

The Materials of Art and the Legacies of Colonization: A Conversation with Beatrice Glow and Sandy Rodriguez

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Beatrice Glow and Sandy Rodriguez are among the most exciting artists working today. Although they are based in cities on opposite ends of the country—Glow in New York City, and Rodriguez in Los Angeles—we decided to focus on their works in this special forum of *JTAS* because of their shared interest in critically engaging with the intimate material exchanges at the heart of colonial and imperial projects. Their works evidence deep commitments to making visible those micropolitics and histories of empire that have been naturalized and obscured through processes of extraction and commodity fetishism. In Glow’s and Rodriguez’s art, everyday materials such as spices, perfumes, foods, plants, minerals, and insects are transformed—remade and recoded to reveal suppressed, sedimented histories of empire.

Glow describes herself as a “multisensory artist, researcher, and advocate.”¹ Her work bridges a wide range of media and thematic concerns, from performance art and multimedia sense-scapes to oil on canvas. One of the throughlines that unifies Glow’s practice is a concern with documenting and revealing the ongoing colonial histories embedded within such everyday items as perfume bottles, cloves, nutmeg, and tobacco. She is especially interested in exploring how a range of colonial spaces are linked by chemosensory experiences of taste and smell. In *Rhunhattan [Tearoom]* (2015), for example, Glow excavates a little-discussed chapter of colonial history. In 1667, British and Dutch colonizers “exchanged” the island of Manhattan for the island of Rhun in the Banda Islands archipelago in present-day Indonesia. During the seventeenth century, Rhun was an important hub in the spice trade. This colonial exchange enriched the Dutch by allowing them to control the global nutmeg trade. As Glow notes, “the consequences were devastating” for the Indigenous peoples on both islands: the Bandanese of Rhun and the Lenape/Lunaapeew/Lunaape of

Manahatta/Manhattan.² At the epicenter of globalization, these peoples experienced forced relocation and the expropriation of their lands, labor, and traditional lifeways. Recovering these occluded histories is a primary concern of Glow's work.



Figure 1. *Spice Roots/Routes*. Beatrice Glow. © Beatrice Glow.
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Similarly, Rodriguez's work centers contemporary politics, the legacy of colonial histories and the dispossession of Indigenous culture, peoples, and lands. Where Glow is interested in the dawn of globalization, Rodriguez's work focuses on the meeting of two worlds and moments of resistance on the lands we now know as the US Southwest and Mexico. Although Rodriguez spent nearly two decades immersed in European collections with a focus on artistic techniques and practices, during the past six years she has turned her attention to studying the flora and territories of the Southwest, including indigenous plants, earth pigments, and medicinal practices of the Americas. Through an immersive, labor-intensive process, Rodriguez creates nearly all of the materials she uses in her creations, except for the amate paper which is handmade by Otomi hands in Puebla, Mexico. She extracts dye from indigenous plants and insects such as elderberry (*Sambucus callicarpa*), palo tinto (*Haematoxylon campechianum*), and cochinitilla (*Dactylopius coccus*).³ As she describes below, Rodriguez also engages in extensive research about all her materials, striving to recover their Indigenous names and uses across the US and Mexico. Rodriguez is



Figure 2. *Mapa de los Child Detention Centers, Family Separations and other Atrocities* (2018).
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widely acclaimed for detailed anticolonial maps like *Mapa de los Child Detention Centers, Family Separations and other Atrocities* (2018) and *Rainbows Grizzlies and Snakes, Oh My! Conquest to Caging in Los Angeles* (2019) that provide alternative cartographies for topics such as the proliferation of immigration detention centers, the development of the US prison system, sites of BIPOC resistance in California, and the uses of native plant species in the Southwest.

During our conversation, Glow and Rodriguez discovered a number of overlaps in their artistic practices, including their mutual interest in scent, color, cartography, and portraiture. Their exchanges evidenced a lively and collaborative mode of engaging with the entanglements of colonization, Indigeneity, and artistic technique. We spoke with Glow and Rodriguez on a Zoom call for about ninety minutes on September 7, 2021. The transcript of our conversation has been lightly edited for clarity and length. We would also like to acknowledge Alexandra Flores, who helped to edit and transcribe our conversation.

Hsuan Hsu: Thank you both for taking the time to have this conversation about your practices and your thinking about molecular and transnational matters. One thing that resonated with us about your work was how you both experiment with unusual multisensory materials such as amate paper, medicinal herbs, mushrooms, nutmeg, perfumes, silk, and tobacco that have strong ties to Indigenous and colonial histories. What drew you to some of the materials centered in your work and how has working with them influenced your practice as an artist?

Beatrice Glow: I think about my practice as one that works in service of public history and community. I am someone who did not grow up with contemporary art. I was surrounded by folk and traditional art practices during my upbringing, so these forms have always been very important as I have come into my own voice and when I try to surface difficult histories. It is important to honor folk forms and to highlight difficult histories in accessible ways. I resonate with Sandy's work as I believe both of us strive to provide access points for our grandparents and/or community members. For me, these ideas have led to working with plants and spices for the past six or seven years. I intentionally use materials and media that are relatable, that we can find in the grocery store or in our kitchen pantries. The materials I use are items that have impacted everyone's lives, yet they often carry largely invisibilized histories. I want to reach people who may not think that contemporary art is for them, but maybe they have a love of food or they desire consumable luxury goods. If they aspire to these things, I imagine they will stumble into my research—creations of little-known histories of everyday common objects and become motivated to start doing their own research.

Sandy Rodriguez: I echo a lot of the sentiments that Beatrice put forward in terms of accessibility and creating entry points into objects presented in a variety of exhibition spaces. Prior to 2016, I was using manufactured paints and synthetic modern pigments, European paper, and French and Japanese watercolors. I was exploring the methods and materials of European artistic practice. I spent twenty years in a dual life as a working artist and museum educator at a major Los Angeles museum. I was steeped in material art history and the timelines of various European and encyclopedic collections. While transitioning out of a museum career and in residence with Art + Practice, I began my investigations and research around materials of the Americas. Cochineal was my entry point to understanding how a pigment of the Americas changed the global art market and artistic production. I was drawn to how the materials can stand in for cultural identity and the politics of a time. The material of color, the history of color, conceptually adds meaning to the content of the work: the ideas, the history, the place. I went deep into the history by looking into the Mexican codices. They were created prior to contact with Europeans in the sixteenth century. The amate paper used to create codices, employed in ritual prior to contact, was outlawed during the colonial period! Knowing that it was outlawed because of its function in cultural practice in ceremonies and rituals was a clarifying moment that I learned about in a doctoral thesis at the University of Twente by Rosaura Citlalli López Binnqüist.

Upon reading Dr. Diana Magaloni Kerpel's work in *Colors of the New World: Artists, Materials, and the Creation of the Florentine Codex* (2014)⁴ about the sixteenth-century painting treatise embedded in the *Florentine Codex*, I learned that the source of color—either solar realm (above ground) or underworld (from the earth, mines, pigment quarries)—has a significant conceptual tie to spiritual practice and underworld beliefs and identities. Translucent red cochinilla is tied to the solar realm. This was the

turning point when I was less interested in the traditions and techniques of European art history and began to think more about the materials, techniques, tools, and underlying concepts that would have been understood in past generations of the Americas. I use the materials and techniques to bring that history forward. Layering the content and form in a potent way allowed me opportunities to investigate and present materials, colors, and narratives that are less familiar to people in our time and in this colonized region.

HH: To follow up, could you tell us about how you approach Indigenous archival or botanical materials and also how you provoke your audiences to approach them with an attitude of respect for Indigenous cultural sovereignty?

BG: Well, for a while I moonlighted as a fashion designer to support my living expenses in New York City. This work experience left me feeling alienated from material culture. I had to travel a lot for that job, and it provided me with insights into the intricacies of international supply chains and labor, as well as the hollowness of an industry that extracts resources, cultures, and labor without caring about ecofuturity and respecting original cultures. I found that the economic, environmental, and social impacts of the fashion industry are not reflected in the retail prices of material objects. This realization drove me to rethink what I was putting my energy into, so I left the fashion industry. That was around 2013 when I made a clean break and I started to think about ancestry, and our relationships with land, water, and culture.

In contemplating your question, the first words that come to mind are “relationality” and “context.” It depends on what materials we’re thinking with. Cultural objects and materials hold different meanings for diverse Indigenous people, settler colonists, immigrants, or what some may prefer to call “racialized settlers.” These are nuanced terms that run the risk of essentialization. My context alters dramatically when I’m in my parents’ homeland, Taiwan, where there are a lot of gradations within the settler colonial paradigm. It’s a complex conversation when I think about materials, and about how and what we claim and how we respond to them. I always try to clarify my relationship to the materials I work with first as well as my cultural positioning, especially when presenting to a public audience. I unapologetically take a stance to claim that we are in a dynamic living world—which is something very central to a larger conversation around relationships to land sovereignty. This stance is something that has always been an important aspect of how I approach my relationship to my materials.

Another important aspect is seeking explicit permission from culture and knowledge bearers when I’m working with a history or material that isn’t part of my heritage or experience. I think that the cultural protocol of seeking consent from Elders is critical. For example, right now I’m working with tobacco. A difficult social history is tied to tobacco as a lot of our world histories of dispossession, enslavement, and trafficking

are tethered to tobacco. I have been working with museum curators through a long process of consultation focused on how can we tell the multifolded stories of the plant that include the sacred uses of tobacco together with its role in shaping international exploitation and commerce. It's a layered process and I assume that the final project won't show even half of the spectrum of our discussions. But that conversation is an important step for respecting Indigenous peoples and traditional practices in relation to tobacco in the process of deepening our collective knowledge. I have a deep reverence for the materials. I sometimes feel like a medium for helping people to understand that we are all part of the land and therefore the materials and you are also in relationship with each other. This mutuality is always a part of my process. These are just some of the steps of always caring deeply about how I bring a material or story or a cultural object into the public sphere. It's done with a lot of care.

SR: My investigations into indigenous color began with Dr. Magaloni Kerpel's *The Colors of the New World* and it was then that I took a deep dive into the primary source of the *Florentine Codex*, Book 11, which covers the natural world and includes the treatise on making color for painting authored by Sahagun and twenty-one Nahua scholars/tlacuilos.⁵ At the same time, I began doing intensive field study with an herbalist across the western US, taking quarterly off-grid camping trips across the western states that had been part of Mexico prior to 1848 and under Indigenous land stewardship for ten thousand years prior.

Learning to identify endemic native plants that are medicinal, edible, and that have a range of utilitarian uses—including the production of color for dye and painting—was transformative for my practice.

I began my studies across the deserts of California, starting at the border and moving north from the Sonoran Desert, the Mojave Desert, the Great Basin Desert, and then I expanded to ten other western states. I was acutely aware of my lack of knowledge around whose ancestral lands I was visiting to explore native flora of the West, this unceded land. I am very conscious of the numerous Indigenous communities that have been displaced and call this place home. I was introduced to plants by their Latin binomials and by their English common names and had to recover their names and histories prior to Anglo settlement, prior to the Spanish invasion. It is a very time-consuming project—and this work is ongoing—but working with ethnobotanists, anthropologists, conservators, botanists, historians, and Indigenous artists along with older texts helped me to find the Indigenous names for plants. A challenge with the older texts, especially from the Malki Museum in Banning, California, was that they may have included outdated names for plants—as genetic testing continues, plants get reclassified and renamed. Ethnobotanical texts from the 1970s have entries that do not match up and I have consulted a range of sources both online and in print from various universities like UC Berkeley and the University of Michigan to arrive at a proper identifi-

cation. The research for each floristic community (deserts, mountains, canyons) of a region takes as much time as processing the color and painting the subject.

Some of the challenges in the research are locating out-of-print publications or finding a complete lack of publications for certain Indigenous groups in the West. There are more publications for federally recognized groups in California and the western United States than for groups not recognized by the federal government. These are oral languages that were transcribed in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries and many do not have published dictionaries. Limited funding and lack of distribution makes it difficult to locate the most recent publications. I am corresponding with retired university professors who are linguists, consulting with Indigenous language groups, and comparing historic sources to provide complete language representation. Each plant portrait has multiple names: its Indigenous language, Spanish name, English common name, and Latin binomial. Language representation highlights plant knowledge over time in a region.

The next step is to investigate the ethnobotanical uses for a plant. I start with research provided by the University of Michigan's Native American Ethnobotany Database.⁶ Then, I cross-check the data against Daniel Moerman's 1998 *Native American Ethnobotany*, the most comprehensive source on forty-four thousand native plants.⁷ Some of this information is in the online database but the print publication is more comprehensive. Next, I cross-reference, when possible, with herbalists and friends. I invest in a careful, respectful way in providing opportunities for conversation within a field, for people to leverage their experiences and knowledge, leading to questions that propel the research further. This work began at the moment when I was able to make art full time and go out each quarter on research. Once I did the research, I would come back and workshop my findings as part of a drop-in watercolor class. I was the artist-in-residence for the Los Angeles County Arts Commission based at a recuperative care center (RCC) in South Central LA for unhoused residents recently discharged from Martin Luther King Community Hospital's ICU. The clients needed to stay in a care facility until subsidized housing could be located. In Los Angeles we have a significant number of ESL speakers and in this drop-in class we had participants who spoke a range of languages including Spanish and Indigenous languages. In the workshop, there were people from across the Americas. There were amazing multiple side conversations. For example, when I presented a certain plant that was both a medicinal plant and used for color, people at each table would talk about what their grandmothers used it for. The narratives about how we make meaning and how we relate to the natural world around us became clear. I saw the opportunity for deep conversations and community building that came from researching the materials. Of course, there are challenges. At the moment, I'm struggling to find Indigenous local Tongva names for azurite, malachite, yellow ochre, and some of the other pigments. I'm not finding Indigenous names for cochineal, the scale insect that yields carminic

acid to create a brilliant red. It is a wonderful puzzle to meditate on, falling down some rabbit holes while respectfully engaging with a history of a place where I have lived and worked since 1987. It is crucial to both keep aware that I am on Tongva land and to vet some of my findings with Tongva artists and language groups.

HH: Our next question is inspired by the intimacy with which you both engage with your materials. For example, the slow process of making pre-Columbian pigments by hand or the intricate processes of mixing fragrances, or the multisensory experiences of field research. Can you share an example of the kinds of intimacies catalyzed by specific materials you've worked with—either for yourself or as a medium that interacts with your audiences.

BG: I'm still traveling with you [SR] in my head, reflecting on experiences I've had with Elders gathering to tell stories, so I am very excited to hear about your process. I also have projects centered on mapping and thinking about place-names. There are so many convergences between our processes!

There are so many ways to think about how intimacy is catalyzed by material. I like to think of exhibition-making itself as a medium. The whole process of sketching out ideas, installation, storytelling, working with the presenting institution, supporting the communities to come together to build: It's all somewhat of a theatrical activity of problem-solving how we can do collective storytelling to shift narratives. I think of exhibitions as opportunities to interact with people beyond my immediate circle. In the past few years, the question that kept coming back to me during the exhibition process was, *what is the smell of colonialism?* This has further evolved into, *what is the smell of extractivism?*

When I think about these questions, it's hard to pinpoint one specific plant; instead, a multitude of plants comes to mind.

One project I worked on called *Aromérica Parfumeur* sprung up around various aromas in the Americas and claims that American origins evolved out of the colonial botanical expeditions searching for the aromas and spices of Asia. These searches for aromas bring forth not only entanglements of empires and their intimacies, but also the entanglements of breath in pursuit of aromatics.

This project transformed into a pop-up fake perfumery that was inside a shopping mall in Santiago de Chile. It was a fun experience because I got to indulge in the guilty pleasure of playing with aesthetics that are sometimes considered too “bougie.” Because of the setting and the nature of the exhibition space, here it was very appropriate to play with bourgeois aesthetics, so I created the pop-up perfumery. We activated different senses and played with words. For example, a scent called *El Picante* is a play on El

Dorado and the search for gold, but here it featured nutmegs and cloves. There was also *Taboo*, featuring tobacco, but also ingredients such as cacao. I also included less savory combinations such as sugar and guano. The exhibition was designed to bring forth all of these scents to create a more interactive experience. Visitors were invited to smell, which is very different from typical museum experiences. Often, in more institutional spaces, due to conservation concerns, bringing scent into exhibitions is rather tricky as it may damage other artworks. But in this pop-up space, staged in a shopping mall, I could do whatever I wanted regardless of the volatile aspect of the different types of oils.

It was fascinating to work in a shopping mall space that was named after Amerigo Vespucci. Obviously, there were many puns that I could play with in such a space. I created these vintage seventeenth-century style posters that told stories about each plant and the unsavory costs of luxury that circle beneath them. It was a very fertile ground to tell the story. People from different walks of life came into the space. Many of the mall-goers may not cross the thresholds of heavy doors of the downtown beaux-arts building that houses the Museo Nacional de Bellas Artes de Chile where, metaphorically, there are many steps to climb. I remember one woman who came to the exhibition. She thought she was stumbling into a boutique grand opening while on her way to the grocery store that was also located in the enormous Chilean shopping mall. She ended up staying for a long time after realizing that this was an exhibition staged as a perfume boutique and was surprised to learn about the hidden histories of many of the spices she cooks with.



Fig. 4. Beatrice Glow, *Taboo—Tobaco*; *Eau de Colón, Gourmand*; *El Picante*, 2016. Olfactory experiences; glass bottles with stoppers, decals, vinyl, scents, glass bell jars, small glass bottles, framed graphic posters, cinnamon bark, nutmegs, cloves, and lightboxes, dimensions variable. Installation view at Sala de Arte del Museo Nacional de Bellas Artes de Chile en Mall Plaza Vespucio, Santiago, Chile, August 13–September 25, 2016

Figure 3. Installation view from *Taboo—Tobaco*; *Eau du Colón, Groumand*; *El Picante*. Beatrice Glow. © 2016 Beatrice Glow. Used by permission of the artist.

I was struck by how people spent time asking questions, smelling, and comparing their sensorial experiences with each other. It made me realize that this was an intimate way of sharing breath in ways that we can't do right now due to the pandemic. While the visitors wandered through the space, they encountered a ten-meter-long black velvet fabric upon which I had carefully laid out plants I sought out with a Mapuche elder, Señora Delfina Huenchún. These plants are rarely referenced in museum spaces. We laid them out like the DNA of the land, threaded together and grounded in the form of a double helix where the ends were looped to form an infinity symbol.

After they encountered the floor installation, people approached a series of glass perfume bottles. This part of the exhibit emulated the display tropes of a luxury brand. People would often begin with the attitude "Oh, this is cool, what is this?" before they delve deeper into the subtle critiques embedded within the works.

I always think about exhibition-making as a way to ask people to unfold layers within not just a corporeal experience, but also the internal space of perception. I ask not just what a place could be, but what is it really like? How can we read between the lines? Intimacy travels. I'm interested in how smell can activate a part of us that we're supposed to turn off because it makes us too "primal."

We are in a culture that values the visual cortex and sight, but scent is something that has always been in tension with the visual. We try to deodorize, to clean up scent, we try to get rid of racialized scents in certain cultural contexts. I find ways in which, by introducing scents from the land, from deep within the attics of our memories, we can start to have conversations. I suppose my intimacy story revolves around how exhibition-making implants, archives, and generates new memories. I think that memory is another term that emerges for me. I'd love to hear more of Sandy's stories about multisensory field research.

SR: I love the strategy of seducing the audiences. Then to slip them the uncomfortable history and make them have to deal with it immediately following a pleasurable moment that they've shared with the people they're with or by themselves.

I was introduced to plant study with an organoleptic multisensorial method. During field research, I have to make sure I have the proper plant. With native plant research, there are look-alikes. Unless you happen to be there during the months when a plant is flowering or fruiting, you may be looking at sticks—or sticks with some leaves. It is not easy to know if it is the same plant encountered four months ago, in a different area, or if it is a relative. I scratch the bark, smell it, pass it around when I am doing field study with others. I will sometimes taste the fruit. The top and bottom side of the leaves need to be felt to understand the plant. Close visual examination happens with a loupe so you can see punctate glands and trichome or starlike hairs. It's a full sensory

engagement with the individual plant, the associated plant communities, the soil types, elevation, and season. We are talking about botanizing in freezing temperatures in winter to triple digits in the summers.



Figure 4. *Mapa de la Region Fronteriza de Alta y Baja Califas*. © 2017 Sandy Rodriguez. Used by permission of the artist.

A potent experience happened when I did a residency with the Natural History Museum of Los Angeles. They invited me to do large general audience programs during a late Los Angeles summer. Almost as an afterthought, they told me there would be a few hundred people on each date, so each twenty-minute, hourly presentation would get fifty to sixty people. I created a drop-in program around the first map I created: a hand-painted map of California that was painted with botanical and mineral colors I extracted from each region. It is called *Mapa de la Región Fronteriza de Alta y Baja Califas*. It has a number of political layers. For the demo and presentation, with help from an assistant, I made an eight foot-tall coloring book page of the map. Then we

did a color demonstration, much like a cooking show, in the native edible plant garden where I introduced palo tinto, cochinita, elderberry, and maya blue. When I introduced the different colorants, people passed them around, smelled them, and tried to identify them.

When we moved to the processing of the pigments, I provided each participant with a little mussel shell to paint with the handmade watercolor. I cut down sheets of amate paper so they could feel the paper and create a bookmark for summer reading. They had to use their senses and dialogue to generate possible kinds of meanings and associations with the particular colorant. They took home both a physical reminder of the experience and the memory of working collectively.

It was a challenge to translate this type of multisensory learning to the remote learning platform during the first winter of the pandemic. I had to transform an in-person ten-week course called “Colors of the Americas: Mapping your Migration” I taught at California Institute of Technology as the Caltech Huntington Art + Research Fellow from January to March of 2021. Just before the course started, I mailed everyone kits with the basic course materials: mussel shells, mushrooms, insects, bark, pigments, and processing tools. We met remotely in different time zones and scattered across the country at kitchen tables and living rooms. I had the students crush colorants and pigments with the mortar and pestle. I asked them to gently smell certain samples and got them talking about our personal associations with the scents. Smell, as you know, triggers memory in an extraordinary way. With one of the exhibitions that I’m working at right now at the Huntington Library, there are limitations about bringing live plants inside the exhibition space. Live specimens, soil, and liquids in the exhibition spaces are not permitted. We’re lucky enough to have an entire team of botanical curators who are organizing a beautiful selection of native medicinal dye plants used in the treatment of respiratory illness and trauma, some of which are also known to be remedies for *susto* or trauma based on the *Codex Cruz-Badiano*, an herbal created during the sixteenth century. We are doing a full planting of them outside of the exhibition. As one enters the Virginia Steel Scott galleries, one must pass a selection of the live plants featured in my artwork and encounter the illustrated labels I created in multiple languages that describe their uses. Visitors then confront painted depictions of the plants they just saw outside. Then they pass into a materials gallery that will have all of the raw materials and a mock Sandy Rodriguez studio setup with the amate papers and other types of papers. Even in the time of Covid, there are ways to emphasize the sensory experience with magnifying glasses and bottom lighting for paper to expose details that you would normally want to touch. We have an opportunity to engage in different ways with audiences during these times when touching, smelling, and convening in real life could be hazardous to one’s health.

It is a meditative process: to go out into nature to locate a plant in its native plant community, make sure you have the right plant, then draw the plant for several hours, then look up how it's processed, vet the process because there are a lot of questionable recipes out there, measure everything, test the pH levels, perform a heat extraction, a decoction, shift the color with acids and bases. It is a pleasurable form of kitchen alchemy when creating dyes for inks and watercolor. On any given day, I have to attend to so many different things that are part of running an art business. I just want to process the dye plants that have been in the fridge for a week! But I have to get some other work done, attend meetings, and such. The processing of color is one of the more centering and soothing parts of the work that I do. It is physically and emotionally grounding work. The other day I spent three hours doing a twenty-two-inch portrait of plumeria. To have my nose in plumeria all day—that did not feel like work.

BG: Sounds a bit like what I'm developing with tobacco plants these days! This is the most joyful part of the work: pausing the intellectual side and letting the body and the intuition lead. Thank you so much for sharing that.

David Vázquez: These are exciting and terrific answers. I'm thrilled with such a rich conversation. I want to shift a little bit to some of the thematics in your works. I want to ask you about the ways you both critically engage with processes of mapping. For Sandy, this involves reimagining the map itself as a decolonial form as in *Mapa de los Child Detention Centers, Family Separations and Other Atrocities*. For Beatrice, mapping manifests connections across space and time obscured by colonial histories such as the 1667 exchange of Manhattan for the nutmeg-rich island Rhun between Britain and the Netherlands, or the star-shaped panoptic forts that claim space across a vast range of settler colonial geographies across the world. The question is, could you tell us about what drew you to your experiments with mapping and how you deploy maps to reframe our understandings of national, transnational, and/or decolonial geographies?

BG: How deep do you want us to go into this question? I feel like this might be a long conversation.

DV: As deep as you want to go in twenty minutes [laughing].

BG: Maps are always political. It matters who creates the map and what perspectives they bring to that project. What is included and what is omitted impacts the worldviews of future generations. Maps offer a way of understanding how we spatially ground ourselves. My parents are from Taiwan and I am from the state of California. I always understand myself as coming from the heritage of deep migrations—many, many, many migrations, and many different ancestors that came from different places. When I think of Taiwan, it is a nation in the Great Ocean in Asia, but also a place tied to

Papua New Guinea, to Aotearoa, to Hawai'i, and the Philippines. This geopolitical location also makes it a contested island that's entangled in the US-China conflict. Whoever draws the map of Taiwan decides questions of sovereignty, whether it's represented as an autonomous island nation or as subsumed by a larger neighbor. Growing up, I've always been sensitive to these contingencies in mapmaking of this place my parents came from.

But I got serious about spatial relations and cartographic practices around 2016 when I was invited to be the 2016–17 Artist-in-Residence at the Asian/Pacific/American Institute at New York University. There, I worked on the Wayfinding Project where we (somehow magically in a nine-month period!) attempted to prepare New Yorkers to receive Hōkūle'a, which is a Polynesian double-hulled canoe that was circumnavigating the world with this amazing message of mālama honua (to care for the land). It made New Yorkers realize how little they knew about the Lenape/Lunaapeew/Lunaape, the people who inhabited, and continue to inhabit, New York prior to colonization. I ended up creating lots of maps for that project to help people find themselves in relation to settler colonialism. But I also started to question the types of stories we want to tell about Indigenous peoples and settler displacement. I then created a Pacific-centric map that placed the Pacific in the middle, rather than on the edges. I took colonial maps and layered them on top of the drawings I made on translucent mylar that blurred and questioned colonial depictions. I also added the Indigenous names for the regions and lands on which I found myself. During my research, I learned—and as Sandy was saying—that there are a lot of gaps in the archives. There are many missing Indigenous words or words from different dialects that complicate the names of particular places. The mapping project became a different can of worms that invited more research, especially on the East Coast where contact with European colonizers has a deep history. Initial contact with European settlers happened more than four hundred years ago, so a lot of this history is not as well documented in the ways that contact had been documented on the West Coast of Turtle Island. There are just so many gaps in this knowledge, so learning how to read between the lines evolved into my current job, where I'm the program manager for The Public History Project. Just today, before this call, I was working on mapping one of the oldest human-made structures in the New York metropolitan area that is not recognized. We've been trying to figure out how to create an Indigenous place-names map for the estuarial region that is home to New York and New Jersey. This is a collaboration with Algonquin linguists, Lunaapeew language teachers, ecologists and historians interpreting geographical contexts, and Dutch and English transliterations of Indigenous languages. It's a deep process that blurs into my creative practice, and it's largely motivated by the obligation to be in allyship with Native people.

Through this process of mapping and research, I've learned so much about the history of New York City's geography. For example, I learned that the Smithsonian National Museum of the American Indian is built right on top of the former site of the

star-shaped Fort Amsterdam, which served as a port and the administrative center of the Dutch colonial government in the 1600s. After looking at these maps, I started looking at treaties and I found this strange chapter that is rarely discussed as being part of the history of New York: that the island we know as Manhattan was exchanged for a small island in present-day Indonesia's Banda Islands. When I started to research these islands on the other side of the world, I also found star-shaped forts. In fact, there are more star forts in this tiny archipelago than in the New York area. This shows the unbalanced priorities of Dutch colonizers during the 1600s. By looking at a treaty, by looking at colonial invasive structures and military forces that are meant to control and dominate the landscape, I started to map a pattern of exploitation. But I also realized that I was mapping patterns of resilience amongst people who face these difficult challenges—and I found these stories all around the world. Then I remembered my first encounter with colonial forts like these was Elmina Castle in Ghana, which is a star fort sort of shape.

So, my research and mapping are about spatial understanding. They are about understanding a moment in the colonial world when there was a reshuffling of power dynamics. In order to grasp this moment, I found I needed many visuals because, again, it's hard to get people to get excited about history without multisensory storytelling. So, I started filming, drawing, and mapping. I started to also imagine the ways I might bring communities impacted by these histories together to help amplify and connect their stories. I wanted to draw attention to why colonists wanted these spice islands in Indonesia. At that time, it was the only place where nutmeg was grown. Cloves were grown on a nearby island. In 1621, in pursuit of cornering the nutmeg trade, the Dutch East India Company orchestrated a massacre that decimated the Bandanese population. Those who remained were enslaved and some were even trafficked to Taiwan to build Fort Zeelandia, another star fort. With the support of my Banda Working Group, I initiated an intimate exchange of sacred tobacco and nutmeg plants between Bandanese and Algonquin Elders. But then Covid hit, so it changed a lot of my plans due to travel limitations. Nonetheless, the intimate side of healing intergenerational trauma can emerge from a mindful process of coming together to think about the patterns of genocidal violence that have happened across time and space and how they unfolded through the story of sacred plants. I wanted to share this history to invite people who might not be interested in geography, or history, but enjoy food, to come together. Mapping can also be about transcending a colonial map, transcending or unfolding a treaty that connected people across the world and bringing them into relation with each other. I think this is how we can bring forth anticolonial geographies. Presently, I'm hesitant about describing my work as being decolonial, as I feel that I am not embodying decoloniality (not yet), but I think my work is anticolonial.

SR: What drew me to experiment with mapping was a lifelong fascination with maps as a way to locate self, locate family, understand migrations, understand histories, and

confront material that was introduced to me in schools. The form and function of mapping is loaded, to say the least. The history of cartography and image-making from the European traditions have some very, very problematic underpinnings. Thinking about the history of cartography and thinking about various map collections and research centers at universities and museums prompted a great curiosity in me. I wanted to understand forms of mapping that were specific to this region. Working in Los Angeles and thinking about place and thinking about uprisings, revolts, occupations, land grabs; having access to digital reproductions of things like the Diseños Collection from Spanish and Mexican Land Grant Records, housed at UC Berkeley; and having access to even low-res images of the *Relaciones Geográficas* from the Benson Library at UT Austin is potent. I am very interested in learning about sacred Indian Sand Paintings in Southern California and how these cosmological maps have been used for instruction of young participants in psychedelic puberty rituals. Creating my own maps allows me to think about how to make visible some of the scholarship I've been processing. As a contemporary artist who loves research but who is not an academic, I will say that with my second map of Los Angeles (a 97" x 97" map of Los Angeles painted using a restricted palette under a rainbow arc with battling hummingbirds and calavera copters, Immigration Customs Border Enforcement helicopters), I did a deep dive into Book 12 of the *Florentine Codex*. This is the only account of the invasion and war in Mexico from 1519 to 1521 from the Indigenous Nahuatl perspective. I was simultaneously reading that text to my mom, discussing each chapter, and then going to various symposia to understand how scholars were discussing it as we approached the five hundred-year anniversary of the conquest. At the same time, I was reading the historian Kelly Lytle Hernández's extraordinary work on Los Angeles history, *City of Inmates: Conquest, Rebellion, and the Rise of Human Caging in Los Angeles, 1771–1965*.⁸ Hernández did a decade of research on what she calls the rebel archives. Her text unpacks how Los Angeles becomes the carceral capital of the world. The map I created in 2019 was a response to these histories and experiences. How do you make visible these histories that are extraordinarily uncomfortable? I plotted our local missions, jails, child detention centers, juvenile halls, juvenile camps, the locations of the so-called alien roundups that occurred in 1954. They were called "Operation Wetback" and they were caging Mexicanos in Elysian Park, which is now where the police academy is located. I also plotted a lynching site that is now a Los Angeles superior courthouse, and the location of Terminal Island, where they rounded up the Japanese in 1942 under Executive Order 9066. I was trying to present this large and beautiful view with these small marks that then have little symbols like you would see in a Google map with an associated key. I wanted viewers to understand a crystal-clear representation of each place as something that is constantly evolving. I'm now moving away from creating a map key on a separate paper and have started including a cartouche that includes a numbered series of events that people can locate in the map. The current map I'm working on shows things like how pesticides were sprayed on migrants in detention centers, where the first migrant died of Covid-19 in

detention, or where uprisings have taken place. There are opportunities to play with how we represent space to reference the mapmaking practices that are historic, but also contemporary. I'm combining hand-drawn techniques with things like satellite mapping. I'm also documenting things like annual wildfires, and I connect them to other moments in history, including los pronósticos that foretold the invasion of the Americas.

DV: Another form of intimacy that appears in both of your work relates to your use of the human form to reclaim the imperial gaze. We're thinking specifically of Beatrice's *Apprentice of the Ghost of Gauguin*, which made me laugh but also made me think about the colonial gaze. I'm also thinking about Sandy's portraits of migrant children. Although much of the focus of this special forum is about reclaiming forms of intimacy that empire treats as quotidian, we were wondering if you could talk about reclaiming the human form in your work and how these reclamations foster other kinds of intimacy? In other words, can you talk about how your use of the human form pushes back against the colonial gaze to create decolonial forms of intimacy?

BG: It's funny that you brought up that early piece. The last time I discussed it was in a lecture performance. This is a series where I intentionally paint in a very amateurish style as the *Apprentice of the Ghost of Gauguin*. It is a response to how Gauguin built a legacy on depicting many women of color in disrespectful, romanticized ways. In my series, I replaced the female figures with a white male figure. This series links to earlier work when I did a lot of performances when I was a student and I always felt this urgent need to push back against the heteropatriarchal and colonial gaze. But I always felt dissatisfied with using my own body in this work because the conversation always shifted back to how I am read racially, my gender, and my cultural identity, rather than the issues I was addressing in the work. During the past few years the human figure has been less present in my practice, but the stories that I grapple with remain deeply human. But, now that I think about it, I want to roll back and say the human figure has appeared in the *Mannahatta* VR project, which is a digital reconstruction of what the island of Mannahatta (the Lenape/Lunaapeew/Lunaape name for the island we now know as Manhattan) may have looked like around 1609. The piece allowed people to time travel between the past and the future. People encounter the physical presence of Lenape/Lunaapeew/Lunaape Indigenous Elders sharing creation stories, world-views, as well as their experiences as contemporary Indigenous people. Looking back, my work has become less about deflecting or pushing back against the gaze (because I'm tired of that!), and more about demanding to be seen and generating opportunities for people to have intimate and palpable encounters about erased histories and voices within the virtual space. This is the trajectory my work has taken, but I do think that telling jokes about Gauguin started as a fun and inviting way to lighten up the load when talking about tough subject matter.

I also wanted to quickly mention that I did a project called the *Colonial Color Palette* that ties into this question, and with Sandy's work with pigments. I think everyone is familiar with the process of buying paint where you get these paint chips that have really ridiculous names. So as part of a performance lecture, I read the names of colors like "Hawaiian Breeze," "Grass Skirt," "Colonial White" or "Incan Gold." But what I highlight is how these names evolved during a post-WWII era when there was a boom in the chemical industry and the standardization of paint colors, paired with the emerging global worldview of GIs returning home after occupying different lands. The names of these colors, to a certain extent, represented this white supremacist, heteropatriarchal gaze. Pushing back against the colonial gaze and shifting narratives can be done with humor, alongside grassroots organizing, policy change, and transforming our education system.

SR: I have to drop in moments of humor and levity because these subjects are heavy. I need to laugh at some point while making the work. I want there to be giggles and dancing in the studio because it is work created out of love and joy even when there is that serious content and emotional weight that we carry within our bodies.

My use of the human form pushes back against the colonial gaze to create decolonial forms of intimacy in a variety of ways in this series. In the first map there are images of color processing from the *Florentine Codex* chapter on color where I swapped out the male figures of artists/scribes (tlacuilos) and included my self-portrait with reddish hair and freckles. I had a friend photograph me in almost impossible profile poses inspired by the *Florentine Codex*. My body was contorted in unnatural ways to show me processing color. The photoshoot was filled with laughter, which helped to ease the weight of including all the immigration detention centers across the state of California on my map before I had to depict myself on the maps.

In the second map I tackled a bit of portraiture, again thinking about the omens in Book 12 of the *Florentine Codex*. This piece displaces some of the historic figures with contemporary portraiture. Instead of the male figures at one of the first omens that are pointing at this column of fire, I included the scholars I was working with: Diana Magaloni Kerpel is on the left and Dr. Ella Díaz is right behind her. I am included pointing at the flame, and then my mom, Guadalupe Rodriguez, who was a painter—may she rest in power—is right behind me. And my older sister Dr. Eliza Rodriguez y Gibson, who is a scholar and dean at Loyola Marymount University, is right behind her.

In the exhibition that I did in March 2021, there are the portraits of the seven children who died in Customs Border Enforcement custody. Those were the most difficult portraits I have ever done. For months, I had a text on the wall that said, "she died of dehydration and shock." I put the text up in December 2020 and I had to live with that quote for almost eight months before I could begin thinking about painting the first

portrait. I researched the news stories in English and Spanish and then heard court testimony from some of the parents of the children before I could do those portraits.

With the rest of the portraits I include in the maps, there is a combination of historic and contemporary. I'm privileging portraiture conventions that are not a part of the European canon. I'm privileging profile views and an economy of line that represents a bicultural production—this moment of the meeting of two worlds that is manifest in the *Florentine Codex* as opposed to a more Euro-identified aesthetic. As I mentioned, for twenty years—but really for an intense sixteen years—I did master studies of numerous Western European sketchbooks and model books held at the Getty Museum and Research Institute's special collections. I taught adult studio courses in art historical styles for the education department as part of my work in Museum Education. I am untraining the eye and the hand and looking at other ways of presenting posture, gesture, expression, and attributes in a codified way that is going to make people have to do some work. It's an intentional attempt at reclaiming conventions in an art history of the Americas.

DV: Could you tell us a little about a current or upcoming project and how it might resonate with themes connected to the forum on *The Molecular Intimacies of Empire*? For example, the colonial histories that underlie everyday material realities, decolonial methods of engaging with chemical or botanical intimacies, or modes of sensory engagement that might ground anticolonial or decolonial relationships?

SR: In 2023, I will have a solo exhibition at the University of California, Santa Barbara (UCSB). I'm working with the A + D Museum, Chicana/o Studies, Anthropology, and Art History. I'm also collaborating with three special collections librarians, the retired director of the Natural History Museum, the education director of the Botanical Garden, and Chumash artists to develop a plan for engaging communities across Santa Barbara. Cross-programming across communities and audiences around a university art exhibition with a full catalogue and on-site programs is all in the mix. It's about maximizing conversations for unexpected outcomes to guide the exhibition and model types of engagement and dialogue.

BG: Congratulations, Sandy! I love hearing about how you're bringing institutions, communities, and research collections into the fold of your process in a way that's transparent to a larger crowd. I'm working on a solo museum exhibition in May at the Baltimore Museum of Art. In a way, this exhibit is an attempt to think with the city of Baltimore about how the tobacco industry made the city a trade hub. The museum's enormous collection of luxurious trade objects is a testament to the wealth that accrued around the tobacco trade. I was recently there for a site visit where I got to see former tobacco warehouses and cigar factories and learned about the inspiring history of union organization by tobacco workers.

But I also got a sense of how the cultivation of tobacco in the region was built on desecrated Native land, and also the labor that was involved in tobacco farming. In thinking about the intimacies of empire, there were enslaved laborers who were trafficked to build this cash crop into a booming industry. The industry was itself built on Native land that is often thought of in relation to Captain John Smith. The stories we have of Captain John Smith emphasize how he was “riding in his canoe and he found empty, uninhabited land.” I conjecture that Native people were seasonally migrating because there was no food source in the area at that moment, but it doesn’t mean that the area was not part of their homeland. These stories help us see how official records always betray a moment of ignorance and a clash of worldviews. But this industry is also part of the story of how Baltimore was able to accrue so many luxurious trade goods from Asia. I’ve been trying to dig into the history of Captain O’Donnell, who founded Canton, a waterfront neighborhood in Baltimore. O’Donnell was an Irish merchant who arrived in Baltimore with a shipload of beautiful trade goods from Canton, China and India. So, a rich man came to town, bought a lot of land and called it Canton. Then he proceeded to establish tobacco plantations. I need to look at the record system statistics, but there were certainly many enslaved laborers on his land. His statue was recently removed from Canton Square by a local community effort.⁹

This work speaks to how this one plant that people breathe in and out and use for rituals and sacred practices became a desecrated plant. It tells a story of the intimacies of empire. One thing I was raving about during my collections visit to Baltimore were the snuff bottles. Snuff bottles came from China as a decorative art form that was deeply inspired by an enigmatic and sacred plant from Turtle Island. These bottles testify to this history. They were shipped across the oceans and brought into the homes of genteel people in Baltimore. I’m fascinated by how one plant can have such a sprawling afterimage. This plant tells the story of the city of Baltimore; it tells a story of community luxury, labor, and land. What’s important for me in this exhibition is how to show this story and peel away the veneer of luxury that arose from smoke. I think that is a story about the molecular intimacies of empire! I love how Hsuan brought this phrase into my life and now I see it everywhere. And we are bringing scent into this space, although in a very constrained way so as to not damage the permanent collection.

DV: These sound like exciting and vibrant exhibitions! We could certainly talk for much longer, but I think this is a wonderful place to stop. Thank you both for your thought-provoking work and for your time and thinking.

Notes

- ¹ Beatrice Glow, “Rhunhattan: A Tale of Two Islands,” artist website, n.d. <https://beatriceglow.org/#/rhunhattan/>.
- ² Ian Burnet, “Rhunhattan—A Tale of Two Islands,” *spiceislandsblog*, July 4, 2017. <https://spiceislandsblog.com/page/10/>.
- ³ Cochineal (cochinilla in Spanish) is a parasitic insect indigenous to the Southwest United States. When dried and combined with aluminum or calcium, it is used to create the natural dye carmine (red).
- ⁴ Diana Magaloni Kerpel, *Colors of the New World: Artists, Materials, and the Creation of the Florentine Codex* (Los Angeles: Getty Research Institute, 2014).
- ⁵ Nahuatl term for an artist–scribe.
- ⁶ *Native American Ethnobotany: A Database of Foods, Drugs, Dyes and Fibers of Native American Peoples, Derived from Plants*. <http://naeb.brit.org/>
- ⁷ Daniel E. Moerman, *Native American Ethnobotany* (Portland, OR: Timber Press, 1998).
- ⁸ Kelly Lytle Hernández, *City of Inmates: Conquest, Rebellion, and the Rise of Human Caging in Los Angeles, 1771–1965* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2017).
- ⁹ O’Donnell’s statue was removed on April 5, 2021, by Baltimore City workers after more than a year-long community organizing effort.

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