MEMORY AND DECOLONIAL PRACTICES THOUGH MAKING: A RECLAMATION OF MESTIZA IDENTITY

BY

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Abstract

We have arrived at a particular moment in the history of the world where Indigenous voices, knowledges, and ways of thinking and making are beginning to be included in the conversations on value and aesthetics within the academy, the gallery space, and within art and design Institutions. With my thesis project, I am striving to put forward a decolonized and anti-capitalist approach to design and art research to have a conversation across history, one that brings forward the genealogy of traditional Indigenous art forms while also transforming them through material and conceptual innovation. At the core of this thesis is a personal exploration of the act of reclamation of my Indigeneity that is not often considered as part of a Mestizo/a identity in Colombia. Questions of gender, aesthetic classification and Indigenous identity are probed through a multi-disciplinary creative practice that resulted in my thesis exhibition. This included a series of masks made in metal (copper, bronze, and the alloy tumbaga[1]), a copper offering vase, a mixed media embroidery, a video of the making process of one of the masks, and a video performance in one of the sacred sites around the city of Bogotá, Colombia. This work continues a lifelong process for me as a Mestiza artist, where I have fought to reconstruct the pieces of my ancestral lineage in order to understand where I come from and my purpose as an artist and academic in today's world.

[1] Tumbaga: Alloy commonly prepared by goldsmiths in Pre-Columbian times, usually made with a combination of copper and gold, or silver and copper, in different proportions. The unique characteristic of tumbaga being the large quantity of copper used as opposed to modern alloys. The surface treatment of metal was accomplished through the usage of plants with high contents of oxalic acid to further deplete the copper component from the first layers of the metal and bring out a golden or silver coloration.

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The pursuit of this MFA would not have been possible without the unconditional support of my parents, my sister, and the communities that accompany me each step of the way. Pursuing this MFA has been a lifelong goal that has taken many years and life turns to materialize. I want to thank my father Alejandro Figueroa for always believing in me and supporting me despite our different ways of perceiving the world. I want to thank my mother Maria Del Carmen Palau for having started as a young woman, a path that I would continue to follow and live. I want to thank my sister Cristina Figueroa for helping me make important decisions along the MFA path. A special mention to my aunt Clara Ines Palau, a great artist and embroidery teacher who has been an example and a guide since I was a little girl. Many challenges including my dear mother Maria Lara's serious illness came to the surface during this time. I can say with confidence and gratitude that despite the difficulties, we have now overcome these challenges and have been transformed as a family and as individuals. I can say with confidence that after so many trials in finding the right place to study, I have been gratefully surprised with what life had in store for my master's degree at Emily Carr University.

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[2] Arhuaco: Otherwise known as Iku peoples. Indigenous Nation from the Sierra Nevada of Santa Marta.
[3] Kanien'kehá:ka: 'People of the Chert,' mistakenly known as Mohawk or 'man-eaters' by non Kanien'kehá:ka peoples.

spirits up through difficulties, pushing me to keep singing at the Sundance drum. I also want to thank all of our Sundance community in Pyramid Lake Reservation, Nevada, for their support and kindness. My perception of my work, my family, and myself has changed for the better over these past two years. The work I have created and will continue to create from this point on has been forever transformed by this master's program.

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This thesis is dedicated to all those mentioned above and to all the Indigenous women striving to make a dignified living through their craft making. I ask the Creator to bless our work and our words, so that we may keep making beautiful art that can be of use to future generations.

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Glossary

Aba: Muisca word for corn.

Alcamari/ Allqamari: Aymara and Quechua word referring to a species of falcon, *Phalcoboenus megalopterus.*

Aymara: Indigenous Nation original to Lake Titicaca, located at the border of Peru and Bolivia. In current times, Aymara peoples also live in northern Chile and Argentina.

Cacíca: Muisca female governor.

Ch'ixi: Aymara word referring to a color composed of strips of black and white appearing to be grey from a distance, used by sociologist Silvia Rivera Cusicanqui to describe mestizaje.

Chicha: Fabqua in Muisca language. A traditional Muisca drink made of fermented corn.

Chumbe: Within several Indigenous communities in the Andes, the chumbe or woven belt holds an important place. It embodies the transmission of knowledge through colors and patterns, and also serves a purpose in "holding" the bodies of children in their developmental stages in an attempt to better "form" them. It is also important in protecting the womb while women menstruate and recover from giving birth.

Co-creation: Indigenous understanding where the human hands or words co-create with material elements that carry agency.

Graver: Tool used to engrave or incise metal.

Hidalgo: Colonial Spanish term to define gentlemen.

Indigenous: Indigenous peoples are referred to in many ways. The term Native is becoming less popular as it relates to plants and flora. The term Indigenous came up as a way of talking about the global field of Indigeneity and it was consecrated at the UN in talking about Indigenous rights. Aboriginal comes from the Latin words- *ab* or form, and *origine*, meaning beginning or origin. This term has now become less popular.

Kairos: Term used by ancient Greeks to describe a moment in time connected to eternity. It is thought of as a small lapse of time, a moment when human consciousness opens to a higher consciousness, also analogous to a flash of lightning.

Mestizo: A person from Central or South America who is part European, especially Spanish, and part Indigenous.

Misak or Guambianos: Indigenous peoples original to the Cauca region of Colombia.

Mochila: A bag. The most important utilitarian object for Indigenous peoples in Colombia. All Native peoples of Colombia have a different way of weaving the mochilas from natural materials. The patterns on the mochilas are sacred to each clan, depicting patterns in nature and sometimes representing a family mark. In some Indigenous cultures in Colombia during Pre-Columbian times large mochilas would also be woven to bury the dead and to deposit ritual offerings.

Muisca: Muisca or Chibcha. Original peoples of the region currently known as Bogotá, its surrounding areas, and the southern part of Santander, Colombia.

Murui-Muina, Muinane, Mi-ka, Mi-pode, Huitoto, Witoto: Indigenous peoples of the Colombian Amazon from the regions of Caquetá and Putumayo and the neighboring borderlands with Peru and Brazil. They call themselves the sons and daughters of tobacco, coca leaf, and sweet yam.

Nariguera: Term used to define Pre-Columbian nose rings. The patterns would often indicate the wearer´s social status or clan.

New Mestizaje: Term that derives from an epistemological disobedience to the current logics of power, of being, and of knowledge that were established with colonialism. Gloria Anzaldúa talks about this concept in her work *Borderlands/La Frontera* in referring to mestizos living in the United States and the subcultures that have emerged from this cultural phenomenon.

Pre-Columbian: Indigenous cultures of the Meso-American, Central American, and Andean region prior to the arrival of Christopher Columbus.

Tumbaga: Alloy commonly prepared by goldsmiths in Pre-Columbian times, usually made with a combination of copper and gold, or silver and copper, in different proportions. The unique characteristic of tumbaga being the large quantity of copper used as opposed to modern alloys. The surface treatment of metal was accomplished through the usage of plants with high contents of oxalic acid to further deplete the copper component from the first layers of the metal and bring out a golden or silver coloration.

Introduction / To be born a Mestiza

I am a daughter of the Andes, a Mestiza, raised with corn, yam, cacao, mamoncillo, plantain, and coffee. I was born and raised in Bogotá Colombia until the age of eleven, when my mother and I had to move to the United States due to turbulent political times in Colombia. I am writing from my city of birth, Bogotá Colombia, the traditional unceded territories of the Muisca people formerly known as Bacatá in precontact times. My father, Alejandro Figueroa, comes from the region of Antioquia, Colombia. My great-grandfather from my father's side, Marcial Figueroa was a Mestizo doctor proficient in both, Western medicine and Indigenous medicine, taught to him by the Embera peoples of Chocó. The records of my father's family were lost in a fire in the Chocó, leaving gaps in our family´s knowledge of his lineage. My paternal grandmother's lineage can also be traced back to Jose Maria Cordova, an important military leader that made Colombia's independence from Spanish rule possible. My mother, Maria Del Carmen Palau was born in Ibagué Colombia, yet her family comes from the Valle Del Cauca region, the unceded territories of the Calima peoples, and from the central cordillera[4] of the Andes. As a former anthropologist, my mother learned to acknowledge and take pride in her Indigenous lineages- the Calima, Quimbaya, and Muisca peoples. The entirety of my family's history is unknown to me due to colonization. My recent ancestors were taught to focus on our Spanish ancestry, while leaving our Indigenous roots unmentioned.

In this thesis work, I make a case for Mestizo people in the Global South (where the majority of the population is Mestizo) to claim our Indigeneity in order to create a more truthful and inclusive society, proud of its multi-racial descent. My metal work is an

[4] Cordillera: The Andes mountains break into three sections, or cordilleras, in Colombia.

example of a living tradition that has been partially dormant, yet not extinguished despite colonization. Through the reclaiming of metalworking ancestral traditions and iconography in my work, I am bringing into the world a tradition that is worth acknowledging and preserving. Colombian Mestizos are not recognized as Indigenous peoples by the Colombian government, whereas in Canada, the Métis have been recognized as Indigenous peoples. In Colombia, Mestizos fail to acknowledge their Indigenous blood lineages and culture due to hundreds of years of Hispanic tradition, entrenched erroneous beliefs, and governmental socio-economic policies that encouraged segregation and racial discrimination towards Indigenous, African, and Mestizo peoples. This is beginning to change. It is a time of hope in terms of inter-racial and cultural acceptance and recognition of Indigenous resurgence, and a time of truth and reconciliation, not only in Canada but also in Colombia and throughout the American continent.

It is significant for me to define and circumscribe what it means to be a Mestiza in order for the reader of this thesis to better understand my work. Mestizaje in the Andes began with the arrival of the Spanish in the early 1500s, mostly men traveling from Europe in quest of new land and resources. There is a history of extended abuse of Indigenous women being raped by Spaniards which left an imprint of intergenerational trauma reflected in a feeling of shame and lack of identity for Mestizo people. Though the Spaniards allowed interracial marriages, they considered Mestizos to be tainted. In creating laws to "bleach" the population (remove the Indigenous knowledges and influences from the Indigenous and Mestizo), they diminished our sense of belonging and our relationship to our ancestral roots and knowledges.

During the 18th century in Colombia the phenomenon of mestizaje was a dynamic process. To prove eligibility to be considered a "gentleman" or hidalgo, and a member of

Spanish colonial society, the Mestizo applicants had to undergo the process of making a case for themselves to be considered untainted by Indigenous, Jewish, or African blood through the Chancellery of Valladolid and Granada. This was a formality that, despite the fact that they were undeniably mixed blood Mestizos, could declare them worthy descendants of Spaniards. Once approved, the Mestizo could be granted tax exemptions and privileges that would allow him/her to study in Spanish educational institutions in Colombia, have positions in government, and achieve better standing in Spanish colonial society (Jaramillo Uribe 2011). My Mestizo ancestors were indoctrinated and taught to think of their Indigenous lineage as impure, thus resulting in a false sense of identity in my family. The same applied to people with Jewish, Moor, or African ancestry. An excerpt displayed at the exhibit "*The Colony: a past still present*" at the Colonial Museum of Bogotá, dating back to the mid 1800s, demonstrates an example of a proof of clean blood legitimacy statement:

> Don Joseph González del Busto, vecino de la ciudad de San Juan de Girón, hijo legítimo de Don Joseph González Del Busto y de Doña María Martín Nieto, ante Vuestra paternidad y muy reverenda, parezco, y digo, que pretendo continuar mis estudios en este Colegio Real Mayor y Seminario de San Bartolomé, siendo en el recibido por colegial, para lo cual presento a vuestra señoría la información de legitimidad y limpieza de mi padre y ofrezco darla con los testigos necesarios de parte de mi madre… hija legítima y limpia de toda mala raza de judíos, moros, negros, etcétera.[5]

This passage depicts the extent to which a "criollo" (a person of Spanish descent born in the Nueva Granada) Don Joseph Gonzalez goes to prove his legitimacy and purity of blood. Don Joseph Gonzalez Bustos is required to present this proof of "clean caste" in

[5] Don Joseph González del Busto, neighbor of the San Juan de Girón city, legitimate son of Don Joseph González Del Busto and Doña María Martín Nieto. With all due respect I declare my aspiration to continue my studies at the Colegio Real Mayor and Seminario de San Bartolome where I have been accepted. As a necessary requirement I present this declaration to your respected Majesty, of my legitimacy and the cleanliness of my father's blood line. I offer this declaration with the necessary testimony from my mother, legitimate daughter, clean of all impure races (Jew, Moor, Black, etc).

order to continue his studies at the Colegio Real Mayor and at the Seminario de San Bartolomé.

Segregation and discrimination were the rule, not only concerning racial origins, but also cultural traditions and beliefs. According to the Colombian historian Jaime Jaramillo Uribe, "to make domination effective, in addition to the economic exploitation of labor, it was necessary to impose the language, religion and moral codes of the dominators" (Jaramillo Uribe 1989). Hence, the dissolution of Indigenous cultures and other cultures other than the Spanish, was the guarantee for domination.

As a result of this history of oppression, the Mestizo peoples became disassociated from their true identity and Indigenous cultures and had to, if interested (as is *my* case), reconstruct the missing pieces of their lineage. I would like to refer to Bolivian sociologist and scholar, Silvia Rivera Cusicanqui, whose ideas and writing serve as a way to reconcile juxtaposing ideas about the identity of the Mestizo/Mestiza. Cusicanqui uses the allegory of *ch'ixi*, an Aymara[6] word referring to a color composed of strips of black and white appearing to be gray from a distance, to describe mestizaje:

> A ch'ixi color gray is white and its opposite, black. The ch'ixi stone, therefore, is hidden in the bosom of spider, or the frog; ch'ixi animals belong to time immemorial, to jaya mara, Aymara, to times of differentiation, when animals spoke with humans. The potential of undifferentiation is what joins opposites. And so, as allqamari[7] combines black and white in symmetrical perfection, ch'ixi combines the Indian world and its opposite without ever mixing them." (Cusicanqui 2020).

In this quote, Cusicanqui utilizes an Aymara creation story to illustrate how seemingly dissonant opposite forces can coexist in harmony without inhibiting each other's

[6] Aymara: Indigenous Nation original to Lake Titicaca, located at the border of Peru and Bolivia. In current times, Aymara peoples also live in northern Chile and Argentina.

[7] Alcamari⁄ Allqamari: Aymara and Quechua word referring to a species of falcon, *Phalcoboenus megalopterus.*

core essence. In the concept of *ch'ixi*, black and white, the Indigenous world and the Western world, coexist without ever mingling. Cusicanqui wants to defy binary dichotomous thinking where opposites are considered antagonistic, one superior than the other, to thinking of them as complementary. In this same way, my practice combines influences from Western artistic traditions and creative technologies as well as Indigenous artistic traditions and technologies, creating a tension that also becomes complimentary in my work. Using the Indigenous Aymara concept *ch'ixi*, Cusicanqui attempts to decolonize the Mestizo mind in bringing into harmonious coexistence apparently dissonating facets that constitute Mestizo notions of identity.

At the age of eleven, I immigrated to the United States with my mother and step-father, a situation that brought another layer of complexity to my notion of identity. In the U.S. I became a Colombian Mestiza, belonging to a new group of immigrant Mestizos. In her work *Borderlands,* Gloria Anzaldúa, feminist Mestiza poet and writer of Mexican descent, delves extensively into the psychological implications of being a Mestiza living in the United States. She talks about the feelings of disassociation and lack of identity analogous to living in the "borderlands," and uses them as fuel for her creative expression:

To live in the Borderlands means you…
are neither hispana india negra española
ni gabacha, eres mestiza, mulata, half breed
caught in the crossfire between camps
while carrying all five races on your back
not knowing which side to turn to, run from;

To live in the Borderlands means knowing
that the india in you, betrayed for 500 years,
is no longer speaking to you,
that mexicanas call you rajetas,
that denying the Anglo inside you
is as bad as having denied the Indian or
Black;

Cuando vives en la frontera
people walk through you, the wind steals your voice,
you're a burra, buey, scapegoat,
forerunner of a new race,
half and half--both woman and man, neither--
a new gender;

To live in the Borderlands means to
put chile in the borscht,
eat whole wheat tortillas,
speak Tex Mex with a Brooklyn accent;
be stopped by la migra at the border
checkpoints;

Living in the Borderlands means you fight hard to
resist the gold elixir beckoning from the bottle,
the pull of the gun barrel,
the rope crushing the hollow of your throat;

In the Borderlands
you are the battleground
where enemies are kin to each other;
you are at home, a stranger,
the border disputes have been settled
the volley of shots have shattered the truce
you are wounded, lost in action
dead, fighting back;

To live in the Borderlands means
the mill with the razor white teeth wants to shred off
your olive red skin, crush out the kernel, your heart
pound you pinch you roll you out
smelling like white bread but dead;

To survive the Borderlands
you must live sin fronteras
be a crossroads.

Anzaldúa 1987

I strongly identify with this poem, as it expresses a condition that I know very well in having to live between two worlds. The smells of my homeland have stayed and accompanied me like the weeds that never leave our gardens. I have found shelter in the forests, rivers, and the Indigenous traditions of the north, which have influenced me through other Indigenous cultural traditions and languages. Living in the United States, away from my familiar cultural influences, allowed me to begin a quest towards reclaiming my Indigenous identity.

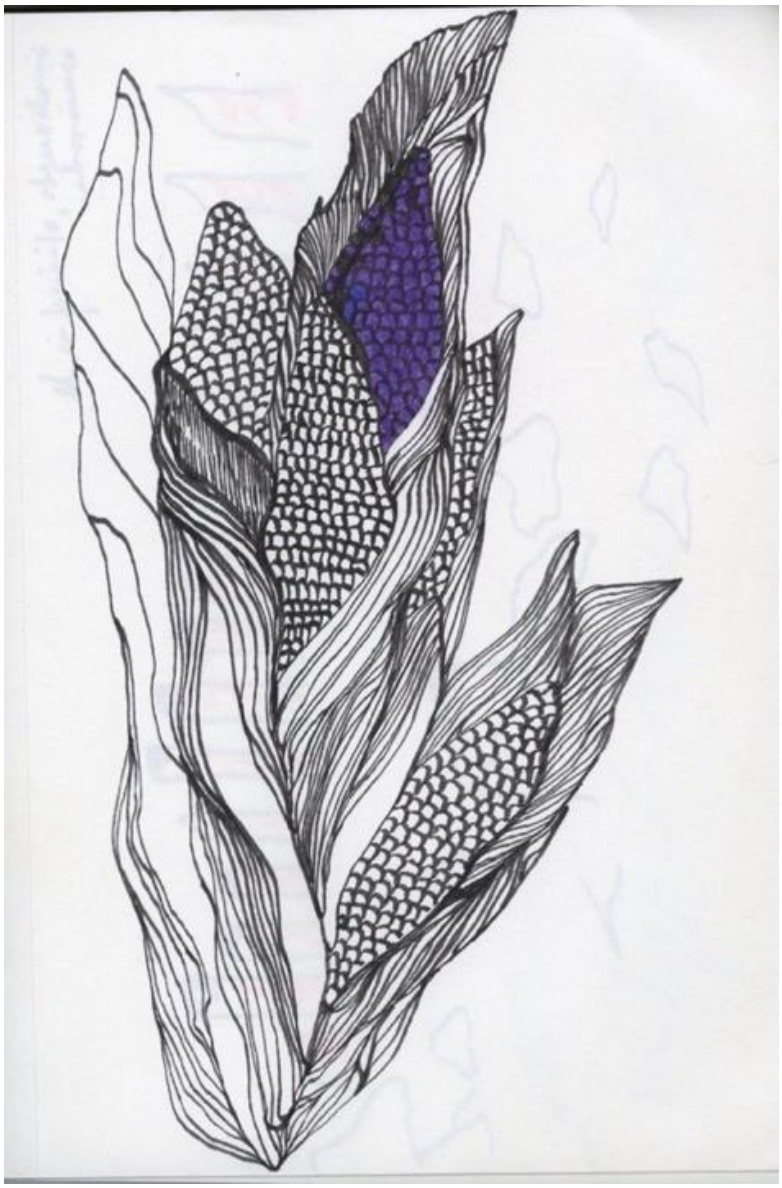
Anzaldua further speaks of the importance of a "New Mestizaje," an emergent identity created from the hybridization of South and Central American cultures with the North American culture. In reading Anzaldua, I have begun to embrace my sense of belonging to more than one geographical place as a source of inspiration and unique identity as an immigrant Mestiza. I want to acknowledge that my Indigeneity is connected not only to my particular Indigenous blood lineages (Muisca, Calima, Quimbaya, and Embera) but also to those individuals from other Nations (Levy Andoque from the Andoque peoples, Julian Bear Runner from the Oglala/Lakȟóta peoples, Josh Dunn from

the Osage peoples, Dianira Niño from the Arhuaco peoples, amongst others) who have invited me to learn from them.

In *Memory Serves,* Lee Maracle, Indigenous Canadian writer and academic of the Stó:lo Nation, comes into dialogue with Anzaldúa's notion of the Mestiza immigrant, and further amplifies the discourse of living *Sin Fronteras* (without borders):

> *Sin Fronteras* means so much more than that. The blankets we weave with their geometric patterns are comprised of border series, layered one over the other. This layering both acknowledges borders and renders them irrelevant. Borders are silly and at the same time so powerful… There was never a frontier. We were never on the edge of anything. We have and always will be in the center. The center is remembered. Borders are determined by where our imagination takes us in the moment. There is no white male center in our memory and so we cannot live on any kind of periphery. Women are the heart of our nations. Women erect and dismantle borders at will, but we will never acquiesce to someone's illusion of *Fronteras*…. We are not assigned place, position or borders; we do not assume them. We relinquish assumptions or we contrive and respect the borders others take on, but no one but ourselves can define place, position, or power for ourselves. (Maracle 2015).

I interpret this dialogue between Anzaldúa and Maracle as an invitation to us, Mestiza immigrant women and Indigenous women, to reclaim our position of power and independence from the limiting colonial concepts of power and place. The concept of "New Mestizaje*"* derives from an epistemological disobedience to the current logics of power, of being, of borders, and of knowledge that were established with colonialism. Recognizing my Indigeneity as a Mestiza breaks a pattern of denial of my Indigenous ancestry which is the common denominator among Mestizos in South America. As Cusicanqui suggests in her discourse, we are finding a new way of being in the Global South where, as Mestizos, our identity is celebrated and is not borrowed from European standards. Like corn, the Mestizos are the product of hybridity, designed to survive and thrive in diverse, often severe conditions (Anzaldúa 1999).



1. Valentina Figueroa, *Corn*, 2022. Pen and color pencil on paper. Photo credit: Valentina Figueroa.

Resistance and Reconciliation through Artistic expressions of Mestizaje

The construction of Mestizaje in Latin America is an ever-evolving process reflected in different layers of our society and culture. We can find examples of the materialization of this phenomenon in the artistic expressions that emerged as a result of the marriage between the Spanish, the African, and the Indigenous cultures during colonial times, as well as in contemporary artistic currents that include my own creative practice. These artistic expressions demonstrate the manifestation of Indigenous peoples' resistance and resilience to maintain their culturally-specific lived-experience despite the efforts of colonizers to force assimilation.

2. *Fresco found at the San Juan Bautista church* in Sutatausa, Cundinamarca, founded in 1538. Photo credit: Valentina Figueroa, June 2022.

The Fresco, circa 1538, located at the San Juan Bautista church in Sutatausa Cundinamarca, is one of the most impressive expressions of Mestizo art in Colombia from the early times of colonization. It portrays a Cacíca, or Muisca female governor, wearing a

traditional Muisca blanket with patterns meant only for the elite, holding a Catholic rosary. This mixture of cultural elements from the Indigenous and the Catholic world demonstrates the way in which the Spanish, in their political agenda, had come to a partial acceptance of Muisca elements within a Catholic context to facilitate assimilation of the Indigenous population. From the Indigenous perspective, incorporating textile elements of their culture within the colonizer's framework would work towards keeping their culture alive despite the consistent threats of annihilation.

3. *Detail of fresco found at the San Juan Bautista Church* in Sutatausa, Cundinamarca, founded in 1538. Photo Credit: Valentina Figueroa, June 2022.

Another example of artistic resistance during colonial times at the church in Sutatausa is the representation of a Muisca mortuary vase (image #3) within a scene that depicts the Christian hell. The mortuary vases would serve as containers of the bones of the deceased or for offerings to assure a good passing in traditional Muisca funerals. In this

particular case, questions arise as to whether this vase was placed to warn the Muisca about the consequences of keeping their traditional mortuary practices alive, or whether the Spanish allowed the artist, presumably Indigenous or Mestizo, to add traditional Muisca designs in order to make the assimilation process appear less violent.

4. Valentina Figueroa & Pablo Ovando, *Orb made for the Virgin of Chiquinquirá in the event of the centennial celebration of her naming as matron of Colombia,* 2022. Engraved gold, sapphires, diamonds.

In 2022, I worked on a collaborative piece destined to be hung on the Virgin of Chiquinquirá's original painting (circa 1560) by Alonso de Narváez, created with my colleague Pablo Ovando, a former restorer at the Gold Museum in Bogota. The orb was commissioned by the Dominican priests of the Cathedral of Chiquinquirá in Boyacá as a centennial commemoration of the Virgin's naming as the matron of Colombia. Pablo and I decided to honor the Indigenous practices of working with gold, while maintaining the parameters we were asked to follow. Pablo constructed the orb using pre-contact tools and soldering techniques. In designing this work, I was asked to follow a classical, ornamental

European aesthetic, incorporating pomegranates and lilies, important symbols of the Spanish colony in Colombia. While keeping the commission within the boundaries of the contract, I decided to also incorporate Indigenous Pre-Columbian designs as an act of vindication of the original legacy of the territory that the Virgin stands on, and bring forward the Indigenous Chiquinquirá. As seen in image #4, I combined classical European ornaments with Indigenous corn and the traditional "nariguera," or nose ring designs, of the Pre-Columbian goldsmiths. Pablo and I were both raised as Catholics, and like most Colombian Mestizos, we pay tribute to the Virgin. On the other hand, we both keep a close connection to our Indigenous roots and considered our construction of this piece as an opportunity to make an offering to both the Virgin, and to our ancestors who also made gold offerings destined for sacred sites. I consider this work a form of Indigenous artistic resistance within a Catholic context.

In the process of engraving this orb, the ornament shed some of its gold. With the gold chips that I collected from the process, I decided to make an offering at the lagoon of Fúquene located in proximity to Chiquinquirá, an ancient place that is sacred to the Muisca peoples.

5. Shores of Fúquene or Siguacinsa lagoon, 2022. Photo credit: Valentina Figueroa.

The Lagoon's name in pre-contact times was "Siguacinsa," derived from "sihua," which makes reference to the mother of all creation, Bague or Bachué, the most important Muisca female archetype (Rozo 1997). The Muisca elders speak of Siguacinsa as being a place where women originally gathered in prayer and gave birth to their children.

6. Siguacinsa or Fúquene lagoon, 2022. Photo credits: Valentina Figueroa.

On a sunny afternoon, I drove through the mountains with my colleague, Muisca architect and Murui-Muina[8] ceremonial singer, Alexander Bustos. We prepared the gold chips, and placed them inside cotton in order to deposit the offering into the lagoon. As we prayed and sang to the lagoon, bubbles began to appear on the surface of the water. I recall

[8] Murui-Muina, Muinane, Huitoto, Witoto, Mi-ka, Mi-pode: Indigenous peoples of the Colombian Amazon from the regions of Caquetá and Putumayo, and the neighboring borderlands with Peru and Brazil. They call themselves the sons and daughters of tobacco, coca leaf, and sweet yam.

the Muisca elders speaking of the foam being formed on the surface of the water as a demonstration of the spirits' joy when prayers are done on their behalf. In turn, the spirits bless the place and the people in the surrounding areas, restoring the original faith and sacrality of the Muisca temples in nature.

Craft as Living Memory: Material Knowledge and Legacy

I am researching the methods that my Pre-Columbian ancestors used to create goldwork in order to revitalize and preserve these techniques. Some of the most proficient goldsmiths among the Pre-Columbian peoples who worked in gold were the Quimbaya, a lineage that is connected to me from my mother's line. I align myself with these Colombian contemporary Mestizo artists that are researching and continuing our ancestral legacy that includes Maria Cano, Linda Pongutá Alex Cortes creator of Metalero, Pablo Ovando, Alexander Romero, Jorge Gomez, and Ossinisa ceramic workers amongst others. I have collaborated and apprenticed with some of these artists, and I plan on continuing to build alliances with them in order to inspire the coming generations of Mestizo artists to develop a solid sense of belonging to their culture and legacy.

Through my practice, I am able to walk as an Indigenous woman of Mestizo origin seeking to reconnect to my ancestral heritage. I am connecting to the land and its materials in intimate and observational ways, so they can inform and teach me how to work them. As Professor Rachel Jones from George Mason University beautifully points out in her work *The Value of Not Knowing: Beginning Again and Letting Be*, one learns from and with the material:

> If we are willing to listen, the materials we work with will tell us which forms they can hold and sustain, and which they cannot...Perhaps aesthetic wisdom lies at least in part in knowing how to let go of knowledge so as to let matter bring its intelligence to bear on the ways in which we work with it. Material intelligence would then belong neither wholly to human beings nor to matter, but would emerge in the space between them (Jones 2009).

For me, learning directly from master craftsmen and craftswomen in metalsmithing, embroidery, and engraving has been the most efficient and meaningful way of learning and truly grasping the nature of these crafts and processes. Direct transmission, like oral

tradition, is worth protecting in a world where technology has made communication and information so readily available, appearing to diminish the importance of learning through direct observation and practice. The Indigenous ethos of learning through modeling has been crucial in my artistic development. Similarly to learning a new language, one does not internalize the sounds and cadence of material processes until immersing oneself in the roots of that material language.

7. P*ablo Ovando, colleague and former restorer at the Gold Museum of Bogotá, installing a collection of Pre-Columbian pieces for a private collector* in Santa Ana, Bogotá, 2022. Photo credit: Juan Manuel Ramirez Ramirez.

In December of 2022, when I arrived back home to Colombia from Canada, I was urgently summoned by my colleague Pablo Ovando. I wondered why someone like Pablo, who has seen so many Pre-Columbian pieces, held them in his hands and restored them, would insist that I come to view this particular private collection of works. I went as soon as I could.

8A. 8B *Pre-Columbian Ceramic pieces from a private collection,* December 2022. Photo credit: Valentina Figueroa.

Upon arriving at Pablo's studio in the Quinta Camacho neighborhood in Bogotá, I sat down and waited. Pablo started unpacking the ceramic pieces, one by one, from their newspaper wrappings. I held the first one in my hand. I held the second head in my other hand. Suddenly, there was something about the porosity of the material, the memory embedded in it, the way it felt against my hands pulsating with life, that took me back in time. In that instant I recognized my Pre-Columbian ancestor's faces and was struck by the recognition and communication that can take place between centuries, passed on through cultural objects from one generation to another.

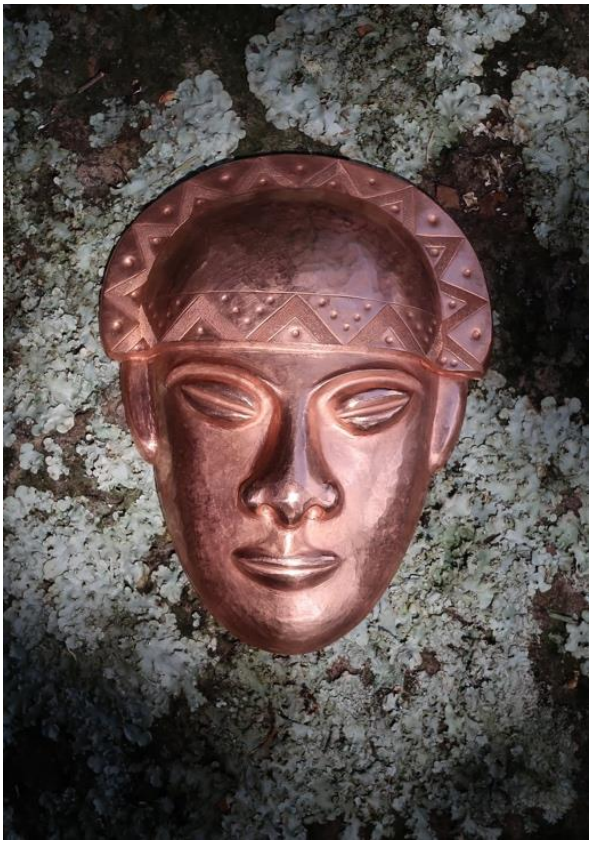
As humans, we are always seeking understanding and knowledge. In this instance, the physical act of holding these pieces was the means through which I received the help and the instruction that I needed to move forward with my thesis project. I was able to discern the life within these works, and to hear their petition to me to continue the legacy of Pre-Columbian iconography. I was able to recognize myself through their eyes.

Ovando reminded me of the importance of recognizing all of my lineages, including the Spanish line. This has been a hard process for me, as so much pain was inflicted on my Indigenous ancestors by Spanish colonizers. The experience of encountering the Pre-Columbian ceramics and holding them in my hands inspired me to consider how to reconcile these apparently dissonant facets of myself, and led me to create metal portraits of my ancestors in copper, tumbaga[9], and bronze. Through my position as a dual heritage Mestiza, I gather information from both cultures (European and Indigenous) and produce works that reflect the technological knowledge of both lineages. This is reflected in my choice of making these masks through chisel and repoussé, a European technique that allows me to achieve a light weight in my pieces, as opposed to casting which would have been a likely choice of Pre-Columbian goldsmiths.

The preparation of materials and the work that occurs behind each finished piece, as in ceremony, is a carefully planned endeavor and a meditative process. I cast a lingot of tumbaga (a mix of 42 gr. of copper and 42 gr. of silver), an alchemical operation where I poured the metals along with some offerings into the fire to cleanse the metal of impurities. I did this not only to honor and restore my memory and come to terms with my multiple lineages, but also to put into practice an instruction that was taught to me by my Mestizo goldsmithing mentors. I then laminated the lingot and began the process of making *Mujer Popóro* (image # 13) through chisel and repoussé. This is a process where my creative practice informs my theoretical thinking.

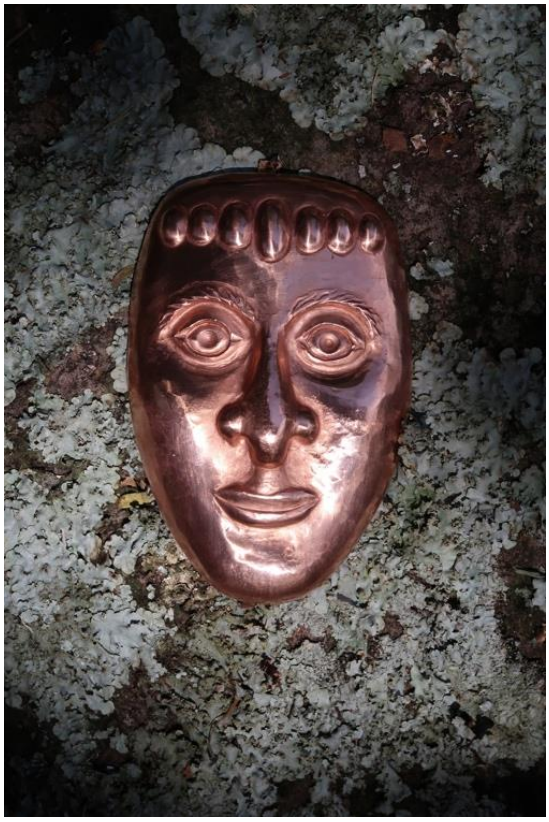
[9] Alloy commonly prepared by goldsmiths in Pre-Columbian times, usually made with a combination of copper and gold, or silver and copper, in different proportions. The unique characteristic of tumbaga being the large quantity of copper used as opposed to modern alloys. The surface treatment of metal was accomplished through the usage of plants with high contents of oxalic acid to further deplete the copper component from the first layers of the metal and bring out a golden or silver coloration.

The proportions used in the Pre-Columbian ceramics speak of an intimate relationship to nature. In the Western world the naturally occurring harmonious proportions would be referred to as the auric proportions. Pre-Colombian goldsmiths and craft workers understood this concept and embedded it into their work. In making these masks and repeating Pre-Columbian form lines I have begun to understand the proportions, the contrasts of texture- the language of my ancestors. Knowledge transmission through making is a process of perseverant practical work where the lines become more polished and the proportions more exact as more experience is acquired. I did not have the chance to sit with these ceramics for long, yet my senses were able to capture and photograph their gist. It was a moment of gathering information through touch, heart-perception, sight, the smell of the clay, and subtle hearing. I consider the pieces made by my ancestors as embodiments of craft that serve as living memory and generational legacy, being reawakened and rediscovered through my work.



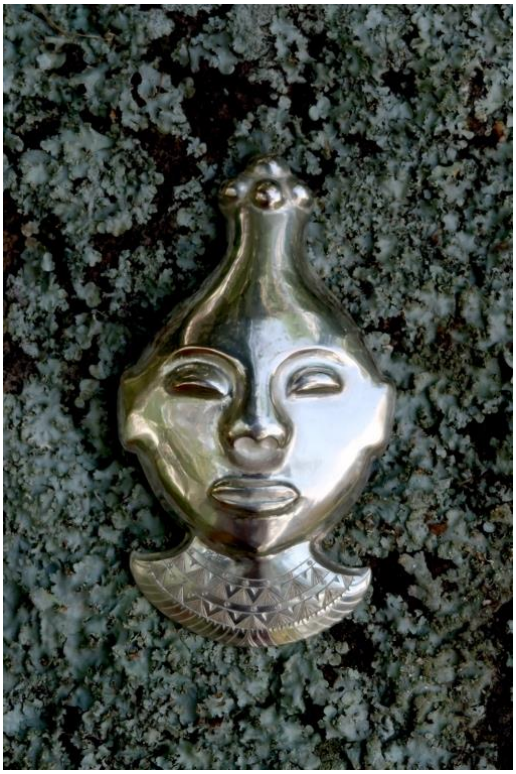
9. Valentina Figueroa, *El Cacique*, 2023. Chiseled & repousséd copper (5.5in x 4.3in).
Photo credit: Valentina Figueroa

10. Valentina Figueroa, *El Guerrero*, 2023. Chiseled & repoussé copper, abalone shell (4.7in x3.3in).
Photo credit: Valentina Figueroa



11. Valentina Figueroa, *El Mestizo,* 2023. Chiseled & repousséd copper (4.5in x 3in).
Photo credit: Valentina Figueroa

12. Valentina Figueroa, *El Abuelo,* 2023. Chiseled & repousséd gold-plated brass (5.3in x 5.7in).
Photo credit: Valentina Figueroa.



13. Valentina Figueroa, *Mujer Popóro,* 2023. Chiseled & repousséd tumbaga (4.5in x 2.5in). Photo credit: Valentina Figueroa.

Mujer Popóro is a small sculpture alluding to the popóro[10] ceremonial object, important to the Quimbaya in Pre-Columbian times (my ancestors from my mother's lineage) and to the Indigenous peoples from the Sierra Nevada of Santa Marta today, where my Arhuaco mentor and friend Dianira Niño comes from. Crushed shell is stored inside the gourd, or popóro, and combined with chewed coca leaf by the elders and adult men in the Sierra Nevada. The popóro represents the earth and the women, and is given to men in a rite of passage to mark their coming of age into adulthood. One of the intentions behind this ritual is to teach men how to properly take care of the earth and women through properly taking care of the popóro. It was my intention with *Mujer Popóro* to give a face to the spirit of the woman that lives inside the popóro and to remember the teachings of our elders. The Mamo, or elder, sits with his personal popóro and "brings order" on a universal level, while

[10] Popóro: Ceremonial object important to the Quimbaya peoples in Pre-Columbian times and currently to the Indigenous peoples from the Sierra Nevada of Santa Marta (Kogui, Arhuaco, Wiwa, Kankuamos).

the young man who is beginning his path into adulthood makes use of the popóro to bring order to his personal life and learn how to properly care for his wife.

14. *Chisels used for the technique of giving volume to metal through chisel & repoussé*, 2021. Photo credit: Digital pixel.

After months of making the portraits of my ancestors, I feel as if a heavy weight has been lifted off my shoulders. The portraits have come to life through my hands with tremendous intensity, keeping me awake in the late evening hours. There is an urgency for them to emerge, a river of memory that wants to flow out of its confinement. Just as the water eventually broke the cement wall colonizers at El Zoque Páramo[11] built to encapsulate it, so the river of my memory is beginning to freely emerge. Every face is alive and wanting to come to the surface. Every piece is speaking back to me and teaching me. Every piece is the face of one of my ancestors, and the embodiment of generational material knowledge.

[11] Where I performed *The Frailejón* piece ritual which will be introduced further into this document.

In learning through intimate observation, I am able to watch the way the master craftsman relates to the graver (the tool to engrave), to the metal, and to the thread. This is a symbiosis that has taken a lifetime to cultivate between the hand, the body, the mind, the spirit, and the material. It is a sacred dance where a ritual takes place, a performance that gets imprinted into the archive of embodied[12] knowledge of the craftsman or craftswoman.

In situating the importance of technique and materiality in a philosophical and artistic context of working with the hands, I identify with the Arts and Crafts movement of the late 1800s into the 1900s, as well as with American Pragmatism, a philosophical current dedicated to making philosophical meaning out of concrete experience. The Arts and Crafts movement represented the resurgence of an appreciation of craft and the decorative arts throughout Europe as a response to the Industrial Revolution's tendency to dehumanize the object and the importance of the hand. William Morris, the English reformer, poet, and designer, defended the importance of craft and its positive effect on the spirit of human beings, and feared the loss of traditional craft knowledges (Britannica Encyclopedia). In his book *The Craftsman*, American sociologist Richard Sennett of the American pragmatism movement points out: "The craftsman represents the special human condition of being *engaged.* The carpenter, lab technician, and conductor are all craftsmen because they are dedicated to good work for its own sake" (Sennett 2008).

Traditional craft knowledges all over the world are tied to the first interactions between human beings and nature. As a species put on this earth by Creator, we were given nature in its beauty to teach us how to make beautiful objects that could resemble its magnificence. Our ancestors learned how to make objects that they could use to harvest, to build shelter and to hunt, all made from natural materials that came from the land. In the

[12] Embodied knowledge: Knowledge that is kept in the memory of the body beyond the solely cognitive processes.

Western artistic tradition, there is a hierarchal distinction between art and craft. Fine art is seen as a higher form of expression than craft, and the latter is often gendered.

In the framework of Indigenous aesthetics, the concept of a hierarchy of art over craft does not exist. As Indigenous artists and craftspeople we make beautiful things as part of a way of life. We make beautiful objects because we value our Indigenous communities and as a way of honoring what our values are, and honoring our world. Not art for art's sake, but art for communities' sake and the continuation of our future generations. In Indigenous worldviews we consider art as a fundamental expression of our relationship to our cosmologies. Art-making is a way of expressing the relationship that we have to our lineage, to the Spirits of our ancestors and our ancestral territories, and to our values.

Colombian Indigenous artist Tahuanty Jacanamijoy (of Inga[13], Wayuu[14], and Arhuaco descent) explains that the notion of art does not exist by itself as an Indigenous concept, it is part of 'el buen vivir' or a 'living in beauty' way of life. One of the gifts of Indigenous making traditions is that they show us a model that does not diminish traditional making that is often considered as craft. This distinction in the Western tradition that privileges art over craft is influenced by a capitalist system and its system of value. However, as Indigenous contemporary artists from South and North America (including Carlos Jacanamijoy and his son Tahuanty Jacanamijoy, Diana Rico, Linda Pongutá, Julieth Morales, Susan Point, Dana Claxton, Xwalacktun, Beau Dick, and Aaron Nelson Moody amongst others), we are currently entering in dialogue with contemporary Western artistic traditions. In the meeting of these different worldviews, the Indigenous and the Western, interesting dialogues around value, aesthetics, and gender are emerging.

[13] Inga: Indigenous Nation descendant from the Inca based in the Putumayo, southeastern region in Colombia.
[14] Wayuu: Indigenous Nation of the Guajira region in Colombia. Place of astonishing beauty where the Atlantic Ocean meets the desert.

Weaving is one of the most ancient forms of art as pointed out by American ethnologist and Smithsonian curator, Otis T. Mason (circa 1907) in his book *Women's Share in Primitive Culture*: "When women invented basketry, they made art possible" (Mason as cited by Berlo and Phillips 2020). Though it is not my intention to take away from the beauty of this statement, I would like to invite the reader to reflect on whether a male, Caucasian ethnologist in the early 20th century had the capacity to know with certainty the gender of the first human that invented basketry.

The categorization of craft as separate from art is also tied to European gender role classifications. In Europe, women were taught to weave and embroider as part of their training as proper ladies. As art historian Rozsika Parker discusses in her work *The Subversive Stitch*:

> When women embroider, it is seen not as art, but entirely as the expression of femininity. And crucially, it is categorized as craft…. There is an important connection between hierarchy of the arts and the sexual categories male/female. The development of an ideology of femininity coincided historically with the emergence of a clearly defined separation of art and craft. This division emerged in the Renaissance at the time when embroidery was increasingly becoming the province of women amateurs, working for the home without pay. Still later the split between art and craft was reflected in the changes in art education from craft-based workshops to academies at precisely the time—the eighteenth century—when an ideology of femininity as natural to women was evolving (Parker 1984).

In different Indigenous cultures of the Americas, weaving and embroidering are not exclusively attributed to women. The excerpt above testifies to the European notion of embroidery being gendered and clearly demonstrates how this notion influenced the separation of craft from art.

My practice as a woman that both embroiders and works metal, breaks away from stereotypes around gender specific forms of craft. My body feels the necessity to connect to both materials, metal and thread. Metalsmithing is usually thought of as an art practiced by men due to the physical challenges it presents. However, if as a woman today I am working

with metal, I am inclined to think that my Quimbaya, Calima, and Muisca female ancestors could also have worked metal.

On the other hand, Otis's statement on the importance of basketry as the first form of art makes evident how disconnected from the origin of art the notion of craft as separate from art stands. I believe all forms of craft are forms of art. Ultimately, the artist or the craftsperson is looking for a suitable medium to express and materialize an emotion, an idea, or a form. I also believe that the utilitarian objects created by my Pre-Columbian ancestors were functional forms of art.

15. *Valentina Figueroa engraving a bracelet with classical ornamental designs, 2021*. Photo credit: Digital pixel.

My practice as a metalsmith, engraver, and embroiderer is born from many hours of labor and learning each individual technique. As Sennett comments about craftspeople in ancient Greece, "Developing one's talents depended on following the rules established by earlier generations; that most modern of words—personal 'genius'—had little meaning in this context. To become skilled requires, personally, that one be obedient. As with deeply held values in any culture, it seemed self-evident that people will identify with other

craftsmen as fellow citizens. Skill would bind them to their ancestors as to their fellows" (Sennett 2008). The skills learned through repetition and observation connect *my* practice to an earlier generation of metalsmiths and textile artists. It is in this way, that I believe craft-making can create and revitalize shared community values.

The significance of engaging with craft resides in the skills learned through and from engagement with the material along with embodied knowledge, which in turn, allows for the training of the mind and the senses beyond solely mental, cognitive processes. Through making with my hands, I am better able to consolidate my thoughts and comprehend the world around me.

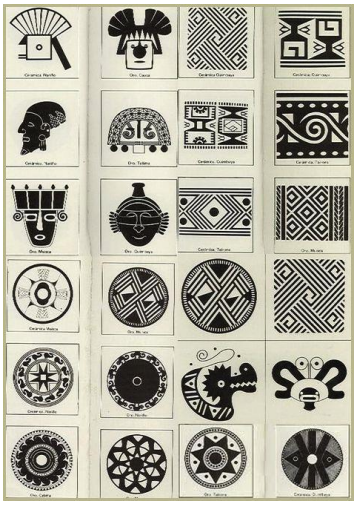
16A. 16B. Valentina Figueroa, *Offering Vase,* 2021-23. Hand engraved copper raised by hammer and fire (7.5in x 5,7in diameter). Photo credit: Valentina Figueroa.

As part of my thesis project, I made an engraved copper offering vase raised by hammer. The act of hammering the metal is to me, a ceremonial act, a meditative process. There is repetition as I work the metal following a circular pattern with every sequence of strikes, beginning from the center to the extremities. The engraved marks came into form through observing the woven patterns on palm fiber and the symbols of the land that come from my Pre-Columbian heritage.

In Pre-Columbian times the Uwa peoples lived in close proximity to the Muisca, the original inhabitants of the place where I was born. It was customary in daily life to make offerings to the land. These offerings were composed of metal pieces, beans, corn and cotton, and were utilized to keep the balance between human beings and the land (Falchetti

2001). These offerings containing many different elements were both, actually and metaphorically, seeds having the capacity to grow in the land.

In making allusion to the ancestral tradition of the Muisca and Uwa peoples of my lands, I will be placing offerings of cotton and corn for my ancestors' portraits into the *Offering Vase*. As a seed must be protected in an adequate environment for it to grow productively, so must the offerings be contained and protected for them to spiritually "grow" inside the copper vase.



17. Antonio Grass, *La Marca Mágica*, 1976. 18. Dicken Castro, *Two-hundred Colombian pesos coin*, 1994.

My work and the images and patterns that it contains, as seen in the *Offering Vase (*images *# 16A, 16B)*, has a genealogy that traces back to Pre-Columbian goldsmiths and to the use of symbols that connect to the land where I was born. I see it as my responsibility to bring forward these symbols in my work, as other senior Colombian Mestizo artists such as Dicken Castro, Antonio Grass, and Christian Abusaid have done. I also carry the lineage of European engravers, passed down to me by Giuseppe Casale and Sam Alfano, my engraving mentors, and the European lineage of chisel and repoussé passed down to me by

Cristiano Pierazzuoli and César Cardenas. In the process of receiving mentorship from European engraving masters, I also learned to draw and incise classical European ornamental designs. In the same way that my identity is Mestiza, my material knowledge and genealogy also reflect this identity.

In the exhibition *The Hearts of Our People: Native Women Artists* (co-curated by Jill Ahlberg Yohe, associate curator of Native American Art at MIA (Minneapolis Institute of Art) and Teri Greeves, Kiowa artist and scholar) the work of over one hundred and fifteen artists from the United States and Canada spanning over one-thousand years is celebrated. The main questions addressed through the compilation of the artworks in this exhibition were: Why do Native women artists create? What is the drive for Native women to create art and how does their art impact the world? Core themes addressed in this exhibition were: legacy, relationship, and power (Yohe, Greeves 2020).

My work emerges from a genealogy of metalsmiths and textile makers, and from a legacy of Pre-Columbian symbology. Every piece that I make speaks directly to the relationship I have to my ancestors, to my craft mentors, and to the techniques developed by them in the past. My work also speaks to the relationship I have to the living materials that come from the land. I see my practice as an acknowledgement of the relationships I have to my metalsmithing and textile mentors, and to the lineages they carry and have passed down to me. The instruction I have received from my mentors and my elders gives me the power to continue their legacy from an informed place.

Traditional crafts and Indigenous artmaking speak of multiple legacies, tying the past to the present and future. As senior curator Heather Ahtone at the American Indian Cultural Center and Museum in Oklahoma City wrote about *The Hearts of Our People: Native Women Artists* exhibition:

> From our mother, we have received the materials from which we make our way in this world. Our cultural drive to make things is the product of the

> need to survive combined with the guiding stories that tell us that we should do what we do well- even the exhortation to make things beautiful. Making things is part of our inheritance from the earth mother to make our world. How we make things and what things we make are an important acknowledgement of marking our place and moment in the world, part of a continuum that began at the beginning (Ahtone 2020).

The materials used by Indigenous women to create craft evoke resilience, resourcefulness, relationships to the land, relationships to the ancestors, and storytelling. Indigenous craft-making is part of the tradition of passing on knowledge, as craft itself serves as a means of pedagogy. The concept of relationality is at the core of Indigenous worldviews. As Yohe attests: "Native artists on our board expressed the idea that the artwork of their people is alive: *We are related to it and it relates back.*" This theme is also articulated in terms of "kincentricity" or the interrelations between people, animals, plants, places, fungi, microbes, and other elements in Native people's lives (Yohe, Greeves 2020).

In my creative practice and in my life, I strongly identify with the ideas of relationality, kincentricity, and accountability to land that are touched upon in this exhibition and the compilation of essays written about it. The theme of power touched upon in this exhibition speaks directly to the unique ability of women to give life. As Yohe and Greeves attest, "In Native worldviews, the ability to create life holds sacred power, and life-creating women are considered inherently powerful whether their nations are matriarchal or patriarchal" (Yohe, Greeves 2020). The act of giving birth to a human and to a piece of art are both, in Indigenous worldviews, sacred acts.

The endeavor of giving life to an object with agency encapsulates a connection to the Creator. It speaks to a way of life where materiality does not exist on its own, but has a spiritual relationship to a creative source. An object is first conceived in its spiritual essence before emerging in a material form. I believe that the Creator has given me the ability to

work with my hands. I must honor this gift and thank her/him in making use of my abilities and give life, as a woman – not only to another human, but also to works of art.

The moment of inspiration can be an instant and can also take much time to manifest. The experience of receiving an inspiration is, to me, equivalent to *Kairos*. Kairos was a term used by ancient Greeks to describe a moment in time connected to eternity. It is thought of as a small lapse of time, a moment when human consciousness opens to a higher consciousness, also analogous to a flash of lightning. When I visited Filicudi, Sicily/Italy in 2017, I attended an art conference where I heard a scientist say the first form of life on our planet was created when lightning struck the ocean. This makes me think of the moment when I get the inspiration to create something. At times, I am not aware of what I am making or why. This information can come in the days following the initial impulse to create. I believe that I am a vehicle through which forms that live in another realm of existence can manifest materially in our world. This represents to me, a sacred act and a responsibility to continue my artistic practices that reflect both my Indigenous and European lineages.

As an engraver, I make a mark on metal in time. I believe that my making is a co-creative act. I keep the continuum of co-creation, an Indigenous understanding where the human hands or words co-create with material elements and spiritual forces that carry agency- a tradition passed down for many generations. As an Indigenous Mestiza, I continue to repeat, as one does in ritual, the designs, the motifs, and the symbols that connect me to my ancestors and to the Muisca land I was born in. Performing this act of co-creation with the creative spiritual sources and with materials involves this repetition, as those symbols do not belong solely to me nor to my ancestors. They are sacred Indigenous symbols of the land and of the stars, available for me to study, recreate, and follow as marks found on a map or in the sky. Through my work, I bring relevance to my connection

to my lineage, to the materials I use, to nature, to place and to those mentors who have been crucial in my formative years.

19. *Valentina Figueroa engraving at studio in Bogotá, Colombia,* 2021. Photo credit: Digital Pixel.

20. *Casting tumbaga* (50% copper & 50% silver) *for Mujer Poporo*, 2023. Photo credit: Valentina Figueroa.

To create my sculptural works, I start with the alchemical transformation of the raw material, metal. As an alchemist and metalsmith, I combine it in the right proportions, acknowledge the earth that created it and the planets and stars that it likewise holds in its essence. Indigenous protocol indicates that before I begin the process, I say a prayer, call upon my ancestors, as this is too great of a work to perform on my own. I must face the fire that will help me transform the material with courage, care, love, and most importantly, humility.

As Mircea Eliade points out in *The Forge and the Crucible*, working with fire has long been a methodology that human beings use to transmute and to defy time, in speeding up processes naturally occurring in nature:

> In taking upon himself the responsibility of changing Nature, man put himself in the place of Time; that which would have required millennia or aeons to 'ripen' in the depths of the earth, the metallurgist and alchemist claim to be able to achieve in a few weeks. The furnace supersedes the telluric matrix; it is there that the embryo-ores complete their growth (Eliade 1978).

The alchemist collaborates with nature in the process of changing metal from one form to another in a sacred, co-creative act. Alchemical practice as the precursor of chemistry sustained the living spiritual qualities of metal, a theme also touched upon by Jane Bennet in her work *Vibrant Matter*, where she writes about the metallurgist Cyril Stanley Smith:

> Smith's central thesis in A History of Metallography is that it was the human metalworker's intense intimacy with their material that enabled *them,* rather than (the less hands-on) scientists, to be the ones to first discover the polycrystalline structure of nonorganic matter. The desire of the craftsperson to see what metal can *do,* rather than the desire of the scientist to know what a metal *is,* enabled the former to discern *a* life in metal and thus, eventually, to collaborate more productively with it. (Bennet 2010).

In a similar manner, my practice involves an intimate and embodied relationship to materials. My body, my hands, my eyes have developed a memory of how to work with the materials. After many years of practice, I have come to know the different shades of red that metal reflects when being heated by fire, indicating when to adjust the temperatures according to the needs of the piece I am making. Metal also serves a personal purpose for me, as it makes me feel safe and protected. As a jeweler and sculptor working with silver, gold, copper, bronze, and steel, I consider my pieces as talismans and vehicles of healing and protection, rather than displays of power and money. I understand the importance of ritual objects in embodying the intangible and the sacred, as well as their capacity to serve as bridges to the spirit world. Gold, long associated with lucre and the blood-stained Spanish inquisition, is a sacred material to the Indigenous peoples of Colombia and to other Indigenous cultures of the Andes. To the Quimbaya and other Pre-Columbian peoples, gold

represented the very reflection of the sun on earth. Its material nature is filled with medicinal properties, representing the life force itself.

Ancient goldsmiths in Colombia, Peru, and Ecuador typically used the alloy *tumbaga*, made with a combination of copper and gold or silver and copper in different proportions. Tumbaga was made with large quantities of copper as opposed to the small proportions of this material used today in modern silver-copper alloys. Copper was what allowed Pre-Columbian metalworkers to create resistant alloys for utilitarian objects (Ovando, 2022). Copper, silver, and gold are noble[15] and easily malleable metals in themselves. However, when adding copper to silver or gold, the result is a metal that can be harder than bronze and more prone to oxidation. As political theorist Bennett states in *Vibrant Matter* in talking about the preparation of alloys:

> Metal is always metallurgical, always an alloy of the endeavors of many bodies, always something worked on by geological, biological, and often human agencies. And human metalworkers are themselves emergent effects of the vital materiality they work. "We are," says Vladimir Ivanovich Vernadsky, "walking, talking minerals." (Bennet 2010).

The unique Pre-Columbian surface treatment of tumbaga was accomplished through using plants with high contents of oxalic acid to deplete the copper component from the first layers of the metal, and bring out a golden or silver coloration. The beliefs around the symbolic aspects of metals were also central in the preparation of tumbaga. For Pre-Columbian goldsmiths, copper symbolized the blood that runs through our veins unifying all humans, no matter the color of our skin. It also symbolized the cyclical nature of the female body, the process of regeneration and decay through the female cycle. Silver was also tied to the feminine, to the moon and its cycles. Gold symbolized everlasting life, the

[15] Noble metals: Metals highly resistant to oxidation (also when exposed to high temperatures) and naturally occurring in nature. They include gold, silver, palladium, platinum, osmium, rhenium, ruthenium, rhodium, and iridium. Sometimes copper and mercury are also included in this list.

part of us that never perishes, and the spiritual nature that comes from the Creator. In Pre-Columbian times it was used to adorn royalty, who were considered eternal and descendants of the sun. An equal combination of gold and copper were used to prepare tumbaga in cultural works destined for marriage rituals. It was believed to create a balance between male and female, securing an equal exchange and a long-lasting union (Falchetti 2001).

In speaking further to the sacredness of materials, the Amazonian elders of the Vaupés region in Colombia (otherwise known as the Jaguars of Yurupari) who I have learned from, also hold the belief that knowledge can be stored in sacred materials such as cotton, gold, stones, shells, animal parts, and crystals. There are six different tribes living in the *Hee Yaia Godo* territory along the Pira Paraná river in the Vaupés, each speaking its own dialect: *Macuna, Barasano, Eduria, Tatuyo, Tuyuca,* and *Itano*. Despite their linguistic particularities, they share a common belief system where the word *Hee* embodies the Spirit of the territory, or the life source residing in all living things. The Jaguars of Yurupari are intimately connected to *Hee* and store its knowledge, also known as *Keti Oka*. The objects they use for ritual – cotton, gold, stones, shells, animal parts, crystals – are said to belong to *Hee,* or the ancestral territories. Through the original word, *Hee Yaia Keti Oka*, the elders have the power to awaken the particles stored in these sacred materials (Santos 2019). These elders also teach that through visiting the territories and coming into contact with them, our ancestral knowledge and memory can be reawakened. The emphasize that our blood has the capacity to retain ancestral memory that is passed on generationally, creating inherent ancestral memory that contains information about the essence of creation in every human being (Santos 2019). Through song, prayer, storytelling and the process of my making, I awaken the material and also aspire to touch upon the ancestral memory in the viewer.

It is interesting to note that quartz and gold, sacred materials to Indigenous peoples, are also used today in our technological devices. The nanoparticles of quartz and gold record digital codes in analog backups. Minerals, both in Pre-Columbian and Western technologies, are used in similar manner, as systems of record keeping and transmission (Santos 2019). In the pieces that I make in metal and also in textile, I select the materials that best serve as conductors of knowledge, transforming the tangible through my hands with the aid of the intangible world.

Textile: The Legacy of Bochica

The role of the weaver and embroiderer is present in my work, as it comes from the legacy of my family. Every stitch is a thought and a point in time, recording the past and leaving a mark into the future. Textiles have their own purpose and affect; they reveal stories through threads and patterns. Just as the metal has a capacity to conduct and retain memory, cotton is also considered a conductor, a magnetic material.

I embroider and weave using the threads that carry the memory of my abuelas that once held those very same needles. I seek to bring forward my grandmothers' wisdom, their teachings and their comfort through my woven and embroidered works.

21. *Pictograms of designs taught by the Muisca God Bochíca.* Photo credit: Diego Martinez, 2011. With no protection around the site, the designs still remain today despite the negligence of the local people to protect Muisca heritage.

The Muisca deity Bochíca teaches the people how to weave, leaving the designs imprinted on a rock (see image #21) that can still be seen today in Sutatausa, Cundinamarca. For the Indigenous people of Colombia, the act of weaving creates relationships between the people and the land. It connects the Muisca back to the territory,

to the *Hika* or stone people, to each other, and to those materials of the land that are woven together. We weave our thoughts into words, our words into actions. This is the responsibility of a weaver.

22. Diego Martinez, *Photomontage of Sutatausa's San Juan Bautista church and Indigenous man (presumably Bochica) drawing pictograms on a rock*, 2011. This image depicts the presence of the Muisca peoples despite colonization. Muisca temples still remain, buried underneath the church/plaza.

23. Valentina Figueroa, *Details of engraving on Offering Vase that relate to textile patterns*, 2023. Engraved copper. Photo credit: Valentina Figueroa.

As I engraved the *Offering Vase* I came to the realization that my gravers also serve like embroidery needles to incise onto metal. Each line that I carve is a metaphor for a stitch. The patterns on copper have a direct relationship to textile, land, and storytelling. The genealogy of the motifs can be traced back to Pre-Columbian patterns, as well as to Spanish and Arab influences. To me, they represent abstractions of the landscape, the female reproductive system, the corn, and the plantain plantations of my lands.

24. Valentina Figueroa, *La Sierra,* 2022-2023. Mixed media: embroidery with cotton and metal thread, native Arhuaco cotton, cotton seeds, corn, horse hair, and textile paint (22in X 22in). Photo credit: Valentina Figueroa.

For my final thesis exhibition, I created a mixed-media work that incorporated material offerings along with embroidery and painting. *La Sierra*, which took over a year to complete, is an imaginary landscape reminiscent of the Sierra Nevada of Santa Marta. Our

elders speak of the pyramids that once existed all over our traditional territories. This landscape-work contains cotton seeds and corn along with maps and instructions on how to cultivate the land. It is not only an artwork, but a didactical landscape that strives to preserve the memory of the land and its inhabitants. It is a representation and celebration of our rich territories that are filled with minerals and biodiversity so sought after today by multinational companies wanting to exploit them.

25. Valentina Figueroa, *La Sierra,* detail of snow peak, 2022-2023. Arhuaco cotton containing seeds within, corn, textile paint, and metallic embroidery threads. Photo credit: Valentina Figueroa.

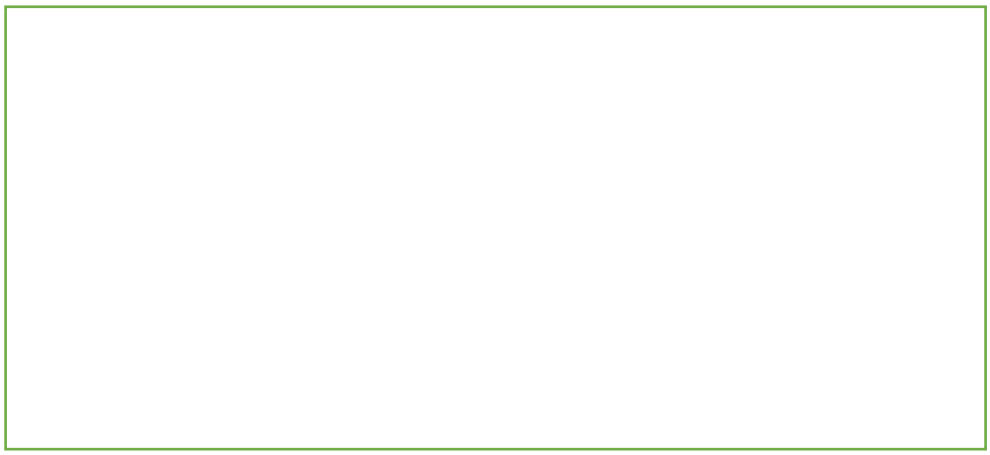
Into this work, I wove Arhuaco cotton seeds that have been kept for generations as heritage for future generations to use if needed, in the hopes that I can help protect the plant legacy of our Indigenous peoples in Colombia. This embroidery takes me to the land where my ancestors have cultivated the crops that sustain life. It was once a land of proficient goldsmiths, crystal sands, snow peaks, and multi-colored waters and animals, some of which still remains today despite the threat of extinction. It is important to note that the

capitalist interests of resource extraction companies are profoundly, negatively impacting the lives of our Indigenous peoples and of our lands in Colombia, leaving behind many deaths and orphaned children, without the guarantee of a promising future ahead.

26. Valentina Figueroa, *La Sierra,* 2022-2023. Details of corn made with cotton and metal thread. Photo credit: Valentina Figueroa.

Corn is of pivotal importance to many Indigenous peoples of the Americas. I recall hearing a Wixárica elder from México, Don Chavelo, speaking of corn. He mentioned that all colors of humanity are represented in the different colors of corn. Corn connects Indigenous peoples to their mothers and grandmothers. In Colombia, the Muisca called it *aba* and used it to prepare "chicha," an ancestral drink made of fermented corn. *Fabqua*, or chicha in Muisca language, is still used in ceremonies today, and is thought of as our mother's milk. We also employ different parts of the corn plant as medicine to treat diverse ailments and as a basis for our everyday nourishment. Despite the efforts of colonizers to

eradicate the use of the chicha drink by demonizing it, it still remains as an important practice today.



https://www.espacioeldorado.com/julieth-morales

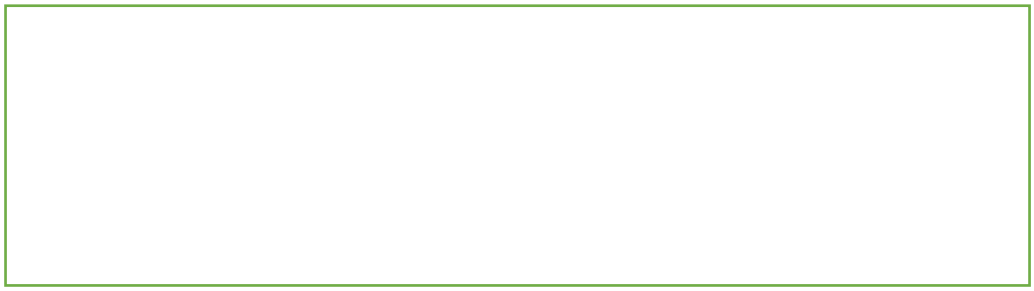
27. Julieth Morales, *La Señorita*, 2019. Serigraphy printed on traditional Misak shawl.

Textile and performance artist Julieth Morales, Colombian of Misak[16] origin, influences me with her work and installations that bring forward her identity as a Mestiza. Her work makes reference to the importance of the traditional female weaving practices of her Misak peoples, while her exhibition displays and theoretical discourse bring forward contemporary issues of Indigenous women. Her use of video, photo installation, and weaving to communicate her positionality and experiences growing up as a Misak woman in her community, portray narrative richness conveyed through art making.

28. Julieth Morales, *The Aracne fable,* 2019. Spinning performance.
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LwNdTaQ9SCE

[16] Misak or Guambianos: Indigenous peoples original to the Cauca region of Colombia.

In her essay *Being Indigenous Feminists: Resurgences Against Contemporary Patriarchy,* Gina Starblanket, Cree and Saulteaux professor at the University of Victoria and member of the Star Blanket Cree Nation in Treaty 4 territory in Canada, makes an important point relevant to understanding both Morales' work and my own. Through colonization, Indigenous communities have adopted European patriarchal structures that degraded the original role of Indigenous women in their societies. Morales recognizes the mestizaje in her Misak community and considers herself a Misak Mestiza: a pivotal act of courage and decolonization that allows her as a Mestiza in modern society, to speak up against the violence against Indigenous women in her community without the fear of being severely penalized. She seeks to retain her cultural traditions while breaking free from the colonized notion of women within her community and beyond, through pushing back and questioning the exoticization of the Indigenous body.



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29. Julieth Morales, *Pørtsik (Chumbe)*, 2014. Performance. Photo credit: Rodrigo Velázquez, Daniela Toba.

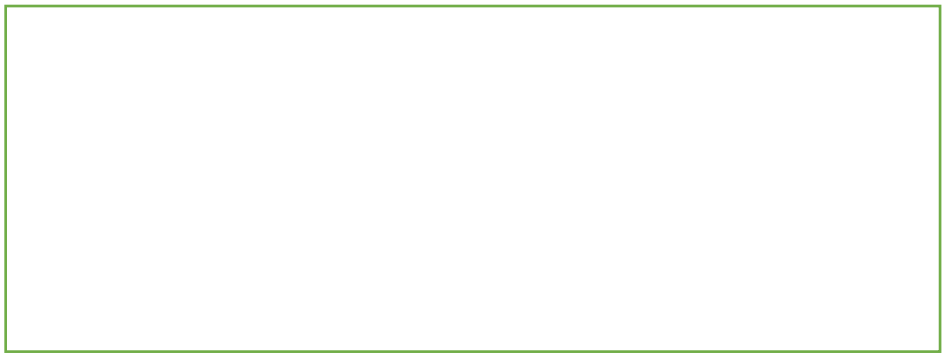
In her photo performance shown in image #29, Morales utilizes the traditional Misak practice of wrapping the body with a chumbe, or woven belt, re-signifying it as a work of contemporary art. Within several Indigenous communities in the Andes, the chumbe holds an important place. It embodies the transmission of knowledge through colors and patterns, and it also serves a purpose in "holding" the bodies of children in their developmental stages in an attempt to better "form" them. It is also important in

protecting the womb while women menstruate and recover from giving birth. As Morales indicates:

> I take this original practice of my peoples and I apply it to my body in a moment when it has already reached maturity. In this action I wrap the "chumbe" around my body to correct the traditional requirements in my community and to nurture a feeling of belonging to my ancestral territory without prejudices. Through this work, I am also suggesting the emergence of the new women we now want to become in our community (Morales 2014).

Morales challenges the practices in her community that undermine the role of women and that justify acts of violence against them. She resists the romantic view of Indigeneity frozen in an archaic past, and the passive role of the Indigenous female body often subject to male gaze and dominance.

As a Mestiza artist, Morales is important in my work and research as we share the same generational trauma in being descendants of Indigenous women who were abused by European men and are still subject to constant male discrimination to this day. As Indigenous women, our bodies are constantly exposed to the male patriarchal gaze in a country in denial of its profoundly rooted colonial practices. While she was born in a Misak reserve, I was born in a capital city – yet we are both a product of the processes of mestizaje and its implicit trauma. We are both Mestiza Indigenous feminist artists who highlight the importance of women as political participants and craft makers.



https://www.espacioeldorado.com/julieth-morales

30. Julieth Morales, *Srusral Mora Kup "Young Women Spinning,"* 2019. Video Installation displayed at 45th Salón Nacional de Artistas.

In the image above, Misak women record history and knowledge in their weavings: a political act performed in silence and concentration. The threads serve as connectors through a woven pattern and also as connectors of ideas and stories. As Indigenous women carrying a textile legacy, we weave our thoughts and stories together through spinning, weaving, and embroidering. The ritual that takes place in making our textiles connects Indigenous genealogies and ways of knowing representing substantiation of women's presence and power in society. The female is the container who makes the world possible through her power to give life and bring solidity to the community. In this same way, I weave my stories and thoughts into my embroideries and woven works. Akin to Morales, I consider myself a Mestiza simultaneously seeking to reconnect to my Indigenous origins, while playing a role as a contemporary woman and artist.

https://artishockrevista.com/2021/06/26/cecilia-vicuna-entrevista-2021

31. Cecilia Vicuña, *Quipu Womb* (The Story of the Red Thread), 2017. Dyed wool. Installation at the National Museum of Contemporary Art (EMST), Athens Documenta 14. Photo credit: Mathias Volzke.

Chilean Mestiza artist Cecilia Vicuña speaks further to the importance of knowledge transmission through weaving by expressing the connection between written language and the craft of weaving: "the weave is ultimately a text, as the etymological origin of the word tejido (weave) and texto (text) indicate. In Latin, both words derive from the root *texere*" (Vicuña 2002). Weavings contain records and stories available to those who know how to interpret this material language. In her work *Quipu Womb*, Vicuña installs Quipus, ancient

Inca artifacts of record keeping through the use of knots in different gallery spaces. In pre-contact times, these Quipus served as a means of communication through which the Incan governors were able to track the exact state of the economy of their territory. Every piece of the Quipus has specific significance: the length, the knots, the colors (Vicuña 2002). When the Spanish arrived to the Americas, they sought to eradicate all Quipus, as they represented a threat to their colonial ambitions. Vicuña resuscitates the Quipus, highlighting the importance of traditional craft as technology and as a way to preserve cultural history and memory. This correlates to my practice, which also seeks to emphasize woven textile works as ways of storytelling, cultural preservation, and memory conservation.

Vicuña argues that consciousness is the quintessential art form of human beings: "The act of performing, creating objects, and exhibitions is only the tangible manifestation of our consciousness, intending to touch other forms of consciousness and open the way to an understanding that makes us feel one with nature" (Vicuña 2002). In my work, I am also intending to connect to a larger consciousness, one that wants to be brought to life in a material form. Hence my belief that the pieces I create do not belong to me, but rather that they are manifestations and beings that have a life of their own, wanting to come about in a material form. As Vicuña expresses, "We are part of the river of memory, an ancient river that is available for many people to build upon. It is important to recognize the path of the image that comes from a very ancient, forgotten culture" (Vicuña 2002).

The memory of the land and of our culture, Vicuña argues, is available to those willing to listen and pay attention to the forms and shapes that have always lived on the land (Vicuña 2002). As with the symbols that come through my intuition, my genetic archive, and the connection I create to the land, Vicuña also seeks to unearth ancient forms of craft expression…craft that is not merely craft, but living cultural memory and technological knowledge.

Ceremony: Gatherings, Offerings, and Prayers

I see my creative process as an act of offering, as ceremony and as a way to thank the Creator for the bounty and beauty of nature around me. As acts of maintaining balance within myself and with the land, I create specific pieces in my practice that are destined to be presented at sacred sites to its protectors and spiritual owners of the land.

In speaking to Yakama elder Robert Onley from Washington state, I have come to realize the importance of solidifying our relationships as Indigenous peoples of the American continent through ceremony. Onley believes we were all once the same people, north and south, one tribe, and states the importance of remembering this union in order to defend the inherent sovereign rights of Indigenous peoples and of the land across the whole expanse of Turtle Island[17] and South America. With colonialism came the tendencies to separate and delineate borders. I have challenged this very concept in my life by building a wide network of chosen Indigenous family and mentors from many parts of the American continent. Through kinship relationships to different Indigenous groups of Colombia, the United States and Canada, I am able to trace back a common foundational understanding between Indigenous cultures of the Americas, that everything comes back to the land.

Within the cultural exchanges that occur through ceremonies in different parts of the Americas, both south and north, people share and perform songs in multiple Indigenous languages that directly relate to their lands and cosmologies. In the Western world, text as archive is often privileged as a form of knowledge over orality and embodied representation. The performance historian Diana Taylor assists me by qualifying the difference between the archive and the repertoire. According to Taylor, the archive is a

[17] Turtle Island: North American Indigenous term originating from creation myths used to refer to North and Central America.

static container for knowledge and the repertoire is an embodied manifestation of it. As she states:

> The intermediary looks to her body as the receptor, storehouse, and transmitter of knowledge that comes from the archive ("I know texts, pages, illusions") and from the repertoire of embodied knowledge ("I also retain memories that belonged to my grandmother, my mother, or my friends") she knows how to navigate among sources and types of knowledge and facilitates their circulation" (Taylor 2003).

I consider the material pieces that I create as a form of archive, while the act of bringing them into ceremony through "repertoire" brings them to life. The metal portraits of my ancestors came to life when I placed them on the land in a specific location and order. I was able to understand a deeper layer of their meaning when I interacted with them through ritual on the land. As Indigenous people, we value orality and knowledge transmission through presence, however, among many Indigenous Nations, texts and archives have also been important as a means of leaving a record of our cultures and languages. It is important to note that as Indigenous peoples, we are aware that *no text* will ever replace the presence of an elder in transferring knowledge through orality.

For the purposes of my work, I am defining performance *as* ritual. Bringing the repertoire (art creation, ceremony, and performance) into the archive (stored knowledge) is a means of building Indigenous community solidarity and helping to create awareness around Indigenous land sovereignty rights. Indigenous knowledge continues to evolve. It is a sophisticated ancient system which is neither outdated, nor primitive. In this moment and time, the voices of Indigenous scholars in academia are crucial in bridging the boundaries created by colonialism that were designed to separate and label Indigenous voices as irrelevant. Bringing awareness to Indigenous forms of knowledge transmission (keen observation, embodied practices, ritual, craft and the importance of oral tradition) into academic discourses compliments and enriches the "Western" archive.

Language is world-building. I have been invited by Osage linguist and academic, Joshua Dunn to study and help revitalize and protect the Lakȟóta and Dakhóta languages. As I learn these Indigenous languages my perception of the world is greatly enriched. These languages have taught me new ways of relating to the world that were not implicit in my native tongue, Spanish, nor in English, or in any of the subsequent Romance languages I learned as a child and as a teenager (French and Italian).

Through a repertoire of songs that I have learned from my elders and relatives, among them the Lakȟóta peoples and the Nahuatl peoples, I carry this archive of embodied knowledge. I am a participant in ceremonies and a witness to political decisions in numerous different Indigenous communities throughout North and South America. My position as a pluricultural Mestiza artist gives me the potential to act as a bridge between different worlds and to become a negotiating agent. In this role, I am able to weave worlds together and serve as a translator. Anthropologist Peter Wade introduces the idea of mestizaje as the construction of a mosaic where all parts fit to create a whole – where relationship, reciprocity, accountability to those relationships comprises the foundation of a new inclusive Global South-Global North society (Wade 2013). This is at the core of my creative endeavor.

In my artistic practice, through the ritual of connecting with the land and its different Indigenous peoples, I receive inspiration and teachings. In *Land as Pedagogy*, Anishinaabe theorist and writer Leanne Simpson, speaks of the importance of connecting to the land and bringing forward Indigenous methodologies and teachings. In this text, she speaks of the process of Kwezens, a girl whose curiosity, desire to learn, and trust in her community leads her to interact with the maple tree and discover how to extract the syrup. As Simpson points out, "she learned both *from* the land and *with* the land," and she was celebrated by her community in the process (Simpson 2014).

32. Valentina Figueroa, ritual of *The Frailejón* at the Zoque natural reserve in Guasca Cundinamarca, April 2022. Photo credit: Ramón Blanco.

The Frailejón[18] piece I created in the spring of 2022 is a jewelry work that combines gold-platted bronze, cotton, palm fiber, and golden embroidery thread. Through a contemporary lens, the symbols sculpted in metal allude to the female reproductive system, as well as to other Pre-Columbian designs and motifs. Similar to Kwezens, who learned how to extract maple syrup, I learned to trust myself in knowing I could use palm fiber as a loom on which to weave the cotton for the *Frailejón* piece.

[18] Frailejón or *Espeletia*: A genus of perennial subshrubs in the *Asteraceae* family. They are native to the tropics and are found at high altitudes in ecosystems called páramos. They have the ability to retain water and grow near sources of water.

33. *Valentina Figueroa weaving the cotton onto the palm fiber*, 2022. Photo credit: Clara Ines Palau.

In the ritual I performed for and with the *Frailejón* piece, I situated myself in the Zoque páramo, a sacred Muisca site in the high mountains near Bogotá. The páramos are sacred highlands and unique ecosystems to the tropics that play a key role in collecting the life-giving waters that nourish all of Colombia's ecosystems. I created a fictional character, the *Frailejón* woman, whom I embodied for the duration of the one-hour ritual through the wearing of the *Frailejón* piece. My intent in performing this ritual was to reconnect to the ancestral memory of the land, to open the gates of my memory that are tied to the Muisca people and to honor the sacred site, and assist in its organic process of constant renewal. I consider this ritual, conducted through song and the embodiment of the *Frailejón* woman, as a prayer for water and its sources to remain protected. When I presented my work, *The Frailejón*, to the ancestors of the páramo and to the land, I felt it had come at last to proper completion and balance.

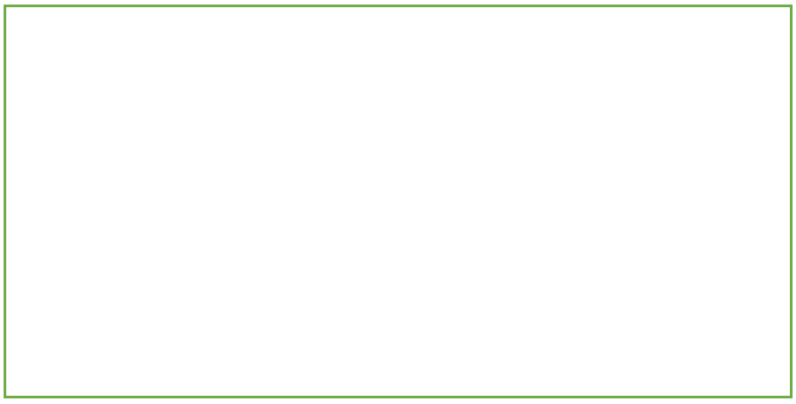
34. *Páramo Ritual*, 2022. Performance and voice: Valentina Figueroa. Video credit: Ramón Blanco. https://vimeo.com/686489214

In reading Lee Maracle's *Memory Serves*, I came upon a quote that resonated with my process: "When humans give breath to life, give voice to their perception of life, this is a sacred act" (Maracle 2015). In the act of taking *the Frailejón* piece to the land where it belonged, to the place it directed me to, it received the breath of life – the last element it needed in order to be complete. Through ritual performance, I respectfully claimed connection to the land that I was born in.

Pre-Columbian peoples made offerings of metal to the territory as a way of mediating with the different "earth beings," as Peruvian anthropologist and writer Marisol De La Cadena suggests in talking about the relationship between the Quechua peoples of

the Peruvian highlands and the apus [mountains] (De La Cadena 2015). Similar to the Pre-Columbian Muisca peoples, the Quechua peoples believe the apus, or mountains, have protectors. Offerings were used to demarcate land, and keep the conflicting forces of nature in harmony within the territory.

I cannot perform these offerings exactly as my ancestors did due to colonization and its annihilation of many of our Indigenous practices. No direct instruction was left to me from that lineage. I can however, make a political gesture as a Mestiza artist recognizing her Indigenous origins, and honor the land from the teachings that I do know, the repertoire of my embodied knowledge, and the inner knowing of my spirit.



https://blog.ted.com/standing-for-art-and-truth-a-chat-with-sethembile-msezane/

35. Msezane performing *Chapungu*, April 9th, 2015.

My ritual performance work is also in conversation with the work of African artist Sethembile Msezane. In the work pictured above, Msezane wears a costume to personify Chapungu, the great spirit bird or eagle of Zimbabwe, regarded by the Shona peoples as a divine messenger. Msezane's piece was performed in Cape Town, South Africa on the same day as the removal of the Cecile Rhodes statue, a pioneer colonizer of her land. The artist stands dressed as Chapungu, bringing justice to Chapungu's legacy and to the inherent rights of land sovereignty for Zimbabwe's peoples. Embodying a sacred totem for her people, Msezane is able to bring Chapungu and the spirit of the people back to life.

Msezane's performance is an act of cultural reclamation and contestation to brutal colonial appropriation of space and identity. It is also an act destined to heal the memory of the people and the land. It is a balancing act, an agent of mediation amongst the violent protests taking place while the statue of Rhodes is taken down. Her gesture brings to the public's attention the inevitable truth: the original stories of a place and its spiritual inhabitants will always survive, even if their voices are not heard, and even if their presence is ignored. The memory of the land prevails, despite all attempts to erase it. Now that colonization is also a part of Zimbabwe´s history, the land and the people must heal. Through her work, Msezane is evoking an ancestral past, bringing a performance to a contemporary political setting. Similar to the setting where Msezane situates her work, my ritual performances take place in a country that has suffered from deep violence and colonial trauma. Through my ritual performance work, I also aspire to aid in the healing of Colombian Mestizos' memories, and create the conditions for a stronger sense of belonging with our kin.

As opposed to the political and controversial setting in which Msezane chooses to display her work I chose *El Zoque* páramo, a site located at 3,400m above sea level, to perform *The Frailejón*. I believe political acts do not have to be performed in front of a wide public audience for them to be considered as politically impactful. In the same way that women keep ancestral craft traditions alive in their daily practice as depicted in the act of Misak women spinning (referred to earlier in the thesis), a political act can also take place in the private spheres. Without necessarily being conscious of it, or deliberately taking a stance, the act of women spinning embodies a political form of resistance. In fact, some of the most notorious acts of decolonization, resurgence, and environmental responsibility are those practiced in solitude, in the ordinariness of our everyday existence.

Another facet of my ritual practice encompasses community. I support my elders in ceremony through my role as a backup singer in Lakȟóta Sundances, and other traditional Indigenous ceremonies in the United States, Colombia, and Mexico. In each of these circumstances, I have been specifically invited to participate. As with my art making, I consider my participation in ceremony as a sacred act that connects me to the Creator. Just as I was given the skills to become a craftsperson, I have also been gifted a voice to share. I consider it my responsibility to use my voice to help people, and support important prayers done in ceremony. For example, song is the guiding thread in ceremony that supports Sundancers through the rigorous four days of fasting. It is the spiritual nourishment that supports the body through prayer. Singing is a responsibility that entails rehearsing all year, and engaging in community work that can include preparing new singers.

Conclusion

The social movements that have been growing during the last decades in the Global South in countries such as Colombia, Peru, Bolivia, Ecuador, and Chile demonstrate an awakening of Indigenous Mestizo peoples. Mestizo peoples have been working alongside Indigenous peoples to reclaim land sovereignty and defend the rights of nature in the face of a growing global economy with great interest in the natural resources our lands have to offer. We are at a point in our history where the Mestizo Nation throughout the American continent is being solidified, and we are beginning to recognize and reclaim our Indigenous cultural lineages. My thesis exhibition and this written support document are a celebration of this historical present time and the claiming of my Indigenous heritage.

I come from a generation of Mestizos who have forgotten their Indigenous identity, and were taught to aspire to live by European standards. Colonization brought devastating consequences to the maintenance of our Indigenous knowledges and practices. Many of our Indigenous languages in Colombia and in the Americas were eradicated, and the history of our continent was written from a colonial perspective.

Throughout this thesis and my final exhibition, I make a case for Mestizo artists from Colombia to proudly reclaim an Indigenous identity that will continue the legacy of Pre-Columbian symbology and celebrate our cultural and historical heritage. With this exhibition and thesis, I am inspiring young Mestizo women to recognize themselves in my work and to feel part of a community.

The process of defining myself as an artist has been tied to my search for identity through material form and intuition. In practicing attentiveness, through attunements to the spirit of place, I have also come to know the land as a source of knowledge.

As a Mestiza, I carry Indigenous and European ancestry, and I must walk with the awareness that both lineages need to coexist in harmony. Colonialism brought new material knowledge that has been incorporated in the artistic expressions of mestizaje, my work being an example. As an Indigenous Mestiza artist, I anchor my practice in the solidity of Indigenous material knowledge and its values around reciprocity, relationality and the significance of passing down this legacy. Through my practice, I also honor the rigor and discipline I was bequeathed by my European metalsmithing mentors, who taught me to strive for impeccability in my work.

In my practice as a textile artist, I make a case for woven and embroidered material as an embodiment of the important political place Indigenous women hold in society in keeping stories and traditions alive. In this context, textiles are a form of written language – they are Indigenous forms of storytelling and pedagogical instruments for the coming generations. Implementing discussions around knowledge transmission through materiality in the academic sphere expands the possibilities of cognitive and artistic development for future generations.

As with the stories written on textile, the different techniques developed to work with metal throughout the ages constitute an archive that tells stories about the fascinating relationship between human beings and tools as extensions of the body. The relationship established between the metalsmith and the metal narrates a story of the human capacity to study, transform and build a solid relationship to complex materials in nature. In this written document, I explored the idea of craft as a historical archive and the ways in which materials can be studied as a source of knowledge and agency.

The pursuit of an MFA at Emily Carr University has helped me to better understand my practice and my identity. Situating my work within an Indigenous cultural and academic context has created a solid foundation for me to continue building upon in the coming

years. The pieces I have created for the final thesis exhibition are the beginning of a life-long exploration.

Through my work as a Mestiza artist and scholar, I am taking part in the construction and revitalization of Mestizo traditional forms of craft and knowledge-creation. With this document and exhibition, I am hoping to educate and bring awareness to the significance of our Indigenous knowledges and creative practices and to contribute to the union and solidification of our Indigenous Nations in the American continent.

As I move forward with my work as an artist and as a community member, I intend to put my research to the service of my community. In acknowledging my identity as an Indigenous Mestiza, I intend to inspire other Mestizos to feel proud of their Indigenous ancestry. In acknowledging the relevance of Pre-Columbian symbols in today's Colombian society as means to assert our identity, I am unearthing and reawakening their capacity to heal the wounds created by colonization. I intend to expand my material research and continue to make pieces that bring this ancestral knowledge forward.

36. Valentina Figueroa, *Offering Vase,* 2021-2023. Hand engraved copper raised by hammer. Installation at Emily Carr University, Vancouver 2023. Photo credit: Valentina Figueroa.

37. Valentina Figueroa, *Installation of final MFA show,* 2023. Emily Carr University in Vancouver, Canada. Photo credit: Lucas Anderson.

38. Valentina Figueroa, *Installation of final MFA show,* 2023. Emily Carr University in Vancouver, Canada. Photo credit: Valentina Figueroa.

Installing my thesis exhibition at Emily Carr University was an opportunity for me to look at my work as a whole and see the works interacting with each other as they came alive in the gallery space. The process of installing the *Portraits of the Ancestors* was interesting to me. At first, they seemed to be uncomfortable on the wall. When I added the soil to the installation, some of the faces seemed to change expression, giving me the sense that the addition of the earth was putting them back at ease. As I placed the offering vase onto the soil and added the cotton along with the corn, I saw my vision of bringing an offering from my land to Canada come into fruition. I was inspired to imagine a gallery space with multiple soil mounts and vases containing offerings, water, and symbols. I imagine these offerings traveling to different places of the continent as a way for me to honor other territories and Indigenous Nations, while creating alliances and getting to know more Colombian and North American Indigenous artists that I could collaborate with.

On the day after the opening of the show, I ran into a Colombian student doing her bachelor's degree at the university. Her eyes watered as she congratulated me for bringing our culture and representing it in the way I had. I knew then, that I had done my job in inspiring a younger Mestizo Colombian.

In continuing to expand on our Pre-Columbian metalsmithing legacy and initiating young teenagers in the craft alongside my colleagues, we are hoping to inspire a stronger sense of belonging in our community and create more working opportunities. In Colombia, we have one of the most important metalsmithing and textile legacies in the world that deserves to be continued for the prosperity of our cultural legacy in the generations to come.

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