

Knowledge Is a Garden An Exchange

Nikita Dhawan and Uriel Orlow

August 2024

Uriel

We first met in Dakar last year where we were paired in a conversation as part of Talking Objects Lab's *Re-imaginer le passé*, a workshop and exhibition exploring the decolonisation of memory, history and knowledge. Since then, we saw each other in your city of birth Bombay/Mumbai and we will soon meet in Berlin, your adopted home. I am happy to continue this dialogue for the upcoming exhibition at Migros Museum in Zurich where I was born. The premise of the exhibition is a dialogue between three works of mine and works from the museum's collection.

The title of the exhibition, *Knowledge is a Garden*, is inspired by a West-African proverb: *Knowledge is like a garden; if it isn't cultivated it can't be harvested*. It proposes knowledge not as something fixed but rather something that is organic, growing. And importantly: it needs looking after, it needs to be nurtured. Staying with this metaphor, a number of questions arise: what seeds are planted, what soil is needed, what plants do we consider beautiful or useful and which plants are disregarded as unwanted weeds, yet might harbour powerful medicinal properties? And zooming out to the garden itself: who has access to the garden? who is doing the sowing and who is doing the harvesting? To be sure, knowledge is not simply a neutral container of facts and information, a universal set of skills acquired through experience or education, or an objective (theoretical or practical) understanding of a subject as a dictionary definition might have it – knowledge is always situated, partial, historical, contested.

For a while now, I have, as an artist, been interested in the botanical world as a means to think about human and more than human histories, considering plants not just as backdrops to human action but as political actors and historical witnesses in their own right. A few years ago, I was on a research trip to Guatemala at the invitation of the Guatemala Biennial. Strolling through a street market in Guatemala City I came across a 1970's publication which had been published by the Instituto Indigenista de Guatemala and featured Mayan medicinal plants and their uses. What struck me immediately was that all the plants were named in Spanish only. It was clear to me that this was no coincidence and not an isolated case. European colonialism had long been engaged in naming and classifying natural resources elsewhere in preparation for their exploitation. Naming something is also a way of appropriating it and the disregarding of indigenous plant names is not accidental. So at the heart of this well-meaning publication was a glaring paradox: the indigenous institute of Guatemala wanted to highlight ancient, local knowledge yet the omission of local names continued to enact what Gyuatari Spivak in her seminal text 'Can the Subaltern Speak?' refers to as epistemic violence, a violence against and of knowledge. And the act of preservation, that is, of publishing knowledge that has been traditionally passed on orally from one spiritual guide to another, can also be seen as a form of suppression of traditional knowledge pathways. This raises many questions, perhaps the first being: *What knowledge is permitted in the course of global power relations?*

Nikita

Colonialism as *mission civilisatrice* was not just about economic exploitation and military occupation, but also the production of imperial and subaltern subjects. For this reason, the idea of 'colonisation of the mind' is so central to understanding the challenges of decolonisation. In his infamous 1835 Minute on Indian Education, Thomas Babington Macaulay explained that the aim was to create 'a class of persons, Indian in blood and

colour, but English in taste, in opinions, in morals, and in intellect'. This imposition of supposedly 'superior' and 'civilised' European norms was accompanied by the disqualification and destruction of native epistemic and cultural practices, which were dismissed as 'primitive' and 'pre-modern'. Colonialism promised to bring the benefits of European Enlightenment to what were deemed 'barbaric' societies. The devaluation and destruction of native cultures and indigenous thought systems were central to colonial practices. A notable example of this is 'linguistic colonialism'. When introducing English education in colonial India, Macaulay asserted that 'a single shelf of a good European library was worth the whole native literature of India and Arabia'. The dominance of colonial languages like English, Spanish, and French often accompanied the erosion of native languages. For instance, before the arrival of the Portuguese in Brazil, between 600 and 1,000 indigenous languages were spoken. Today, only about 180 indigenous languages remain in Brazil.

The renowned Kenyan author Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o speaks of the need for the decolonisation of the mind, emphasising that political sovereignty must be complemented by cultural and epistemic sovereignty. Understanding the value of multilingualism is crucial, as is recognising the limitations imposed by the 'monolingual fallacy'. As Ngũgĩ suggests, the constraints of our language reflect the constraints of our worldview. For instance, while English has only one word for snow, Sami languages spoken by the Sami people, indigenous to the northern regions of Norway, Sweden, and Finland, have up to 180 snow- and ice-related terms and as many as 300 words describing different types of snow, snow tracks, and snow conditions.

Vandana Shiva's metaphor of 'monocultures of the mind' highlights how dominant 'scientific' and 'positivist' frameworks have led to the erasure of diverse indigenous knowledge systems. Rather than being simply forgotten or replaced, these local knowledges are actively erased and denied. This epistemic monoculture homogenises, standardises, and suppresses diversity in ways that serve capitalist and neo-colonial interests. Such a reductionist worldview not only aligns with commercial capitalist agendas but also appropriates and exploits local and traditional knowledges, effectively 'cannibalising' them in the process.

Uriel

The connection between linguistic and cultural diversity is key – there is a continuum between the diversity of soil bacteria, via thriving flora and fauna to flourishing local knowledges. Publishing and disseminating indigenous medicinal plant knowledge in the example from Guatemala makes traditionally held knowledge vulnerable to extraction, for example by the pharma industry. The cannibalisation of traditional knowledges exists in a continuum from exploration and settler colonialism to neocolonial practices in the present. I was looking at questions of who has the right to help themselves to what knowledge in the context of the *Theatrum Botanicum* trilogy I developed in South Africa thinking about the (continuing) entanglements of Europe with its former colony. I first came across a reference to a historical case in which Mafavuke Ngcobo, an inyanga or indigenous herbalist was accused by the white medical establishment of non-traditional behaviour and stealing from West, because he was also using non-endemic plants and ingredients in his medical formulations. Using transcripts I found at the National Archives in Pretoria, the first film of the trilogy, *The Crown against Mafavuke*, restages the 1940 court case and explores how the clash of two different yet intertwining medical traditions and knowledge systems was not just an ideological confrontation but also, above all, a commercial one. When Mafavuke Ngcobo travels through time and returns in the present in the sequel *Imbizo Ka Mafavuke* to organise a people's tribunal against the pharma industry, the tables are turned and bioprospecting is exposed as one of the neo-colonial frontiers. The film asks who benefits when plants become pharmaceuticals, given multiple claims to ownership, priority, locality and appropriation. The pharmaceutical industry has long considered traditional medicine (especially from the Global South which has a much higher biodiversity than the Global North) as a source for identification of new bioactive agents that can be used in the preparation of synthetic medicine. This raises questions about what could be termed the knowledge commons and its selective

suppression by property/copyright/patent law at the heart of capitalist extractivist economies. Whilst traditional practices view medicinal knowledge as ancestral, common, spiritual and individual at the same time, Western multinationals argue that they should be able to access this resource for free because it's common heritage of humankind with the catch that, once they've extracted the so-called active ingredient, that knowledge in turn is patented and exploited without sharing any benefits with the prior knowledge communities. So in addition to knowledge being suppressed or hidden, we need to ask what knowledge is unlawfully appropriated?

Nikita

You insightfully describe the 1970 publication by the Instituto *Indigenista de Guatemala*, where all Mayan medicinal plants were only named in Spanish. This is a textbook example of historical theft of indigenous Mayan medicinal knowledge and the subsequent Westernisation and privatisation of these traditional and communal practices. These are striking examples of colonial 'epistemic violence', characterised by the systematic erasure of indigenous origins, echoing Frantz Fanon's observation that 'Europe is literally the creation of the Third World'. Coffee houses are often celebrated as the birthplace of the European Enlightenment and sites of deliberative democracy. This prompts important questions: Where did the coffee come from? Where did the sugar in the coffee originate? What about the tobacco that bourgeois men smoked? Who financed the Enlightenment? The tragedy lies in the fact that colonial products like coffee, chocolate, bananas and pineapples continue to be produced under exploitative conditions in the Global South for consumption in the Global North. For instance, coltan, a rare metallic ore essential for producing electronic goods such as mobile phones, laptops and video game consoles, is primarily sourced from the Democratic Republic of Congo. Approximately 80% of the world's coltan supply is mined by hand under dire conditions, contributing to the region's civil conflict, where violence, including rape used as a weapon of war, is rampant. Similarly, the production of garments in sweatshops in Bangladesh and electronic products in *maquiladoras* in Mexico reflects the gendered international division of labour. This system outsources labour-intensive, low-skilled, and low-wage work to countries in the Global South, where exploitation of women's labour and precarious working conditions are commonplace. Such practices subsidise the privileges enjoyed in the Global North.

In *The Crown against Mafavuke*, you focus on Mafavuke Ngcobo, an *inyanga* or indigenous herbalist, who was accused by the white medical establishment of 'stealing' from the West, because he was also using non-endemic plants and ingredients in his medical formulations. Taking this as the point of departure you raise questions about privatisation of the commons that is at the heart of capitalist, extractivist economies. We know from the history of inoculation that the vaccines are mostly tested in countries of the Global South on the very poor, who, after the vaccines are declared safe and successful, are unable to afford these vaccines. Similarly, there have been numerous attempts to patent yoga, particularly in the West, which seek to establish proprietary rights over a practice that is deeply rooted in ancient Indian traditions. A communal cultural heritage is being commodified into a patentable invention. Along similar lines the patenting of basmati rice, turmeric and neem is being pursued by multinational companies. In the case of basmati rice, specific strains or methods of cultivation emerged over generations of harnessing traditional agricultural knowledge. Similarly, neem and turmeric have been used for centuries in traditional medicine and efforts to patent them raise urgent questions regarding ownership of indigenous knowledge and bio-piracy. Vandana Shiva's concept of 'stolen harvest' addresses how agricultural produce is effectively pilfered from the farmers who grow it, benefiting agribusinesses and global trade practices instead. This involves both cultural and intellectual theft, where traditional farming knowledge is exploited by multinational corporations like Monsanto. Although Monsanto claimed that genetically modified seeds would increase agricultural production for the benefit of humanity, the company's practices, including seed patenting and intellectual property rights, have deprived farmers of their rights to replant and save seeds, further exacerbating exploitation and inequality. Tragically, thousands of farmers have fallen into debt due to expensive genetically modified

seeds, failed crops and an inability to repay loans, leading to widespread despair and suicide in rural farming communities in countries like India. This is just one of many examples of the 'subaltern's' inability to speak, which vividly illustrates the interplay between epistemic violence, capitalism and neocolonialism.

Uriel

The extractive motor driving capitalism is mirrored in Western medicine's approach to treating illnesses with so-called 'active ingredients', many of which were first extracted from plants. The flip side of this approach is drug resistance, malaria being a case in point. The British colonial project in India famously relied on the 'discovery' of quinine in southern America and the transplantation to India of the cinchona tree from whose bark quinine is extracted. Eventually, mutation and natural selection helped malaria develop resistance to quinine so new treatments had to be found. The discovery and extraction of artemisinin from the *Artemisia annua* plant, used in China against fevers for over two thousand years, was rewarded with a Nobel Prize for medicine and led to a new generation of patented medications. However, resistance is now also building up against the extracted artemisinin. At the same time medical trials in Congo have shown that the non-extractive use of the related plant *Artemisia afra*, which grows in many parts of the African continent, is highly effective even though it contains no artemisinin (but a potent cocktail of minerals). Especially in the extractive context of Congo which you already described, this struck me when I was working on a project for the Lubumbashi Biennale in the DRC and realised that despite studies that show *Artemisia afra*'s effectiveness, the simplicity of its use as an infusion and the sustainability of local cultivation, even in backyards, it is not recommended as a treatment by the World Health Organization and scientific research is suppressed. A plant that not only resists drug resistance but also resists extractive medicine was obviously seen as a threat. In *Learning from Artemisia* I collaborated with a local women's cooperative who grow *Artemisia afra*. The work attempts to think through this wilful ignorance which seemed not only powered by the economic interests of the pharma industry but also by a knowledge orthodoxy which discounts effects that cannot be fully explained or quantified. There are many forms of wilful or chosen ignorance (agnotology). What knowledge is permitted in the course of global power relations, what knowledge is suppressed or hidden? Certainly, we cannot know everything but we perhaps also prefer not to know some of what we don't know. What do we want to know and what do we chose not to know? Some things we want to know, or should know but are prevented from knowing. Which brings me back to Gayatri Spivak's 'Can the subaltern speak?' where she makes the case for non-hegemonic histories, for the small voices of history. It still feels urgent to ask who gets to speak and whose voice is silenced and what forces are at play in the loss of knowledge?

Nikita

Your examples of the history of malaria treatment as well as the World Health Organization's wilful neglect of *Artemisia afra*'s effectiveness are eye-opening. Let me share some similar historical examples of how the suppression of non-commodifiable knowledge continues to impact current postcolonial societies. The first example is the systematic discrediting of traditional indigenous practices of 'cultural burning' in many parts of the world, including Australia and the United States. Across generations, indigenous communities have practiced ritualised low-intensity burning that involved deliberately setting small, controlled fires at specific times of the year to reduce underbrush, recycle nutrients into the soil, and prevent larger, more destructive wildfires. The knowledge of when, where, and how to burn was deeply rooted in understanding local ecosystems, weather patterns, and the behaviour of fire. With the colonisation and subsequent development of these lands, European settlers often viewed fire as destructive and dangerous. As a result, policies were implemented that focused on fire suppression and prevention, which devalued indigenous experiences with land and fire. These top-down policies were influenced by a preference for Western scientific approaches to land management and a disdain for indigenous practices, which were dismissed as unscientific or primitive. Tragically, the suppression of indigenous traditions has led to the build-up of combustible materials in forests and bushlands resulting in an increase in large-scale catastrophic wildfires. This is an instructive example of how in the name

of modernity and progress so-called scientific approaches have had disastrous ecological and social consequences. My second example is the destruction of traditional techniques in regions such as Bangladesh that were specifically designed to manage the region's complex network of rivers, floodplains and wetlands. These included a variety of local practices, such as building bunds (embankment), canals and drains to regulate water flow. These methods helped manage seasonal flooding and provided irrigation during the dry season, ensuring both agricultural productivity and community safety. During British rule, the colonial administration imposed the construction of large-scale infrastructure projects, such as railways and roadways, to facilitate the extraction and transportation of resources like jute and rice. In doing so, they disrupted community-based techniques, branding them as backward and inefficient. Favouring large-scale engineering projects, they imposed European-style water management that were ill-suited to the unique hydrology of the Bengal Delta. Furthermore, deforestation and the reclamation of wetlands for agriculture to maximise land use disrupted the natural water absorption and drainage capacity of the region. As a result, there has been increased flooding and waterlogging during the monsoon season. This had a lasting impact on agricultural productivity and food security in the region as well as loss of drinking water. To undo the disastrous legacies of colonial water management policies there have been concerted efforts to revive traditional practices. Another prominent example of the suppression of non-commodifiable knowledge is how through the advent of industrial agriculture there has been a destruction of indigenous agricultural practices, biodiversity and cultural heritage. For instance, in regions like the Andes Mountains in South America, particularly in countries like Peru and Bolivia, there were thousands of varieties of potatoes that were historically cultivated. Similarly, there has been a reduction of rice diversity in Southeast Asia, particularly in countries like India and the Philippines. For generations, cultivation of potatoes, rice and other crops was based on traditional agricultural knowledge to grow a wide range of species adapted to different altitudes, soils and microclimates. The diversity of crops ensured food security by minimising the risk of crop failure due to disease, pests, or adverse weather conditions. If one variety was affected by a disease or environmental change, other varieties could still thrive. Driven by the demands of global markets and industrial-scale farming, the cultivation of a single crop variety over large areas was imposed. Focus on economic efficiency and higher yields resulted in standardisation for the global market and large agribusinesses. The shift towards monoculture led to erosion of local agricultural knowledge with farmers being forced to adopt Western agricultural practices, relying on chemical fertilisers, pesticides and irrigation techniques tailored for a single crop variety. Monoculture practices have not only made crops more vulnerable to diseases and pests and led to soil degradation, water pollution and loss of biodiversity, but also resulted in the loss of cultural heritage and traditional culinary practices, affecting food security and nutritional diversity. In response to the negative impacts of monoculture, there have been efforts to revive and conserve crop diversity by setting up seed banks to preserve the genetic diversity of crops.

Uriel

Your examples remind us that the question is not just who gets to speak, but also how can we learn to listen differently? There has been renewed interest in non-Western cosmologies that give agency to the more-than-human (plants, rivers etc.) but how do we listen to stones, rivers, animals and plants who speak in a different language to ours? How do we learn other than human languages and engage with more-than-human witnesses? How can knowledge be preserved without at the same time suppressing its own history and context? How can knowledge by others be accessed without appropriating, or worse, destroying it? What decolonial tools do we need to negotiate the knowledge economy?

On the one hand, there are countless examples, as discussed earlier, of the destruction of indigenous epistemologies and cosmologies – sometimes actively through censorship and coercion, and other times more subtly through erasure and the denial of support and resources. But as James Scott explains, there is also resistance to co-optation and assimilation, using what he refers to as ‘weapons of the weak’. In his book *The Art of Not Being Governed: An Anarchist History of Upland Southeast Asia* (2009) Scott studies how various indigenous groups in Southeast Asia intentionally cultivated crops that were difficult for the state to tax, confiscate or control. His research reveals that as a strategy to resist state authority and maintain their autonomy, indigenous people often planted crops that were less visible or portable, such as root crops like yams, cassava or potatoes. These crops were chosen because they could be hidden from the state, which sought to extract resources through taxation or labour. In times of state encroachment or threat, indigenous people would even destroy their own crops to avoid detection or punishment. Scott’s argument highlights how these clandestine practices were a form of resistance against state domination.

Toni Morrison’s novel *Beloved*, which tells the story of an escaped enslaved woman who kills her infant daughter to save her from a life of slavery, serves as a poignant example of the practice of ‘care to know.’ It highlights the challenges involved in confronting painful truths and shameful secrets. Beyond the narrative of the novel, the phrase succinctly summarises the role of art as a medium that offers the possibility of a more ethical approach to sharing knowledge. Due to them being painful and unsettling, one may prefer to not confront uncomfortable realities, opting to remain ignorant of traumatic pasts. Aesthetic practices can open up possibilities to rectify this by uncovering difficult topics in a responsible manner. It offers self-critical and introspective ways of approaching historical injustice.

You explain that the exhibition *Knowledge is a Garden* draws upon an African proverb: ‘Knowledge is like a garden; if it isn’t cultivated, it can’t be harvested.’ This goes against the understanding of knowledge as mere ‘brute’ facts awaiting discovery through stringent positivist methodologies. Instead, it is conceived as an evolving, organic entity that necessitates ongoing painstaking cultivation and attention. This epistemic labour has to be undertaken by both the elites *and* the subalterns. While facilitating interaction between diverse epistemic communities, we need to be vigilant about epistemic extraction, which entails mining the Global South for data and information in the name of intercultural competence and global learning. Gayatri Spivak’s ideas of ‘planetary ethics’, ‘transnational literacy’ and ‘aesthetic education’ encourage the pursuit of an ethics rooted in the principle of ‘caring to know’. This requires acknowledging the constraints of our epistemological frameworks and remaining open to diverse modes of meaning-making. Interactions among disparate epistemic and linguistic communities can promote a reciprocal and multidirectional exchange, while resisting the commodification of alterity and the exoticisation of marginalised viewpoints. Fostering the dissemination of varied epistemologies and ethical paradigms can mitigate paternalistic attitudes towards the non-Western world. The German philosopher Immanuel Kant, drawing inspiration from Horace, famously invoked the Enlightenment motto *sapere aude*, or ‘dare to know’, which emphasises the courage to use reason. This motto has served as a foundation for the Western approach to world-making. In contrast, post-colonial, queer and feminist critical epistemologies advocate for an ethics centred on caring for marginalised and silenced voices, as well as nurturing the unsaid and the forgotten. These approaches prioritise respect, humility and a recognition of non-Western norms and practices, avoiding both romanticisation and paternalism towards the Other.

Your efforts in *Learning from Artemisia* resonate with Spivak’s imperative to ‘learn from below’. Instead of seeing traditional knowledge and modernity as antagonistic, the effort should be to revive and integrate traditional knowledge with contemporary practices thereby valuing and preserving diverse forms of knowledge. An essential aspect of decolonisation involves acknowledging the colonial erasure and theft of non-Western wisdom. As previously argued, the destruction and denial of both personal and collective histories, as well as the degradation of native norms, rituals, practices

and traditions, are intrinsic to colonial processes. Restitution and reparation of these losses are crucial for restoring dignity and humanity to those whose histories and futures have been stolen. Provenance research plays a key role in tracing the claims of those whose rights have been violated to address colonial harms. Postcolonial scholars highlight that a fundamental obstacle to decolonising the West is its inability to engage with the non-Western world in a non-Orientalist, non-hierarchical, and non-paternalistic manner. Here aesthetics can play a significant role in provoking us out of our indifference and irresponsibility. In my view, 'the art of decolonisation' involves countering instrumental reason which is aimed at efficiency and progress that destroys or appropriates that which stands in its way. Aesthetics can engage with the unthought without teleological intent, serving as an antidote to purposive rationality by remaining open to previously foreclosed possibilities and potentialities. It does not seek mastery or conquest, but rather the transformation of the mundane into the extraordinary.

In conclusion, I would like to bring attention to two significant German concepts: *Vergangenheitsbewältigung* and *Zukunftsfähigkeit*. The former, roughly translated as 'working through the past,' and the latter, which implies 'future viability'. To be *zukunftsfähig* one must engage in *Vergangenheitsaufarbeitung*, which involves critically examining global inequalities in the economic, political, and socio-cultural spheres. If the Western world is willing and able to learn from history and from societies it previously stereotyped as 'backward' and 'inferior', there is an opportunity to forge a post-imperial world. Postcolonial experiences in the Global South offer valuable lessons for envisioning a shared future free from domination and oppression.