

ATATA

Natalia Chaves López PhD is a Colombian historian. She undertakes participatory research into and with the native peoples of Colombia and Mexico, hereby focusing on the struggle for preserving clean water and the processes of organizing the protection and spread of native (corn)seeds. She obtained her MA sociology at the National University of Colombia, and recently graduated from the doctoral program in ethno-history at the Anthropology and History National School of Mexico. She collaborates with a wide range of (native) collectivities especially in the environmental field. Chaves López has published among others *We Cultivate the Word* in 2011, and *Worldview and Defense of Water by Tsotsiles and Tseltales in the Chiapas Ts'ajalsul Lagoon* in 2018.

I

The purpose of the following text is to present and preserve the concept of ATATA: it is a composition of two ideograms in the Mhuysqa dead language. ATATA can be defined as 'I give myself and you give yourself,' where giving is an act of receiving, because what you do for others is also affecting yourself. This exercise of reciprocity is a very important vibration of life because nobody can live without others, this includes all living creatures with whom we share the Earth. As a Colombian student of ancient history, I have experience with this concept for many years through learning about the wholesome ways of living with the indigenous people in both Colombia and Mexico.

It was through my PhD research that I experienced and looked further into the Mhuysqa and Mayan legacy. It was then that I realized the devastating reality that is currently affecting the quality of food. There is a systematic problem caused by the 'green revolution,' from radical changes to the local ways of cultivation to the use of inputs made and sold by big global corporations which are creating dependency as well as poisoning the seeds, the soil, the water and therefore our own bodies. Meanwhile, as a response to this, an 'undercurrent' is developing everywhere - people are living and cultivating according to new or past principles outside global corporations, recovering solidarity, hope, life, food, and bio-diversifying forms of being.

I have based my writings on the perspective of 'Heart's Epistemology.' What I mean is that heart and brain come together into my proposal of bringing to light my feel-thoughts about how to keep on living and how to make collective decisions about territory. The intention of this essay is to find ourselves and others heart to heart. In fact, the heart is the place where you keep dreams, hope, joy, and pain, according to the Mayan culture. You need to have all these clear to know what is the kind of living knowledge you want to go over.² In the Mhuysqa's worldview, the human heart is named *puyky*, an onomatopoeia of the heartbeat, that is said to be connected with the beating of the cosmos itself, representing the frequency where one can

1. To Yaku.

2. Pérez Moreno, María Patricia. *O'tan - o'tanil. Corazón: una forma de ser - estar - hacer - sentir - pensar de los tseltaletik de Bachajón. Chiapas, México. FLACSO, Quito. 2014*

find answers in the path of protecting life. The questions that this essay aims to answer are: How to feel-think the future of food from a perspective of reciprocity? Why is ATATA a fruitful principle for the future survival of the human kind?

Mhuysqas are an ancient indigenous culture who live in Cundinamarca and Boyacá regions of Colombia. They lost their language in the eighteenth century, which consisted of compact ideograms and hieroglyphics representing complex ideas about their understanding of nature. Today the Mhuysqas speak Spanish because of persecution since the colonial period and the banning of their language, but they kept some of their ancestral ways of living. I have studied their language, named Mhuysqhubun, and I propose here to bring back to life the 'dead' word ATATA, so that it is not forgotten. ATATA is a palindrome unity made by two ideograms and hieroglyphics of the moon calendar: Ata and Ta. Mariana Escribano,³ a linguist who writes about the Mhuysqa language and worldview, explains that Ata refers to the number 1, which in cosmogony is relative to the beginning of times. From the eighteenth-century grammar of the priest Jose Domingo Duquesne, we can translate the ideogram as follows: "the goods and something else." This means common goods or everything that exists. It also refers to the primordial pond, which links it to water as well.

Ta, the second sound in the unity, is the number 6 and represents a new beginning that is showing the comprehension of time in sequences of 5 and 20. The priest Duquesne wrote that Ta means "tillage, harvest." The Ta ideogram also means the bearing of fruits, the giving of yourself freely, as in agriculture labor. In this perspective the act of giving is an act of receiving; it also implies the responsibility of taking care of what you are receiving.

One of the most important acts in Mhuysqa culture was the offering in some holy lagoons. The main offering happened in Guatabita lagoon. This lagoon held the gold, offered by Mhuysqas and sought after by the Spanish conquerors who heard about it and tried to dry the lagoon up. The leader of the town of Guatabita, covered in gold, would be introduced on a raft, adorned with more gold and emeralds. The raft would be then given to the lagoon followed by the leader who would introduce himself into the water as an offering of the gold that was covering him and receive a purification bath. This astonishing ritual ATATA was done as a reminder of gratitude to water as one of the most important living beings. In reciprocity some of the few sacred female entities living in the water, representing the lagoon itself, would hold the abundance of Mhuysqa people. One of the ways water supplied life to the people was through rain, which provided corn to feed everybody.

In order to understand this reciprocal interaction/cycle of humans-lagoons-rain-corn I refer to Tzeltal Mayan people, who live in the Highlands of Chiapas and the Lacandona jungle

3. Escribano, Mariana. *Semiological research on Mhuysqa language, Decryption of moon calendar numbers*. Antares, Colombia. 2002

in Mexico, who keep alive very ancient knowledge and have the belief that corn spirit is living inside the mountains and lakes. It is given to the humans as result of offerings asking for maintenance of people. ATATA can be related with the Mayan Tselal concept of *Ich'el ta muk'* translated as "respect and recognition for all living things in nature."⁴

The corn cycle is Tselal life itself and requires a permanent compromise, the way they explain this is by referring to corn as a double being. Seen on one side as a baby and on the other as a woman supporting her family. When someone wastes corn, they can hear it crying - even if a single seed is left in the soil or a piece of tortilla lies on the kitchen floor. When seen as the woman supporting her family, it appears in the harvest when the corncobs have smaller corns sticks. These are signals that it is the mother of the plant and they do not eat it because they prefer to hang it up in the house as a gesture towards keeping abundance present in the home and community. This double reciprocal relation with corn as demanding care on one hand while at the same time protecting its own people, is a meaningful trait in understanding the power of this spirit.

In Tenejapa, a Tselal town, they traditionally make an offering in an important lagoon named *Ts'ajalsul* to show *ich'el ta muk'*. In the ceremony authorities deposit a traditional handmade dress to the female being that is living in water and is representing the lagoon itself who provides corn, because she happens to be also the mother of red corn. Red corn is now hard to find in the Highlands of Chiapas, it represents the strongest spirits and connection with ancestors through woman's blood. Some families are aware of the high value of these and other varieties of corn, but diversity becomes a challenge for this communities.

II

Despite these cultures that live in a reciprocal cycle with the land they inhabit, we have arrived to latent and urgent conflicts surrounding food. Since in the 1950s, Mexican and United States politicians started an alliance to increase productivity of the most consumed cereals: wheat, corn, and rice. Even if the pioneers of this project said so, this was not to fight off hunger, because there was an inequality in the availability of food. That inequality is still growing. The 'green revolution' began as a movement of engineers - George Harrar, Edwin J. Wellhausen, and the Nobel Peace Prize winner Norman E. Borlaug. They worked together in Sonora, Mexico through the Office of Special Studies which later was called the International Maize and Wheat Improvement Center (CIMMYT) financed mainly by the Rockefeller Foundation. They developed a biochemical 'technological package' for pest control that started affecting natural interdependence and agricultural cycles by achieving full biocontrol over the process.

4. López Intzin, Juan "Ich'el ta muk': the plot in the construction of the Lekil kuxlejal", in: *Feel-think gender*. La Casa del Mago, Guadalajara. 2013

Most of these substances were created during the Second World War as biological weapons to kill populations, such as the Japanese, through starvation by the spraying of fulminate herbicides. When the war was over, they needed to sell the products, but these herbicides were killing the traditional locally adapted seeds so they worked in two steps: First they collected a bank of germplasm to study the varieties of corn in Mexico, and second they chose and separated only two varieties of the approximately 64 types and adapted them to the chemicals above mentioned, producing a dependency in the seed which could not grow without pesticides. Then, with a major commitment of the governments through credits and funding, publicized this alleged progress as a need for peasants. They could then sell these 'packages' to the farmers, who only realized their negative effects after spoiling their soil and water with nitrates and phosphates among other toxic elements that produced soil erosion and broke the biological equilibrium. Nowadays 'technological packages' in Mexico include hybrid seeds of white and yellow corn, chemical fertilizers, herbicides, and pest controllers. All of them come with a negative impact in health - proved this year in the United States by the court case of Dewayne Johnson vs. Monsanto regarding Roundup Ready, a pesticide that contains glyphosate.⁵ When a community loses their traditional seeds (highly adapted to their territories through the work of the generations before) because of a new hybrid, the damage is difficult to undo. Once they want to go back to the organic ones they will need years of adaptation, recovering the soil again that will in consequence provoke a low production. An unbearable lost for peasants.

In the nineties, genetic engineers modified the hybrid seeds and created new ones by mixing animal and bacteria genes such as bacterium 'Bacillus thuringiensis' into the cereal creating the BT transgenic corn, also dependent on agrochemicals as well as not fertile, which meant that peasants needed to buy them anew each year. As a result of this process, today in Mexico there are sequences of transgenic contamination of 90.4 % in the whole production of tortillas which are consumed with every meal.⁶ There is a lot of money invested in the creation of food that is low in nutrients but high on private patents owned by big corporations like Bayer (owner of Monsanto), Pioneer-Dupont, Syngenta, DOW Agrosiences, among others. This has created a scenario where the keepers of ancestral seeds started to be treated as criminals because of the pollination of their harvest from transgenic plants.

The ancient cultural cycle of corn is now a dependent one. On one hand there is a biopolitical issue of the 'green revolution'

5. Levin, S. and Greenfield, P. Monsanto ordered to pay \$289m as jury rules weedkiller caused man's cancer. The Guardian. <https://www.theguardian.com/business/2018/aug/10/monsanto-trial-cancer-dewayne-johnson-ruling>. 20188.

6. Álvarez-Buylla Rocas, Elena. *Agroecology and Sustainable Food Systems*. IE y C3, UNAM, México. 2017 http://www.dgcs.unam.mx/boletin/bdboletin/2017_607.html

where traditional practices of working with land were replaced by new technologies and cooperate businesses agreements. On the other hand, there is an issue of who has the capacity and power of deciding who lives, and therefore also who dies. Michel Foucault refers to a kind of authority that is “endangering life,” while hiding the evidence of being responsible for the dead.⁷ According to this, foundations and corporations named above are contaminating corn and doing so guilty of an act of “endangering life.”

As a result of such violent acts on natural goods, a huge crisis has manifested itself in the indigenous territories. Peasants are in poverty in part as consequence of the global competition, which has lowered the prices of some food. The only possible way of keeping producers in the market is by having more land where bigger quantities of food can be produced. This leads to land concentration; a few actors having control over important areas. Additionally, due to bad harvest the value of their products is so low that farming is unprofitable for the peasants, who lose their lands to these economical disasters. And as if that isn't enough the state of Chiapas, which is a large producer of corn, is also importing the same cereal from South Africa. This type of transgenic imported grain can be found in the governmental rural stores of Diconsa, competing with and thus endangering local varieties and peasant production.

In this losing cycle, farmers are first pushed into debt and then onto the streets, forced to start working for others on the lands that used to be theirs; a result of the systematic process of impoverishment. All this is creating a downturn, wherein the indigenous young people are looking for other options to live. Thus some of them are migrating legally and illegally to the United States or other Mexican territories trying to find a job in touristic places. One elder man from Tenejapa said in an interview, “Sometimes it looks like the heart of young people is a stone, it seems nothing is important for them and nothing is touching them anymore. They walk without knowing where they are going, like robots.”⁸ However, in the middle of such multilateral complexity some of them are keeping the seeds, water, lands, wisdom, and memory, alive.

III

I feel-think offerings for getting water and food are a reminder for us to be grateful for what we have received from previous generations and take care of this common goods. Reciprocity might be something as wonderful as the kind of work indigenous cultures do when they are preparing their meticulous and ephemeral artistic compositions as offering for the water. They spend a lot of time because in their hearts they know

7. Foucault, Michel. *The History of Sexuality*. 1997.

8. López Intzin, Juan.

life ends when water is not flowing, so this offering is worth the effort. When indigenous people are keeping corn, they are cultivating the plant with great respect and an attention that goes beyond 'just growing it.' They also sit around a fire in the kitchen to reproduce face to face the teachings of the meanings, the varieties and the ways for harvesting and healing with corn; all the wisdom is given in this warm community-oriented touch. Learning to listen to the elders and keeping in touch with people who still know natural ways to cultivate as well as carry ancient seeds and memories, are ways to remember. But to resurge these practices today we need to act as well. We need to disseminate organic seeds and the knowledge to take care of them, appropriating available technologies to recover natural balance in living (decontaminated) soils and water.

This is a time for creative collective praxis to protect life and common goods; humanity is living through a serious historical process. Something people in every country could do is to finding community solidarity through the act of conserving the biodiversity of food. For example, we can get in touch with the seed collectives which are taking on a significant labor by keeping germplasm banks to conserve seeds in low temperature environments, and, more importantly, growing the seeds in the soil and renewing each cycle. We could also be responsible for at least one seed's survival, in our rural soils we should research cultural production systems as 'milpa' to associate the plants - in this case corn and beans among others - to have abundant and various harvests. In the urban areas walls, roofs, or pots are great hosts to plants; also schools or parks. Reinforcing local exchange of producers and conscient consumers is also important. By organizing time around sustainable, organic, abundance and sharing it with children we are offering to the Earth and humanity life, autonomy, and richness. In this way we make the noble effort to keep alive the rainbow seeds (varieties of food) to give the future as much colors and flavors as we have received from earth and our previous generations.

That is why taking myself serious is an act of reciprocity, which means that (inter)acting from within the power of my heart is necessary because through my work and my way of living I am affecting others, known and unknown. As native people say it is through the heart that we can be aware of the consequences of our acts in the territory we live in without ignoring other lands and people. This is related with developing fair economics and politics that reduces inequality. It is important to highlight that dealing with the urgent problem of ecocide means dealing with the collateral disaster of genocide - provoked by that ecocide. Addressing such issues will demand that we recognize, respect, and embrace our cultural differences, belief systems, traditions, and languages ending any cultural supremacy and dominance that requires the oppression and starvation of others. Reciprocity is a relationship with living nature: plants, territory, animals,

and cultures to which we have a lot to re-appropriate and learn from, because feeding ourselves is a process where awareness, memory, and re-learning are needed.

The construction of a good way of living named *Lekil kuxlejal* (full, dignified and fair life) in Tseltal language is not only a product of harmonic relations with nature and society, we can only get there in a collective transformation process where both concepts of reciprocity ATATA and *ich'el ta muk'* are present in both a local and/or global scale, through political intimate acts and public transnational reciprocal agreements.

ATATA

The Narrativecollective investigates the influence of technology, history and biopolitics on movement in the public sphere. The work is often shared as intimate conversations and experiences in the form of performative installations. The NarrativeCollective is established by Hilda Moucharrafiéh as a single-person collective in an aim towards practicing the polyvocal self and a way of art-making that extends beyond the individual biography. In 2017, The NarrativeCollective started a long-term and multi-faceted practice-based research revolving around the social organisation of time and economic structures governing our perception of life through the lens of death.

THE WEIGHT OF A FEATHER

As the second manifestation of the practice-based research, this work explores the relation between systems of measurement and value making. 'To Measure is To Know' is the credo in Western society. If something is not measurable, it does not seem relevant. This performative research project aims to investigate how quantification of the immaterial is assessed and judged, according to what, by whom and for what purpose.



Weighing of the Heart, taken from Book of the Dead



The Weight of a Feather (2018)

Anubis, a half man half animal creature from ancient Egyptian mythology, is associated with mummification and the afterlife. One of his roles is the 'Guardian of the Scales'. When one dies, Anubis measures if a person is worthy of entering the afterlife by weighing their heart against a feather. If the heart is heavier than a feather, it would be devoured by Ammit, a goddess with the head of a crocodile, body of a lion and hind legs of a hippopotamus. She was called the 'Eater of Hearts' waiting upon a hearty meal, and once she devours the heart the soul is believed to become restless forever. If the heart is as light as the feather, it will be placed back in the body and the person could ascend to a heavenly existence and a voyage towards immortality.

This story and image from Book of the Dead, is used as a catalyst into the conversation at a table. Participants are asked to contribute to the research by answering the questions while stitching on a fabric made of counted measure. Each day a special table-guest* is invited. Egyptologists, behavioural economist, researcher in data practices, and a cultural program maker joined in conversation during 10 days, to discuss this image and its notions from their field of expertise.

* Guillén Torres, Juan Ramírez, Lucia Langerak, Marwan Aboul Magd, Maud Slingenberg, Sjoerd van der Steen



⊙ rethinking the image of 'weighing of the heart' in light of capitalism and its interest in life-value

⊙ transforming the image of 'weighing of the heart' from drawing on papyrus, to digitisation, pixelation, to counted measure, to stitching on fabric

⊙ using a highly time consuming form (stitching) to raise questions on capitalisation of time and labour

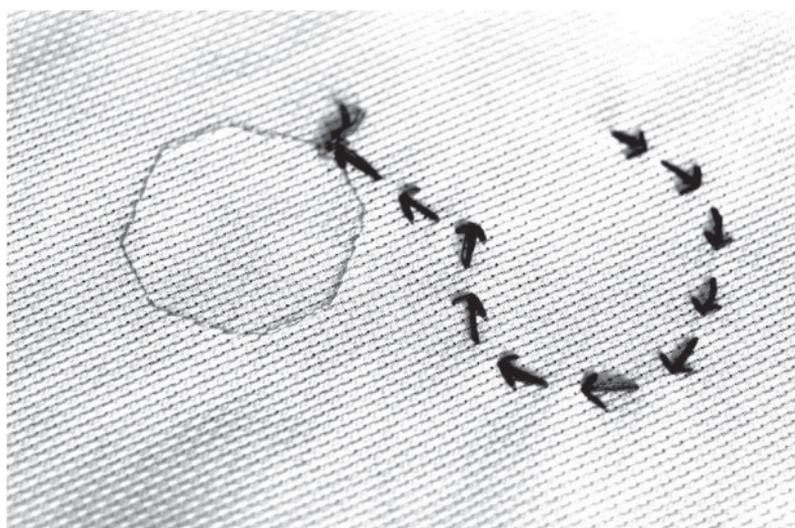
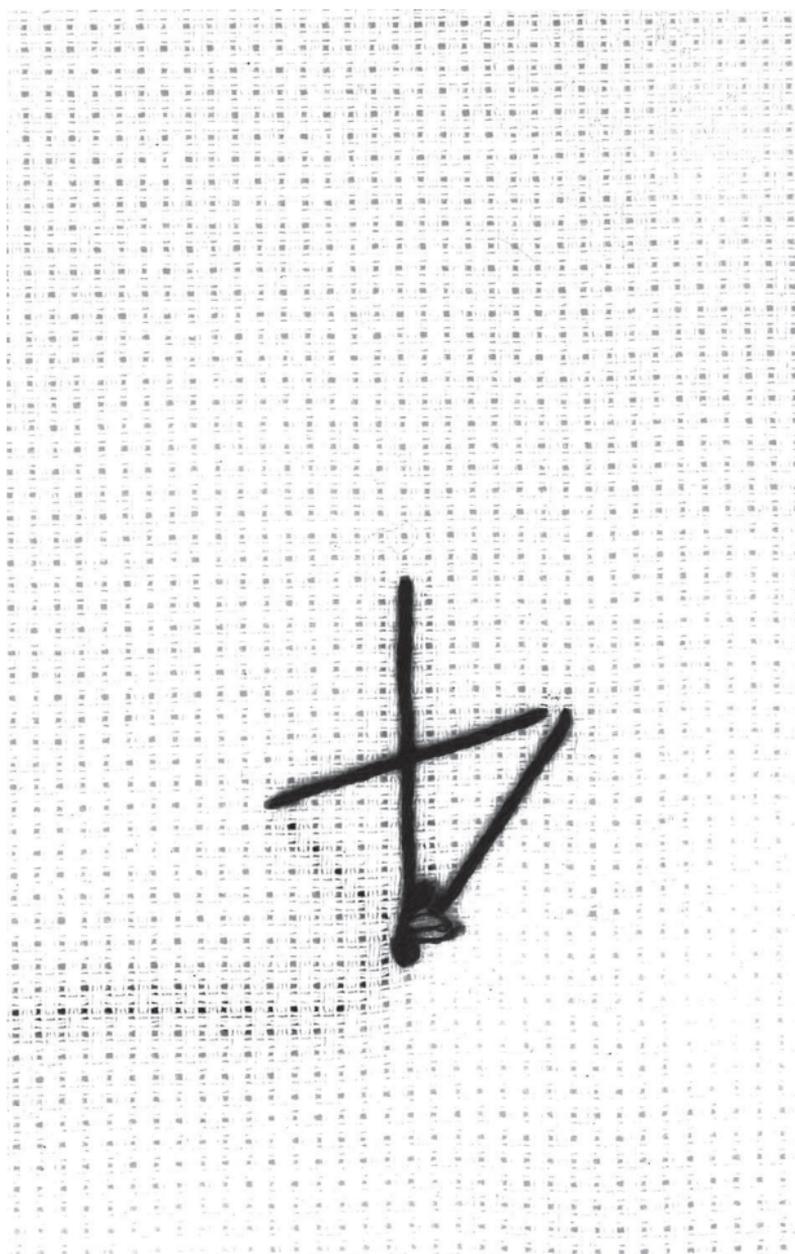
Stitching (and other other handmade textile works) is a subjective labour and a personal practice that defied capitalism for a long time. It is a personal production of what one wants to wear, via adapting, using, re-using, and including signs and symbols from personal experiences.

⊙ inviting experts from different scientific and humanities research fields to inform this image from their own perspective, and vice versa

⊙ applying a participatory form of artistic research, inviting both experts and audience to join at the table and respond to the image of 'weighing of the heart' by stitching their own keywords and symbols on the fabric

⊙ creating an endless chain of attributing meaning to the image of 'weighing of the heart' in the form of slow graffiti-like stitching on fabric

The format used is an intimate personal practice done collectively in the aim of resisting the capitalist act.



Hieratic is the cursive writing system used in parallel to the hieroglyphic script, and the principal script used to write that language. The word freedom in hieratic script is symbolised by a child sitting down (top left image).

New borns experience the most trauma and yet have the most genuine fresh will for survival.

To what extent does measurement and quantification determine our assessment of situations, people, performance, success.. all what is material, and all what is immaterial.

Anubis decides the heaviness of one's heart based on immaterial weights, such as greed, hate or unrequited love. Capitalism reversely rewards these individual immaterial traits.

Is there a way to look at reality differently, in order to escape the datafication, quantification and therefore the capitalisation of our lives?

Mark Fisher spoke of no future under capitalism.

Future *is* whenever we rethink the past.

Future always *is* when we now *are*.

A Manifesto Towards the End of Existentialism (2016)
The NarrativeCollective

Ink on cigarette packing foil, to be read while listening to Eye of the Tiger by Survivor (1982)

A
MANIFESTO TOWARDS
THE END OF
EXISTENTIALISM

science has proven
that when stars
die, the energy
continues to bounce
around and exist.

The most important
thing about humanity
is that we have
developed across the
ages. The energy of
our forefathers continues
to exist and bounce
around. Our forefathers
that envisioned an
evolution. And our fathers
that envisioned destruction.

AFTER YOU DIE, YOUR
ENERGY WILL CONTINUE
TO BOUNCE AROUND
AND EXIST IN THE
WORLD OF THE FUTURE
GENERATIONS.

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“ **Veem** ”

“ **House** ”

“ **for** ”

“ **Performance** ”

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