RE-ROOTING ORALITY: ON PLANT ORAL HISTORIES IN PAREDONES, MICHOACAN, MEXICO

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I. Dedications

I want to give gratitude to Paredones, Michoacan, Mexico which has been the home of my maternal ancestors, both human and nonhuman, for many generations. This is dedicated to my abuela, Josefina, who told me stories of her village, Paredones as she watered her luscious garden in Stockton, California. When I got the chance to visit Paredones for myself in August 2022 and reconnect to both humans and nonhumans of my motherland, many individuals and relatives graciously offered to me their knowledge of the land and generously gifted me their time, memories, and plant cuttings - gracias a todos.

I want to also acknowledge that this is a project which culminated during my time in the Oral History Program at Columbia University, located on unceded Lenape Land. Thank you to the wild plants on this land that have healed me and those (both humans and nonhumans in NYC) who taught me how to slow down and pay attention to the calmness of the nonhumans in an otherwise chaotic city.

In this thesis, although I can not translate the beautiful experience of taking a hike and encountering some plants to meet, learn, or forage, I am attempting to encapsulate plant knowledge as much as possible in order to preserve the treasured connection to the land. I hope to circulate the plant knowledge of the elders in a form that is accessible and inspiring to the new generations of Paredones during a time of climate change or value shifts.

II. Be(long)ing in Paredones, Michoacan

I grew up in Stockton, California, with my multi-generational family (Grandparents, Uncles and Aunts, Cousins) rooted to Paredones, Michoacan, Mexico. My mother told me stories of her childhood and of her family who worked as farm workers whenever we passed fields in the San Joaquin Valley. I always wondered what their lives were like before coming to California. I felt a pull to learn more about my ancestral land and the traditions that I had only heard about but not lived - having grown up away from the land.

Paredones (colloquially el rancho) is a village belonging to the municipality of La Piedad, Michoacan, Mexico. Across from the mountain el Cerro Grande and at the base of the mountain colloquially referred to as el Cerro, the dwellings of Paredones are built. Paredones is located in a monsoon-influenced humid subtropical climate. It is temperate: there is a dry winter and hot, rainy summer. The rural village of Paredones is populated with 1,500 inhabitants. During an oral history with my relative, Martin, he told me Paredones was named around the eighteenth century by some unmarried sisters with the last name, Paredes. There have been many generations of human and nonhuman life on the land whom I consider los antepasados, my ancestors.

The first time I met the plants and ancestors - *plantcestors* - was during my first ever visit to Paredones in August 2022. I was introduced to the many different nonhumans of Paredones by my relatives who pointed out various wild growing plants and told stories surrounding their function. For example, on a hike in the mountains we encountered Xocoyol (also Jocoyol). After meeting the plant, I remembered that in my childhood my abuela had mentioned how her family collected the Xocoyol plant with

sour leaves, grinded homegrown corn into masa, and put the Xocoyol in the middle of freshly pressed tortillas to make quesadillas de Xocoyol. When I asked oral history narrators about Xocoyol, I was told that it was no longer common for people to forage for it. When I visited in August during the rainy season, I counted only four flowers of the edible Xocoyol - a lot less than the abundance told about in my abuela's stories. The change made me consider what Robin Wall Kimmerer writes in *Braiding Sweetgrass: Indigenous Wisdom, Scientific Knowledge, and the Teachings of Plants* about traditional ecological knowledge of Indigenous people: "if we use a plant respectfully, it will flourish. If we ignore it, it will go away" (159).

During a hike, my relatives and I encountered many Biznaga - Cacti that grow yellow fruit - spread out on the trail, so we decided to collect some to bring back home. Since we had not prepared to collect the Biznaga, we unrooted the plant with sticks we found laying around in order to save our hands from the spines. I was told by Maria (my grandmother's sister) that as a child, her siblings would collect the yellow fruit and call them little bananas.

On my hike, I also was guided to smell different plants, such as Anís, who had a wonderful smell that I was told paired well with many dishes. Later on, back at my relatives house, I was feeling unwell with a change in diet and was guided by my relative Jose to try Yerba del Sapo tea. Before bringing me to the pasture where the Yerba del Sapo was growing, he shared his memory with the plant:

> *How did I manage to survive? Why do you think I told Gustavo to drink that Yerba de Sapo water I made for him, and he said no, that he should take it with him [to*

the United States]. And he doesn't even know what it is for, it is good for high cholesterol, for diabetes, for many things. Yerba del Sapo.

>And where is it?

Up there. I brought him a bunch like this [hand motions to bundle]. And he did drink some.

You have to drink it naturally. It's not bad for you, it cleans everything. That's why I got better. Because I was in bad shape, it [motions to stomach] hurt all the time. I am going to tell you why. When I was going to the US, when we got off the train, we walked for two days and we couldn't get there. And then we got there and saw some stables. They were in the desert.

>And which way did you go? Through Texas? Or which way did you go?

No, through Arizona. There were some stables, right, but the horses weren't there. It looked like they had abandoned the ranch. But they left a dirty water trawl like with poop and everything. I am going to tell you the truth. Oh, excuse me, I'm sorry. All the water was gross, but we hadn't seen water for about two days. You know what I said? Cousin, I am going to drink. He didn't want to drink it. I did drink it and that water was the thing that made me sick. I got here, very sick. I was asking doctors and I got some ampicillin for infections. It didn't relieve me at all and then that little herb came to help me. A man told me, you don't even know that you have the medicine right there, this Yerba del Sapo. The Autonomous University of Mexico has it on record as the best herb.

>Can you bring it to us?

If you have a bang, it takes away the hurt. It cured me. It cleansed my whole organs.

>Will there still be some now?

Oh yes! There's a lot. Come on, here it is up the mountain.

To preserve the traditions of my ancestral land and share the richness of Paredones with future generations who live as guests on other lands, I chose to learn from the relatives still residing there and record their knowledge. A research grant from the Experimental Humanities Collaborative Network allowed me to visit Paredones again in January 2023. During this trip, I recorded stories and interviews with ten individuals about their plant knowledge and traditions of Paredones. I prepared questions to prompt conversations regarding the following themes: seasonal edible wild species, labor market effects, gendered division of labor and knowledge of plants, influence of big farming, the role flora and fungi play in ceremony/reciprocation/gift giving, maintaining nutrition and health, and governmental policies. During the post-interview phase, I indexed the themes of climate change, traditions, migration, economy, and the land which are presented on the digital repository. These codes allowed for a qualitative analysis of the oral histories about participants' relationships to other humans and nonhumans and helped me understand - How are the traditions shaped by humans' relationship with nonhumans? How can preserving stories and traditions of storytelling benefit both the humans and nonhumans?

Through asking questions, listening to stories, and collecting oral history, I am holding space for memories to be remembered about my relatives' lives in Paredones, while also doing the work necessary to reconnect with the ancestral land myself. In

Memory Serves: Oratories, Lee Maracle illustrates the necessity for holding memory: “when we forget, we fail to learn.” In the chapter *Memory Serves*, Maracle explains that memory is shaped by one’s understanding of self. Recollection is inherently personal, as each individual shapes a memory with their own interpretation. For example, Maracle points out that the words we choose when recalling events are influenced by our intent. Whether consciously or not, the narrator is mindful of how the story will be told. Each story is remembered and shaped by the individual, and its impact varies from listener to listener. People take away different feelings, lessons, or insights based on their own experiences. As a result, interpretations can differ, with some details being forgotten and new ones possibly added. Oral traditions are shaped by current realities because they are remembered differently. There were many moments when I was astutely aware of my positionality: an outsider having grown up away from Paredones, an insider being told about plant knowledge and family traditions, and overall collecting stories for academic purposes.

In *Earth-Beings: Ecologies of Practice Across Andean Worlds*, Marisol de la Cadena states that “no translation would be capacious enough to allow me to know certain practices. I could translate them, but that did not mean I knew them” (3). Translation is not one to one; translation inevitably adds or subtracts a part of the whole. I am thinking about how the narrators shared their stories in the Paredones colloquial Spanish, which is not my first language, and wondered if I held the space for memories to be remembered and shared in the most comfortable way. One example where I had to shift my practice was that I needed to adapt my interviews into group settings and more informal conversations that mirror the way oral traditions are usually passed along

in Paredones. I planned on sitting behind the camera and asking questions to one person at a time so that I could have a microphone record the answers clearly. For the first interview, when asking one person a question, the surrounding people jumped in to answer. I decided to shift my approach to use both communal interviews as well as absorb stories that were initiated through everyday occurrences. In order to see oral history as more than an academic interview, I valued oral tradition as a daily practice and cosmology involving myself and the whole community. I came to understand that plant knowledge in Paredones is circulated through casual conversations when encountering the plant while doing another task, or through an ailment that necessitates a cure. I noticed that knowing about plants came in an organic form inspired by the beauty that surrounds the inhabitants.

During the visits to narrators' patios, I was given medicinal plant cuttings. I also collected plants in baskets on the mountain with my relatives who helped me identify the name of the plants and their medicinal properties. I gained wild plant knowledge through verbal exchanges and bonded with the residents of Paredones over how awesome their (both wild and domesticated) plants were. Plants that grow on the mountain without human daily interaction or caretaking in Paredones were considered wild plants. The wild plants in Paredones had been known to the human community for many years, and some wild plants could be found in home patio gardens both intentionally and unintentionally. In the oral histories, I noticed the wild plants that grow in the region were classified as useful and non-useful plants. Useful plants (such as Yerba del Sapo and Xocoyol) could be used for medicine or food. Non-useful plants (such as Tabardillo) could be used to start fires, mix with clay for building, or to admire.

III. Oral Traditions and Storytelling

The plant oral histories shared to me while walking near, touching, or seeing a plant, are remembered best in my mind. In *Rethinking Oral History and Tradition: An Indigenous Perspective*, Nepia Mahuika emphasizes an immersive experience rather than seeing oral stories as a mere source of knowledge:

> The form then of the indigenous oral traditions and histories is more than simply a source to be heard, but an experience to be had. In the doing of chores, the cooking of food, the preparation of beds, mattresses, and the collecting of wood, oral histories and traditions were absorbed, remembered in the scent of specific aromas in the cook house and beyond. The passing of oral histories, particularly the rationale inherent within these distinctive cultural scripts, was presented in sometimes seemingly menial work, explained in the daily rhythms of life, where routines were textured with underlying stories that gave meaning to their existence in tribal practices and affairs. The form of the oral histories then, as Herewini Parata highlighted, could be heard, observed, and passed on in various ways. His knowledge of oral histories, he says, was gathered over a lifetime of listening and learning.

Mahuika's framing of oral history shows how daily activities provide the perfect place for oral narratives to be absorbed and remembered because they add to and create sensory connections. The repetition of stories during routine deepens the embodied knowing, remembrance, and understanding of cultural practices and environmental surroundings.

The oral traditions and practices shared among families relating to the nonhuman are passed on as new generations listen to stories told by older generations. It is clear

that for Mahuika, Māori oral history must be lived and shared among family in the same way as I have witnessed in Paredones. He writes: “my indigenous understandings of oral history see them as more than chants, myths, and legends, and much more than merely an archive of interviews in a post-colonial era” (Mahuika 6). The form of oral history can not just be an archive in an institution. Oral history must live within the people it belongs to so that the retelling of stories continues among future generations. The digital Paredones plant oral history repository is making the stories of Paredones accessible to the community that reaches beyond the physical land. The orality of history is a direct embodied experience that ties one individual to their ancestral lineage and allows them to receive the gift of understanding their place in the aspect of collectivity. Mahuika realizes it was not simply her grandfather who was speaking, but “generations of relatives weaving together an aural tapestry representative of our collective identity” (6). By circulating stories of the nonhuman in daily encounters, individuals can connect with their collective ancestors—both human and nonhuman.

Another example of this relationship with the land is the presence of el Arroyo, a stream that flows in the middle of the village of Paredones. The rainfall has decreased in recent years and the stream now lacks constantly flowing water as it once had. We walked along el Arroyo and noticed the laja (limestone). Despite there being no water, the laja served as inspiration to recall many stories that happened at the stream – how much water it used to carry, washing clothes on a specific rock, children playing and bathing in the water, and building a bridge. One particular story that stood out to me was about children holding up their dresses while sliding down the limestone like a water slide so that they did not get in trouble by their parents when they came home wet.

Childhood memories and stories that are told about el Arroyo keep the relationship between humans, the stream, and its nonhuman inhabitants alive. We share stories of the water, the wild plants, and our ancestors so that their histories remain. These ancestors may have existed in the particular ancestral soil where the story is being shared or the ancestors may have also engaged in an activity such as gathering water which inspired the story. Through the repetition of these stories and actions over time and space, these connections are kept alive.

Though collecting oral histories in Paredones, I was able to reimage the role humans must take as caretakers and protectors of the nonhuman to regenerate a reciprocal relationship with the earth. For instance, a daily routine was preparing for the main meal of the day, comida (around 3:00 P.M.) and after, women gathered to chat. During the dry season (September - May), the casual afternoon gatherings happened on patios where knowledge was passed around and stories were shared. During the rainy season (which used to start in April but now starts in June and goes through August – resulting in decreased rainfall), the women gathered in living rooms. In traditional houses of Paredones, the living room was constructed as a partially enclosed porch which allowed for both views of the surrounding environment and of the patio which was commonly filled with an abundance of plants. The living room and porches often had pictures of family members which sparked conversation about those particular individuals. During other stories and conversations that I listened to during afternoon chit chat, women shared their knowledge of Paredones' wild plants by referencing their lives and the health of others - for instance there was a story regarding the health of a person who used the dry wild grass, Tabardillo to cure a skin rash.

One day in January when neighbors were visiting my patio, there was a truck that drove around Paredones blasting “Garbanzo Beans for sale.” I shared with my company that one of the most vivid memories of my deceased grandfather was picking Garbanzo Beans off their branches. We decided to call out to the truck that was a few streets away to come by our house. We had set the bushels of Garbanzo Beans in the center of five chairs and two buckets. Without explanation or hesitation we started pulling the Beans off the branches. As we were working to de-branch the Garbanzo Beans, the women felt comfortable to share their recollections of the past.

One neighbor, Alicia, commented on how she and her husband Martin collected a good amount of Toronjil in the rainy season to save for the dry season. Toronjil is a wild plant from the mountain (and one of my abuela’s favorite herbs). Alicia said that many people go on the mountain to collect Toronjil. It is rarely able to grow in house gardens, but it was surprisingly able to in Alicia’s patio. She mentioned that Martin had collected some branches in his pocket to share. She said that some seeds must have fallen out when she hung his laundry to dry on her patio. The ‘Toronjil’ was able to reproduce in a new place. This story reminds me of Robin Wall Kimmerer who believes care is required to maintain a reciprocal relationship with the land. She speaks about the Indigenous practice that gives gratitude to all things: the Honorable Harvest constructs a way to “govern our taking, shape our relationships with the natural world, and rein in our tendency to consume—that the world might be as rich for the seventh generation as it is for our own” (Kimmerer 180). According to Kimmerer's explanation of the Indigenous Honorable Harvest practice, taking a nonhuman gift requires gratitude: to reciprocate the gift by taking care, protecting from harm, and ensuring its

reproduction (21). The chain of reciprocity exhibits how plants benefit from the circle of life – humans give care to the plants, plants provide humans with gifts. Humans have the capacity to care for all the other beings who have been so kind by giving them thanks - “the relationship of gratitude and reciprocity can increase the evolutionary fitness of both plant and animal” (Kimmerer 30). Because Alicia and Martin generously collected and dried Toronjil to send to my uncle Francisco in California, they received more Toronjil which had a chance to grow abundantly in a new location. It was a reciprocal relationship: “by our use of their [plant] gifts, both species prosper and life is magnified” (Kimmerer 185). While Toronjil is beneficial to those who drink it as tea for nerves and other health conditions, it can also benefit from human care - it reproduces easier with human consumption.

Discussing wild plants in oral histories plays a crucial role in allowing the plant to be remembered, brought to new spaces, and consequently increase the species survival as Kimmerer argues, “losing a plant can threaten a culture in much the same way as losing a language” (261). Without plants, the patio gatherings and conversations in Paredones would not be the same. During interviews, I was shown the many wild plants which grew in the gardens and concrete cracks of people who used soil from the mountain for their potted house plants - Juana told me she could see wild plants growing on her rooftop, especially near the water tank. The beauty of the earth made it easy for me to see how a reciprocal relationship could form between humans and nonhumans.

IV. Human and Nonhuman Relations

Oral history as a daily practice keeps nonhumans alive. Through repeated interactions and stories shared about nonhumans within one's lifetime, an individual gets to know and remember not only the plants or animals, but also the lessons they can teach to bring a society into harmony. Kimmerer asserts that all individuals rely on others: “there is grave error if [one] tries to separate individual wellbeing from the health of the whole” (16). Human beings can not exist without some relations to the nonhuman (ie. plants, animals, land). All groups need collaboration for survival. Benefiting from each other is best done through a network of reciprocity where giving is as important as receiving. Respecting the nonhuman includes sharing stories and saying their names. If stories of the nonhuman are not shared, it could pose separation of people from the land because nonhumans may not be remembered in the same way as if they are spoken about numerous times through a person’s lifetime:

> Philosophers call this state of isolation and disconnection “species loneliness”—a deep, unnamed sadness stemming from estrangement from the rest of Creation, from the loss of relationship. As our human dominance of the world has grown, we have become more isolated, more lonely when we can no longer call out to our neighbors (Kimmerer 208).

Storytelling provides future generations the knowledge to recognise, observe, and connect to nonhuman ancestors. Unfortunately, “if we allow traditions to die, relationships to fade, the land will suffer” (Kimmerer 166). If humans stop valuing or respecting the personhood of plants and animals, there is no guarantee they won't disappear from conversations.

It is necessary to reimagine, in the time of a climate crisis, the value of nonhumans within cultural practices. Humans can reconnect to nonhumans in order to regrow relationships as disturbance and climate change ensues:

> It is an intertwining of science, spirit, and story—old stories and new ones that can be medicine for our broken relationship with Earth, a pharmacopeia of healing stories that allow us to imagine a different relationship, in which people and land are good medicine for each other (Kimmerer, p.x).

Storytelling is essential for humans to connect with nonhuman beings, as it allows humans to recognize their significance and engage in a network of reciprocity. Retelling stories of the nonhuman reinforces a network of reciprocity and can help “to restore balance, to locate ourselves once again in the circle” (Kimmerer 179).

Kimmerer provides a framework for ensuring that human needs are met through creating an economy built upon laws of nature, ecology, and interconnectedness (153). The interconnectedness must value the lives of nonhumans as equal to humans. Being appreciative and grateful for the interconnection leads to respecting the animacy and value of other creatures. In the chapter “Learning the Grammar of Animacy,” Kimmerer explains the Potawatomi language places the same value of animacy on humans and nonhumans. She emphasizes the linguistic relationship between English and humanity's imagined superiority by stating that “the arrogance of English is that the only way to be animate, to be worthy of respect and moral concern, is to be a human” (Kimmerer 57). Like Kimmerer does in her book, in my thesis, I also refer to nonhumans with capitalisation in order to value their equal animacy through language.

Kimmerer explains that “names are the way we humans build relationships, not only with each other but with the living world” (208). I noticed the specificity of names given to plants and places in Paredones during an interview with the narrator, Martin, he made sure to let me know that the plants were named in the Paredones way. He was referring to the practice of naming locations and nonhumans in relation to people’s residence, using diminutive suffixes to indicate size, or denoting the color, shape, or usage.

V. Knowing the Land

While visiting Paredones, I witnessed healing stories of the past in my oral history practice, and in the process absorbed an understanding of the land to retell as stories. It helped me reimage the role humans must take as caretakers and protectors of the nonhuman to regenerate a reciprocal stewardship with the earth. Learning about the nonhuman inhabitants of Paredones through talking with narrators, particularly elders, was fundamental to my stays in the village, but I noticed some disconnect between what I was told and what I witnessed. I started to wonder how climate change, shifting values, and migration patterns would impact certain traditions for generations to come.

While visiting I noticed that the small population and close proximity of houses in the village allowed the human inhabitants of Paredones to form relations to each other and the land in a way I had not experienced in my city upbringing. During oral histories with Paredones residents, I learned that wild plant knowledge was often gained in childhood through conversations with friends and family. Before various lifestyle

changes occurred, it was common practice for families to take walks in the mountains to collect seasonal berries, mushrooms, or plants together. Josephina recalled that as a child she would go with her father to bathe in the creek or to collect seasonal berries. Her father would point out various wild plants and share their usages.

Plants (including non-wild plants) played an important role in the cultural traditions of Paredones. When Eva was younger, she remembered going to her friends' homes and she would comment on their plants. The friends often gave Eva offshoots of the plant so she could grow it in her own garden. Sometimes there would be a small transaction, barter, or trade – for example a plant root in exchange for a small soda. I hope this tradition continues. The gift of plants (both given by humans and the plants themselves) and a practice of oral traditions proves that humans in Paredones rely on the nonhumans to maintain reciprocity and keep plant knowledge alive.

The residents of Paredones used trucks, ATV and motorcycles while I was visiting. I was told most people used to rely on horses or donkeys, for instance, to ride in the mountains while fetching spring water for cooking, bathing, or washing. The residents advocated for piped water and received water into tanks, three days a week - and no longer needed to walk to the spring to collect water. There was little reason to walk the path and slowly the path was overgrown. Refugio, Ramona, and Josefina told me they could not walk through the mountain anymore and regretted that it was unsafe for their age. For them and other residents who shared their oral histories, encounters with noticing the wild plants on those paths became scarce.

VI. Reflections

In order to see how human disturbance (or simply existence) could bring about nourishment for both humans and nonhumans in Paredones, we must understand that human beings can not exist without some relations to the nonhuman (e.g., plants, animals, land) and the nonhumans also need collaboration for survival - we must understand the role of care and reciprocity in local traditions which connect the two. In the ideal network of reciprocity, humans bring the gift of care to the nonhumans. Being that life is a necessity to other life for survival, the lives received should be honored and treated with equal value for example, giving gratitude through traditional storytelling practices and being aware of signs communicated by nonhumans such as a decrease in abundance from rain or wild plants. The web of reciprocity relies on giving back to the land so that to receive nonhuman gifts of abundance.

Respect for the nonhuman is demonstrated by the customary use of plants as medicine, cooking, and in ritual by Paredones residents. By caring for and protecting the nonhuman in Paredones, the nonhuman is nurtured, and humans become part of a reciprocal relationship, receiving gifts of nourishment and sustenance from the nonhuman world. As I collected oral histories in Paredones, I realized the value of the stories I was told in my childhood of self sustainability in Paredones and hope that the oral traditions and foraging are not lost. The oral transmission of knowledge about human and nonhuman reciprocity enriched my relationship to Paredones.

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