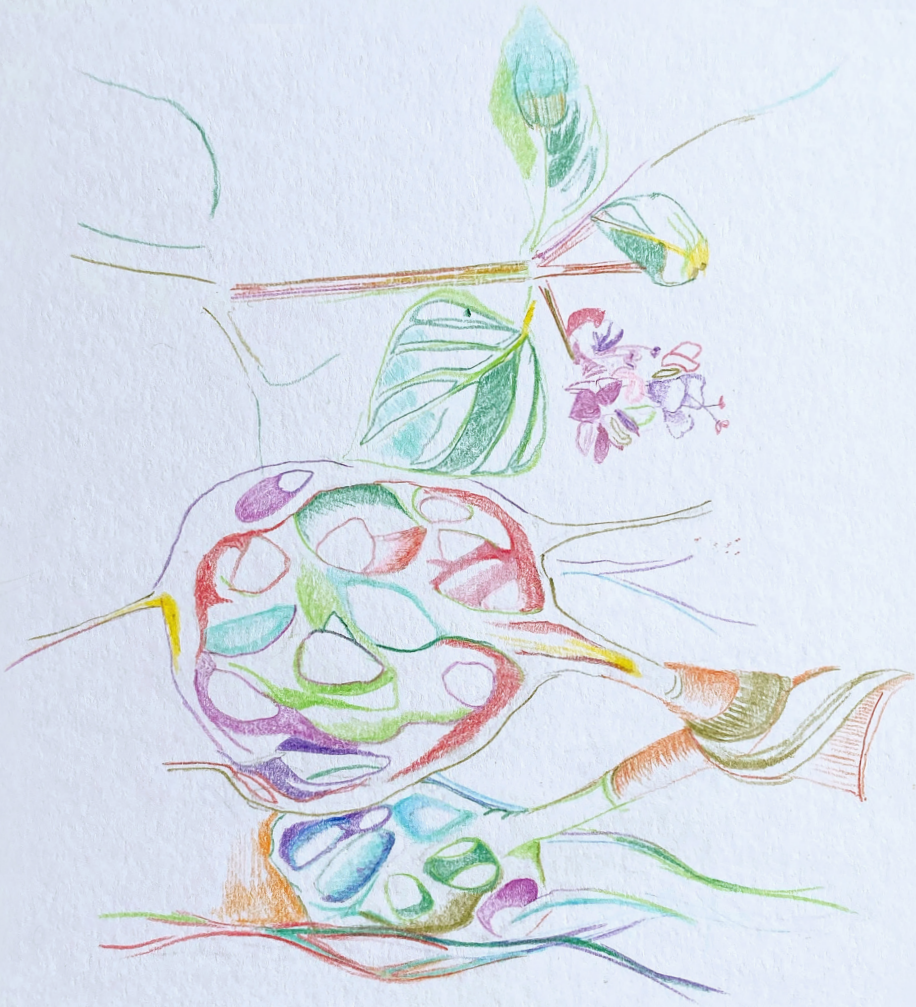
7 With the next deep breath, visualize the air being sucked through your nose or mouth, traveling through your throat and filling your lungs with air, letting your chest swell, and inviting the plant gasses into your bloodstream. Welcome this product of the plant in your body as a gift.

8 While breathing out, offer your breath as an ingredient for the plant to grow.

9 Continue to visualize this exchange between you and the plant as a collaboration for another minute.

10 To finish the exercise, engage a feeling of appreciation connected to the air and plant while you breathe in.

11 Lastly, send a long and deep breath out to express your gratitude. Don't forget to return the plant to their favorite spot.



WE BREATHE EACHOTHER IN AND OUT OF EXISTENCE
ONE MADE BY THE EXALATION OF THE OTHER –

I
Plants in (de)coloniality

The Coronavirus disease (COVID-19) pandemic and many environmental crises are inseparably entangled with modernity: coloniality, capitalism, industrialism, and the supporting cultural and political tools such as the Western invention of the nation-state. These crises result from how capitalism and consumerism obstruct other worlds, possibilities, and ways of being needed to find solutions and remedies for our common issues, erased or transformed by colonialism. From within these dominant systems, it is hard to imagine ways of traveling without citizenship, international communication without the English language, religions that are not Christian,[17] knowledge without science, or economy without capitalism. Finding present-day environmental and social crises entangled with the national history of the Netherlands inspires me to pursue curatorial and pedagogical approaches that, as posthumanist feminist scholar Astrida Neimanis puts it, "offer imaginative tools for rising to the challenge to account for past actions and recalibrate present ones."[18,19] This first chapter looks at plants as agents and witnesses in the Western European colonial project and asks *what role do plants play in coloniality and what agency could they take in decolonial processes?*

The Western European colonial project claimed and commodified humans, land, and non-humans, treating them as a resource for capitalist industries. Modernity/coloniality and extractive systems to support colonial structures are still largely in place.[20] However, their outward appearance and language have often been updated, leaving many of the structures less visible within the dominant cultural narratives. Within the structures of neocolonialism, prosperous countries that previously profited from colonialism preserve power and control through indirect politics and capitalist exchange. However, who is behind these exploitations of humans, land, non-humans, and resources of the global south are much less visible. For example, under-or unpaid labor in the highly polluting and dangerous fashion and tech industries that produce for the multinationals, the structure and power relations established through colonialism are retained.

17. In the Netherlands being religious is very often considered synonymous to being Christian, especially among white people other religions are not often considered. Islam, even though the second largest religion in the country, is often not considered as a voluntary option.
18. The Netherlands serve as a starting point with similarities to other West European countries and connecting all continents.
19. Astrida Neimanis, *Bodies of Water: Posthuman Feminist Phenomenology*, 2017. p. 15.
20. Modernity/coloniality is a concept coined by decolonial scholar Walter Mignolo. "Modernity/coloniality are the two pillars of Western civilizations. The two pillars are supported by a complex and diverse structure of knowledge, including Christian theology as well as secular science and philosophy. Actors and institutions conserve, expand, and change the structure of knowledge but within the same matrix of colonial power relations." See Walter Mignolo, "Key Concepts," *E-International Relations*, 21-01-17, https://www.e-ir.info/2017/01/21/interview-walter-mignolopart-2-key-concepts/

Current practices of genetic modification and patenting of seeds by companies like Monsanto, DuPont, and Syngenta can be seen as neocolonial acts that pursue destructive practices at the expense of indigenous peoples and ecologies. Modified species cultivated for trades that increase profits commonly have increased susceptibility to pathogens and insects, thus increasing crop failure.[21] Patenting increases the chances of legal issues for independent and small farmers, including many indigenous people. When their traditional seeds have genetic traits in common with the patented ones, which is increasingly the case, they will fall under the legal ownership of the multinationals.[22] Similarly, farmers are not allowed to share, sell, or replant any seeds these patented plants produce. The consequences for biodiversity and endangering the reliable, independent food supply of their business are incalculable. Subjecting people to forced dependency and supply of resources is one of the mechanisms of coloniality that started many centuries ago and continues in the present.

The colonial endeavor of the VOC (Vereenigde Oostindische Compagnie or Dutch East India Company) was motivated by profit. Exoticism and curiosity are common explanations for colonial expeditions but did not prove as crucial as the drive for profit gain.[23] Like most European seafarers, the Dutch and their trading companies did not own much that people in other continents were interested in. Their homelands did not bear rare minerals, grow particular produce, nor were the handmade fabrics of any remarkable quality or aesthetic. The Dutch colonial project of the VOC began at the start of the seventeenth century when the Southeast Asian region was rich in resources, production, and very active in trade. By confiscating Spanish and Portuguese ships, the Dutch would get a hold of valuable Inca and Aztec coins which were used in international trade. In general, they attempted to maintain a monopoly in the spice trade by force. Constant violence by the superiorly armed Dutch invading armies against the usually defenseless indigenous population runs like a blood-red thread through overseas history.[24]

> *Before the intruders arrived on the Banda Islands, we, the nutmeg trees, were doing well in relations with caretakers. We had successfully wrapped our offspring in something adorned and valuable to the animals, establishing reliable bonds with humans. They acknow-*

21. Including ironically those species which were appropriated from indigneous people in the first place, the most notable example being corn/maize.
22. Paul Harris, "Monsanto sued small farmers to protect seed patents," *The Guardian*, 12-02-2013, https://www.theguardian.com/environment/2013/feb/12/monsanto-sues-farmers-seed-patents
23. Claudia Swan, *Collecting Naturalia in the Shadow of Early Modern Dutch Trade*, 2005, p. 225.
24. Ewald Vanvugt, *Roofstaat*, 2017, p. 29.

ledged the original taste, medicinal properties, and practical format. The merchants were helpful in bringing the seeds through human infrastructures in Asia, where Arab traders connected the East and the West, bringing our sources to other sides of the sphere. The intruders were humans who wanted to take over the distribution fully, mono-poly. Quite a demanding task, we thought. Nonetheless, we were neglected for seven years. The caretakers and their families who wanted to maintain their freedom fled the islands, were uprooted or cut down. Before we could mourn our friends, the invasion of weeds set in; it was a proper fight for minerals that cost a lot of energy, reminding us again of the advantageous past with the caretakers. Fortunately, this was also the age of the birds. The caretakers used to pick the fruits and scare the birds, but now, with the fruits untouched, and no one around, we provided a feast for the pigeons. Making up for the loss and soil struggles, the birds brought about the air distribution. In the nighttime, we would dream how far they would fly and where they might drop the kernel, carrying our legacy in their stomachs.

Lauded writers like Hugo de Groot or Grotius (1583–1645), cited from other classical and religious scholars, argue how privateering and human trafficking proved a significant investment for national prosperity, science, and the arts.[25] De Groot's writing started a long-lasting national campaign to conceal, verify, and glorify Dutch colonial violence. Modernity soon followed Grotius in using the dichotomies of the enlightenment to separate not only church and state, religion and science, but also nature from culture, human from animal, and the body from the mind; "subjecting land and people, nature and the colonized to the Cartesian logic of mastery and appropriation."[26]

Landscapes and their vegetation have long been considered passive backdrops for colonial violence but are important agents and means of colonization. From the start of the Western European colonial project, the quest for profitable plants was a central motivation for overseas journeys.[27] Botany is often perceived as a non-political and non-ideological study of plants. What is easily forgotten is that the cultivation of plants went hand in hand with the cultivation of people and is closely connected to colonialism. Botany as a field came into existence to support exploratory voyages across the world. Exact classification, determination, and extraction (by colonizers) guaranteed profit from significant

25. Ibid., p. 23.
26. T.J. Demos, *Decolonizing Nature*, 2016, p. 202.
27. Londa Schiebinger, Claudia Swan, *Colonial Botany*, 2005, p. 2.

investments and provided efficiency.[28] Western European botanists traveling on colonial fleets had an important task in gathering plants and knowledge about them. Their work also led to what Boaventura de Sousa Santos calls "epistemicide":[29] extracting and erasing local names, knowledge, and connection with their environment, as well as modifying plants and making them suitable for large-scale monocultures for plantations. Meanwhile, local labor, ecologies, and cultures were taken over and erased, leading to the eradication of whole worlds.
Carl Linnaeus, one of the most internationally known botanists, published *Systema Naturae* in 1735. In this book, he introduced the binomial classification system for plants using two Latin words consisting of a family name and a specific denomination for each of its kind, which is still in use today. *Systema Naturae* also consisted of the first categorization of humans in order of race—a theory that colonizers eagerly applied.[30] These intellectual projects sought to scientifically legitimize the subjugation of other peoples in order to exploit their labor, knowledge, and natural resources.

Botanists on colonial expeditions were sent to study possibly profitable plant species to uproot and culture in European greenhouses. Sugar cane originated from Southeast Asia became one of the cash crops used for large monoculture plantations in Indonesia and was brought to similarly warm climates in Brazil and the Caribbean. Many lands confiscated by colonizers were turned into plantations. These monocultures depleted biodiversity, soils, and people. Like other Western European colonizers, the Dutch displaced and enslaved vast numbers of African, Indian, Chinese, and Indonesian people. The enslaved people that survived the lengthy journey by ship were forced to work with crops, landscapes, and environments, often unfamiliar, under inhumane conditions and severe physical and mental abuse.

> *After this, the times of the mono-poly and plantations began. Plantations forced us all to grow very close together, many trees per island and strictly marked with hedges. The caretakers came from far and worked unwillingly, suffering. Like before, the seeds were traded and distributed, reaching the far corners of the globe, and we grew many fruits. The mono-poly meant that we were not allowed to grow on the other side of the hedge. When a tree does, humans would kill them, and the people in their nearness would be uproot-*

28. Ros Gray, Sheila Sheikh, "The Wretched Earth: Botanical Conflicts and Artistic Interventions," *Third Text*, 2018, p. 164.
29. Boaventura de Sousa Santos, *Epistemologies of the South*, 2014.
30. And repeated in Social Darwinist theories of race.

ed. Also, seeds were treated differently under the mono-poly; they were treated with a layer of chalk that would deliver them like new to the other side of the earth but would not allow them to germinate whatsoever. Being so specific on where to grow was a pain, but sterilizing our seeds meant humans and water was no longer our means of transport. That is when we set our bets on the air; the birds worked their tail feathers off to catch the fruit. Swallowing the fruits in their entirety, the pigeons, our flying allies, broke our seeds out of their captivity, slowly crumbling the mono-poly and preluding the downfall of the VOC.

Anthropologist Anna Tsing claims that the domestication of crops originally cost more effort and labor than foraging but served the elites and the rise of the state, enabling systems of social hierarchies.[31] Structures without which coloniality is unimaginable. The plantation system illustrates how planting itself has been used as an act of colonization; changing local ecologies by introducing foreign crops in monocultures, with the addition of foreign and extracted labor, to create profits.[32] Now, in a similar vein, large areas of rainforest—that support the livelihood of many ecologies (human and non-human) and simultaneously play an important role in stabilizing the global climate—fall prey to deforestation and are depleted in favor of commercial soy and palm oil plantations for multinationals.

While still in the process of recovering from centuries of depletion of people and the environment, countries located close to the equator that fell victim to colonial violence are also meteorologically more vulnerable to climate disasters. Local recovery is often complicated by continuing political conflict situations fueled by historical divide and conquer strategies and continuous influences from multinationals and global political interventions that complicate peaceful independence. As a result, colonialism continuously increases inequality globally, with the division of roles remaining since the sixteenth century.

To deconstruct and move away from colonialism and apply other perspectives of being in the world than the Western European hegemony, we need to learn to recognize the violence of modernity/coloniality. From this awareness, we can imagine, exercise, integrate alternatives, and decolonize. As agents and witnesses of coloniality, I propose plants

31. Anna Tsing, "Unruly Edges: Mushrooms as companion species," *Environmental Humanities 1:1*, 2012, p. 146.
32. Ros Gray and Sheila Sheikh in conversation with Martin Clark, "The Botanical Mind: The Coloniality of Planting [podcast]," *Camden Art Centre*, 31-07-2020, https://www.botanicalmind.online/podcasts/the-coloniality-of-planting

to become agents of decoloniality, not as tools but as teachers and companions. They become teachers and companions in unlearning coloniality and relearning forms of reciprocating, queering, storytelling, listening, and imagining. Plants broaden our perspective and bring us to new understandings, including, for example, our definition of what life is and what intelligence means. Partnership with plants supports multi-species interaction and moves away from anthropocentrism. Like art historian T.J. Demos states: "decolonizing nature entails transcending human-centered exceptionalism."[33]

The decentering of humans does not mean that humanitarian issues of the oppressed are less important but emphasizes the importance of considering these within their proper ecological and thus holistic context. Plants are not inherently good, nor are we as humans inherently bad. Some plants survive in a symbiotic relationship with other beings; a few suffocate and deplete others' resources, behavior that in science is often called colonial. Therefore, it is not my intention to focus on the biological existence of one specific plant species but rather the process of relating with them, embracing and accepting response-ability as our part in the complex entanglements that make up ecologies.[34] We are interdependent. Like evolutionary ecologist Monica Gagliano says, "we breathe each other in and out of existence, one made by the exhalation of the other."[35] Through this exchange, we have a vital connection to plants that we don't have with any other species on earth, adds Emanuele Coccia.[36] In relationship with plants, we need to think beyond the modern dichotomies and think in complexities; ecologies.

To get to the point of accepting plants in these new roles—in western accounts—it is helpful to understand why they have not been considered as such. Therefore, we need to examine at least two historical hurdles. Like in colonial histories, the role of plants, or sometimes even their general existence at all, is easily overlooked. The first reason for this is "plant blindness," a biological explanation that claims that humans evolved in green environments where anything not green and moving could form a threat.[37] Plants form the calm and safe background in which early humans tried to survive and therefore did not develop as an essential protagonist in the human vision. Professor of philosophy

33. Demos, 2016, p. 203.
34. The concept *response-ability* was coined by John Cage in his work Silence from 1957, and refers to the ability to respond carefully and consciously to a situation of sorts by shifting the interpretation of the word responsibility from accountability to one of engagement.
35. Monica Gagliano, *Thus Spoke the Plant*, 2018, p. 15.
36. Emmanuele Coccia, "Plants Make us Human [podcast]," *Live Mic*, 2020, https://livemic.simplecast.com/episodes/emmanuele-coccia-plants-make-us-human
37. Prudence Gibson, "Earth Voice: Plant Blindness, Magic and Art," 2016.

and writer of *The Philosopher's Plant*, Michael Marder, explains a second reason for plants to have been overlooked. Movement or locomotion, he says, is an essential factor to classify life from a classical western perspective. Therefore, a vegetal way of being alive did not fit with our understanding of living or categories to understand our surroundings. Plants appear mobile in timescales that are generally not accessible to human perception, making them the opposite of genuinely being or worthy of knowing from the conventional standpoint.[38] Accepting the plant as a living being motivates us to accept the impact of external influences and central concepts of collectivity, complexity, and exchange.

38. Michael Marder in conversation with Martin Clarke, "Conversations: Michael Marder & Martin Clark [podcast]," *Camden Art Centre*, 07-05-2021, https://camdenartaudio.libsyn.com/conversations

Summary

The intruders started a complex time, one that created more division between different plants. Some of us got the benefit; often for being so successful in human metabolism (tasteful, addictive) that many humans wanted to grow and distribute us. These plants, like us, the nutmeg trees, were multiplied in large numbers and got appointed to the monos, large fields growing by themselves as much as they could to be harvested and newly planted continuously. Although by now few of them remember where they came from, they all look the same, the earth is silent, they don't speak to the earth and critters nearby drop. Caretakers and plants that did not prove as profit-able for the humans, however, suffered great damages. The supportive plants, sharing homes, and hosting small-scale communities, once crucial, have been removed and replaced by concrete and monos. By now, the intruders have new names, and their favorites vary only slightly. Now it is corn, rice, wheat, potato, and soy who take the guano, err cake. While the intruders grow louder, our stories make no noise.

Plants have been at the center of colonial history, both as a means and goal, becoming entangled in these systems as agents of violence. Their seemingly, but contradictory, neutral position by means of inhuman characteristics or rather unacknowledged qualities, make them an unobtrusive agent that can function as a force through their marvelous and generous gifts and teachings. These vegetal characteristics disturb ideologies and social systems entangled with coloniality like white supremacy, capitalism, anthropocentrism, and dualism. In collaboration with plants, we can activate decolonial processes with methods like listening, storytelling, imagining, reciprocating, and queering.
To recognize these qualities in plants we need to overcome plant blindness, acknowledge interdependency, and allow variety in our definitions of life and intelligence. Fiction and imagination can help to practice thinking of agency and shape possibilities. Plants can inspire decoloniality and coexistence by thinking in complex systems, like ecologies. Studying their qualities, acknowledging their lessons, granting them agency, and inviting them in collaborations is part of a decolonial path itself and will moreover support us to continue. Art is a space that can be deployed to experiment with this and will be further interpreted in the following chapter.

2
Art as ground for transformation

"Art, given its long histories of experimentation, imaginative invention, and radical thinking, can play a central transformative role here. Art holds the promise of initiating exactly these kinds of creative perceptional and philosophical shifts, offering new ways of comprehending ourselves and our relation to the world differently than the destructive traditions of colonizing nature."[39]

- T.J. Demos

39. Demos, 2016, p. 18-19.

Introduction

This chapter works around the question: *how does art function as a ground for transformative, decolonial processes while allowing a central role for plants?* Specifically, distilling and developing methods, narratives, or actions to facilitate and establish these processes. After a short introduction of qualities and characteristics of art that promote transformation, I will present a selection of six case studies. The cases are selected for their emphatic relation to vegetal life and the possibility to distill methods with decolonial potential. In each of the sections, I provide categories called "Case study," "Anecdote," and "Exercise."

Firstly, each case study presents an artwork. These artworks each introduce a plant species, category, or ecosystem: nutmeg, and clove, rice, cannabis, ferns, houseplants, the amazon, followed by a description and contextualization of the artwork. From this, I distill and describe a specific method that is apparent in the work and invites decolonizing processes: sensory learning, storytelling, listening, imagining, reciprocating, and queering.

Secondly, each anecdote shares a narration from an experience as a curator, teacher, friend, participant, student, in which the decolonial method is applied in practice. This reflection adds perspectives, questions, considerations, and reality to the earlier previous text.

Lastly, each exercise draws from the distilled method and formulates an activity that activates the method and concepts from the artwork and theory. By transforming these subjects into exercises and activities, I invite readers, viewers, and audiences to interact with these and perform/practice them to move beyond the role of spectator/reader and offer possibilities for including these in everyday lives, as new ways of being and relating with actual and imagined plants.

As a curator and art educator, for me, it is the obvious choice to think and learn with artworks. However, I will shortly argue why art is specifically valuable for this praxis and the questions central to this thesis. Most artists' lives are precarious, and they struggle to be able to practice their work in ways they would like. Many cannot make a living from their artistic practice or have a hard time making ends meet when they do. In this short reflection on what art can or could do, I use a speculative approach in which I will not continuously question whether there is enough funding and support, something most artists do have to deal

with. Thus, the starting point for this is abstract and hypothetical. In this introduction, I will highlight some characteristics of art and artistic practices that can contribute to the overall thesis of this writing: how can we collaborate with plants in processes of decoloniality? Using the writings of Heather Davis in *Art in the Anthropocene*, T.J. Demos in *Decolonizing Nature*, Prudence Gibson in *Covert Plants*, and Marilyn Oladimeji's contribution to the publication *Decolonial Pedagogy* to connect my ideas.

The first characteristic of art and artistic practices I want to address is the unique and creative relation to research. As Oladimeji writes: "Art making can be a process of inquiry leading to emergent knowledge—knowledge that is new, unanticipated, and unpredicted."[40] Artists often have the ability to zoom into their fascination without there being a specific field of study that asks similar questions. The artist is able to explore freely, collaborate, and collect knowledge without the restrictions of (dated) methods, guidelines, or traditions. Or as Davis and Turpin more decisively formulate it: "Art provides a polyarchic site of experimentation for living in a damaged world, and a non-moral form of address that offers a range of discursive, visual and sensual strategies that are not confined by the regimes of scientific objectivity, political moralism, or psychological depression."[41] Finding and experimenting with methods and materials to approach the chosen subject matter, artists can inhabit cracks and crevices unattainable to others. Art digs deeper, moves sideways, and continuously questions. Artists often work independently without an employer with a strong political or commercial agenda. If this is, however, the case, their questioning of the employer becomes public more easily. The disadvantage of not having a permanent contract with an employer becomes an advantage for the quality and independence of art.

The second aspect of art I list is that of taking on new perspectives and other standpoints: art looks at issues from another direction. Artists see issues that others may not have seen and question them. To quote Olademeji: "[art can] disrupt your status quo and challenge assumptions, embrace uncertainty. Moreover, it promotes a positive understanding of diversity, of different approaches, and of multi-perspective ways of viewing things."[42] The in(ter)dependence of artists can allow for taking risks and stepping outside. Artists add important perspectives beyond monetary value, economic considerations, health care, safety, or environmental law. Artists invite new perspectives when we learn we

40. Marilyn Oladimeji, *Using Arts-Based Learning as a Site of Critical Resistance*, 2018, p. 100.
41. Heather Davis, Etienne Turpin, *Art in the Anthropocene: Encounters among Aesthetics, Politics, Environments and Epistemologies*, 2015, p. 4.
42. Oladimeji, 2018, p. 97–103.

cannot continue the old ones, "offer[ing] new ways of comprehending ourselves and our relation to the world differently,"[43] to quote Demos.

Thirdly, an important quality of artists is that they are storytellers. Art makes things visible and tangible and brings ideas to life. Artists fabulate, imagine, create; art is worlding. Transforming ideas, research, interests, insights, and feelings into an artwork allows for processing and sharing this content with an audience. Art specifically employs materiality and allows agency to materials to narrate and construct meanings. With multisensorial characteristics, it invites a variety of understandings that are not purely dependent on linguistic knowledge. The process of transformation simultaneously adds to the story and creates space for other interpretations. This mediation is also mentioned by Prudence Gibson in *Covert Plants*: "Art, literature, and philosophy," she writes, "have the capacity to mediate difficult issues of climate change and present a new perspective on human–plant interactions."[44]

The fourth point I want to address is the role of art in producing knowledge and meaning. Art is central to thinking and to feeling. Artists convey experiences, emotions, stories, and adventures through their work. The production of art as well as the work of artists, which is not only focused on production, plays an essential role in knowledge building. I believe that this kind of knowledge production is unique and crucial for finding ways to deal with the all-encompassing crises we find ourselves in. Like Heather Davis and Etienne Turpin, who in their edited volume, mobilize art as a means to "thinking and feeling through the Anthropocene."[45] Art can function as a reflection of society, of our times, entangled with our past and connected to possible futures. Art contextualizes; it shows what is behind, below, overlooked, at the core, and all around. But above all, art questions.

With these arguments, I have illustrated how art can provide an invaluable perspective that leaves space for interpretation and the experience of the viewer and brings additional ways of relating to what science offers. By acknowledging these qualities and characteristics, it becomes apparent how crucial the arts are in thinking, practicing, and giving shape to alternative ways of being from the dominant and destructive ones. The selected six case-studies below will further set out and crystallize how these qualities are activated and reflected in specific projects.

43. Demos, 2016, p. 18-19.
44. Prudence Gibson, *Covert Plants: Vegetal Consciousness and Agency in an Anthropocentric World*, 2018, p. 11.
45. Heather Davis, Etienne Turpin, *Art in the Anthropocene, Encounters among Aesthetics, Politics, Environments and Epistemologies*, 2015, p. 3.

Nutmeg

Nutmeg is the hard, aromatic, almost spherical seed of a tropical tree that originally grows on the Banda Islands (also known as the spice islands) of the Moluccas in Indonesia. There, people call it pala. Nutmeg is used as a spice that tastes nutty, sweet, woody, and a bit bitter and has a slightly sweet, and earthy smell. 'Meg,' comes from musk: a type of smell that is produced by some animals: like the musk deer and muskrat. This musky smell has been a popular scent for centuries for its quality to mask other present penetrating smells.

Nutmeg became popular in Europe in the thirteenth century and had a peak in the seventeenth century. It was mentioned in many popular recipe books that would commonly contain both cooking and medicinal recipes. The demand for nutmeg increased with raised production of the printing press causing increased production and distribution of recipe books and converged with the exploration, trade, and colonizing endeavors by Spain, Portugal, England, and The Netherlands.

Clove

Cloves are made by drying the light pink flower buds of the clove tree that originally grew on the Banda Islands in Indonesia. The spice, locally called cengkeh, has a spicy and woody smell and a strong warm, dominant taste, used in both sweet and savory dishes. The name clove comes from the French clou, meaning nail, referring to its appearance. The dark brown flower tops, about one cm long, are thin and pointy like a pin or screw. The chemical eugenol, causing cloves' typical smell, is used as anesthesia, against toothache, fever reduction, and can repel insects.

To monopolize the trade of cloves, Dutch colonizers put a death sentence on trading the spice or exporting clove trees by anyone not part of their company. All clove trees outside the designated plantation set up by the VOC were destroyed, instigating ecocide by needlessly burning down 90.000 trees.

Nutmeg, Clove
Notes on Nutmeg,
Clove Boat,
Discussing Dispersion

This section brings together spices and sensorial experiences with the topics of imagination, storytelling, and reprogramming colonial narratives. The case studies in this section address the potential of spices as an artistic material for storytelling. Both spices presented in the cases, clove and nutmeg, play a specific role in Dutch-Indonesian colonial histories. Through their sensorial capacities, spices inspire imagination and can comprise a complexity of events and narratives. By creating space for oppressed and unacknowledged stories relating to the sensorial experience, I hope to aspire a reprogramming. The anecdotes following these reflections then connect to how two individuals from the Dutch Maluku community relate to storytelling on colonial implications.[46] The first person focuses on the future and promotes storytelling of cultural heritage through diverse crafts, while the second person activates cloves in artistic practice in their process of coming to voice on personal (de)colonial topics. The exercise then invites one to activate scent as a means of getting to know a plant through memory, association, and imagination. By creating consciousness on the agency of plants by mobilizing people in dispersion, the exercise uses humor to reimagine (neo)colonial practices while including awareness of the vegetal perspective.

46. Maluku is the region of Indonesia where the spices originate.

Notes on Nutmeg/Clove Boat

Plants can support us in working through the complex and painful events of coloniality and have agency in processes of decoloniality. It is common to take problems for a walk in the park or the forest to help organize one's thoughts. This can help to find priorities and relativize the issues one is dealing with. This green environment does not give a reaction, no direct response; one does not feel self-conscious or ashamed *with* plants. They are living entities that can absorb, and in exchange, offer generous care (oxygen, food, material, healing, etc.).

Coloniality is a complex problem in which those involved can experience pain, guilt, shame, anger, indignation, humiliation, and many more personal and intense emotions. Inviting plants as agents to work through these issues can be very useful to be able to address them in a way that feels safe. Plants are living entities with which we feel safe and cared for. Moreover, since they have been at the center of colonial violence they can lead us through processes of understanding and acknowledging this past. Taking the (neutral) perspective of the plant can offer us the change in perspective we need to learn our histories and thus our present. Acknowledging coloniality and its ongoing implications and actions in the present is part of the process of decolonizing. A next step is to look deeper into the systems that support coloniality and change this mindset. The self-perception of the human on life commonly is anthropocentric, regarding humankind as being the most important element of life. Anthropocentrism is a world view that supports coloniality/modernity, e.g. extractivism. By decentering the human, we can work on acknowledging our place within ecologies, in relation to the environment, and begin taking responsibility, a step of decoloniality.

In the video *Notes on Nutmeg* that I made in 2020, I activate my sensorial connotations of nutmeg; memories of a cozy winter holiday and traditional Dutch spiced cookies, speculaas (fig. 1).[47] The dried nut that finds its origin in the Indonesian archipelago is the protagonist of a journey that touches upon different narratives that are entangled with the nut. The video moves through nine chapters that open up bits of information about nutmeg. By sharing experiences of touch, smell, taste, and sound, the relation between the consuming human body and nutmeg are depicted and transferred by activating a shared memory of a common experience. This physical relation to the spice is connected

47. Speculaas spices: a mix of cinnamon, pepper, ginger, clove, nutmeg, anise, and cardamom.

with fragments of West European traditional medicine, colonial histories, and neocolonial issues.

The violent narrative of how the spices became part of the national identity,[48] excluded from the history books I learned from while growing up, is woven into the exploration the video depicts. As a seemingly neutral agent, the nut carries complex histories and memories but also allows us to imagine other ways of relating to them beyond dominant culture. In the video, I aim to reveal the complex and contradictory context of historical, cultural, and capitalist narratives entangled with seemingly everyday products and experiences. While moving through the chapters of the video, a re-imprint of stories in a critical framework acknowledges coloniality and everything entailed by it as an attempt to de- and reprogram experiences anchored in colonial ideology. The sweet memory of speculaas is not simply one of holidays anymore but makes space for oppressed and unacknowledged stories.

48. The VOC enforced a monopoly on local spices resulting in a loss of income for many local traders. By burning boats, houses, and crops, the inhabitants that survived, lost their primary sources of livelihood, and with the arrival of the colonizers, the prosperity in the archipelago declined (see Ewald Vanvugt, *Roofstaat*, 2017). On Banda specifically, J.P. Coen murdered 95 percent of the population to control nutmeg production (see Willem Oosterbeek, *Nootmuskaat, De geschiedenis van een wonderbaarlijk nootje*, 2017). People from Java, Papua, and local dissidents were brought in to work on the nutmeg plantation run by the colonizers. Banda, also known as the Spice Islands, is part of the Maluku in East Indonesia.

In a similar vein, I want to propose the clove boat—a carrier of complex colonial and neocolonial stories—as an object of local and global, cultural and ecological, present and historical importance (fig. 2).[49] Next to their use in dishes and kretek (clove cigarettes), cloves are a much-used material in Maluku. Cloves are strung together with wire or connected with glue, time-consuming techniques that demand concentration and skill. Different types of boats and ships are made from clove, both the local proa, and West European trading ships are depicted.

The boat in the image is a relatively simple model with one mast and one deck; the proa, a type of boat common in the Austronesian region. With the entire boat made from just cloves, it is surprising how easy it is to recognize the images sculpted with spice. The people depicted on the boat, related to the production of the spice in one way or another, emerge from cloves. The majority of the indigenous inhabitants of the Banda Islands, where cloves were produced, have been murdered, eradicated, and replaced by migrants, dissidents, and foreign slaves. Under Dutch rule, most spices were produced in conditions of slavery. The people producing spices had lost their families, lives, lands, and identities. Their bodies—not related to their loved ones, the earth, and life anymore—have become confined to cloves. In this clove boat, the people have become the spices they produce; it has become their meaning and value as part of the colonial system.

At the same time, the cloves in this model form paddles, the tool that moves the people through the water, through life. The people on the boat with paddles are not forcing their movement. They and the cloves together float on or even over the water as one. Individual cloves are hung like festive flags on lines that span the structure of the boat, celebrating the spice.

The boat, we must admit, is not a real boat; at least, it doesn't function as a practical means of transport. It is a representation of a boat. This imaginary vehicle is like a conversion of the colonial ships that were filled with cloves being transported to Europe; this boat does not seem to hold a load. In contrast to those ships, this boat is made of petrified flowers, perseverance, resilience, imagination, and probably dreams, hopes, and wishes. The maker massaged the medicinal oil out of the dried flower buds containing oil with sedating properties,

49. To control the trade of cloves, W. C. de With, captain of the VOC led the destruction of all clove trees that were not part of the VOC plantation, instigating ecocide by needlessly burning down 90.000 trees.

forming an aura of the dominant scent with the warm musky smell of clove perfume around the creation of the boat.

The shells in the box surrounding the clove boat could suggest the setting, the ocean, the other life that the people relate to. The part below the boat could be imagined as the realm of the ocean; oceanic relatives, livelihood, seafood, and survival. Their visibility can also suggest they are above water, representing the surrounding landscape, beaches, islands, the archipelago. Mollusks, plants, and humans; habitants of the water, earth, and sky come together in the model.

These clove boats were often sold as souvenirs to Dutch sailors, but in the last decades, these boats were mostly collected by Moluccan people living in the Netherlands and visiting the Islands on holiday.[50] Huib Akihary, the curator at Museum Maluku in The Hague, bought this clove boat at the end of the last century on a trip to the Moluccas. Interwoven with histories and stories, these boats made from strong-scented dried flowers hold experiences and information that is often too sensitive to talk about. Carriers of these narratives should therefore be treasured all the more so.

50. The colonial divide and conquer strategies were specifically targeted at the inhabitants of the Moluccan archipelago, where no other job than joining the Dutch military army paid a living wage. A majority of the inhabitants had a wish for independence for the south Moluccas named Republic Maluku Selatan or short, RMS. When Indonesia declared independence from the Netherlands right after WOII, Moluccan soldiers fought on the Dutch side to suppress this declaration. After capitulation under UN pressure, Moluccan soldiers and their families were temporarily brought to the Netherlands to guarantee their safety. While the Dutch government actively ignored the political situation overseas and the social situation of these people in the Netherlands, 2021 marks the 70th anniversary of Moluccans in the Netherlands. Only a few felt safe to return.

In the reflection on the Clove Boat, scent and the memory of taste and touch play an important role in the meaning of the sculpture. Similarly, the video *Notes on Nutmeg* uses sensory experiences to enhance storytelling. Plants address all bodily senses. This makes them attractive, inclusive, multiversal, and experiential beings. Regardless of the ability of the other being to navigate their world, plants can make themselves detectable.

In modernity/coloniality, vision has become the most important and used sense organ. Within Aristotle's understanding of the senses—not counting thermoception, nociception, proprioception, and possible others—vision and hearing were seen as high senses. A myth was created around visibility as being truthful and the visible as something pure and innocent. Visual observation is therefore also one of the most acknowledged methods of scientific research. Looking and the observing gaze, however, tend to construct a subject/object relation that does not allow equity. Similarly, the colonizer gazes at, for him, unknown surroundings and communities as a discovery of "new found land", full of potential for his benefit. The colonial gaze creates a power dynamic as the observer, surveilling and radicalizing the other without active participation or showing vulnerability.[51] Taste, smell, and touch, like the other senses listed by Aristotle, were seen as bodily, lower senses and thus more primitive. The re-discovery of these embodied perceptions is a rich experience especially in relation to plants since it allows a more versatile understanding of their being.

To analyze and understand scent, we need to consider its interesting location in the human brain, positioned behind our memory center, connecting the experience of scent closely to memories. Writer Marcel Proust published his well-known work *À la recherche du temps perdu* about the relation between taste, smell, and memory. In this work, imagination plays an important role, where parts of our memory that are unclear can be complemented with fiction. While plants use volatile chemicals for communication, many flowers produce essences that are very pleasant and attractive for humans and are both naturally collected and chemically reconstructed to reproduce their olfactory experience in our homes and onto our bodies. This wide application and reproduction of flower scents entangle our memories with that of plants.

51. Ovidiu Țichindeleanu, "Foreign Substances of YouTube," 2020, p. 8.

-Anecdote-

The first time I encountered a clove boat was when I visited Moetiara Maluku, the Moluccan community center in Maastricht. As a curator of the storytelling festival in the city, I was there to discuss their possible contribution to the festival, which was dealing with the theme of migration. Meeting with Sam Abraham, he shared with me that the organization was open to participation and had an amazing network of creative people that could share their skills, like cooking, dance, martial arts, and poetry. Sharing a story of their migration to the Netherlands, however, did not seem like an interesting invitation to them. There was an option to screen a DVD that would share the history of Maluku and the Netherlands, but the members of the board could not think of anyone in their circle interested in storytelling related to their history. Sharing these stories was alright but still very sensitive to most. Moreover, Sam mentioned, "we want to focus on the positive and the future. How we can maintain our rich culture and identity and pass our heritage on to younger generations is central to our efforts."

This summer, my friend Jerrold Saija is showing sculptures in the graduation exhibition of the Art & Research program at AVK St. Joost in Den Bosch (NL). Although we grew up in the same town and both work in the arts, we met online during the Decolonial Summer School. In his practice, Jerrold works through the colonial traumas woven into the fibers of the Dutch Moluccan community he is part of. His work deals with topics of (in)visibility, construction, and building, and coming into voice.[52] These topics

52. "When we end our silence, when we speak in a liberated voice, our words connect us with anyone, anywhere who lives in silence. […] It is our responsibility collectively and individually to distinguish between mere speaking that is about self-aggrandizement, exploitation of the exotic 'other,' and that coming to voice which is a gesture of resistance, an affirmation of struggle."- bell hooks

touch upon experiences, emotions, and stories that move between him, his identity, the Moluccan community, their past, and our shared colonial histories.

Through holes in a three-piece room divider, 70 kreteks stick out—clove cigarettes with tobacco. “They are quite heavy, but give a good taste. Many family members and friends have come by. Anyone who shares Moluccan roots is invited to smoke.” When they smoke, they are hidden behind the screen. We can smell the typical kretek scent, but cannot see them. In his play with (in)visibility he set himself the task to show his work in action. At a desk, he carefully chooses one clove from a carton box, adds a layer of glue, and plates it with a film of silver. An overhead projector projects the silhouette of the action on a nearby wall with two-tailed salamanders. “Those critters are for my mother, she told me she encountered a salamander with two tails in Maluku, it’s a bearer of good luck, something I’d like to share with other people.” The cloves, too, entered his world through a family member; visiting the Moluccas with his grandfather he met an older man crafting boats on Ambon. This sparked the start of inviting the dried flower buds of lush green bushes as a material, form, scent, color, and associations for his voice.

Having a voice, using a voice, or deciding on what story to tell is often not evident. The processes of making can support the search for and (re)construction of stories. Relating meaningful material, form and idea here navigates connections to a story and growing into owning a story.

Discussing dispersion

Materials needed:
paper, pencil/pen

1 Find a flower with a scent.
Preferably one growing in the wild, in a season without many flowers try a gentle scratch and sniff with a leaf.

2 Sniff it carefully.
And describe the scent first with adjectives and then with (imagined) personal characteristics and qualities that fit the perfume; think of a cover letter.

3 Add a note on how the fragrance compares to the color and shape of the flower—these can feel contradictory, which creates complexity.

4 Now note where this flower comes from and in which areas it grows (books, the internet, and imagination can be a great help). If you don't recognize the species, you can either make it up or look it up with Seek or other plant identification apps.

5 Now map out schematically where the flower grows; either realistically or imaginative.

6 Try to imagine who (human/non-human) might find the scent of the flower attractive, based on your description.

7 Review the options in conjunction with the current and potential distribution of the flower, mark areas that could potentially be of interest, and imagine how the scent would impact the local landscape and inhabitants.

8 Discuss your distribution options and form a proposal with the plant.

Rice

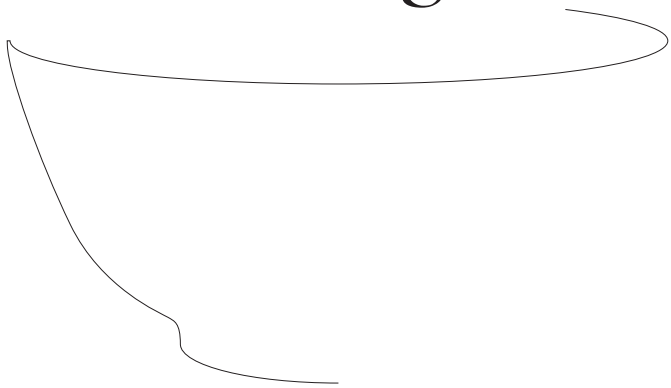
Rice is part of the genus Oryza. Asian rice varieties are in the genus *Oryza Sativa*, with about 20 varieties known to science. About 2000 years before the Christian Era, rice was introduced to Indonesia from China, where the plant originates.

Rice has had a significant impact on developments and connections between the continents of Africa, America, Europe, and Asia. "Its history is inextricably entangled with the emergence of colonialism, the global networks of industrial capitalism, and the modern world economy."[53] Almost half of the world's human population is fully or partially dependent on rice as the main staple food.

Originally rice is not a swamp plant, but vast quantities of water improve the growth and flowers of the plant, a process that takes between three to six months. In bloom, the panicle of the plant can hold between 50 and 500 ears that each holds a flower.[54]

53. Francesca Bray, *Rice: Global Networks and New Histories*, 2015.
54. Anjesse Stremler, "Rijst in Big Picnic: EU Horizon 2020 for Hortus Botanicus Leiden," 2017.

Rice, Rijsttafel: The Flamboyant Table, Folktale vegetable



This section brings together colonial narratives, counter storytelling, and food culture through nutrition, facilitating stories by listening, and questing peace from colonial impacts. The case study in this section is a multi-sensorial dinner performance that addresses the (ongoing) impact of colonial power in Indonesian food culture. By including counter-narratives to relate to the consumed dishes the stories become nutritional value while the dinner table is activated to keep guests captive and endure. The anecdote that follows takes the perspective of the table guest and underlines the value of listening with awareness of different voices. Storytelling is a wonderful method, but when and how do we listen with empathy? The exercise then reconnects with the relation between food and colonial impacts in a format inspired by traditional folk tales. The protagonist aims for peace with the earthly realm by investigating colonial impacts on a chosen food and making recovery their core quest of an adventure.

Rijsttafel: The Flamboyant Table

Rijsttafel: The Flamboyant Table is research and performative dinner by artist Elia Nurvista and writer Michael C. Vazquez curated by Nat Muller in 2014 for the Delfina Foundation ongoing program *The Politics of Food* (fig. 3, 4). In the performance dinner, the Indonesian artist works with counter-narrative storytelling that reflects on power relations and socio-economic inequality by sharing food and stories with guests at the dinner table. The artist collected these anecdotes from historical events in Indonesia, from both outside perspectives as well as local stories of Indonesian opposition. Multi-sensory experiences, power relations activated in serving, the abundance of food, and listening to a web of entangled histories draw out complex relations of inequality.

"Rijsttafel" (Eng: rice table) is a combination of rice and side dishes with condiments and comes from Dutch East Indies cuisine. This kitchen emerged during the colonial occupation of Indonesia and has influences from the Indonesian, Chinese-Indonesian, and European cuisines. In this fusion, Indonesian dishes are adapted to European tastes and European dishes made with local Indonesian ingredients. The combination of rice and side dishes originates from the local Indonesian custom to eat rice with one or a few savory side dishes and condiments. In the former Dutch East Indies (1816–1945), ingredients and labor for cooking and serving were exploited by those in power, allowing the Dutch colonists to dine in gluttonous abundance with as many as twenty dishes per meal. This means that not only the ingredients, flavors, and composition but also the cooking and serving are specific to the colonial Indies kitchen.

With the independence of Indonesia in 1945, Indies repatrients—Dutch, Dutch-Indies, and Indonesian people with Dutch ethnicity, occupations, or other ties—moved to the Netherlands, bringing with them this colonial heritage. In the 60s, Chinese immigrants initiated restaurant culture in the Netherlands by opening large restaurants in many cities and towns. Because of the familiarity and popularity of the Indies kitchen, an adapted version of the rijsttafel and Dutch Indies dishes are commonly served in these establishments. In the Netherlands, the rijsttafel has not been critically addressed much. As such, the collaboration between Dutch curator Nat Muller and Elia Nurvista on the performance was fruitful to gather perspectives on this rich and complex subject.

"This work also tells its way from continent to continent and back again, implicating a cast of Spanish explorers, Portuguese traders, Dutch planters, Javanese Sultans, Indonesian cooks, Chinese migrants, Japanese soldiers, and many more. By presenting performances and a sprawling banquet table featuring "rice mountains" and 30 dishes. As it was also served sequentially by Indonesian servants, it highlighted the senses about abundance, gluttonous and the guilty." [55]

As the dishes carry the implications of colonial power, the performance by Nurvista makes an intervention in the unquestioned serving of this meal, opening space for counter-narratives of resistance. Labor relations are questioned by having the dishes served according to the colonial traditions; many servants put as many dishes on the table to impress the guests and radiate authority. The role of serving the dishes and waiting the table was performed by Indonesian students living in London. The performers acted out a conversion of the expected role, instead of nicely and subtly placing the dishes with food, they emptied the rice straight onto the table. Without any communication or explanation by the serving staff, the food was offered to the guests as a parody of the "excess of the colonial table." The present fashion of presenting and explaining dishes was replaced by storytelling on the historical background of the meal and the meaning and role of rice in Indonesia by the artist and collaborator and writer Michael C. Vasquez.[56] In the Rijsttafel performance, she addresses issues related to national identity and the performance of hospitality. The unfamiliarity and experience of the exotic or other are amplified by serving the rice not in dishes but in heaps, piled on banana leaves that are positioned on the table. Plates and cutlery are missing, inviting guests to eat with their hands from the green leaves in front of them. This creates a more conscious, physical, and alienating experience for the many white Europeans at the table. The stereotypical Southeast Asian trait of hospitality is addressed by the students performing roles of humble servants. The difference in ethnic backgrounds of people in the space, exposing relations, serve as "a critique of post-colonial self-exoticization and of ahistorical nostalgic performances which reassert the colonial paradigm," writes Maravillas.[57]

Nurvista's performance does not directly address plants themselves or our human perspective in relation to vegetal life. Nevertheless, fruits, vegetables, nuts, spices, and herbs are the materials of her work and

55. See https://www.elianurvista.com/Rijsttafel-The-Flamboyant-Table
56. Ellen Kent, *Entanglement: Individual and Participatory Art Practice in Indonesia, 2016*. p. 288.
57. Francis Maravillas, *Food and Hospitality in Contemporary Asian Art*, p. 163.

are transformed into meals. Locality, climate, and origin play a very important role here, especially since the exchange, trade, and cultivation of plants are inseparable from coloniality. In the artist's practice, food serves as a medium to research Indonesian culture and identity in a local and global context. Questions of national identity, hospitality, exoticization, and colonial history are addressed in her works and performances. Complex relations between these issues are brought to the surface by bringing together realities of restaurant culture and critical art context.[58] In her work, Nurvista asks questions about the exoticization of Indonesian people. This is drawn out more explicitly by organizing still life drawing classes that propose a table with exotic fruits and an Indonesian model, posing with papaya, mango, pineapple, and bananas.

> *"The overriding fear is that cultural, ethnic and racial differences will be continually commodified and offered up as new dishes to enhance the white palate – that the other will be eaten, consumed and forgotten."*[59]

The fear to be eaten, consumed, and forgotten, as written by bell hooks in her publication race and representation, is addressed by the addition of counter storytelling during the dinner performance by Nurvista. Counter storytelling aims to underline the subjective and emotional experience of historical events, especially by minorities and underprivileged communities. By countering dominant narratives that produce forms of erasure, perspectives of the minority are allowed at the center stage of the story, and space is created for these voices, cultures, and experiences.[60] Especially in the colonizing countries, these narratives are often invisible. Where the rijsttafel itself is hardly questioned in the Netherlands, the addition of these stories can offer the perspective needed to critically reflect on the roles, identity constructions, ongoing colonial relations, and racist structures embedded in our societies and thinking. The setting of the dinner table is known as a confrontational space and full of social complexities where nurturing, sharing, as well as discussion, and conflict can be mobilized. Through the social constructs of the dinner table, the audience is held captive to endure the situation. While the artists provide information, in the form of counter storytelling, possibly evoking mixed feelings of pain, guilt, shame, anger, and humiliation.

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58. Kent, 2016. p. 266.
59. bell hooks, *Black Looks: Race and Representation,* 1992. p. 39.
60. Luna Castelli, "Introduction to Critical Race Theory and Counter-storytelling," *Noise Project*, https://noiseproject.org/learn/introduction-to-critical-race-theory-and-counter-storytelling/

The storytelling in Nurvista's performance is reinforced by the dishes creating a multi-sensorial experience that appeals to vision, hearing, scent, touch, and taste simultaneously. The experience of eating involves scent, touch, and taste, and invites an embodied relation to the storytelling. The performance and context of the rijsttafel illustrate how colonialism is an embodied project, including "the processes beyond the mouth and inclusive of the many stories that are interwoven with a certain food" as part of the digestive system.[61] By creating awareness about the implications of the foods themselves, the peoples and histories involved become part of the food. Dinner is served, eaten, and digested that carries and incorporates these stories as part of its nutritional values.

61. Joelson Buggilla and Jorgge Menna Barreto, *Enzyme #1,* 2020.

-Anecdote-

In the Storytelling Festival, I curated in 2019 this balancing act of who is speaking and who is listening as a starting point to reinforce the intersubjectivity within the act of storytelling played an important part in my curatorial work. With the aim to change the local status-quo by making space for other voices, I centralized questions about who could facilitate a stage for storytelling and which stories were important to include in the festival. This simultaneously meant a change of roles: when one person is speaking, it invites the other to take the position of listening. Our collaborators, who would be sharing a story as part of the festival—students, artists, citizens with a migration background, and volunteers from local refugee work from Syria and Palestine—were offered a masterclass in storytelling by international storytelling platform Mezrab. For our project team and students, who were given the assignment to work around the topic of storytelling and migration, we offered a complimentary workshop in empathic listening. With storytelling as a given format/method and migration as a decided theme, practicing empathy and compassion functioned as an entry point for creating space for counterstories, unconventional ones, that might not always be the most pleasant because they are somewhat unfamiliar or share the pain.

The workshop was led by Eveline Beumkes, psychologist and dharma teacher in the tradition of the Vietnamese Zen master Thích Nhất Hạnh. Beumkes describes empathic listening as the ability to walk in someone else's shoes and experience the world from there: "The art is to try to understand someone like they understand themselves—apart from us agreeing with them or not. From the moment we truly understand someone, compassion emerges." Unconditional acceptance thus surfaces with the practice of empathic listening. Through this understanding of listening, we created a more fertile soil for counter-narratives, non-dominant voices, and all kinds of stories to be told in the festival.

Folktale Vegetable

This exercise invites one to imagine making peace with the earthly realm through inspiring elements of a hero's journey. Palestinian artist Jumana Abboud proposes old wives' tales from bygone days as a remedy towards finding our own happy ending, a savior.[62] Stories can hold the capacity of healing especially when mined from personal experience and connected to one's own heritage, claims writer Clarissa Pinkola Estés.[63] Stories create and reflect our relations with others. In folktales, we can discern three different relational worlds: the human, spiritual, and earthly realm. These worlds can embody characters, locations, and events in stories like friendships, love and family relations, spirits, magical beings and clairvoyants, non-humans, and natural phenomena. The protagonist is challenged to make peace with all three dimensions they encounter during their journey. When harmony and balance are accomplished within these universes, only then is the quest completed.

62. Jumana Emil Abboud, "The irresistible shade of the vine [soundcloud]," *Casco Art Institute*, 30-04-2020, https://soundcloud.com/cascoartinstitute/jumana-emil-abboud-the-irresistible-shade-of-the-vine
63. Clarissa Pinkola Estés, *Women Who Run with the Wolves*, 1992, p. 507–511.

This exercise focuses on the earthly realm and how this realm challenges the protagonist (you or your alter-ego) to restore peace.

1 First, choose one edible plant, e.g. a favorite ingredient from your lunch salad. Take a bite and let the taste and smell inspire you. Alternatively, from memory, relive the experience of eating your favorite vegetable.

2 Then investigate the colonial/capitalist relations to the plant, what adaptations, interventions, and acts of violence have been done to create a profitable production?[64] What counter-narratives might be part of this product? Whose voices are heard, whose stories can be uncovered or given space?

3 Now, take the perspective of the earthly realm, consider the damage that has been done, and propose a quest to work on recovery. You are the instigator but can always ask others to help.

4 Set up an outline of a short narrative in which you as the protagonist are challenged with the quest of your vegetable in an adventure to recover peace with the earthly realm.

5 Mask the real with symbolic objects; in folktales, nothing is ever what it appears to be.

6 Use your imagination and add fictional elements.

7 Build the story using sensory descriptions of the characters, experiences, and surroundings.

8 Share your story.

64. For example, the orange carrot became naturalized by Dutch growers that chose this variety to celebrate the monarchy (named Orange). As the world's second largest agricultural exporter, this has had a large impact on the international appearance of the plant.

The Amazon

The Amazon is the largest rainforest on Earth and contains more than half of the remaining old-growth forests on the planet; about 7.7 million km^2, divided over nine countries within South America. The diversity of plant species in the Amazon is the highest in the world. It, therefore, has often been called the lungs of the earth. Recent scientific research, however, has shown that the Amazon is currently producing more carbon dioxide than it absorbs, mainly as a result of forest fires. Sixty percent of the surface of the forest is within Brazil. The current president, Jair Bolsonaro, nonetheless supports deforestation for farmland and is not committed to the preservation of this precious ecosystem.*

*"There are so many ecosystems part of the Amazon, it's not enough to say that the Amazon is a complex ecosystem, it is rather a complex of ecosystems."[65]

65. Luisa Puterman, interview by author, Maastricht, 29-7-2021.

The Amazon, Imaginary Museum of Natural History of the Amazon, Together like Peas and Carrots

This section brings together workshopping and decolonial ways of producing collaborative knowledge through imagination, relationality, and listening. The case study in this section is the ongoing collaborative research project *Imaginary Museum of Natural History of the Amazon*. Through non-extractive collecting and modes of workshopping, this project creates knowledge with methods of collective listening and imagining. By then zooming in to the colonial implications and decolonial options of listening as a relational act, the project is further contextualized. The anecdote subsequently reflects on the experience of a deep listening exercise in which students collectively clap to the rhythm of their hearts, transmitting their presence and creating space for different voices. The exercise that follows invites a similar acknowledgment of relationality in listening by focusing on this alliance with the vegetal. In dialogue with a plant, one takes turns in answering the question, "we are together because . . . ", imagining the voice of the plant through knowledge, imagination, and empathy.

Imaginary Museum of Natural History of the Amazon

Under the name SubSonora, Brazilian sound artists and music producers Luisa Puterman and Bruno Garibaldi work with sounds, words, listening, and imagination. In 2017, the artists set themselves the challenge to create an imaginary museum reflecting the Amazon. The project started from their work experience in art education and sound design, where they developed collaborative methodologies. After receiving grant support for the communication of science from their artistic perspective in sound, it was the Amazon that called out to them. Building an imaginary museum of the natural history of the Amazon came into existence along the way.

This became a long-term research project traveling through the Amazon connecting art and science, collecting sounds, data, and stories. By visiting research institutes and local communities, they collected the different concerns, investigations, and knowledges found in all corners of the large rainforest. Bringing their project to a large variety of spaces and institutions like forest communities, community centers, schools, and hospitals, they invited others to co-imagine rooms, collections, and curiosities of the museum. Through workshops, interviews, performances, sound recordings, and using existing archives, the collaborative project emerged.

Workshops or facilitated activities are both an input and output of the project that shares and gathers content simultaneously. Because the comfort of the participants plays a crucial role in the experience and effect of the activity, the approach is customized and adjusted to each group. The group dynamic and how they are approached and facilitated is thus very important. "People, in general, like to be invited to listen, when they are comfortable, you don't need to do much," Luisa shares.[66] In many of the workshops, fragments and soundscapes invite participants to listen. "Sound experience naturally evokes memories and imagination. People always have a specific relation or memory of nature."[67] By asking questions based on the listening activity, experiences are then shared within the group.

66. Puterman interview, 29-7-2021.
67. Puterman interview, 29-7-2021.

"The act of remembrance, of relating to the past in the manner of listening, escapes the reduction of reality to presence; it escapes the modern/ colonial rule of representation and appropriation. It contains the possibility of breaking open the linear continuity of history, the chronology of domination." [68]

- Rolando Vázquez

The Imaginary Museum of Natural History of the Amazon, is a project with modular outputs (fig. 5, 6, 7). Individual and collective elements can form or present the work that is ongoing and still developing. One of the outputs is a scalable sound installation that has been installed at the central train station of Sao Paulo, a public space available to large numbers of both local people and commuters. The collectivity of its creation and accessibility simultaneously challenge the modern construct of the museum. What a museum is and what its core objectives are is expanded by SubSonora by centering the characteristic of the institution as "a tool to reinforce narratives, a space to produce knowledge."[69] Through their choice of format and research methods, making or using existing sound recordings, they use non-violent ways of collecting knowledge and information about the land. The experience of these sounds, often mixed into soundscapes, do not require a specific type of schooling nor relate to the hegemony of modern epistemologies common in natural history collections. Puterman and Garibaldi try to ensure that the widest variety of people living in and around the Amazon are included, and there is no distinction made on whose knowledge is more valuable. These modes of collecting applied, listening, and collective imagining, can be seen as a decolonial act that opposes extractive practices of modern collecting.

Historically, the forming of collections has played an important role in suppression and extraction. The collecting of objects and the construction of a Wunderkammer or cabinet of curiosities—the first forms of

68. Rolando Vázquez, "Towards a Decolonial Critique of Modernity: Buen Vivir, Relationality and the Task of Listening," 2012, p. 8. https://www.researchgate.net/publication/271506450_Towards_a_Decolonial_Critique_of_Modernity_Bu_en_Viivi_r_Relationality_and_the_Task_of_Listening
69. Puterman interview, 29-7-2021.

collection presentations—originated from the colonial era. It is by appropriating properties and objects from other cultures and natures that they are stripped from their original functions and location. The interpretation, destination, and approach of these expropriated objects were given a new context by means of systematization, categorization, and presentation. These first forms of collecting were seen as prestigious forms of scientific research by the rational, civilized, white collectors that would study the invisible other belonging to the realm of nature.

Plant geneticist Daniel Chamovitz, and writer of the book, *What a Plant Knows* (2013), claims that research on the effects of music on plants has failed, and they don't have a specific preference between classical or rock music. However, research that uses sounds that are relevant to plants, like recordings of water and the chewing of a caterpillar, has proved that plants do hear and respond to these signs through their behaviors. Evolutionary biologist Monica Gagliano has worked on research with plants and sound and writes in her book Thus Spoke the Plant (2018) how plants use sounds to support their survival, and for example, use it to their advantage to find water sources and extend their roots in that direction. A plant is able to sense sounds from a lot of different actors in its surroundings and respond to them. In a field full of flowers, one specific plant might hear on one side a caterpillar chewing a leaf and on the other side a bee. The plant then responds to these events within minutes by increasing the brightness of its flowers and sending chemicals to deter the insect. To be able to increase their chances of survival, a plant needs to manage these different systems and needs to have a high sensitivity and perceptibility to their environment.[70]

This receptivity of the environment that plants display is part of what Deep Listening practices teach with the aim to create connectivity with our surroundings. Usually, urban life leads to limited focus and disconnection: too much information is received by the auditory cortex or habit has a limited hearing to what seems important to the listener. Everything else is seen as unnecessary noise. Compassion and understanding arise from impartial listening to the entire spacetime of sound, not just what the person is paying attention to: "In this way, discovery and exploration can take place."[71] Through Deep Listening practices, we can get to know the other actors in our surroundings and simultaneously

70. Monica Gagliano in conversation with Martin Clark, "The Botanical Mind: Plant Sentience – A New Model of Intelligent Life [podcast]," *Camden Art Centre*, 22-05-2020, https://www.botanicalmind.online/podcasts/plant-sentience-a-new-model-of-intelligent-life
71. Pauline Oliveros, *Deep Listening: A Composer's Sound Practice*, 2005, p. XXV.

learn about ourselves as part of this environment.
Practices of listening have been described by decolonial scholar Rolando Vázquez as a means of humbling modernity: a necessary step towards decolonizing.

> "The humbling of modernity and the positioning of the self are necessary conditions to engage in the task of listening. Listening is not the movement of incorporation, of appropriation, of alterity into one's own aesthetic and epistemic frameworks. Listening is about *learning each other*, about the possibility of becoming ourselves in relation *with* others and Earth-Worlds. It harbors the possibility of plentitude beyond the enclosure of the self."[72]

Similarly, writer Ursula K. Le Guin mentions listening as a relational practice: "Listening is not a reaction, it is a connection. Listening to a conversation or a story, we don't so much respond as join in—become part of the action."[73] In the same text about speaking and listening, Le Guin also writes that "speaking and listening are mutual acts, speaker and listener enable each other. A shared, intersubjective event."[74] This understanding of both speaking and listening as reciprocal actions illustrate clearly a discharge of power relations since so many examples of speaking do not illustrate the mutual act described. Vázquez explains this situation as follows:

> "We could say that modernity's monopoly over[-]representation is grounded on the negation of listening, that is, the negation of language as relationality. The negation of relationality materializes in the world of commodities as a simulacrum, as a self-referential system of signification (Baudrillard, 1968)."[75]

The denial of listening as part of modernity removes the mutuality (Le Guin) or relational (Vázquez) character of the conversation. Modernity has given the role of speaking to the white male, creating a disbalance in voices and taking away the mutuality in the acts of speaking and listening. This disbalance similarly impacted the act of listening, which inherently became an activity of obedience rather than the mutuality Le Guin mentions. It is, therefore, that both the acts of speaking and listening are important to be reconsidered. The ideas of Vazquez and Le Guin are thus not opposing but rather are describing a situation of

72. Rolando Vázquez, *Vistas of Modernity*, 2020, p. 139.
73. Ursula K. Le Guin, "Telling is Listening," in *The Wave in the Mind*, 2004, p. 156–172.
74. Ibid.
75. Vázquez, 2012. p. 6.

intersubjectivity that is not supported by modernity and in need of un- and relearning.

> *"Before we can directly proceed to unlearning, we first have to understand that learning is the result of hegemonic relations. […] Learning does not simply mean acquiring a set of knowledge and skills, but to some effect, that we also perform existing power relations. We study them by making use of this knowledge and passing it on and, in turn, we are also able to use this knowledge to question and turn power relations around."*[76]

The practice of deep listening and empathic listening are fruitful ways of unlearning by being open to counter storytelling, unfamiliar narratives, including the existence of others in your realm of understanding, and learning about yourself from the perspective of the other.

76. Nora Sternfeld, "Learning Unlearning," *Cumma Papers #20*, 2016, p. 3–4.

SOUND INSTALLATION

-Anecdote-

I introduced the practice of listening when I was given the title of ‘seeing differently’ to a series of classes to teach as part of a minor in Art Education. The artistic programs in the university, as well as the hosting bachelor program, are very focused on visual perception. The majority of the participants, studying Japanese, Chinese, Business and Management, Social Studies, and Food Design, chose the minor because of an interest to improve their skills as makers and enjoy drawing, painting, and art history. In the classes, however, with the students, we focused on how we can relate to each other, our environment, and art through a range of sensorial experiences. Moving the focus from visual to a broader spectrum of senses was thus equally challenging the approach of the institute and the visiting students.

In a range of short lectures and exercises on touch, scent, and visual thinking strategies, our experiment with deep listening forms one of my most profound memories. The class took place on a warm and sunny September morning when we gathered and walked to a nearby park. After doing a few preparatory physical relaxation exercises, we embarked on a Deep Listening exercise formulated by Pauline Oliveros. Sitting in a comfortable seat of choice, we created a rhythm circle with our heartbeat; each person detects their heartbeat and starts tapping this rhythm softly with a finger, when all participants are tapping, you switch to clapping. For a few students, it took some extra effort to find their heartbeat, but luckily everyone was actually alive and able to participate. At first, the irregular clapping felt somewhat off and uneasy to many, but once realizing everyone was representing the rhythm of their heart and body, illustrating their physical participation in the group, it was incredibly beautiful to feel and hear these bodies gathered in a circle.

Connecting on this level during the first physical meeting of the group laid out a great baseline for collaboration and including everyone's participation. It seemed an experience of resonance happened with this exercise, something feminist writer Lucia Farinati might connect back to Le Guin's idea of mutuality, which Farinati describes as "the reciprocity of speaking and listening that is so fundamental to a politics of difference."[77] This similar approach to creating space for coming together in differences rather than a mere focus on our similarities, as experienced in the rhythm circle, created a starting point for the following classes and courses. Active listening, as Farineti describes as a feminist listening practice, "opens up the possibility for understanding our experiences and responding to them in ways that challenge the self-other dichotomy."[78]

To connect this learning experience back to the earlier concept of Vázquez, Farinati argues that by ignoring relationality—for example, that human culture is part of larger ecologies, not separate from them—violence and destruction operate. In this way, feminism (as a social field) and environmental activism are one project since the causes of the violence they seek to redress are ultimately entangled.

77. Alex Martinis Roe, "Proposition #12 The Practice of Listening", in *Two Become Two: Propositions for Feminist Collective Practice*, 2017, p. 227.
78. Alex Martinis Roe, 2017, p. 228.

Together Like Peas and Carrots

We Are Together Because is an exercise formulated by Pauline Olivero focusing on the social and relational aspects of listening.[79] To this formulation, I have added a layer that invites a vegetal connection into this practice. Engaging in the exchange with both humans and plants can draw out our position on vegetal life in insightful ways.

Set up:
You can choose whether to do this exercise with another human, plant, or both. Articulating relationality and mutual dependencies can be interesting to explore in different domains and situations. Think about inviting a friend, family member, a lover, students, peers, colleagues, a stranger. You can engage with plants in different locations and situations: in your (living)room, in a garden, a park, forest, between pavement cracks, in your fridge, in your stomach. Feel free to think of other situations where you could have this dialogue with a plant. Try to imagine their answers and build an exchange combining your vegetal knowledge and phantasy.

Exercise:
Finish the sentence in as many ways as possible:
"We are together because . . . "
When you run out of answers, continue with finishing the sentence:
"We are together like . . . "

79. See *We are together because* (1980) in Pauline Oliveros, *Deep Listening: A Composer's Sound Practice*, 2005, p. 37.

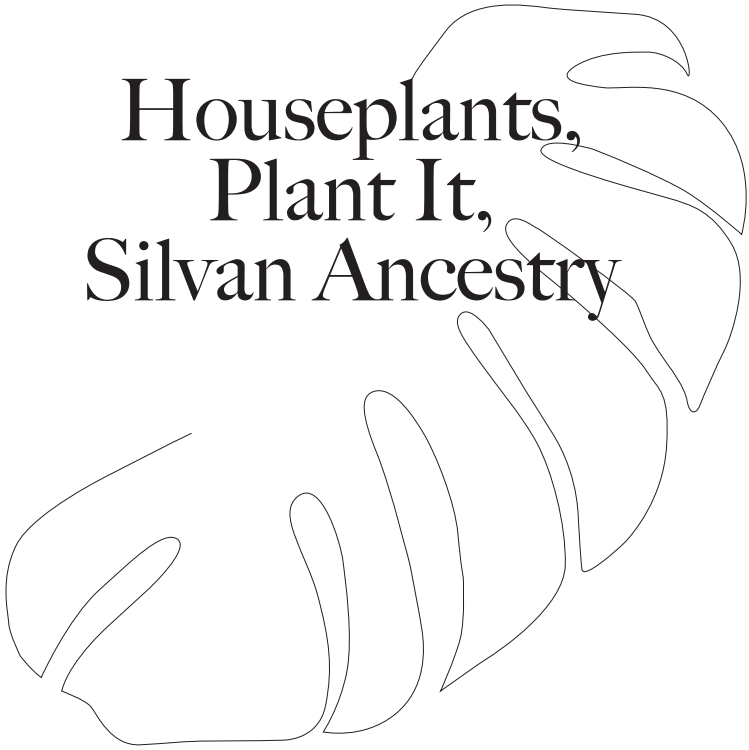
Houseplants

A houseplant is a cultivated plant that is kept indoors for decoration—often in a pot.[80] Houseplants often originate from countries with a tropical or desert climate and cannot survive outside in Western Europe. Often flown internationally at a small size, plants are grown to commercial size locally, using a lot of water, energy, and toxins.

Taking plants from a tropical climate, without careful consideration or consultation, to the Netherlands and growing them for a profit is a process that started in colonial times. While more and more people live in urban environments, the need for green surroundings grows. Compensating for our disconnect with our environment, people are decorating their houses with plants. Living room plants are great for stress relief and the climate indoors, but the impact of their production on the outside world is often overlooked.

80. Allowing to move the unmovable, but also disconnecting the sensitive root system from possible connection and communication with other plants.

Houseplants, Plant It, Silvan Ancestry



This section brings together resilience from colonial histories with ancestry, imagination, and non-human relations. The case study in this section is the music video *Plant It* that engages with plants to create an imaginary dream world manifesting resilience. With symbols and attributes of colonialism and African diaspora, the black musician reclaims her position through worlding a multi-species community reinforced by ancestral rituals. The following anecdote reflects on the difficulty of connecting to ancestrality and understanding this struggle as implications of coloniality possibly made undone and recovered by accepting plurality and understanding each individual is made by others. The exercise then activates this idea by imagining oneself as a tree from memory. Through taking a non-human relation as ancestral origin, a pluriversal connection is made, stretching generations and relating to various forms of life.

Plant It

Plants and art have carried ideas of modern/colonial imaginations. Botanical research was, in part, a result of orientalism and the Western imagination of an idealized landscape.[81] Early botanical gardens often aimed to recreate the Garden of Eden, a paradise that was the home to the Christian male (Adam) but was lost by the greed and selfishness of the woman (Eve). Green and tropical landscapes full of flowers of this lost paradise narrative have been pictured into familiar images by artists. These rich landscapes, full of plants and biodiversity, are made by plants. As one of the oldest forms of life on earth, plants created an environment that welcomed all kinds of non-human life and eventually also human life. Plants actually make soil; they build worlds, futures, and provide other life with oxygen, food, medicine, and shelter and moreover have proven to do this in a "sustainable" way.[82] I thus want to invite, in these urgent times of ecological breakdown, to not only make use of plants as a carrier and material of building futures but also take inspiration from their work. Taking plants as inspiration for (modes) of worlding.

> *"It has been a failure of our imagination not to see plants for what they are, in their own right or even as a source of inspiration."* [83]

Building a collaboration with plants is not far-fetched since popularity and interest in plants are growing significantly. While in contemporary art, the "vegetal turn" "attempts to recognize the central but overlooked cultural and ecological presence of plants and to find imaginative ways of engaging with them,"[82] millennials have spent their bar money in lockdown on building indoor jungles. One can find as many plant cuttings as bookshelves at online marketplaces, and actual plant exchange libraries pop up in public space like mushrooms in a Finnish forest in fall. With an increase of 226 percent revenue for garden stores in the Netherlands, plant growers take over the market while our living rooms are becoming greener.

A year before the COVID-19 pandemic, Portland-based musician Amenta Abioto found a collaborator in director, screenwriter, and towny

82. In a way that is sustainable for life and biodiversity, not for the comfortable existence of humans and continuation of capitalism as the word used in commercial and neoliberal terms.
83. Monica Gagliano in conversation with Martin Clark, 22-05-2020, https://www.botanicalmind.online/podcasts/plant-sentience-a-new-model-of-intelligent-life
84. Anna Souter, "Artists, Writers, Musicians, and More Explore the Intersections of Art and Ecology," *Hyperallergic*, 25-05-2020, https://hyperallergic.com/565756/artists-writers-musicians-and-more-explore-the-intersections-of-art-and-ecology/

Alberta Poon and produced a music video for her song *Plant It* (fig. 8). Poon herself describes the video as "an entryway into the world of plant magic and earth fantasy" and "a musical journey through mystical lands of synth waves and vibrations."[85] The video connects beautifully to the current trends and explores many more interesting layers that connect to the histories of plants related to Abioto's African diasporic background.

During a conversation between Ros Gray, senior lecturer in Art and Ecology at Goldsmiths, and her colleague professor in postcolonial culture, Shela Sheikh, on the racialization of greenspaces, Gray notes, "[t]here is a historical racial construction of who is supposed to enjoy the land versus who takes care or works on the land. These ideas and constructs are inherited from colonial plantation systems, and we are proceeding these forward,"[86] During the corona lockdown periods, this has been illustrated by disproportionate targeting of people of color in public green spaces, like the much-discussed case of the Afro-American birder Christian Cooper, who was reported to the police in Central Park by a white woman on the same day George Floyd was murdered.[87]

In her music video for the song *Plant It*, Amenta Abioto challenges these historical and racial constructions and suppression of Black people. Within a colorful and dreamy setting, Abioto is presented in various situations consisting of tropical plants, fruits, ritualistic attributes, and a chameleon. Wearing a safari hat and Victorian-inspired Vlisco wax printed dresses with a necklace of cowrie shells, symbols of colonialism and African heritage are an integrated part of the visual language of the video. Despite the possible discomfort and pain of the past, she shares with the attributes, she does so by reclaiming and retaking her position amid the green, transforming the objects into symbols of resilience. Decorated with different jewelry and beautiful dresses in every shot, her relation to the natural surroundings and positions of reclaimed a central place reminds me of a subtle, young, and mystical version of Beyoncé's role in the Carters' music video at the Louvre.

85. Alberta Poon, *Plant It*, https://albertapoon.com/plant-it
86. Shela Sheikh and Ros Gray in conversation with Martin Clark, 31-07-2020, https://www.botanicalmind.online/podcasts/the-coloniality-of-planting
87. Sarah Maslin Nir, "The Bird Watcher, That Incident and His Feelings on the Woman's Fate," *The New York Times*, 27-05-2020, https://www.nytimes.com/2020/05/27/nyregion/amy-cooper-christian-central-park-video.html

"Imagination is one of the most powerful modes of resistance that oppressed and exploited folks can and do use. Without the ability to imagine, people remain stuck, unable to move into a place of power and possibility." [88]

- bell hooks

Plant It combines plant-inspired ecological thought, imagination, arts, and the concept of worlding. Thinking with plants and taking inspiration from their ways of being in the world opposes systems of thought embedded in modern and colonial patterns. Art could therefore help in activating this inspiration by opening and expanding on this proposal. As the video by Poon and Abioto illustrates, art can "reveal images from dreams, activate imagination" and thus "be a process of inquiry leading to emergent knowledge—knowledge that is new, unanticipated, and unpredicted."[89] It is in this created environment with plants that Abioto positions herself to activate a multi-species community in the present. Her throne, a trendy rattan armchair, is surrounded by a beautiful selection of tropical plants, placing her in the self-constructed world the director depicts as "nature as a source of magic to manifest dreams from."[90] The plants, however, are not only a backdrop for the video; they often take the foreground. They also become actors of storytelling, related to Abioto's ancestry, creating an environment for all subjects to flourish. To the beat of the music, a plant and Abioto connect and we see a moving leaf tapping the palm of her hand. It seems that these non-humans play an essential role in her worlding as much as a relationality built by ritualistic practices. A glass sphere, crystals, large shells, candles, and a bottle of rum on an altar illustrate the musicians' practice of affirmations, visualizations, prayer, and spells.[91] These items, connecting to the African diaspora, built alliances that move beyond the now and connect Abioto spiritually to ancestral relations.

Opposing the effects of displacement caused by the European colonial project, decoloniality proposes worlding and emplacement. Worlding

88. bell hooks, *Teaching Critical Thinking, Practical Wisdom*, 2010. p. 61.
89. Oladimeji, 2018. p. 100.
90. Alberta Poon, *Plant It*, https://albertapoon.com/plant-it
91. Amenta Abioto quoted in Travis Liepzig, "Video Premiere: Amenta Abioto – 'Plant It'", Eleven PDX, 07-02-2019, https://elevenpdx.com/new-music/premiere/amenta-abioto-plant-it/

requires deliberate efforts of connecting to experience and imaginaries and can be understood as creating a background or context in which phenomena emerge and this way, built meaning.[92] We realize that in the world she is creating, the role of plants demonstrated in the video could simultaneously have a ceremonial meaning and one of nurturing and care, for example, when we listen to the lyrics in the song saying, "did you plant it, with your feelings and all?" In the music video, Poon shows how Abioto builds worlds that bridge histories and futures from relationships in both human and non-human worlds.

92. Helen Palmer, Vicky Hunter, "Worlding," 2018, https://newmaterialism.eu/almanac/w/worlding.html

-Anecdote-

Almost a year after my participation in the Decolonial Summer School, I log in to Zoom for a decolonial ritual hosted by Ayesha Ghanchi-Goemans, lecturer in critical pedagogies from the Piet Zwart art education Master's program. Artist and dancer Fazle Shairmahomed invites the participants to a decolonial activity that connects to ancestrality, a writing ritual named "An Act of Materialization." After a cleansing act with water and burning incense, sage, or palo santo, we were asked to invite and connect to our ancestors with an emotion or feeling. At steps three and four, the participants were asked to formulate a question or request and reciprocate this with a sacrifice or promise. After not being able to gather the ritual materials within the few minutes given, I was startled by the assignment to connect to my ancestors. I needed more time and practice to develop an awareness of my ancestors and make up or learn about who they could be to connect to them. This first hurdle complicated all the following steps, and I struggled to decide between bringing up memories of stories of great grandparents that didn't feel significant enough or attempting to imagine a vegetal ancestry. The internal struggle did not allow more than some chaotic notes while I wondered what type of writing was expected from me or if I would be asked to share this in the group later. When the time was up for the ritual, Shairmahomed shared with us his video work *UMAD* that strongly relates to the introduced topic of decolonial ancestrality.

I stopped feeling overwhelmed and out of place when Rolando Vázquez, who was invited as a guest speaker of the event, contextualized the meaning and role of ancestrality in decolonial practices. Vázquez explained how identity in the West is generally constructed individually in contrast to many other cultures and indigenous peoples who construct their being in relation to the ones that came before them, biologically, locally, and relationally. The construction of identity, as a disconnected individual is an impoverished view, according to Vázquez. Taking the Netherlands as

a reference, he explained how the country, as a radically secular society, suppresses consciousness of ancestry, becoming an amnesic condition in line with coloniality/modernity.[93] Accepting ancestrality is needed:

> "to remember who you are
> is part of plurality and
> accepting that we are made by
> others. Without these others,
> you would not exist. We come
> from the earth, communal and
> ancestral. An acknowledgment of
> our heritage is a way to deal
> with our Western condition of
> forgetfulness."[94]

Vázquez mentions that this limitation is caused by isolating the person from their history/ies. The learning and knowing of the self, characterized by Eurocentrism, allows Western Europeans to only know themselves through themselves, which is a very limited and one-sided perspective.

93. However, enforcing particular ancestral ties and associated ideologies as well as enforcing collectivity can also be a form of tyranny. Non-Western cultures can also be hierarchical, patriarchal, tyrannical, sexist, racist, etc. The reformation, which was a process of individualising and democratising the edicts of the ancient collective authority of the church and which epistemologically feeds capitalist individualism, was at the time emancipatory. The soviet experiments were an example of modernity's attempts to enforce collectivism. We need to be wary of ideological tyranny wherever it occurs.
94. Rolando Vázquez quoted in Decolonial Rituals workshop organized by Piet Zwart Institute, Rotterdam, 11-06-2021.

Silvan Ancestry

"It is above all by the imagination that we achieve perception and compassion and hope."

- Ursula K. Le Guin

Every living being has ancestors, we can speak about biological ancestors but ancestry can also be associated with your identity, beliefs, ethics, and so forth. The possibility of connecting to your ancestors can depend on several things: your knowledge about them, your identity, and your ability to imagine. Since it might take a significant amount of time and effort to learn about the first two options, I would like to invite you to the third option: imagining. By imagining yourself as a tree from your memories, an understanding of ancestral connecting through multi-species communities can be practiced. Fragments of this exercise relating to the embodiment of the tree have been inspired by Natasha Myers' Kriya for cultivating your inner plant.[95]

95. Natasha Myers, "Sensing Botanical Sensoria," *Centre for Imaginative Ethnography*, 2014, https://imaginative-ethnography.com/imaginings/affect/sensing-botanical-sensoria/

You can read the text yourself or ask someone to read it to you or practice in a group. Ideally, this should be practiced outside on a sunny day. The exercise takes about 15–20 mins.

Find a spot in the sun, straighten your back and ground your feet, keep your arms slightly away from you and create space between your arms and your torso. Then close your eyes and experience the sun on your skin, take it in, consume it. Slowly let the outlines of your human body fade.

Think of a tree you have encountered and connected with, was it recently or as a child? In your garden or that of a relative? A tree you enjoyed climbing or maybe you have picked their fruits, flowers, or leaves? Take your time remembering this tree.

Do you remember the shape of their leaves? Do you remember any flowers on this tree? What is the current season and what does that mean for you as the tree? How different will you look in different seasons? Fill the holes of your memories with imagination. Now transform into this tree.

Your body stretches leaving only the thickness of a membrane cell. Your skeleton slowly dissolves, and your muscles melt. Your flesh branches out and forms several stems that continue the process of branching.

Now send water through your veins so that they stretch and become thicker. Extract water from your trunk and navigate it to your leaves. Play with your buoyancy, and feel your leaves rise and search for daylight to suck up. "You are becoming phototropic."[96]

How long has the tree been here? How many other people could they have encountered? How do they relate to them? How many relations does the tree have with other life: which birds have built nests in the branches and how many generations of them? Imagine your connectedness with the world of air. Which beetles have lived under your roots, under your bark, and rested on your leaves? Remember the caterpillars munching, transforming, and frolic around you later as moths and butterflies.

Now move your attention down to your roots, and experience the moist, cool earth around it. Notice how your confidence below provides an upward boost. Then direct your attention to a root tip, taste the wet, metallic soil with a moldy tinge of decay, finding nitrogen and phosphorus in the ground. Extending this feeling to the experience of two searching root points, then four; can you imagine what it would feel like to move a thousand root points in the earth? Experience the thrill of feeling millions of sensitive root tips sensing deep into the earth.

96. Myers, 2014.

Who and what do you encounter there? What does your presence mean to them? Imagine your connection to mycelium, touching other roots, feeling their messages and signals communicating continuously.

Now imagine the tree that made the seed you grew out of. Where could it be located? Where have the other seeds of this tree dispersed? And which of them grew into trees as imposing as you? Imagine the relations your parent tree has built over and underground and the relations you built by dispersing your seeds every year. Imagine the network of relations built by the origin and lineage of trees and move through hundreds, thousands, ten thousand years of time in the lineage of this tree.

Now slowly draw in your roots and branches and return to your human body. Can you think of something that you could do for the tree that acknowledges your memory of them? Write down or draw your tree or a part that you find significant about your tree from memory or imagination. Add your act of acknowledgment in words to your paper.

Feel free to come back and repeat this exercise to build your relationship with this and other trees and your shared connectedness through the experience of the tree.

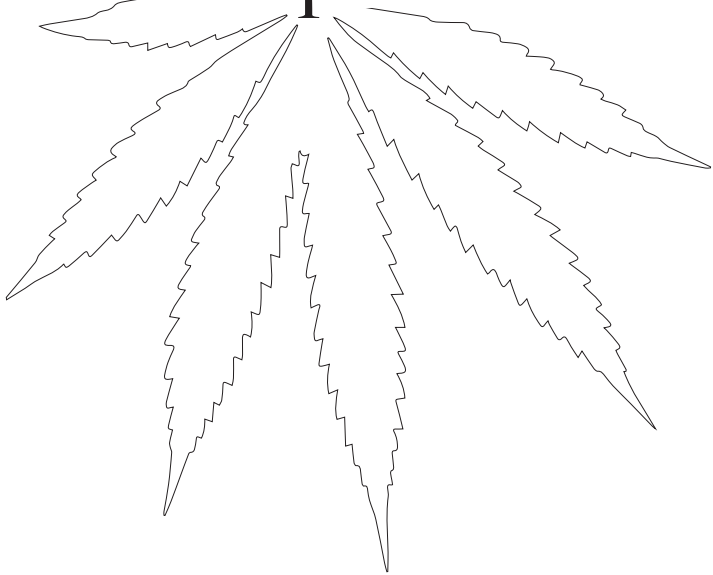
Cannabis

Cannabis, also known as hemp, is a wind-pollinated flowering plant originating from Asia. The oldest pollen identified from the cannabis plant has been found near the Tibetan Plateau and has been dated as 19.6 million years old. The plant is versatile and can be processed into food, paper, rope, fuel, textiles, plastics, medicine, but is mostly known as a sedative.

Cannabis has been cultivated much and has been adjusted to either produce more fibers for industrial uses, or more of the psychoactive substance (THC) for its recreational and medicinal use. The Sativa variety gives an energized, creative, and uplifting effect; the Indica species offers relaxation and pain relief. The flower buds contain the highest THC levels and are referred to as weed. The pressed resin is called hashish. The bad reputation of consuming cannabis has more to do with criminalizing lower-class minorities, racism, and religious bigotry than care for public health.[97]

97. Dale Pendell, *Pharmako/Poeia: Plant Powers, Poisons and Herb Craft*, 1995, p. 204.

Cannabis, Lungs of Flowers, Reciprocitea



This section addresses reciprocity between plants and humans by acknowledging and practicing relations through foraging and care. The case study in this section is a short and humorous video on caring, exchanging, and consuming in which an anthropomorphized mollusk shell that enacts a caring relationship with cannabis plants. The title *Lungs of Flower*, suggests a vegetal standpoint that attributes agency to plants and their influence on humans as an extension for dominant plants like cannabis. The anecdote then shares an experience of activating a reciprocal relationship with trees through whisk-making and sauna rituals. The exercise invites one to activate reciprocity through foraging, making, and drinking herbal tea while learning and improving relations with herbs and the body through mutual care.

Lungs of Flowers

In the 2018 video work *Lungs of Flower* by the Canadian artist Arvo Leo, various large cannabis plants in a rooftop greenhouse have a reciprocal relationship with a creature dressed in a faceless, white, cone-shaped costume decorated with pebbles (fig. 9). The video starts with shots of Xenophora pallidula shells from mollusks that decorate and camouflage by cementing discarded stones and shells of others onto theirs, creating fascinating and odd, pointy sculptures. Then a drone shot shows the Rijksakademie building, a prestigious post-academic institute offering international artists' studios for a two-year residency period where the artist made this work. On one of the roofs, a large greenhouse is built to shelter five flowering cannabis plants growing a few meters tall, touching the ceilings of the construction. Next, we see Amsterdam canals and warehouses enveloped by a grey and misty day. Walking the pebble-covered rooftops, a human-sized Xenophora creature with a long stick, pointy hands and feet becomes the anthropomorphized shell. Their soundtrack combines a deep tuba base with electronic beeps that add to the absurdity and humor of the character. When they start scooping roof pebbles with the stick and putting them one at a time through a hole in a nearby door, the strange labor act reminds of Mika Rottenberg's conveyor-belt installations. When the creature takes off, we see the cleared spaces on the roof represent the silhouette of human lungs. In the last scene, we are at the other side of the door: an artist studio with white walls and grey-greenish floors. The rocks have accumulated here through the hole in the door. When a human hand offers a stone to a clay instrument from a hole in the floor, a cannabis flower bud is being offered in exchange, ending the video.

Caring, exchange, consuming, and mental and bodily effects of this relationship between human and plant are communicated in the video. Like the effects of smoking cannabis, the video offers unexpected connections and brings humorous events that invite imagination and further thought. Ingesting the plant is presented as an embodiment of the character and possibly the worlding of the other; alternatives to history lessons and scientific knowledge. The relationship that Leo builds between the Xenophora creature/hand and cannabis plants is one of care and reciprocity or "gift economy." While reciprocity relates to exchange, it should not be understood as transactional or eye-for-an-eye. I understand reciprocity as an ongoing process or relationship of mutual care and respect, rather than a contract. Robin Wall Kimmerer describes this concept as an economy of non-monetary exchange that moves away

from capitalist systems of profit and exploitation. To participate in the gift economy, Kimmerer invites humans to relate to plants, their fruits, and flowers as gifts rather than resources. These gifts should first be accepted and cherished as such, and secondly, the gift can and should be returned by us. How humans can accept and return this gift is a (re-) learning process of ourselves in relation to the other that we can, for example, shape as caregivers.[98]

In the video, it is unknown whether the collected and offered rocks are directly for the cannabis plants. They might symbolize gifts or resources, but can also practically improve the quality, minerals, and oxygen needed for healthy soil. For the Xenophora, rocks serve a decorative purpose but can also impact their safety through camouflage and increase their reproduction by attracting a partner. Shells themselves have long served as a medium of exchange in large parts of the world. What we learn in the video is that the offer is accepted and returned.

The Dutch colonizers worked on their profits with various sedative, poisonous, and addictive plants like sugar, coffee, tobacco, cacao, and opiates. By creating dependence and establishing a market in which consuming was to be a pastime activity, future profits were secured, and capitalism was born. Despite the centuries-long involvement of the Netherlands in the production and trade of opium, with its rulers as principal shareholders, it is cannabis that is connected to the country's present international identity. Governmental policies that tolerate rather than legalize have played an essential role in putting the Netherlands on the map as an exceptional liberal and progressive country. This tolerance includes growing up to five plants, and carrying a maximum of five grams of weed, although not allowed, without being legally prosecuted.

Poet and ethnobotanist Dale Pendell mentions that the taboo on and prohibition of certain plants and poisons is mainly dependent on cultures and politics, which change a lot over time. Taking coffee as an example, Pendell explains how consumption has been made illegal in many European countries during the years of introduction because of its intense effects on people. Cacao, similarly, has not been available for the lower classes for its special effects that were kept exclusively for the upper class.[99]

Despite the specific connotation as a sedative, cannabis is an incredi-

98. Robin Wall Kimmerer, "Returning the Gift," *Minding Nature 7:2*, 2014. p. 20.
99. Tim Ayres in conversation with Dale Pendell, "Mad River Anthology [podcast]," Humboldt State University, 14-12-2008, https://podcastaddict.com/episode/22871977

bly versatile and generous plant that can be successfully used as food, paper, rope, fuel, textiles, plastics, and medicine. Pendell notes that "the plant has been cultivated for at least ten thousand years. There is no way to know how it was used first: for food, for fiber, or as a visionary power."[100] Despite its long history of domestication, versatile and valuable application, cannabis was not used as a crop in the Dutch colonial plantations. Its qualities like durability as material, nutritional, and medicinal properties do not support capitalism and are by far not as addictive as sugar, coffee, or tobacco.

Recent scientific research, including the work of evolutionary ecologist Monica Gagliano, challenges human understanding and definition of intelligence in relation to the brain, observation, decisions, and communication by proving plants' ability to memorize and apply gained information from past situations. By performing intelligence without a central nervous system or a brain, plants prove agility is not exclusive to (human) animals.
Monica Gagliano concludes in conversation with Prudence Gibson, the head of the Critical Plant Studies program at the University of New South Wales in Sydney, on "Plant Blindness", that there is a need to give more attention to concepts of embodied knowledge and situated knowledge and learn more about how these function.[101] Because plants cannot move, their ability to protect, hide, or flee is limited. Having separate organs would be a significant risk because damage to one part of the whole, as humans, is life-threatening. In the modular structures of plants, all information and functions of their being are compiled and multiplied with growth. As humans consist of many different parts, often in collaboration with non-human cells and microorganisms, plants reproduce more of their own, making them more "themselves" than humans are.[102] This difference between human and plant bodies invites us to understand the title of Arvo Leo's video work, *Lungs of Flowers*, to be our lungs affected by plants. After all, lungs collect and process air; the oxygen produced by plants is subsequently pumped through all veins and blood vessels circulating in our body. Equally, through the lungs, compounds of cannabis are usually inhaled and enter the human body. Because oxygen is not a human but a vegetable product, it is interesting to relate to the human lungs as a location or organ in the body that closely relates to plants and, when smoking cannabis, to their flowers. Leo explains with a statement on his website, "I can offer you some of

100. Dale Pendell, 1995, p. 180.
101. Monica Gagliano in conversation with Prudence Gibson, "Plant Blindness part 2 [video]," *Youtube*, 11-11-2019, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=il14lWU4zEA
102. Michael Marder in conversation with Martin Clark, 7-05-2021, https://camdenartaudio.libsyn.com/conversations

these flowers, not because I care about you, but because I care about the flowers. You are just a receptacle for the plant's own transformation."

-Anecdote-

In the summer of 2018, I participated in the Silvan Kinship workshop by the Finnish artist Mari Keski-Korsu as part of the inter-format symposium organized by Nida Art Colony in Lithuania. This workshop entailed going to a nearby forest and building a connection with trees, gathering branches for whisk making, and a sauna ritual that evening.

Starting the workshop in a nearby forest, we connected with the trees by imagination and embodiment. Each of us picked a tree we were interested in, and in close proximity, we stood tall imagining roots growing from our feet, anchoring our body to the soil. Then we branched out and swayed with the wind rustling our imaginary leaves. The connection brought a grounded kind of peace, a rest that reminds me of wisdom.

After this restoring exercise, Mari shared her knowledge about some of the trees that were to be found locally, how to recognize them, and their medicinal values in sauna rituals. Birch can be used for a classic refreshing whisk, juniper to stimulate blood circulation and massage soles of the feet. A whisk from oak branches has an anti-inflammatory effect. Following this discourse, we gathered branches for our own whisk. For this, we used some guidelines that I found later articulated in Robin Wall Kimmerers writing about the honorable harvest.[103] Asking the tree for permission to take branches, cutting them off with a sharp tool, and we took only what we needed for constructing one whisk each. With instructions and tips from Mari, we then gathered a tight bunch and bundled it with rope, ready to soak for the evening sauna.

103. Robin Wall Kimmerer, "The Honorable Harvest", in *Braiding Sweetgrass: Indigenous Wisdom, Scientific Knowledge, and the Teachings of Plants*, 2013. Kimmerer considers herself rather a student than a teacher of this instruction that can be found in many indigenous teachings.

The sauna ritual took place that evening in a wooden sauna at a nearby beach. The wood-fired hut had a very pleasant heat and amazing smells of the cedar, birch, oak, and juniper mixing. After enjoying the sauna together with the lovely company of the other workshop participants, I was incredibly lucky to receive a full session from Mari. In the treatment, she covered my head in soaked whisks and massaged my body in the heat by gentle and intense whisking. Breathing the steamy tree-scented air through the wet leaves on my face felt like becoming part of the birch, taking in the saps and essence, while the heat was altering my state of consciousness. The slapping of the tree branches on my legs, chest, back, belly, and arms brought a massage, a liveliness, and stimulation to my skin and muscles, with a heat that reached through to my bones. Cooling off with a dip in the sea under a moonlit sky, and digging my feet into the chilly sandy beach, made me feel rejuvenated with such a strong bodily sense of connection I had never experienced before.

> An important aspect of the workshop happens after the ritual. When the whisks are used up, they return back to the forest; with gratitude and thanks for using the branches, the whisk is taken apart and will become nutrients and soil for other plants. It is in this conscious relationship of mutual care, a give and take, that healthy relationships of reciprocity with plants are built.

Reciproci tea

Guided by the honorable harvest from Robin Wall Kimmerer

Their pleasant taste and medicinal properties make plants interesting ingredients for tea. Their roots, leaves, fruit, and flowers can be used for herbal tea. Tisane is another word for herbal tea. In fact, tea refers to the specific tea bush, while tisane is an infusion of herbs or a decoction of them. Due to the different properties, they can provide different flavors and effects. The effect of herbal teas is often mild, but it does not rule out that long-term use, especially in combination with medicines or conditions, can have dangerous consequences. After all, it is many of these plants that have been used as medicines for a long time in various applications. In many cultures, herbal medicine, in addition to or instead of Western medicine, still plays an important role. Think, for example, of Chinese medicine or Indian Ayurveda. By practicing knowledge about plants and their medicinal properties, we can work towards a better understanding of both our environment and our own bodies and how they are connected. Identifying, picking herbs, and learning their effects is a great way to be actively involved in this. Tisane, unlike coffee, can be obtained from the immediate vicinity. Usually, the goal is not to increase the heart rate or adrenaline but to create a moment of rest and healing. It does not encourage crossing borders but makes room for care, reflection, and contemplation.

The honorable harvest is a ground-rule built on values of reciprocity and human responsibility as caretakers. It keeps in mind the systems of ecologies that support a gift economy and the ability of sustenance and survival of all species. By this code, when picking or foraging:

1 One never takes the first nor the last.

2 When you intend to take, you introduce yourself, why you have come, and ask for permission.

3 Devise beforehand what and how much you need, and never take more than that.

4 Practically, it is important to carry a sharp knife or good pair of scissors because a plant can heal more quickly when a branch is cut off cleanly.

5 A basket is useful to keep your gatherings and let critters crawl out.

6 For your own health, it is advised to not pick near roads or train tracks. Also, pick above dog-pee height or where wildlife with rabies could cross.[104]

7 Observe the plant you are picking from, how is their health, how could you contribute to their wellbeing? Allow this relation to growing over time.

8 Ask if there is something you can do for the tree. Maybe it is sharing a cup of tea with a friend and telling them about your encounter with the tree.

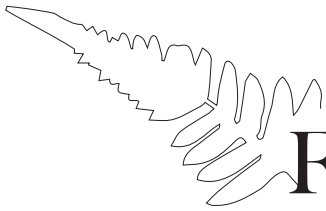
Start with a sprig of lemon balm, nettle, chamomile, or marjoram. In June, I would especially recommend linden blossoms. Rinse the herbs and add them to a mug, glass, or teapot with some boiling water, add lemon and sweetener to taste.

104. Alie Ward, "Foraging Ecology (EATING WILD PLANTS) with @blackforager Alexis Nikole Nelson [podcast]," *Ologies*, 18-05-2021, https://omny.fm/shows/ologies-with-alie-ward/foraging-ecology-eating-wild-plants-with-blackfora

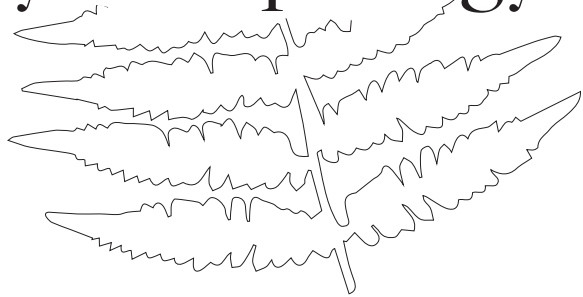
Ferns

Ferns are vascular plants and can vary in size from as small as a thumbnail to 25m high trees. They are one of the oldest plants species, and fossilized ferns have been found 360 million years old. Due to their multiplicity during the Carboniferous period, the ferns from that time form a large part of our fuel today.

Ferns do not form flowers or seeds but multiply by means of spores. These develop into a gametophyte that is fertilized and forms a seed. Both the roots and the leaves of many ferns arise from a rhizome, an underground stem—used by Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari to develop a philosophical concept widely used in contemporary art for its a-linear characteristics. Ferns grow on all continents except for Antarctica and survive in all kinds of limited circumstances uninhabitable for flowering plants. Because of their need for specific pH ranges, many ferns are dependent on associations with mycorrhizal fungi.



Ferns, Pteridophilia I, Queer Phytomorphology



This section brings together plants and queer sexuality as a way to renounce categories, support creativity and inspire inclusive ways of collectivity. The case study in this section is a video showing queer sexual relations between men and ferns. Through rejecting binary categories, queerness is a concept that can be inspired by plants that show variety and fluidity in gender and sexual concepts. In the anecdote, queer theory is discussed with students who are struggling with a lack of determination. A workshop in making and creating flowers inspired by the concept, however, establishes the fluid and connecting energy sought after. The exercise similarly invites one to take inspiration from plant genders to create imaginative, queer flowers.

Pteridophilia I

In the video work by Chinese artist Zheng Bo, we see six naked young men in different positions engaging in relations with plants in a forest (fig. 10). Without talking, the men, with bodies that remind of Classical Greek sculptures, move softly but intensely erotically towards and with the ferns. Pterido, the Greek for fern, comes from feather, based on the featherlike characteristics of the plant; philia in Greek stands for the highest form of love and is often used for friendship or affection.

Starting with an overall shot of the location, we can see the figures scattered over a plain of about 100m2 green landscape densely grown with ferns, palms, and a dry stream indicated by a path of rocks. By showing several people involved in the action, the relations between humans and plants seems like an activity from another time, culture, or place rather than an individual kink. When the camera direction changes to film secluded situations of intimacy and affection, the activity is experienced as a session of lovemaking.
In this first video of an ongoing series titled *Pteridophilia*, no genitals are shown, focusing on the erotic exploration and sensual connection that is not necessarily based on sex or lust itself. With adoring eyes, licking, touching, embracing, and heavy breathing, the tense, worshipping, and surrendering bodies are depicting pleasure. With this work, Zheng Bo creates a series in which human and vegetal relations are questioned. It is extremely normal to eat plants, burn them, grow them, culture them, alter their DNA, but making love to them is something unheard of. Building on physical relations, the artist investigates ways we can relate to plants without using language.

By researching the past and non-human worlds, Zheng Bo gathers inspiration to imagine other possibilities that are inclusive of marginalized and multi-species communities. In *Pteridophilia*, the fern loved and adored by the humans in the film, is newly appreciated. Although Taiwanese indigenous people have much respect for these plants, they have been disregarded by Japanese colonizers and Chinese migrants. Addressing colonial issues and connected concerns of positioning humans above their natural environment, Bo reimagines futures inspired by relationality and equality.

At Manifesta 12 *The Planetary Garden, Cultivating Coexistence* in 2018, the work *Pteridophilia* was presented as part of the biennial theme *The Garden of Flows*, installed at Orto Botanics, the botanical gardens of

Palermo. Dealing with a city impacted by tourism, migration crisis, illegal trafficking, and climate crisis, the project invites transformation with new models of citizenship, diversity, and coexistence.[105] Orto Botanics, founded in 1789, was an important scientific place to culture, study, and collect species and colonial botanical experiments with plants like cotton and date palms.[106] Thinking *with* the concept of the earth as a planetary garden, the botanical garden is activated as a site where nature and culture meet. Exploring forms of politics and rethinking our alliances with non-human others in relation to the global commons is an aim of the biennial, clearly reflected in the video by Zheng Bo.

In his practice, Zheng Bo spends time with plants to experience and sense their existence and ways of being. He is concerned with the climate and extinction crisis and aims to address this in his practice informed by collaborations with scientists. By understanding plants better on a biological level, he works on speculating and imagining how we can learn from plants on political levels by allowing them more and different agencies. He asks how we can include plants in our politics and how we can collaborate in politics with plants? By moving beyond using plants as resources, Bo looks at how we can learn from and collaborate with plants.

On his website, Bo states that the video series connects queer plants and queer people. Other videos include a collaboration with BDSM practitioners and eating plants after making love to them. Taking the concept of queer ecology as an inspiration for his work, Bo rejects binary categories applied to systems and agents in the natural world. Approaches that then can reflect and inspire moving away from dichotomies applied onto human cultures.

Queerness and plants are fashionable, as gender binaries are questioned and broken, plants can inspire thinking beyond these limiting categories. As curator and art critic Anna Souter claims: "Plants explode gender binaries."[107] With a lot of fluidity and different categories, plants challenge sexual and gender hierarchies and binaries of the human world. In the eighteenth century, Linneaus played an important role in determining and categorizing plants and their sexes. To make his theories acceptable for the Christians in power, he applied the patriar-

105. Hedwig Fijen quoted in Manifesta 12, *The Planetary Garden, Cultivating Coexistence*, 2018, p. 13–14.
106. Lisa Mazza, Paola Nicolin quoted in Manifesta 12, *The Planetary Garden, Cultivating Coexistence*, 2018, p. 24.
107. Anna Souter, "The women who speak to plants: How plant knowledge breaks patriarchal archetypes," London Drawing Group, 22-03-2021.

chal Christian and heteronormative marital conditions to his analysis of plant sexuality.[108] Describing vegetal sexuality as a wedding and flowers as a marriage bed, a flower with a pestle (female) and stamen (male) sexual organ was categorized as perfect. The sexism in his thinking becomes even more evident when determining female organs of a plant in minority to the male ones as meretrices or concubinae.[109]

In the plant world, sexuality is very fluid; there are more than the two genders modernity has acknowledged, and the sexuality of plants can even change over time. Plants can be unisexual (male/female), bisexual, hermaphroditic, and transexual. Within these categories, there are variations possible. The diversity, richness, and beauty of genders in plants can show us that we do not need to use categories. Plants use creativity, diversity, and imagination in the many ways gender is expressed. Since plants have been on earth for so much longer than humans and have evolved so much greater, they are far more developed than us, making them a perfect inspiration for thinking about gender and sexuality.[110]

"Queer is a zone of possibilities, always inflected by a sense of potentiality that it cannot yet articulate." [111]

- Annamarie Jagose

Characterized by lacking defined limits, the indeterminacy of queer is simultaneously one of its strongest qualities. In the text "The Mediated Plant," film theorist Teresa Castro invites the practice of queering beyond decolonizing as a way to move beyond the human, as a means to reimagine our role and essence. As an inclusive and boundary-less concept, queer can invite new relationalities with other beings and entities and move beyond the human category and way of knowing as a norm.

108. However, his theory was still too progressive for the church to accept.
109. Teresa Castro, "The Mediated Plant," *e-flux*, 2019, p. 13.
110. Céline Baumann quoted in Martin Clark, *T*he Botanical Mind: Queer Nature [podcast], *Camden Art Centre*, 09-07-2020, https://www.botanicalmind.online/podcasts/queernature
111. Annamarie Jagose, *Queer Theory: An Introduction*, 1996, p. 2.

-Anecdote-

In the second class within the course on identity and art education, the students were asked to listen to the podcast on "Queer Nature" with Celine Baumann and read the introduction on "Queer Theory" by Annamarie Jagose.

In class, we discussed how they had experienced the homework and what they had taken from it. First of all, they were very excited to listen to a podcast as homework and were very happy with this as a change to their learning load. It was at the same time informing and, for them, a very refreshing way to think about human sexuality from the world of plants. Biel, whose father works as an arborist, felt right at home with giving more meaning to the characteristics of plants in our thinking about identity. Sjors, identifying as homosexual, felt a strong need to understand queer theory in detail and was eager to discuss and find clarity in the vagueness of definition. And this was the case for most of them; the theoretical text was quite confusing. It was a rollercoaster that moved swiftly between grasping the concept and feeling totally lost again. The option of queer sounds very interesting, endearing, but coming from a hetero or homo perspective, it is very challenging to understand it while having the expectations of a category.

After the discussion, I shared a bit more in detail about the work of Linneaus, categorization, and the relation to race theory. Moving away and beyond these concepts, we looked at the amazing designs of flowers and shared images of flowers as an inspiration. Bringing an overwhelming range of colorful, bright, glittery craft materials, I invited all students to let their imagination flow and construct their queer flower. With playdoh, chenille stems, feathers, pompoms, pearl beads, glitters, googly eyes, and stickers we created

the most fantastical, colorful, abundant, and attractive flowers.

Because no one was involved with what the outcome would be and how it related to art or fitted in an art school, the activity felt liberating. Coming from the heart of each student it was a perfect way to work on connections in and with the group. Letting go of any expectations and focusing on fun and play proved a successful way to let go of the need for rules, definitions, and categories.

Queer Photomorphology[112]

For sculpting:
Mix and match with colorful and fun crafting materials like: play dough, crepe paper, chenille stems, pompoms, googly eyes, glitter glue pens, colored feathers, anything else fun, colorful, and sparkling you can think off

A cheaper alternative when you lack materials is to make a drawing.

For drawing:
- drawing paper
- as many colored pencils and felt tips as you can find

Instruction:
Take inspiration from flowers, visit a flower or botanical garden, allotments in summer, browse through images online, or use pure imagination. Flowers have the most incredible and mind-blowing designs to attract pollinators and humans equally. As all kinds of genders and sexualities are possible and engaging colors, shapes, and forms surprise and excite endlessly. Now, take this as an inspiration to sculpt or draw your imagined queer plant sexes: flowers. Think of intriguing shapes for petals, vibrant color combinations, and combine as many stamens and pestles as you like.

Tip: While making, keep asking yourself how you can make the flower stand out even more.

112. This activity is inspired by the plant-gender composing element from experimental installation performance Inter-Floral Mint Box as visited at Viirus Theater in Helsinki by Laura Marleena Halonen, Tom Lönnqvist, Marjut Maristo, Kristian Palmu, Riika Thitz. In this element of the performance the audience was invited to collaboratively construct plant genders from large fabric, foam and stuffed materials, after getting a lecture on Carl Linneaus binomial system and use of genders for plants.

Summary

Art that allows a central role for plants can take a crucial role in processes of decoloniality. Through qualities like—unconventional research, independence, unique viewpoints, building and showing relations, imaging, shaping, questioning, and producing knowledge—art is indispensable in constructing roads for decolonial processes, which can lead to alternative, inclusive, and just multi-species communities.

A short summary of each art-inspired chapter is concluded with questions that follow from the outcomes of the research.

In *Notes on Nutmeg* the vegetal agency of the spice is addressed by connecting colonial stories to the physical experiences of the nutmeg through the means of storytelling. Drawing from Dutch colonial histories and personal experiences the video made by myself introduces the first case study as a start of my journey in inviting vegetal actors to collaborate in decolonial processes. The clove boat, part of many Dutch-Maluku households, similarly carries relations with Dutch colonial activities in Indonesia. The scented, spice sculpture addresses both hope and despair, expressed in the vegetal material that sparked centuries of colonial violence in the Archipelago. Scent specifically invites the imagination to rethink, and dream of other ways that are collective and inclusive. The first anecdote illustrates how sharing stories embedded in coloniality can be too painful to share, while the responsibilities of learning and listening remain with the (former)colonizer. In the second anecdote, clove serves as a carrier of colonial stories and a way of coming to voice, collecting stories, and activating art as a platform to share personal and global issues of colonial violence. By inviting to activate smell as a way to think of characteristics of a plant the imagination is used to practice a more active and conscious allyship to plants.

> *How can we give plants a central role in how we think of and understand histories? How can we include our senses more actively in understanding and relating to our surroundings? How can we make space for stories that have been oppressed? How can we support others that are going through a process of coming to voice? How can we create more awareness and act out our value to plants?*

In *Rijstafel: The Flamboyant Table* by artist Elia Nurvista, the artwork specifically focuses on (neo)coloniality. Nurvista draws this out and

questions this through the means of (counter)storytelling. In the performance, background stories from suppressed voices and minorities of dominant narratives are foregrounded. Within an organized, choreographed, and documented artwork, the production of the decolonial action is repeated, enhanced, described, and shared, ruling out the possibility to be consumed and forgotten as described by bell hooks. The anecdote underlines the power of the (dominant) narrative and the challenge of balancing out the activity and responsibilities of speaking and listening. Moving beyond the colonial, cultural, and societal power dynamic in the exchange of stories, the exercise invites the creation of personal savior or healing through storytelling. By taking the format of a folktale, one can extract valuable learning processes from everyday life by using metaphors and imagination. Considering the three realms of human, spiritual, and earthly relations in a journey reminds us of the importance to find balance and peace encompassing all worlds.

> *Can we with each meal ask ourselves what stories are part of this meal? What counter-narratives might there be in each product, each vegetable? Whose voices are heard, whose stories can be uncovered or given space? Which stories have we not heard because we were talking?*

The project *Imaginary Museum of Natural History of the Amazon* by the Brazilian collective SubSonora, is modular, expanding, and long-term project that gathers and exchanges knowledges from and about the amazon in collective ways through sound and listening. By non-violent methods of recording sounds, workshopping, and performances with soundscape experiences, memories and imagination are activated and decolonial alternatives are practiced. The anecdote reflects on an experience of a Deep Listening activity with a group of students that brings out aspects of receptivity and practicing relationality. This quality of relationality is reflected in the exercise that invites exchange between human and plant agents by digging into possible reasons and forms of our relations while underlining reciprocity.

> *An exercise to practice a more conscious role within your environment is offered, now how does your environment sound? What sounds do you block out? Which sounds are new and which are not there? What sounds can you invite and include?*

In *Plant It*, an imaginary world is brought into existence in the music video of Portland artist Amenta Abtioto filmed by Alberta Poon. In the

depiction of a colorful multi-species community, filled with tropical plants, both colonial and ritualistic props are presented. By re-appropriating and "owning" the colonial items and presenting them in relation to glamorous, mystical, and ritualistic objects the relation to ancestral and decolonial practices are embodied by the African American singer. The anecdote contextualizes how relating to ancestry can oppose coloniality but similarly can be a challenge when cultured in a modern/colonial society that individualizes. Within the exercise, an option for activating and imagining vegetal ancestry is formulated. Starting from the embodiment of a tree, generations of time are bridged by the experience of vegetal life in an ancestral journey.

> *From this experience, we can practice interspecies relationality and ask how we can implement what we have learned into our lives? How do plants relate to ancestry, and how important is it to differentiate between (human) biological and environmental ancestrality?*

In the video *Lungs of Flowers*, artist Arvo Leo employs humor, fantasy, and association to show a reciprocal relationship between five cannabis plants and an anthropomorphized Xenophora pallidula shell. The film brings out our role as caregivers in relation to plants and non-human others. Understanding both the bad reputation of cannabis and under-appreciation of plants in a cultural, modern/colonial framework helps to recognize the subjectivity of these ideas. The anecdote is a reflection on a ritual guided by the artist Mari Keski-Korsu that practices the reciprocal intentions of the honorable harvest shared by Robin Wall Kimmerer. Listing and activating these guidelines, the exercise is an invitation to pick herbs as a practice in relations with medicinal herbs and tisane from our surroundings.

> *We can ask how we can live with ourselves understanding our implication in destructive behaviors? Where do we find strength and hope to take this responsibility? Taking inspiration and ideas from indigenous knowledge also needs to be questioned in how this is not a continuation of colonial violence?*

In the video *Pteridophilia I* by Zheng Bo, we see young men having intimate relations with ferns. While eating, culturing, or burning plants is normalized, making love to them seems extreme or absurd. Learning from the ways plants live and relate, the artist finds inspiration for social and environmental issues in allowing plants political agency. Taking

inspiration from gender fluidity in the plant world, we can queer our ideas of what sexuality is, should look like, and create space outside the conservative norms. The anecdote shares an experience of how this approach within the freedom and fluidity of queer ecology invites fun and connectivity within a learning and creative environment. In the exercise, this experience is extended to the reader with an invitation to create an abundant and inventive plant sex organ (flower).

> *From this, we can take the experience of queering and ask what other categories need queering? How will we relate to plants and our own sexuality in the future? How can politicians and leaders be affected by these inspirational concepts and practices?*

3
Vegetal Curating

Introduction

In the first chapter, I embed the concept of plants as collaborators in decolonial processes in my curatorial practice by working around the question: *How can a curatorial practice take inspiration from plants as a way to support processes of decoloniality?*

Firstly, I will briefly touch upon the relation between curating and coloniality and how the curator's position of power can be challenged in the present through the decolonial path and the questions appearing along the way. Secondly, I will introduce and formulate a call for vegetal curating, inspired by the work of indigenous botanist and scholar Robin Wall Kimmerer and the way she relates to plants. Inspired by the gifts of plants Kimmerer lists—nutrition, shelter, material, oxygen, healing, design, scent, compost, relational, teachings[113]— I imagine and sketch out ideas of how these can be incorporated in curatorial work. I call for incorporation not only in an abstract and symbolic way but also in the world's original etymological sense of bringing something into the body.

Identifying and addressing all elements of modernity/coloniality in curatorial work can be challenging, especially acknowledging that one is already starting from a position of power embedded in colonial traditions. Like pedagogy, curatorial work is strongly linked to coloniality. Historically, they have been tools of suppression and extraction. In curating, the collecting of objects and the construction of a Wunderkammer or cabinet of curiosities—the first forms of collection presentations which emerged in the sixteenth century—originated in the colonial era. It is by appropriating properties and objects from other cultures and natures that they are stripped from their original functions, location, and context. The interpretation, destination, and approach of these expropriated objects were given a new context by means of categorization and presentation. These first forms of collecting were seen as prestigious forms of scientific research by the rational, "civilized," white Europeans that would study the invisible other belonging to the realm of nature.

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113. In the publication *Braiding Sweetgrass*, there are several listings of qualities of plants. From those I have selected those most viable for this purpose.

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The profession of the curator in art is a fairly new position that took off as a global phenomenon during the "Curatorial Turn" in the 1990s.[114] The word curator comes from *curare* and stands for care; the caretaker of objects. This person investigates and discloses to the public the knowledge and stories that can be drawn from the composition of objects. Within the institutional structure of the museum, this work was done by the conservator, who is responsible for the management and preservation of, for example, a museum collection. Due to the popularization of the profession of curator, it was also practiced by art professionals with no connection to a specific collection. Gradually, more training courses, jobs, and projects have been created that give space to the curator. These programs were created disproportionately in Europe and the United States; a class of jet-setting global curators emerges.

The statements and actions of the curator, although no longer necessarily linked to a collection of objects, are related to power exercises with potentially great influence. Selection, presentation, and contextualization are ways in which history and narrative are created. Through prominent events and institutions, certain popular curators reach large audiences and influence how history is told by creating and recreating narrative.[115] Aspects like payment and invitations moreover determine who benefits from the curator's work. Each step and choice in the curatorial process is potentially one of power and exclusion. Therefore, it is especially important to pay attention to the decolonization of the curatorial practice.

The decolonial path, formulated by Rolando Vázquez, can be used as a guideline to question and position a curatorial practice in relation to

114. Paul O'Neill, *The Curatorial Turn: From Practice to Discourse*, 2010, p. 240–257.
115. Ivan Muñiz-Reed, "Thoughts on Curatorial Practices in The Decolonial Turn," *On Curating* 35, 2017, p. 100, https://www.on-curating.org/issue-35-reader/thoughts-on-curatorial-practices-in-the-decolonial-turn.html#.YTOMq9Mzb0s

the legacy of coloniality today.[116] It is a method that can support learning about entanglements with modernity and coloniality in cultural practices. Following this path takes one through three stages: first questioning modernity, then coloniality, and lastly, the colonial difference of the practice.[117] Relating to modernity, a curator can ask how their project reproduces or challenges the normativity of modernity. This process entails examining the dominant frameworks, canons, norms, and established hierarchies used in a curatorial project. When questioning the coloniality of a project, one looks at how this project furthers or contests the erasure of coloniality. By asking what is erased, what convention (eurocentrism, whiteness, anthropocentrism, etc.) has rendered invisible, irrelevant, disposable? The colonial difference is addressed by asking how your project is reproducing or undoing the colonial difference. To what extent are your practices ethical versus dependent upon the suffering of others and the devastation of earth? Within these three stages questions can be divided into what/who/how.[118] What is curated, collected, narrated, taught, investigated, archived, etc.? Who is represented, who is in charge, as well as whose voices are heard and whose stories are heard—just the artist, or the cleaner, or members of the community? How are these choices, both conscious and unconscious, reinforcing or questioning the colonial difference? To take a next step in the attempt to decolonize curatorial work, I propose to take plants as a starting point to think about curating.

116. Vázquez, 2020, p. 163–168.
117. See Rolando Vázquez, 2017, p. 78.
118. The similar questions that are asked by and form the name of the curatorial collective from Zagreb WHW (What, How & for Whom). " "What?" "How?" and "For whom?" are the three basic questions of every economic organization, and are fundamental to the planning, conception, and realization of exhibitions, the production and distribution of artworks, and the artist's position in the labor market." See https://formerwest.org/Contributors/WHW

Call for Vegetal Curating

Plant behavior and characteristics serve as a starting point to increase generosity, viability and care in a world traumatized by modernity/coloniality and the resulting ongoing climate crisis. As part of this process of care and repair, curatorial work can take on vegetal qualities as a way to support processes of decoloniality. Thinking about curatorial work through the gifts of plants thus provides fresh perspectives and ways to eschew extractivist practices and move toward practices rooted in nurturing values. This perspective also encourages moving away from egocentric curatorial work that is overly concerned with outputs, image building, and social positioning within a small curatorial bubble.

The following interpretations of vegetal curating move between speculative, abstract ideas, and very concrete and hands-on actions. This call invites more dialogue and discussion on the possibilities of integrating vegetal qualities into curatorial work. In addition, I cultivate an Anthro-*de*centric perspective by practicing a vegetal viewpoint where I see possible. The call is not inspired by all characteristics of plants, some aspects are more admirable than others.[119] Vegetal characteristics are organized into the groups: metabolism, support, presence, and communication. The metabolism group includes the elements nutrition, compost, and oxygen. The support group includes the elements of shelter, relational, and healing. The presence group includes form and material. Finally, the communication group includes sensory and teaching. Each group and element first mentions the plant characteristic. This is then followed by a few overarching questions that connect the vegetal quality with the curatorial domain. After the questions follow thoughts and ideas on how this can be included or made concrete.

Just as plants are praised for their generosity and care the curator is a caregiver of artists, audiences, objects, and spaces, but simultaneously of the relations in between[120] The focus of the vegetal curator is not on selection and exclusion but on bringing together and facilitating people, stories, and materials.

Rather than a classical manifesto, the call for vegetal curating can be seen as an invitation, a thought, and an imagining that could allow

119. There are highly poisonous plants but the aim is not to create a toxic work environment.
120. Robin Wall Kimmerer's speech about the generous characteristics of plants inspired me to understand similarities between the vegetal and the curator. See Robin Wall Kimmerer, *Braiding Sweetgrass* [Audiobook], 2013.

more care, oxygen, and fun in curatorial work.[121] Approach it as a mix and match of ideas. Some ideas might bring you healing, while others leave you itching. This call takes inspiration from life that has been seen as sessile and learning from the backdrop that is regarded to be without intelligence or imagination. It offers an alternative perspective inspired by plants that challenge Eurocentric discourses, something that feminist curator Chandra Frank contends a decolonial curatorial practice must do.[122]

I am called to and call for vegetal curating in the following ways:

Metabolism

In the process of photosynthesis, plants use water, CO2, and sunlight to create glucose and oxygen, taking sources that used to be seemingly inexhaustible to sustain themselves and their surroundings.

> Nutrition: Different plants have different needs; often the nutrition of a plant needs to be found in the near environment, soil or brought to them by a symbiotic companion species.

What nutrition is readily available and where do you need companions to support? Create a mix that leaves organization and audience nurtured. Offer a variety of organic ingredients, grown with love, whole wheat.
Make projects tasty, balanced, and fair with a variety of ingredients; that is when people are willing to take and distribute your goods: concepts, artworks, texts, events, publications, etc. Offer juicy berries that lure people in and can be enjoyed out of hand: humor, color, understandable texts, accessible concepts, fun, imaginative design. Some tree roots grow as deep as their crown. Balance the fun and visible aspects with elements that offer depth, and need time to digest and can be taken home for further processing.
Share materials, which have inspired you along the way, with your colleagues, whether they work as educators, administrators, or invigilators. Let them choose what they are hungry for, but share generously.

121. Crown shyness is a phenomenon seen with some groups of trees, often from the same kind, in which the crowns grow close but do not touch or overlap each other, allowing the others space and sharing resources.
122. The understanding of good (healthy) and bad smells (unhealthy) motivated the interest in for example nutmeg in the sixteenth and seventeenth century; the strong musky smell was considered to be healing and, among others, used to cover up the smell of spoiled meat.

Practically, never underestimate eating healthy meals on time and taking care of all bodies involved in the labor of the project.

> Compost: Whether it is leaf, fruit. or branch, all products made are environmentally friendly and can be used as nutrients for your own and other life.

What nutrition is already available and how can you work within a closed cycle? What needs to be further digested? How rich is the humus layer? How about your top and subsoil? Can you collaborate with others to make this richness available? Who can be your bacterial or fungal collaborators?
Think about your locality as a condition for nutrition and development. Work with a focus on local elements. How can you support or further improve this situation? Curators often have a lot of choices to make. Consider the planet in these decisions. Consider the waste produced by a project. Consider both human and non-human actors. Reconsider what seems like a given: are wall texts large and made from plastic, how many prints are needed, where is your printer and what materials do they use? What are the alternatives? Get to know more local artists and makers. Do people need to fly to have their work installed? Are commissioned works necessary? Why not show existing work, with a fee providing income for an artist without demanding significant labor or producing additional waste? Ask around thrice before purchasing electronics and tools. How can a project live on in other forms and be valuable in the future?

> Oxygen: A waste product of one can be the nutrition or lifeline for the other. The gas O2 is a byproduct of plant metabolism, while CO2 is a byproduct of human metabolism and burning fossil fuels.

How can oxygen not only be a lifeline but an acknowledged vegetal gift in curatorial work? Leave space for experiencing, playing, and a general freshness and energy. Leaf space in an exhibition, leaf time in a program, and never underestimate breaks. First, consider leaving elements of a program out before skipping the break. Add empty pages, leaf a margin for notes. Be mindful of your breathing. Invite a sigh and let go of tensions built up in your body. Ventilate as much as you can. Open a window, and air the space out. Bring in only plants that you are able to be responsible for. Invite others to interpret things their way. Experiment with expression and formats. Can you draw a text? Can you play a concept? Take a breather when things don't move forward. Allow emotions, so frustration doesn't branch out.

Support

Many plants are relational, some serve as a host and can be a shelter for whole ecosystems, creating homes, food, shelter, and livelihood for a diversity of life forms.

> Shelter: Many plants provide shelter for others; they can shelter from the rain, support a place higher up to hide your hoards and offspring from predators.

How can we create spaces and moments of shelter for a diverse community and needs? Let projects feel safe, welcome to anyone with any background. Create starting points and information outlets that can be accessible to a broad audience. Challenge your audience but be careful no one feels irrelevant because of curatorial decisions. Think about inclusive language and who is represented in the project? For whom could the project be interesting and how could you open this up? In the space, check accessibility guidelines to make the project as available as possible. Add furniture for rest, larger fonts, remove physical and cognitive thresholds. What could make visitors more comfortable? Have accessible restrooms. Offer refreshments. Create a place that can be a shelter from whatever someone might encounter outside the gallery.

> Relational: Plants are connected to their surroundings and are knowledgeable about what is going on with others, their whereabouts, health, needs, and other developments.

How can a curator support the arts to work more collectively and less individually? How are positive relations built among a curatorial multi-species community? A curator is like a tree connected to a fungal network that connects many different agents. Facilitating, associating, bridging, and combining. Ask how can you make your network richer and how you can enrich your network? Ask what you can do to make others flourish and then bloom together? Some plants can increase the brightness and scent of their flowers when noticing the presence of pollinators but also deter invaders by activating their defense systems. How can we increase our awareness of the actors in our milieu to attract and nourish companions while providing a sense of safety and security?

> Healing: Plants have the capacity to heal themselves—amputation can mean multiplication. When parts are beyond repair, their modular structure allows them to repel, allowing

for continuation. Moreover, plants heal others; many animals instinctively know which plants to nibble on to restore their health.

Can we think of our projects and organizations in a modular way? How can we continue when vital parts are damaged? Can we increase self-sufficiency by increasing awareness of our needs? Healing is part of being alive; everyone needs healing. When you are not sick, there is also a continuous need to work through trauma and issues. This is not done by ignoring signals but by developing awareness of the ongoings. Offering a space, physical or otherwise, that provides comfort, hope, new ideas and can promote processes of healing. Remember "art can provide a balm for the modern soul."[123] Consider that people will carry with them their own issues and traumas. How can you hold space to welcome these while listening, offering care, comfort, hope, and ideas?

Presence

As sunlight is an important life source, most plants are easily visible. Plants will grow towards light and water to sustain themselves, but in many ways, their growth is shaped by consideration of their kin. Through transparency, slim, curvy, and open shapes but also behavior like crown shyness, they create space for others.[124] Plants show us all sides of life, including death and decay.

> Shape: Form emerges from life that is supported by decay and past life. Plants can show all kinds of design at once: timeless, durable, original, attractive, fun, and problem-solving.

What and when do we present projects? How can we take time to develop design like promotion materials, exhibition design, publications, slowly while staying attractive for all kinds of beings to enjoy? Let there be beauty while simultaneously giving space and platform to things unpleasant, deemed ugly, shriveled, rotting, dried, and decaying. Let all sides into your projects. It is common to share the outcomes that worked out, the successes, and things finished. Show the fallen leaves, what went wrong, what caused pain, sleepless nights, what has it cost you? Leave the dead branches on, so we can learn together. There is beauty in that too. Mutations are adaptive responses that function as

123. To quote Claude Monet.
124. Crown shyness is a phenomenon seen with some groups of trees, often from the same kind, in which the crowns grow close but do not touch or overlap each other, allowing the others space and sharing resources.

problem-solving within and sometimes beyond generations. Growth takes time through slow and deliberate development. Life itself is the domain in which experience is gained by moving through trial and error as a problem-solving process.

> Material: As well as fruits and edibles, plants also produce many other substances that increase their attractiveness to humans in return for dispersion, growing, and upkeep like wood, rubber, fibers.

How can we offer durable materials that people can build tools from to support their wellbeing and get dispersion and care in return? How can the material be so durable that members of the audience can continue building after their participation? Materials require creativity from the ones producing and receiving, although the roles can be blurred. Present artworks, ideas, and projects that are durable in their concept.

Communication

Plants communicate using sound inaudible to humans—they show but don't tell. Among plants, communication happens through mycelium networks and volatile organic compounds. Externally, they are able to pick up photic, olfactoric, audible, and palpable incentives.

> Sensory: plants have a very complex and developed relation to scent and use smells and other volatile compounds to communicate their condition or send messages they want others to receive.[125]

How can we move beyond a binary understanding of non-verbal communication that plants practice so proficiently? How can we create more awareness of scent and use it as a means of communication? How can we decolonize smell? Speak to as many senses as possible in projects and presentations. Include olfactory elements in the projects you organize. Scent can play an important role in creating a comfortable atmosphere, bringing up memories, inviting stories, and triggering imagination and is, therefore, a very important element of workspaces, collaborations, presentations. Practice awareness of the conditions of

125. The understanding of good (healthy) and bad smells (unhealthy) motivated the interest in for example nutmeg in the sixteenth and seventeenth century; the strong musky smell was considered to be healing and, among others, used to cover up the smell of spoiled meat.

your surroundings through smell. Try to learn what a space might need through consciously taking in its situation.

> Teacher:[126] Plants are world builders and among the oldest life on the planet that can offer inspiration and lessons that embody "sustainable" ways of living.[127]

How can we learn from plants and integrate their ways of being in the world to make curating more viable, environmentally conscious, and inspire social justice as subtle teachers? How can the spectator be considered as an important creator of knowledge within a dialogue facilitated by the curator? Discerning lessons from plants as teachers is the first step in this process. Another is formulating a question: what would you like to learn? Next is to analyze what there is to learn. Stimulate others to ask questions, make them feel safe to question and dare to not know. Offer tools and artworks that can support a visitor in understanding what the project tries to communicate, as well as how this could relate to their reality. Support differs from explaining. Being supportive can still be respectful and does not underestimate the emancipation of the spectator;[128] staking an individual tomato plant doesn't mean disabling their independence. Plants can inspire decolonial processes, teaching us sensorial learning, storytelling, listening, imagination, reciprocity, and queering.[129]

Vegetal curating is an anthrodecentric perspective, challenging Eurocentric ideas with a view on curatorial work that is generous, more viable, and strongly connected to its environment. Aspects plants show in their way of being in the world generate questions that reconsider ways that have become normalized. They can also help establish supportive guidelines for experimentation towards creating multi-species muddles that aim to stay with the trouble.[130]

126. Plants as teachers come significantly from psychedelic and ethnobotany thinkers. I want to expand this concept to learn from all kinds of plants, beyond the mind-altering impact.
127. In a way that is sustainable for life and biodiversity, not for the comfortable existence of humans and continuation of capitalism as the word used in commercial and neoliberal terms.
128. *The Emancipated Spectator* is a book by Jacques Rancière that considers how the spectator's personal frame of reference is part "viewing actively that transforms and interprets its objects" and does not just "read" what an artist puts in.
129. For examples of teachings, check the case studies with distilled methods and exercises inspired by plants in chapter two of this thesis.
130. Donna Haraway, 2016.

Continuation

As a conclusion to the work, I will share ideas and opportunities on how to move the research of the thesis further. This paper takes a first step in considering plants as collaborators and inspiration for curatorial and pedagogical work in art. These areas are still limited, considering the possibilities of plants and the need for decolonization. Climate emergency, social and health crises follow each other at an extreme rate, showing us the disastrous and devastating effects of coloniality and the need for radical changes. Therefore, I see great opportunity and importance in investing in the aim for social and environmental justice, and personally by further exploring collaborations with plants in decolonial processes and taking inspiration from plants in curating. It is the abundance and generosity of plants that inspire me to stay with this trouble,[131] as part of my practice and daily life.

I am looking forward to continuing to share and develop pedagogical skills and exercises learned with others through my teaching practice. I see lots of potential in integrating these vegetal qualities and creating more hybridity and fluidity between my curatorial and pedagogical practice. This is something I want to explore by merging the two further.

The freedom of format and expression within the degree program ViCCA sparked my interest in artistic exploration. *Notes on Nutmeg* is the first video I have made. Apart from enjoying this process, I find a lot of benefits in the possibilities of sharing and distributing ideas with animated quality. I am curious to dive into the possibilities of storytelling, performance, zine-making, and facilitating sensorial experiences as means to share, learn, and present my research and integrate these formats in a versatile and hybrid practice.

131. Donna Haraway, 2016.

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Colophon

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