Adorned with rattles
Meditations on indigenous sonorism, communal healing, and nature.

Master of Fine Arts Thesis

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Table of Contents

Introduction — Artist Statement 2

Anthropological gathering, Acoustic ecologies 4

Museum Reparations 8

The practice of healing, relational consciousness, mending the wound 11

Decolonizing Methodologies: Research and Practice 12

Adorned with Rattles, Thesis Installation 17

Conclusion, Ancestral remembering 18

Acknowledgements 19

Bibliography 20
Artist Statement

Grounded in Indigenous ontologies, Latinx anthropology and nepantla, I seek to understand the sonic and oral traditions that have populated the Americas for millennia as a way to repair, reclaim and reimagine temporalities of healing and to tell stories across time and space. I gaze at the night sky the way my ancestors did, to inquire about how to make sense of the world and ultimately connect with them and their stubborn capacity to survive within us.

I re-construct pre-Columbian instruments that have been locked away in museums, reclaiming their sounds and sovereignty. Through this act, my body becomes a vessel for the most primal creative force. I perform so that we may reaffirm our connection to the earth.

To adorn these instruments and to turn them into ceremonial objects, I use achiote, mango leaves, shells, tobacco string, and iridescent pigment that reminds me of the skies in the coast of Ecuador, the ancestral homelands of my ancestors who played these instruments. My work is the past and future conjugated in the present. By reclaiming we remember; by remembering we heal.

I imagine how sounds and rituals can restore a subjective-geographic relation to living systems and engage with intersectional technologies that can dismantle imperialism and ecological degradation in order to tend to the earth and heal mutually.
Anthropological gathering, Acoustic ecologies

In the fall of 2020, I joined the Escuela de Sonoridades Ancestrales, a group that focuses on the careful reconstruction and examination of Mesoamerican and South American instruments\(^1\) that exist in museum collections. Using 3D modeling, x-ray images, ethnographic research, field study and parallelism among groups, we gather a wider understanding of the sonic past of Abiayala\(^2\) (America). Members of different countries in South and Central America met weekly through zoom to study the formal characteristics of sonic objects. We created an onto-epistemological condition where we discussed and recreated objects imagining potential uses and applying them to our realities rather than just studying them. I have re-created many instruments in these past two years, from idiophones and wind instruments to whistling water vessels.

In my current practice, I juxtapose many of these instruments with personal accounts and childhood memories of artifacts and findings my mother and I receive as gifts from our relatives, who live in these ancestral lands. In coastal Ecuador, you can still find instruments and objects washed up on shore, like anthropomorphic flutes and rocks with incised iconographies. In the following lines, I will explain some of the instruments and acoustic characteristics of the instruments I have been developing.

\textit{Idiophones}

\textit{Idiophones} are instruments that create sound by vibration, like rattles, bells, and benta. Diverse Mesoamerican and South American cultures developed rattles with various forms and sounds, showing how common and important they were in ancestral ceremonies. This

\(^1\)While many indigenous peoples in the Americas continue traditional practices with sound, my research focuses on instruments where a continuous legacy has been severed. I am also choosing to use Mesoamerican and South American instruments to imply instruments created Pre-1492.

\(^2\)Hannah Burdette, \textit{In Revealing Rebellion in Abiayala}, (UAPress, 2019) on page xi, “The term Abiayala ... derive[d] from the Guna (Kuna) language of Panama’... is ‘an alternative name for the Americas’ ... and “an alternative to the geopolitical boundaries imposed on the American continent through the process of conquest and colonization.” “Abiayala refers to the Americas as a whole, not only the region south of the U.S.-Mexico border.”
instrument is made of a hollow and enclosed sphere with small stones or clay inside that produce sound when shaken.

Through iconographic references extracted from polychrome vessels of the Maya Preclassical period, we see rattles accompanying different instruments such as whistling vessels and flutes. It has been theorized that Mexico, Ecuador, and Peru had long standing trading relations, which included ceremonial objects, sound instruments, and ceramic techniques.

Throughout Mesoamerica and South America, there was also a proliferation of “sounding plates,” plates with two or three hollow legs that contain small pieces of clay that made sound when shaken. These plates had the dual purpose of being utilitarian ceremonial objects, and sonic instruments.

Woodwind instruments or Aerophones

These instruments produce sound by vibrating air. Globular flutes, commonly known as Ocarinas, poly-globular flutes, and long tubular flutes fall in this category. Poly-globular flutes are distinctive instruments with a unique morphology developed primarily in Mesoamerica. The flutes are composed of two or more globular chambers connected directly to each other or by way of a tube. According to the design, the arrangement of the chambers can vary.

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3 https://research.mayavase.com/kerrmaya.html


5 Vanessa Rodens y Gonzalo Sanchez Santiago, Flauta Poliglobulares de Mesoamerica, Archeología de las Americas Vol. 2, (Verlag, 2013)
By recreating these flutes, we can see the complex acoustic system that they generate. Furthermore, it gives the player the ability to interpret how their tuning system could have been, what type of sounds they favored and established a connection to the natural and supernatural world. Although these instruments present a great diversity of sonic textures with mainly low pitch sounds, the original sounds of Abiayala have a unique sound aesthetic that we are just learning to understand and unravel.

This sound experience can be related to rituals that lead to trance due to the effects it produces on the auditory system and the human consciousness. Based on iconographic information, the characters that appear to be interpreting aerophones, stand out through their ritual ornaments. Due to their acoustic designs, these instruments could be played in parallel with other instruments and allow the realization of other actions such as dance and movement to be performed.

**Whistling water vessel**

Although the whistling water vessel is also an instrument that produces sound by vibrating air as previously seen with aerophones, hydraulic sound objects are extraordinary artifacts that deserve their respective category. Developed exclusively throughout Abiayala, the whistling water vessel has a particular design and mode of operation. It is composed of a whistle and two or, at times, three chambers. They are all connected by a tube that generates sound through its pendulum movement. The water is poured into one chamber or via a spout (figure 5), and as it travels to the other chamber, the whistle reacts to the subtle airflow that moves with the water, generating a sound akin to the song of birds. In my observation, it is similar to common Loons.

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6 Mayavase.com
7 https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4ENNzjy8QjU
According to oral tradition, the whistling glass contains the action of the five elements: the earth to mold its body, the fire to turn it into ceramic, the air inside, the water to actuate it, and the sound as a fifth element.  

Batimento/ Polyrhythm

Polyrhythm is not a category of sound instrument but a type of sound indigenous to Abiayala, polyrhythm plays an essential part in the understanding of the sonic weave of this land. Harmonies that are indigenous to the Abiayala seek to generate an effect in consciousness that is not concerned with melody but with inter-species communication and the effect of the sounds on the body. Polyrhythm, for example, is widely used in Mesoamerican and South American instruments. Polyrhythm happens when two tones emanate simultaneously with a slight differentiation in frequency, like how cicadas sing in the natural world. These sounds can generate heat in the listener. Even today, different Amazonian tribes like the Shipibo in Peru, and Napo in Ecuador use polyrhythm for expelling negative energy or maladies from the body.

According to Medical News Today, an embryo will begin to develop ears during the 2nd month of pregnancy. The Valdivia Culture from coastal Ecuador, dating back 3,500 years B.C.E among Abiayala oldest cultures, created anthropomorphic flutes that speak of the importance of sound in the womb. These figurines, as they are popularly known, have three chambers; one chamber is at the crown of the head, and it is to blow air, and the other two are the whistles that sit right at each side of the ovaries. The musician blows from the head of the figurine, vibrating the whistles in the ovaries, and resonating through the body. Symbolically, this is the breath of the cosmos entering the womb and wiring the embryo's neurological system through sound.

Studying the sounds of Abiayala is not only a way to reclaim our traditional heritage, but also to be in dialogue, to understand and learn how the ancient indigenous mind viewed and healed their world.

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8 Esteban Valdivia, *Coloreando Memoria Maya*. (Self publish, 2020) pg. 37
9 Interview with Mama Celia, a healer and medicine woman from the rainforest region of Napo, Ecuador
10 Interview with Mama Celia, Napo Ecuador
11 [https://www.medicalnewstoday.com/articles/324464](https://www.medicalnewstoday.com/articles/324464)
Museum Reparations

Most of the objects that I research are in museums in the USA, Europe, and Latin America. Although we could argue that objects in Spanish and Portuguese-speaking countries are in their land of origin or are culturally connected; the structures that created museums in these countries come from the same conditions that created museums in the USA and Europe.

I ask how we can create relations to these artifacts without the mediation of the museum, centering personal accounts, indigenous knowledge and the land as points of departure and belonging. It is essential to question the role of museums and contemplate how we can dismantle the inherent hierarchy that these institutions have on how they teach us about our history and cultures. “The number of objects that were looted in the 19th century required the creation of museums all around the USA and Europe.”

When entering and walking in any museum, I have already allowed my body to be trapped in the imperial temporality that birthed these institutions, destroyed cultures, and created spaces where artifacts became objects of viewing that consequently, created what we know as modern and contemporary art.

Contemplating and reconstructing sonic objects that I observe through glass in a collection, or a museum site makes me question even more the separation between objects as relics and people from the same land as aliens. The instruments I study have been sanitized, denuded for museum spectators, with clean labels that speak of the past as if there are no descendants. Generations of this violent act create a Latinx diaspora that feels unfamiliar with their heritage, learning about their ancestors through impenetrable glass, through a particular taxonomy, and through a line of sight that has been neatly chosen to show what the museum expert deems exciting or valuable.

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13 It is notoriously known that Picasso went to the Trocadero Museum of Ethnology’s basement and spent hours drawing looted African artifacts that he used as inspiration for his renown works without giving any tribute to the cultures that he felt entitled to appropriate. https://www.meer.com/en/64697-pablo-picassos-debt-to-african-art
Through this particular taxonomy many sound instruments could come by unnoticed, because unless the viewer is an expert in sound instruments, the sound portion of an object is not always noticeable. It is impossible to ignore the evident; objects are relics of a time and cultural past, but the people, the descendants of those lands, do not share the same consideration. The documented objects and the undocumented people are related. In my research, this acknowledgement is a fundamental aspect of reclamation.

In an interview with Hyperallergic, Author Ariella Aisha Azoulay responds to this notion by saying “Imperialism destroys cultures by destroying the infrastructure that creates objects; their value system.”

The acknowledgement of people and artifacts also ties to the relation with the land and how by associating land with labor, we lose a sacred relation that is not based on production but is in reciprocity with the elements. We cannot decolonize the museum without decolonizing our relation to the land. Although we may see these instruments in a museum, they have a longer history. Their place of origin is the soil and environmental conditions that inspired and compelled the makers to create sound instruments, ceremonies, and rituals to be in right relation with the land and their deities.

When we walk through these spaces, we must search for different epistemes, ask questions that point at reparations. Just as colonialism exists, forces opposing it have also always existed. Re-creating these instruments is an act of opposition and dismantling, but more importantly an act of love and resilience.

As part of my artist residency at The Samuel Dorsky Museum, I accessed the collection and created videos of ancient objects showing all their sides, so we have a fuller understanding and relation to these artifacts. I activated the sound instruments in the collection and wrote my interpretation of the objects via my social platform. I also recorded objects from various places around the world that are alongside the artifacts I researched.

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14 My experience seeing a whistling water vessel at the Met Museum cataloged as a vessel with other artifacts in the Americas wing, instead of the Music wing with other more recognizable sound instruments of the same period.
invited colleagues from the same geographies as the objects to write a reflection and observation on the piece.

Additionally, I taught sound ceramic workshops to the New Paltz community and engaged in conversations around belonging and solidarity.

![Whistle making workshop, Dorsky Museum, 2022](image)

**Figure 6, Whistle making workshop, Dorsky Museum, 2022**

**Figure, Cyprus, 2,000BCE, clay, Dorsky Museum Collection. Invited writer Defne Cizakca**

Growing up on the island, they delivered us a few truths. 1) That all the women here shared the same almond shaped eyes. 2) That strangers fell into those eyes, the way they would fall through the cracks in other places. 3) That this was the birthplace of Aphrodite: the Goddess no one could decipher.

They also said that this Goddess of Love and Beauty was born of semen and foam. But no islander ever believed that story.

We believe the beginning was you. You, whose eyes we inherited. Inhabitant of the summer, and of the sea, and of the conch. You birthed desire and suffering, before there ever was anything else. Too much time has passed but we still shield our hearts with arms as slender as yours.
The Practice of healing, relational consciousness, mending the wound

“What process of change can move a people that does not know who they are, nor where they came from? - Eduardo Galeano, Defensa de la Palabra

In her book Medicine Stories, Aurelia Levins Morales writes “one of the first things a colonizing power or repressive regime does is attack the sense of the history of those they wish to dominate by attempting to take over and control their relationships with their past.” I have previously discussed this concept regarding artifacts in museums. However, another important characteristic is how this disruption also affects our relation to self, youth, and the land.

One of the side effects of delving deep into the study of ancient artifacts, especially those of your ancestral homelands, is that one starts to recover an indigenous mind, and visions emerge with practical and specific ways in which these instruments could have been, and still can be used for healing.

Recovering an indigenous mind is crucial to the social imagination of sustainability, especially in places where this connection has been severed. Today, many Latinx people living in the USA live disconnected from an embodied spirituality and healing practices that feel too remote to claim. The original wound of colonialism is the struggle with internalized oppression and a historical sense of the conquered, which has played a predominant role in the narratives of being of mixed race, mestize.

“Trauma in a person can look like personality, trauma in a family can look like family traits, trauma in a group of people can look like culture”.  

I question how we find ground from where to work through this trauma that is deeply embedded in our bodies, and how we reconstruct different genealogies that imperialism severed from us. Borrowing a term from Gloria Anzaldua, how do we inhabit our nepantla17 nature as a place of power and connection? Furthermore, using a voice that is

16 Resmaa Menakem, radio interview 2021, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=omyzEvVvjog

17 Nepantla is a concept used in Chicano and Latinx anthropology, social commentary, criticism, literature and art. It represents a concept of in-between-ness. Nepantla is a Nahuatl word which means in the middle. Wikipedia
personal and political, how do we creatively engage with the process of resistance and rejection?

In my practice, I see the body as a root, and through the process of art making, this singular root becomes part of the root system of a world tree that goes back centuries of somatic experiences and an unbroken connection to a cosmic energy that forever flows through us. The objects in a museum were not taken from an individual, but from a collective group that formed into a culture, a collective trauma that can only be healed collectively. The muddy soil which becomes clay and later, through fire, becomes ceramic, plays a pivotal role in this healing and mending of us to become whole again. Making instruments, speculating, reconstructing, performing, sharing, and making them with community empowers our innate connection to our past, to our bodies as repositories of memory, and to our ancestors, who were in right relation with the land.

**Decolonizing Methodologies: Research and Practice**

If we understand that the creation of western modern art and subsequently contemporary art is part of the imperial project, then how do we create what we create without contributing to it? How do we bring forth different epistemes that challenge this temporality? What role does contemporary art play in dismantling extractive policies? Paraphrasing Resmaa Menakem; if trauma happens first in a community, healing must also happen communally. This is also true for art. Creating art that is accessible and inspiring is a radical shift in perspective. Making art with community teaching communally, and sharing the sounds of Abiyala with the undocumented, Latinx, trans, afro-indigenous is a way to challenge the imperial project, and most importantly, to bring us together.

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18 See Cherrie Moraga writings, in particular her poem *Art in América con acento*, 1992
19 The meaning of healing is to become whole, different from curing which means eliminating all evidence of disease.
In *Amuleto, 2021*, a series made of six relief drawings in clay, I rubbed each piece with charcoal onto 8x10 sheets resulting in 100 rubbings per relief. Each is a meditation on personal and environmental distress that I make available for the audience to take during my thesis exhibition.

I use the idea of an amulet as a totemic figure, in this case a two-dimensional figure, to draw on ways in which we can think of personal trauma and environmental distress through the power of image, word, and ancestral remembering.

The *Amuletos* are images on single sheets of paper, each with its own meaning. I draw inspiration from the stone relief in Tiwanaku, Bolivia and Ingapirca, Ecuador. These are sacred temples covered in symbols and stories. Their specific meaning and use have been lost in time; however, they still carry an inexorable power.

When I ponder upon cultural lineage, I reflect on how we sustain a radical practice of reclamation and indigenization\(^{20}\) that also speaks of our times and environmental perils. In *Amuleto, 2021* the title of each piece is the accompanying poem/reflection that links words with images, thoughts with actions.

Guardiana of the wildfires. We pay respect to elders past and present stewards of the land from time out of mind. We pay respect to all the creatures and life forms that have also suffered from the disruptive forces of capitalism and colonialism. We join you in the resistance against this ecological emergency and call upon the weavers of the land and sky to make a new tapestry for us to follow.

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\(^{20}\) If Decolonization is the removal of colonial practices, then indigenization is the redoing of indigenous elements

Sound healing is central to my work. In my ongoing research-based work on acoustic ecologies centering on indigenous sonorism, I developed *Siete poderes de la mar (Seven powers of the sea)*, 2021. This piece includes a video installation accompanied by the instruments that were used in the performance. The project was developed as a response to the ecological degradation of the ocean through oil spills and rising temperatures. I invited six participants, some of whom were activists, water protectors, and a member of the Shinnecock nation, to perform with me using these instruments for the ocean. I created five whistling water vessels, each informed by a key species in the Atlantic Ocean, and two flutes that are informed by other sea creatures. The video is based on a poem that I wrote in Spanish, Kiwcha, and English, and the audio is the sound of the instruments.

In this project, I reflect on my childhood and relation to the ocean and coastal Ecuador. By making these whistling vessels I am in dialogue with the ancient makers of these instruments, but I am also speaking of our challenging times. The whistling bottles are based on the acoustical principles of the Chorrera culture, that lived in what is now called coastal Ecuador from 1,500 B.C.E - V A.D., one of the earliest cultures to develop this hydraulic sounding system.

I use both dark and light clay. I often decorate the dark clay with shells, corals, and materials I trade or purchase at powwows or other gatherings. For the white clay, I apply a post-firing technique using mica with pigment to create iridescent patterns that evoke the skies of coastal Ecuador and the Bioluminescence of deep-sea creatures. This emission of light by a living organism is similar to the light that instruments of Abiayala emanate when played.
Through my extensive research on material, ethnomusicological archives and empirical methodologies, I have found that nothing exists by itself. Everything is a continuation and in dialogue with other forces. In Oficio Divino, (Divine Office) 2022 a black and white photograph of a large round egg-like object is surrounded by hands and hay falling in the background. This image is inspired by two concepts: one relating to the nature of clay and the other a pre-classic Mayan codex. It is known that clay is ready to be fired through a tactile temperature test or by how it sounds. For me, as someone exploring ceramic sound objects, the nature of clay to be intrinsically sonic is fascinating. When I tap the object, it makes a sound that is inherent to clay, but it also sounds like a heartbeat. I connected this egg-like object, that has an inherent sound, to a Mayan Preclassical period codex, where it is said that art is a divine office, as work that allows society to connect with the universe and understand beauty as an intricate and essential part of life\textsuperscript{21}. I imagine many hands drawing on the object, tapping on it, pondering, and creating worlds for us to inhabit.

\textit{Calling song, 2022} is a fifty-five-second sound meditation performance where the artist plays a polyrhythmic frog motif instrument. The camera view is a closeup; two elements that stand out are the achiote-covered hands of the player and the iridescent blue frog. This performance is informed by ecosystems in coastal Ecuador; it aims to highlight the importance of frogs as barometers of climate and the impact that industrialization has in the preservation of these forests. As much as 98\% of the Pacific Forest has been lost in

\textsuperscript{21} Esteban Valdivia, \textit{Coloreando Memoria Maya}, (Self-published, 2020) pg. 44
just one century. Most of it has been converted to marginally productive cattle pasture. Almost the entire ecosystem has been sacrificed to feed cows\(^{22}\). Through this performance, I seek to embody the pacific coast forest that I want to protect and bring to attention.

\[\text{Figure 12, Calling song videostill, Koyoltzintli, 2022}\]

Adorned with rattles, Thesis Installation

I build my language with rocks. – Édouard Glissant, “L’Intention poétique”
For my thesis exhibition, I created a sonic environment formed by objects, fabric, photographs and performances.

I divided the space into the four quadrants of the chakana, the stepped cross of the Andean sky and culture. One can face the installation at once and choose whether to walk through the left or right side. Chakay means “to bridge” to another place or a portal to an altered dimension. Every piece in the space is in dialog with each other. To see a photograph is to be in dialogue with the ceramic object near it; to look at the sound instruments is to be in concert with the sound emanating from the videos. This is comparable to my research, in which each instrument was not observed in isolation, but in relation to the life around it. Everything in the exhibition becomes alive only in relation to one another. The body transiting the space is the recipient and the bridge between a primeval force and the present.
Conclusion
Los pasos encontrados

“El piso indio de abajo tala lo que está por debajo de las construcciones y ficciones” – Silvia Rivera Cusicanqui

In the summer of 2014, my professor Esteban Valdivia, who initiated me into the school of ancestral sounds, traveled to Europe and played many of the instruments I have written about here, in different cathedrals throughout the continent, as a way to carry the sounds of Abiayala across the ocean. He points out that the sounds of Abiayala are not gone, they have been dormant for 600 years and are starting to wake up.

We are the inheritors of indigenous legacies that adapted, transformed, innovated, and hid in order to survive in us. We are a part of a larger story: the Earth story with her own time and will. My part in this human story in this Earth time is to bring these sounds to the community, to nature, and to awaken memories that have been in my cellular body all along. My intention in making instruments is to teach people to be their own healers and menders between the past and the now. I do this so we can sing, and restore songs to the earth and to each other, so we can transform, dream, and heal.
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