

# UNESCO OBSERVATORY MULTI DISCIPLINARY eJOURNAL IN THE ARTS

TRANSNATIONAL TOMORROWS TODAY VOLUME 8, ISSUE 1, 2022

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## ABOUT THE e-JOURNAL

The UNESCO Observatory refereed e-journal promotes multi-disciplinary research in the Arts and Education and arose out of a recognised need for knowledge sharing in the field. The publication of diverse arts and cultural experiences within a multi-disciplinary context informs the development of future initiatives in this expanding field. There are many instances where the arts work successfully in collaboration with formerly non-traditional partners such as the sciences and health care, and this peer-reviewed journal aims to publish examples of excellence.

Valuable contributions from international researchers are providing evidence of the impact of the arts on individuals, groups and organisations across all sectors of society. The UNESCO Observatory refereed e-journal is a clearing house of research which can be used to support advocacy processes; to improve practice; influence policy making, and benefit the integration of the arts in formal and non-formal educational systems across communities, regions and countries.

### CANADA

#### **MEMORY HERBARIUM:**

DRAWING AND LISTENING WITH PLANTS

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**ABSTRACT** 

Memory Herbarium is a research-creation project to listen to, and to draw complex life stories with Colombian social leaders. This pilot project is in collaboration with Comunidad, an Afro-Colombian social leader forcibly displaced from Tumaco to Bogotá. We co-created intimate, poetic narratives that emerged while talking and drawing plants as symbols that recalled aspects of his experiences and opened unexpected connections and meanings. The project reflects on how and in what ways talking and drawing with plants can work as an accountable listening space, urgent in a context of impunity and persecution of social leaders. Such spaces constitute an atmospheric condition in research and generates pedagogic insights through ideas from oral history theory, Indigenous research approaches, new materialism and diffractive methodology. Finally, I discuss the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals and the possibilities of art education in promoting social inclusion and creating safe spaces for threatened social leaders in Colombia.

**KEYWORDS** 

life stories; Colombia; social leaders; community art practice

#### LISTENING TO DIFFICULT KNOWLEDGE IN COLOMBIA

For over fifty years, Colombia has experienced a prolonged internal armed conflict that continues to impact millions of Colombians, leaving at least 220,000 people killed (Grupo de Memoria Histórica 2016). As a result, being a community leader has become one of the most dangerous roles in Colombia today (Abondano 2019). Indigenous, *campesinos* and Afro-descendants who serve as social leaders comprise most of the armed conflict's victims historically (Grupo de Memoria Histórica 2016). This situation endangers their lives and threatens Colombia's democratic and participatory system because they play a central role in promoting and defending human rights today. In this context, speaking about what has happened is an act of courage and risk. However, silence is proving to be a telling strategy among social leaders to survive and resist, given the government's negligence. It is also a way to give meaning to what has impacted one's dignity (Aranguren 2008).

Even though the atrocities of war can and should be told from the people who lived it, it can also be told from its survivors' courage and resilience (Das et al. 2002). Their stories include plenty of moments of solidarity, social cohesion, and countless strategies to recover the dignity that has been taken away from them by the armed forces. Colombia has a long history of violence, but it also has an enormous capacity for resilience. Art has been one of the most potent manifestations in the last two decades to denounce, affirm differences, transform entire communities, demand justice, and heal social trauma (Grupo de Memoria Histórica 2009). There is urgency to explore the narratives of social leaders as a way of contributing to the transitional justice system in Colombia, while at the same time, their narratives offer an opportunity to learn about their experiences. Artistic methodologies are well-suited for this task because they can generate safe spaces to speak and listen collectively to personal stories around war. Artists, researchers, and teachers play a key role in this context, as art is a means to recognize, share and cope with the pain as well as to awaken new forms of reconciliation throughout affected communities. Art education can generate reflective thought and stimulate different sensibilities, numbed by the excess of news on violence and misinformation in the media.

In the following conversation, I explore the *United Nations Sustainable Development Goals* through the pilot of a research-creation project entitled *Memory* Herbarium. I connect this project with Goal 16: 'Promote peaceful and inclusive societies for sustainable development, provide access to justice for all and build effective, accountable and inclusive institutions at all levels', and Target 16.10: 'Ensure public access to information and protect fundamental freedoms, in accordance with national legislation and international agreements' (United Nations n.d. Goal 16).

Disseminating life stories of community leaders from the perspective of risks and achievements in a caring and creative way to proceed in such violent times. Today in Colombia, we witness daily how human rights organizations and citizens spread the news of assassinated leaders on their social networks. One example is the social media campaign #NiunMuertoMas (Not one more dead) launched by the media platform *¡Pacifista!* in February 2020. For 413 days, *¡Pacifista!* published the name and the picture of one murdered social leader in their networks (¡Pacifista! 2020). The significance of names and pictures was key, for the dissemination of numbers alone is not necessarily a call for action.

Through my research and artistic practice, I have explored how artistic methodologies (Hernández-Hernández 2019; Sotelo 2020) can be a useful medium for listening and interviewing survivors of the Colombian armed conflict. In the Colombian transitional context, it is necessary to deepen our knowledge around the act of listening, because as Katey Lacey (2013) remarks, 'communication is about both the production and distribution of content and its reception and critique' (p. 19). Luis Carlos Sotelo's (2020) words resonate with this understanding of communication when he notes that 'very little attention is given to who listens, how, in what context, for what purpose, with what effects, and what happens in the process' (p. 2). Both Sotelo and Lacey conceive listening as an active, creative, subjective, and political process. I extend this position further by proposing we listen to social leaders as a pedagogic action, expressed materially, in this case through their sensorial and poetic memories of native plants. Beyond being one of the world's most biodiverse countries (Suárez et al. 2018), Colombia is home to multiple Indigenous and

Afro Colombian communities, and thus it embraces an enormous legacy of traditional knowledge around plants.

#### THE SOUND OF CUNUNO

Comunidad is 37 years old. He is an Afro-Colombian and a social leader from Tumaco who arrived in Bogotá in 2018 because he had been forcibly displaced from his hometown. The pseudonym, Comunidad, which translates to community, was selected as an act of resistance in response to displacement. Comunidad is also a musician, an expert on traditional music from Colombia's South Pacific Region, and a community healer's grandson. His growing concern about drug cartels recruiting young people in his neighbourhood in Tumaco led him to create a cultural center. His informal music school increased, and Comunidad taught over 300 children and teenagers while keeping them away from weapons, violence, and drug trafficking. In 2018 he was threatened by local gangs and forced to leave his house and his family. He moved to a peripheral neighbourhood of Bogotá, where Comunidad continued teaching and making traditional music (Comunidad, March 2021, personal communication).

I met Comunidad a few months after his forced displacement.

I interviewed him briefly as part of my work at the Museum of Memory of Colombia. The MMC was recently ordered by the Law for Victims and Land Restitution (2011) to contribute to the symbolic reparation of the victims of the country's armed conflict. This museum, which in the future will have a building in the city of Bogotá, is a site for encounters and debate around the Colombian armed conflict. Although Comunidad was eager to talk about his music school, he was primarily silent when asked about violence in his city and the events and people that forced him to leave. He then showed me the only thing he carried from Tumaco to Bogotá on the long bus trip: his cununo, a traditional musical instrument from the Pacific coast. We organically connected our conversation to the sounds of his cununo. He played it as we continued speaking, and our discussion acquired a smoother, more rhythmic tone. The cununo became part of the conversation in its mode and language.

This first encounter with Comunidad was transformative. It marked the beginning of a series of conversations and creative narratives with him. Without planning, my innate curious practice (Haraway 2016) as an artist and researcher disrupted binary thinking around researcher and participant. As we talked around a non-human element, the cununo, entanglement came into play. As Amélie Lemieux (2021) describes, new relational conditions emerged in her moments of makings and becoming with others, and quoting Burnett and Merchant (2020), Lemieux highlights precisely what emerged in my project:

The spatiality and conditionings of the material environment (Burnett & Merchant 2020) conditioned the dynamisms of what might have been if those entanglements remained unacted or unperformed. (p. 2)

On this note, Comunidad and I, like Lemieux (2021), held a conversation 'as part of the entanglement and not as a qualitative, separate, static "piece of data"' (p. 2). From that first musical encounter, I recollect Comunidad's answer when I asked, 'What does it mean to be a social leader?'

'To me, being a leader is loving your community. A leader takes care, looks after people. A leader is someone who cares about their people'.

His role as a leader in his community was directly linked to his role as a music teacher. Being a music teacher allowed him to deepen and expand his traditional knowledge, sharing it with others in his neighborhood:

I was simply giving them tools for life. I mean, let's change this for this. Let's put this weapon down but then let's make music, let's make art from what we know, what we carry in our blood, that we know which is ours. It was just an exchange. It wasn't about fighting with anyone. I did not want to fight with anyone. I wanted to do my job. I wanted to liberate them. I wanted to achieve something with them. But the moment came when they kicked me out. It was either leaving or my life, but thank God they gave me a chance and I'm here. (Comunidad, March 2021, personal communication)

The connections between caring and teaching became evident in our conversation, and have remained at the forefront of my thoughts across time and place. The armed conflict has destroyed the social fabric by threatening

leaders who are the 'knots' that hold together their communities. Where no one cares, it is easier to perpetuate cycles of violence.

#### **MEMORY HERBARIUM:** AN ONGOING PROJECT

Comunidad and I have continued talking over the years. More recently, we developed the pilot of *Memory Herbarium*, an ongoing research-creation project. To start a series of conversations, we met on the street in his neighbourhood in Bogota and walked together. Comunidad was looking to rent a bigger space with a garden so that he could have plants.

As we walked, we talked about the plants that call to him: chivo, chiyangua, hierbabuena, manzanilla. The list of plants from the Pacific region went on. He mentioned his grandmother, the community healer and midwife, the person who taught him everything about plants, gardening, and building a loving home. Plants have been part of his life since he was born. Although I had planned a semi-structured interview around his childhood and adolescence, this did not unfold ultimately. I encouraged Comunidad to tell me about his life experiences in as little or as much detail as he wanted. Since the beginning of our conversation, it became clear that his memories were not linear nor chronological; they were generative.

Lynn Abrams (2010) proposes ideas on personal memory that reflect our first interview, for example, a viable sense of self resonated throughout and made meaning of our experiences:

Memory then is about the present as much as the past. It is through which people interpret their lives and redesign the conditions of possibility that account for what they once were, what they have since become, and what they still hope to be. In other words, our memory is our roadmap: it tells us where we have been and aids us in finding where we want to go. (p. 82)

In our conversation, Comunidad weaved together his memories to make sense of his decisions, highlighting the value of his efforts. He narrated the story of his grandmother as part of his own, demonstrating how stories are relational. He presented the story of their neighbours, their territory, trees and plants,

Volume 8, Issue 1, 2022 Memory herbarium: Drawing and listening with plants - Manuela Ochoa Ronderos and even their African ancestors. In this interview, Comunidad and I reflected on the importance of remembering traditional and ancestral knowledge to understand his identity and the significance of his leadership in Colombia today. In his community, Comunidad's actions reflect SDG number 4: 'Ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all', and specifically Target 4.7 which recognizes cultural diversity as a contribution to sustainable development (United Nations n.d. Goal 4).

Back in Tumaco, Comunidad created a cultural center in his neighbourhood to give children and teenagers something to do after class. It is relevant to clarify his motivations because social leaders in Colombia have been highly stigmatized, and their persecution is often justified with false accusations. Survivors do not retell their stories only to inform others, they raise questions for all of us to engage with them together. In this case, to understand silences means getting to know Comunidad better, and it also requires time.

Based on our walks and talks, for our next meetings, I decided to bring coloured pencils, markers, and paper for our subsequent encounter at his house in Bogotá. Art activities were intended to help to keep our attention on conversation, and less so on the recorder, lowering our nervousness. This also allowed other forms of communication to unfold responsively. I understand drawing not only as a symbolic tool but also as an exploratory mechanism. I chose these materials for their simplicity; I wanted to bring accessible art materials as an invitation to conversation. Before the recording started, I set the materials out on the table so that we could use them freely during the interview. I planned to discuss some of the plants mentioned during our first encounter as possible prompts. I made this decision to help guide us, and to think about symbols that could connect different memories. I hoped we could deepen the conversation about Comunidad's displacement in the process, and reflect upon his homeland as part of his identity.

Comunidad was very open to thinking together with plants and he was also enthusiastic about sharing his knowledge on his community's healing practices. We talked about some of the plants that were the essentials at any

house in Tumaco. In Figure 1, I drew responsively, as we discussed plants like chivo that are considered as heritage for Comunidad. They carry along the medicinal practices used for centuries by healers. For example, chivo is commonly used for newborns to 'clean bad spirits and get rid of any disease' (Comunidad, March 2021, personal communication). Comunidad's drawings are not included in this essay, respecting his preferred level of confidentiality at this stage of the research-creation project.



Figure 1.

Comunidad described the use and appearance of the chivo plant. I drew some of the uses and characteristics that he mentioned. Translation: 'Plants are history, (they) are heritage. You must hit the baby with the leaves on their back

and arms to get rid of malviento (disease). Hairy stem. Grab them (the chivo plant) at 5:30 AM with your left hand. Movement to clean and get rid of malaire (disease)'. Drawing and translation by the author.



Figure 2.

Comunidad described the use and appearance of the Verdolaga and Gallinazo plants. Translation: 'Verdolaga. It can be eaten as a salad. It grows on the beach. It refreshes the body. It heals the fever. (It kills) parasites. Gallinazo. Drink or bath. Vaginal infections, period pains. Drink: gastritis, stomachache, tooth pain'. Drawing and translation by the author.

Some of the notes that I took during this conversation (see Figure 2) bring back the idea of *agency* discussed thoroughly in Ramya Ravisankar's essay (2019): 'In my ongoing reconfiguring with the jasmine plants, I never felt like I was in complete control of the situation' (p. 109). Part of this

methodological disposition to artistic research is about losing and gaining agency as other human and non-human characters enter the scene. Plants guided our conversations; they not only contain Comunidad's memories of Tumaco and his ancestors, but they also allow us to understand Tumaco in the present as a living territory struggling to survive in the middle of war that has not ceased. The illegal drug trade, the increasing social inequality, as well as the internal armed conflict, are major threats to the conservation of Colombian biodiversity (Suárez 2018).

In this regard, our conversations highlighted the importance of conserving care practices, not only between human neighbours but also with other species. SDG number 15: 'Protect, restore, and promote sustainable use of terrestrial ecosystems, sustainably manage forests, combat desertification, and halt and reverse land degradation and halt biodiversity loss calls governments to stop the degradation of natural habitats and the loss of biodiversity' (United Nations n.d. Goal 15). Understanding the spiritual, medicinal, and social relationships with plants and ecosystems helps to contribute to a holistic conception of knowing and being in the world.

Dialoguing with Karen Barad's concept of intra-action as 'a mutually constitutive event produced by and producing entangled agencies' (2007 cited in Lucie 2020), Memory Herbarium proposes listening to human and non-human voices and making sense of these emerging narratives together. According to Comunidad, plants like verdolaga heal fever, refresh the body on a hot day and kill parasites. Afro-Colombian communities have passed on an invaluable amount of knowledge about plants through oral history – even amidst violence and repression (Oslender 2007), and many of these inherited stories were entangled in our drawing and talking exercise. I recall Yoon-Ramírez's (2021) words when writing about walking-sensing as a decolonial practice in regards to this experience, which resonates with our conversations: 'Reconnecting with forgotten memories are not a simple recollection of what happened in the past, but a deep reflection on how I become who I am and in what ways my sense of self is constructed through forgotten or remembered moments' (p. 120). Memory in this project plays a relevant role in understanding identity. As Yoon-Ramírez reflects, this is a relevant starting

point for decolonial solidarity across differences. On this aspect, it is relevant to remember SDG 4 and the call to action in Target 4.5 to 'eliminate gender disparities in education and ensure equal access to all levels of education and vocational training for the vulnerable, including persons with disabilities, indigenous peoples and children in vulnerable situations' (United Nations n.d. Goal 4). In this project access is another relevant component since I plan to expand this research with other social leaders from various origins and identities in Colombia.

Throughout our conversations, I perceived the plant's agential pull as we continued engaging with them and their healing properties. The plants guided us into the stories and environments they contain. The plants have been a witness of violence, and they too have struggled and grown upon destruction. For example, Comunidad's abandoned house in Tumaco is currently covered and inhabited by weeds and fungi.

As a middle-class, urban, *mestiza*, I recognise that I hold the privilege to grow up far away from the most violent areas of the country. This was not an option for Comunidad. I became his student at points, learning and taking notes about his community healing practices and plants. Comunidad in turn observed he was making connections that he had not in previous interviews. Drawing together on the theme of plants made silences less awkward because we could focus on our sketches and let other sounds (like coloured pencils moving on the surface) come into the conversation. It also became a space where previous hierarchical relations – between interviewer and interviewee – balanced as we did the same activity, and in the process, we shared the results.

I want to highlight two aspects of the conversations in terms of mapping visual-oral stories: 1) the Tumaco house was always present in these associations, 2) in addition to plants in general, trees became central as he told me about their different uses to make traditional musical instruments. I knew that music was transversal to his life, but I could not see these associations until we took up drawing. It was through drawing together that we could arrive at symbols that Comunidad felt comfortable with as expressions of his life story.

For example, we talked about all the feelings that the *Balso Macho* tree evokes for him. Comunidad explained the moon phases that are optimal for cutting trees. He drew the cununo, which is made out with balso wood, and described each part of the musical instrument carefully. When the quality of the wood changes, he explained, the sound of the cununo changes as well. Humidity levels also affect the wood. When Comunidad arrived in Bogotá with his cununo he noticed how its sound was altered. This memory opened the story of his arrival and all the feelings around it. It became a site of becoming.

He said to me, pointing at his drawing of the cununo, 'This is me. This is my identity and what gives me strength. If I ever stop playing the cununo, I know I will get sick and I will die'.

Relationality through drawing and talking echoes *yarning*, an Australian Indigenous practice where:

Both the storyteller and audience are involved in rearticulating knowledge passed down from previous generations in processes that can be understood as an interpolation: the insertion of situated knowledge or new understanding of current states of affairs and conditions into established narratives as a dynamic and evolving mode of cultural production. (Barrett 2019: 32)

Through *yarning*, Estelle Barrett (2019) writes, relationality is possible, and the researcher and the participant become co-producers of knowledge. This practice of Australian Indigenous communities is relevant to the Colombian context, whereas Oslender (2007) argues, oral history can challenge dominant representations of space and can become a powerful political tool in the struggle for cultural and territorial rights. As the drawings emerged as a source of information for the project, it was important that Comunidad felt free to choose his symbols in this session and that the results made sense to him (see Figure 3). As an artist, I could have selected plants that I found poetic in terms of healing properties, but if there were not strong associations with his memory, then we could not be co-creating something meaningful for both.



**Figure 3.**Comunidad described the use and appearance of the Espíritu santo plant. It says: 'Espíritu santo. It is used for baths (to heal) snake bite.' Drawing and translation by the author.

In this regard, Alessandro Portelli's (2018) words resonate with the overlapping nature of different agencies discussed in Barad's *intra-action* concept:

Our task is not merely to extract information, but to open up narrative spaces. Some of these spaces are generated by our presence and explicit and implicit questions; some are generated by the narrators' subjectivity and self-image creation. The two may converge and overlap to some extent, but they never coincide entirely. (p. 243)

They are also in relation with Sarah Lucie's (2020) description of an atmosphere as 'something that exists in the between spaces, through evolving collaboration between the many distinct materialities sharing the theatre space, human and non-human alike' (p. 17). Drawing plants together became an atmospheric condition for our conversations, and a connection point where we could talk despite our different origins, roles, and life stories. We discussed our perception of the city of Bogotá as we drew together, leaving aside my formal art training and concentrating on the stories around plants and their uses. In the light of *intra-action*, rather than thinking about this project as the methodology applied to a participant, I think about it as a whole, whereas Mark Cypher (2018) writes, 'components, materials, tools, the artist, and the artwork become more aligned, resolved, or determinately bounded through the ongoing collective relation that is practice' (p. 1). Every aspect and each entity involved in this project made a difference.

### ARTISTIC-RESEARCHER AGENTS IN ZONES OF CONFLICT

In the context of an armed conflict, talking aloud about what has happened was and is still an act of courage (Aranguren 2008). For this reason, stories of the Colombian social leaders must circulate through a broad spectrum of media and formats. Special consideration must be given to actively listening to these stories and engaging in further conversation.

Disseminating their voices only does not necessarily grant understanding, reconciliation, or empathy. Moreover, memories of displacement are crucial to understanding the causes and acts of violence that preceded it, especially the impacts on the displaced person's life, family, organizations, political parties, and communities. As Lucy Hovil (2019) states, 'the criminalization of migration – and, therefore, of those who move – dehumanizes the protagonists and robs us of an understanding of movement and its drivers' (p. 201). Thus, there is an enormous potential for exploring narratives that generate much needed light and understanding around forced displacement and exile around the world. Through stories, we learn about each other, but most importantly we understand the motives and decisions of others. In my view, the Colombian war has polarized citizens to the point where

spaces for collective and diverse reflection are rare. Through this pilot of the *Memory Herbarium*, I have explored how and in what ways drawing can work as a 'thinking space' with oral history, listening practices, and memory studies. Drawing is a tool that can help us access challenging aspects of learning that otherwise remain hidden or ignored. It is also an effective strategy to engage and connect researchers and participants in a dialogical manner, challenging hierarchical relations that divide people rather than bring people together.

Many of the ideas and concepts of this research-creation project resonate with the UN Sustainable Goals. It particularly addresses Goal 16 and Goal 4, with an aim to become an artistic methodology that adds to the building of inclusive knowledge societies. In countries like Colombia, human rights advocates are at high risk and thus it is important to listen to their voices – many times censored by media powers – and take immediate action in order to protect them.

During the first stages of *Memory Herbarium*, my role of a maker, researcher, teacher and student merge. I facilitated a space; I took notes; I listened; I drew. We co-created dialogues together; we performed; we imagined together possible outcomes. This approach resonates with Natalia Calderón's (2019) ideas on disruptive artistic research, as it 'not only produces representations but generates a social space where the unknown can surprise our understanding frameworks such that a new "knowing us" is formed'. Artistic research can be disruptive when it inspires us to become 'social, spatial and politically engaged artistic-researcher agents' (p. 100).

Collaborating with Comunidad and imagining together conversations, mental maps, and drawings has resulted in generative ideas and symbols that resonate with our expectations. We have worked through intangible concepts such as longing, leadership, resistance, and displacement in this process. These spaces facilitate the emergence of painful memories, and hopeful memories too. Along with this participatory methodology, memory work offers a rich entry point for engaging in essential issues by studying the act of representation itself and exploring how to reach multiple and diverse audiences, and ultimately, for reaching various and diverse audiences for social action.

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