

Editorial Creative Writing and Arts

Vegetal Humanities in the Amazon

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“forest my dictionary / words alive and gnawed / rough with paths already traveled / Açanà, Tapajurà, Igarapé / each word a being, ringing sharp.”¹ With these words, Amazonian poet Márcia Theóphilo describes the Amazon forest as a pulsating body resonant with history and survival, a living archive filled with raw physicality and sensorial memory. The Forest is not merely a landscape but a synesthetic web of lexicons emerging from it. If, on one hand, the weaving of Indigenous and Western language exposes the ongoing impact of colonial erasure attempting to overwrite ancestral memory, their intertwined coexistence on the other stands as a cultural testament to the refusal to forget. Indigenous words sprout between verses like they do from the Forest as living vessels of tradition and resistance.

The visceral livelihood of Theóphilo’s poetry, stands in stark opposition to how the vegetal world has been represented in dominant Western traditions. Too often, in fact, Western art and philosophy have cast plants as static props or silent ornaments, once again imposing a gaze that strips away the vitality of vegetal wor(l)ds. The tradition of still life painting, for example, depicts flora removed from their ecologies and frozen in time, most often to stand as symbolic reminders of relentless decay. Even when interrogating the sense of “things,” this genre tends to establish an ontology of inanimacy, further reinforced by pairing vegetation with dead animals or so-called inanimate objects, leaving no space for dialogue or active listening.² This aesthetic logic parallels early botanical cataloguing practices during the Renaissance, when plant specimens were severed from their relational ecologies, studied in isolation, and renamed, a process that prefigured the rise of natural history museums,

¹ “La foresta è il mio dizionario / parole vive e masticate / Açanà, Tapajurà, Igarapé / ogni parola un essere, risuona affilata” (Theóphilo; translation is mine).

² It is important to note that still life was historically ranked as an inferior art form and was often the only avenue available for women painters to express their creativity. While this restriction was imposed by patriarchal social norms, still life became a means for women to assert agency and challenge traditional gender roles. As Rebecca Birrell (2020) observes, these artists created a new moral universe in dialogue with plants, transforming their botanical art into acts of resistance against objectification and seclusion of both women and nature.

where taxonomic classification was institutionalized and the semiotic rupture it enacted was consolidated.

And so, as Giovanni Aloï observes, “for centuries we have posed as sole protagonists on the historical stage and when through art we have turned to plants, all we could ever see was ourselves” (10). This anthropocentric orientation underpins extractive epistemologies that continue to shape western thought, an approach that is more and more incapable to reckon with current socioecological urgencies. The artists featured in this special issue do not passively depict the Amazon; their work emerges from it, just like the words in Theóphilo’s poem emerge from the Forest’s living textures. Through their creative practices, the vegetal speaks, listens, and we, as readers and viewers, are invited into relational and multispecies modes of thinking. The epistemic shift they propose goes beyond introducing a phytocentric perspective. It recognizes the inextricable, reciprocal links that entangle humans within a larger web of living relations.

The cover image, *Preparing the Diet with Medicinal Plants*, is a generous offering by Elena Valera Bawan Jisbe, a Shipibo-Konibo artist whose work honors the healing knowledge of her ancestral lineage. Her depiction illustrates a sacred *dieta*, a dietary ritual that involves the ingestion of plants who are acknowledged as guides of transformation, transmitters of knowledge, and agents of purification. Her visual language transcends representational art by acting as a repository of cosmopoetic memory interlacing the body with the land and the vegetal world of the Amazon. Stylized medicinal plants, flowing rivers, and geometric patterns are not decorative elements but encode spiritual knowledge. The plants encircle the central figure like guardians and interlocutors, reminding us that to engage with Amazonian cosmology means to enter a dense semiotic web where vision, sound, breath, and vegetal life intertwine. The cover thus stands as a vibrant testament to Indigenous vegetal epistemology rooted in reciprocity, attunement, and ongoing dialogue with plant life.

The first contribution of the creative writing and arts section reiterates and expands on these ideas. Pedro Favaron and Chonon Bensho, descendants of a Shipibo-Konibo family, engage in a relational, co-written dialogue on their lived cosmopoetic philosophy. As they share in their text, in the native community of Santa Clara de Yarinacocha (Ucayali, Perú), they run a family cooperative with their relatives dedicated to artistic practices, ancestral medicine, Indigenous research, food sovereignty and reforestation projects, and the care of an ethnobotanical garden. Their immersive way of knowing draws from embodied Amazonian wisdom, materially expressed in Chonon Bensho’s embroidery, described as a meditative practice through which the artist synchronizes with ancestral rhythms of complementarity. Eight of Bensho’s works are interspersed in the essay, each accompanied by careful interpretations that guide the viewer toward a decolonial gaze. Through geometric designs such as *koros kene* and *maya kene*, Favaron and Bensho articulate the ethical principles embedded in Shipibo-Konibo visual thought.

Moving away from the term “animism” which they argue “carries the epistemic bias of hegemonic modernity,” the authors propose to embrace the concept of

Amerindian cosmopoetics: a relational ontology in which plants, rivers, stars, humans, all participate as communicative and expressive beings in a living cosmos. Their essay also engages in a critical yet hopeful dialogue with contemporary plant science. Yet the authors stress that Indigenous understandings of vegetal vibrancy do not derive their legitimacy from scientific validation; they precede it, offering an ethical and spiritual vision that Western science is only beginning to grasp. In the midst of ecological devastation and extractive violence, the authors call for a reweaving of scientific and ancestral knowledge, grounded in the regeneration of bonds and a reorientation of knowledge itself that prioritizes a wondrous celebration of belonging.

The second contribution is an exclusive selection of eight illustrations by Sheroanawe Hakihiwe, an Indigenous Yanomami artist from Sheroana, a community along the Upper Orinoco River in the Venezuelan Amazon. Working primarily with drawing, Hakihiwe draws on the signs and symbols of his culture to create artworks deeply rooted in ancestral knowledge. Since the 1990s, he has been crafting handmade paper from natural fibers and used vegetable inks to bring the vibrant color of his surroundings to his pieces. His art-making is itself an ecological practice, a process of co-creation with the vegetal world that invites a tactile awareness. Rather than mimetic imagery, his style embraces synthetic abstraction characterized by linear pen or brushstrokes and geometric motifs learned from basketry and body painting for ritual ceremonies. Luis Romero notes in the curatorial premise that Hakihiwe's visual language aims to "document his profound connection to his community, the jungle (*urihi*), and the collective Yanomami imagery."

Through his works, the Amazon not only escapes the "dichotomous depiction of vegetation either as reminiscent of Earthly Paradise or as a green hell" (Vieira 217), but also challenges the ocularcentric construction of plant-experience that dominates Western visual culture. As Hakihiwe explained to writer Lauren Moya Ford, "I don't invent anything, everything I do is my jungle and what is there" (n.p.), anchoring his practice in place-based, experiential knowledge, immersed in the land and in intimate dialogue with it. This embodied approach allows his art to move beyond passive seeing toward active sensing, where the vegetal becomes the storyteller of its own stories.

Following Hakihiwe's evocative selection are two works by the multiversed artist Maria Thereza Alves: five paintings from her series *This is Not an Apricot* and a reprint of her poem *The Umbragiade*. For the first time available in open access, the poem features hyperlinked numbered references connecting directly to the endnotes, making the reading experience more dynamic and immediate. Alves's oeuvre spans from political texts, mixed media installations, and drawings, to photographs, performances, and in situ works. As one of the most significant voices to emerge in recent years from Brazil, her work bears witness to silenced voices and addresses both the devastating effects of Portuguese imperialism on the Indigenous peoples of her native Brazil and the broader impacts of Spanish conquest across the Americas.

In *This is Not an Apricot*, a title that intertextually nods to René Magritte's *This is Not a Pipe*, Alves undertakes a powerful act of semiotic resistance and botanical decolonization. The series was inspired by a real encounter in a market in Manaus where she asked a vendor the names of various unfamiliar fruits. To each, he simply replied, "an apricot." In reality, these were not apricots but fruits whose original Indigenous names had been erased through colonial assimilation, which forbade Indigenous languages and, with them, both the breadth and specificity of the ecological knowledge those languages encoded. Losing words, especially to imperialist subjugation, is not just a linguistic loss, it is the collapse of entire ecologies (Kimmerer 258). In response, Alves painted these fruits accompanied by their scientific names with the phrase *this is not an apricot* displayed beneath each image. Through this repetitive gesture, she challenges the colonial homogenization of signs and exposes how both language and biodiversity are deliberately erased under systems of domination. At the same time, she rescripts the visual language of Western art through an Indigenous cultural imaginary, using painting as a site of epistemic reparation.

The Umbragiade is more than a poetic composition; it is a collective act of witnessing. Composed from interviews with agroforestry agents from AMAAIAC (Association of the Movement of Indigenous Agroforestry Agents of Acre), all belonging to various Indigenous communities who, in Alves's words from the prologue, "have survived genocide campaigns," the poem foregrounds a chorus of voices that rise from within the forest to assert ecological sovereignty. Its cumulative rhythm bears testimony to the ongoing devastation caused by ranching, soy farming, and logging ("as they get more cattle, the clearings get larger"), while also affirming the unwavering resilience of the forest's protectors: "When I am in the middle of the forest / I am fine, / I am at home, I am with the elements." By interweaving oral testimony, song, and political critique, Alves turns this epic poem into a polyphonic defense of the forest's right to stand as a living entity entitled to sovereignty. This ethos is further stressed by recurring declarations of territorial belonging and kinship: "the forest is our home," "our shelter," "This is ours... ours. / It is ours." The poem, then, in articulating a cosmogony fundamentally at odds with extractive logics, leaves us with a vital warning: "If it were not for the forests, there is no 'us'."

The fourth contribution to the art section features four illustrations by Afro-Brazilian artist Rosana Paulino. Her recent exhibitions include *Diálogos do Dia e da Noite* at Mendes Wood DM, New York (2025), *Novas Raízes* at Casa Museu Eva Klabin, Rio de Janeiro (2024) and group shows such as *Project a Black Planet: The Art and Culture of Panafrika* at the Art Institute of Chicago (2024) and *The Milk of Dreams* at the 59th Venice Biennale (2022). Paulino's work speaks directly to what Vincent Brown has called "the political life of slavery," in which "ancestry, mourning, and commemoration" were fundamental to the struggle of the unfree to remake their social condition (1247). Her artistic practice confronts dominant historical narratives and opens space for reflection, resistance, and reimagining. Deeply rooted in Afro-Brazilian cosmologies, Paulino offers a vital voice attuned to the experiences of Black

women navigating the enduring consequences of racism and enslavement in Brazil. Working across sewing, collage, drawing, video, and installation, Paulino deconstructs colonial visual regimes and reconstructs genealogies of identity and belonging. In the selected artworks, she reconfigures mythological archetypes to center Black and Indigenous women within a vegetal cosmology. Human figures merge with roots, vines, and tree trunks transforming into hybrid forms that speak to shared histories of survival and regeneration carried in the land. Through these interspecies entanglements, Paulino articulates a vision of the vegetal as a site of both trauma and healing, through a methodology “self-described as employing processes of *refazimento* (remaking)” that “upends the notion of racial democracy and equality within Brazilian society” (Das 63).

The two reproductions from her *Jatobá* series expands the scope of vegetal humanities beyond territorial ecologies into shared embodiment that affirms interspecies spiritual presence and processes of re-rooting. Drawing on plants significant to Afro-Brazilian culture and found across diverse Brazilian biomes, including the Amazon, Paulino grounds her vegetal iconography in geocological realities. In these works, plants grow out of limbs, mouths, and hair, rendering an interspecies metamorphosis that is more than just metaphor. Plant tendrils flourish as they envelop the human body, which, in reciprocity, receives strength from their embrace, a process that, as Liv Cuniberti observes, signals the body’s release from imposed boundaries: “The skin becomes the relic of an earlier time and the shedding of constraints” (n.p.). This exchange is further expressed in the selected pieces from *Senhora das plantas* (Woman of the Plants), where Paulino depicts the *Espada de Iansã*, a plant named after a deity in the Yoruba tradition. The hybridized figure lifts her forearms and extends open palms, which evokes feelings of nurturing care and protection. Here, plants act as threshold beings, as agents of connection, and as symbols of cultural resurgence, marking a movement from diasporic fracture to collective rootedness.

As the final contribution to this special issue, we present an interview with artist Thijs Biersteker, whose practice brings together science, art, and technology in service of environmental communication. Through immersive installations, Biersteker seeks to engage the public imagination and catalyze awareness around pressing ecological issues. He describes his role as a translator of data into emotion and of environmental science into multisensory experience. Yes, plants are constantly communicating; we can measure their neurological reactions. But without the affective labor of poets and artists who turn those signals into laughter, visual animacy, and musical vitality, plant sentience remains cognitively unthinkable. In works directly concerned with the Amazon, such as *Wither* and *Amazonium*, developed in collaboration with UNESCO, Biersteker uses real-time ecological data to create living sculptures that make the scale of deforestation and reforestation tangible to distant audiences. These installations exemplify what Ryan John has defined as “plant-art,” “with a conjoining hyphen signifying the inseparability of the two terms” (41), which refers to artistic works that mediate plant and forest systems

through digital technologies and data-driven aesthetics. In the example of the cacao tree in Indonesia, discussed in the interview, live sensing reveals the plant's responses to environmental stress, transforming the tree into a co-narrator of systemic crises, among which Biersteker mentions "slavery in supply chains, deforestation, soil depletion, food insecurity, corporate monopolies, and of course climate change." Through such works, Biersteker bridges multiple distances—geographical, linguistic, cultural, and epistemic—crafting a space in which art, science, and multispecies communication converge into a new language system made possible through technological mediation.

What stands out in the conversation is Biersteker's ethical awareness, which is evident not only in his engagement with the Amazon and its local communities, but also in the sustainable ethos that underpins his practice. At his studio, Woven, Biersteker adopts environmentally responsible production methods, using recycled materials, material passports, and considering the full life cycle of each installation. Equally, he acknowledges that the Amazon is not his story to tell. Instead, he situates his work as part of a collective chain of translation between scientists and artists, forests and viewers, always conscious of his position as a European artist working within histories of extractivism and colonial legacies. "The Amazon," he notes, "has become an ecological icon for biodiversity and interconnection." Yet this iconic status is not romanticized in his installations but rendered into affective materialities where viewers can experience loss, urgency, and the possibility of regeneration. Biersteker's art enacts, in practice, the kind of transdisciplinary and cross-cultural entanglement that this issue seeks to explore, one where multiple knowledges, affect, and care converge through shared concern and co-creation with the Amazon and the communities sovereign to that land.

Plants teach us resilience, the mesmerizing beauty of both growth and decay, and their intricate dance. To be in a place without plants, is to be "in a strange, loveless, unhealthy place" (Di Paola 1). If that is true, the Amazon must be one of the most vibrant and love-filled places in the world. As ecocides unfold in real time and ancient, wise trees are uprooted in acts of imperial and military violence, let us rise in care and solidarity with our plant kin and amplify Indigenous and other historically silenced voices in the struggle for ecological and artistic freedom. Protecting the Amazon and other vital ecosystems is not only an environmental imperative, but a matter of planetary balance, cultural memory, and justice.

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