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Repair

Sustainable Design Futures

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**To our children,
and all children on this planet,
who look critically at our
own practices and challenge us every day
to push for more sustainable habits,
to be aware of our privileges,
and to demand
Sustainable Design Futures.**

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Kurhirani no ambakiti (Burning the Devil):

Since That's the Only Way They Listen to Us

Adela Goldbard

The harm inflicted by the Michoacán state police on the P'urhêpecha community of Arantepacua (México) on April 5, 2017 is irreparable. At 2:45pm an operation involving thousands of armed units (300 according to the media) took place: *the entire police force of the state of Michoacán headed to Arantepacua.* The church bells resounded: this was the community's emergency call. *The police did not come to have a dialogue but to generate a confrontation: they entered, shooting tear gas, with a "rhinoceros" (colloquial name for a kind of armored tank) and with dozens of pickups and vans, in addition to three helicopters. The shooting lasted between 2 and 3 hours; it looked like a war.* Four community members were killed and another nine were detained. Families had to hide from the police, who looted their houses. The *comuneros*—a term that in Spanish implies that community members are not only neighbors but share a commitment for the common good—*had to defend themselves with sticks and stones, run to the hill, flee.* At 5:30pm a military convoy approached Arantepacua from its other entrance. *They were coming for a red truck; which they took away with them.*

The use of blockages and the holding of trucks are some of the few strategies left for

Arantepacua's community members (and for many other marginalized communities in the region and in the country) to make themselves heard by the government: *it's the only way they listen to us.* That red truck was one of 20 trucks held in Arantepacua to protest the arrest by the police of 32 *comuneros* who had traveled to Morelia (the state's capital) the previous day to negotiate the boundaries of their territory with the neighboring community of Capácuaro. This is an ongoing and ancient dispute. Years ago, when Arantepacua supported the Teachers' Union strike instigated by the educational reforms imposed by the federal government—which required, amongst other things, the standardized testing of teachers, a measure that clearly penalized marginalized *normalistas* in rural areas—more than 30 vehicles were detained in the town, and no one came to claim them. *We believe that that truck had something illegal: weapons, drugs, organs, bodies since no operation against drug trafficking has ever been this big.*

Arantepacua has always been a community *en pie de lucha*, always ready to fight and to support social struggles; *a pebble in the government's shoe*, since social conscience has always proved an obstacle for power and oppression. *The lack of state support and social projects for indigenous communities has led to marginalization, and a lack of opportunities and employment in the community have encouraged*

OPPOSITE Embroideries from the Archivo Bordado de la Resistencia (Embroidered Resistance Archive), 2020. Photos Marco Antonio López Valenzuela.



Documentation of the burning of El Rinoceronte (the rhinoceros),
Arantepacua, December 4, 2020.
Photos Marco Antonio López Valenzuela & José Luis Arroyo Robles.

migration to the United States. The loss of the P'urhépecha language due to acculturation processes, accelerated by migration, is one of the greatest concerns for the community, especially for the normalista elementary school teachers. Their constant struggle to defend their ancestral territory, their sovereignty, and self-determination, based on the practices of their *Tatakeri* grandparents, seeks to strengthen and revitalize the P'urhépecha language and culture within the community and in other communities of the region, to become a tool against acculturation and in defense of communality. *This fight for the well-being of the community requires opening people's eyes and awakening social conscience; the fight for justice and the social good is the fight against dispossession, private property, and neoliberalism.*

A saga of resistance against oppression that can be traced back to colonial times is what allowed a small and marginalized

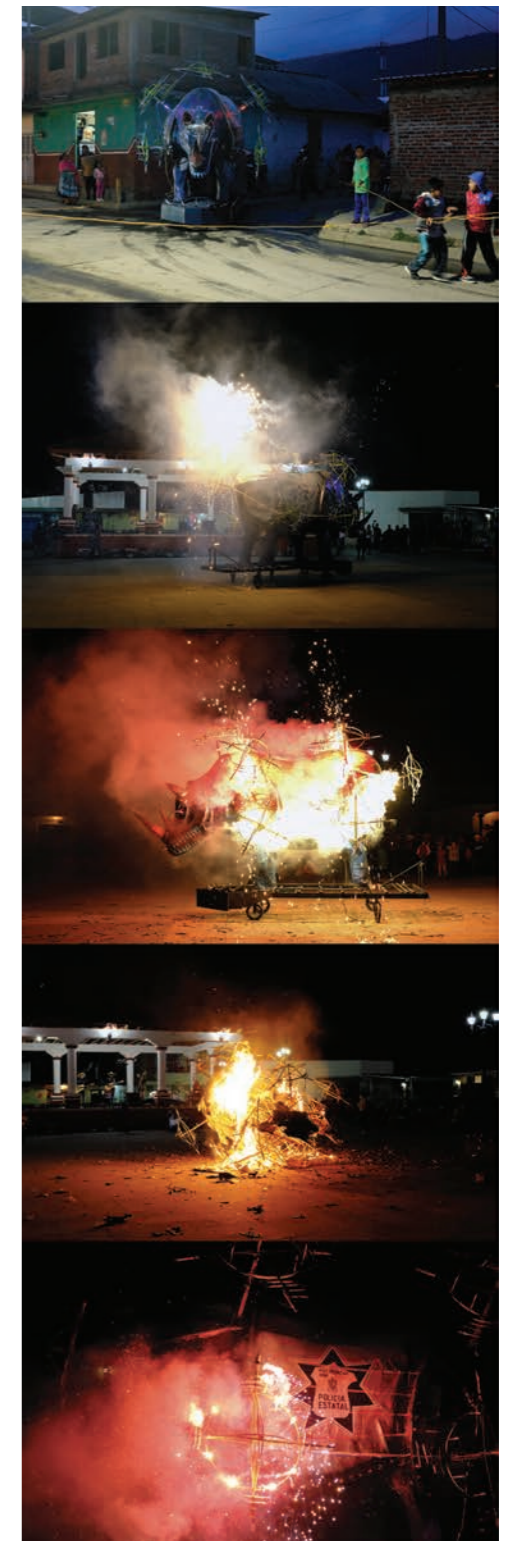
indigenous community to recover from an extreme act of incommensurable and incomprehensible sanctioned violence. *What was our crime, being indigenous, being marginal?* The damage caused by the April 5 attack is irreparable; *we will never be able to forget; there are many consequences of psychological trauma.* But mourning did not result in silence, as the government expected. Repression fueled rage, which in turn invigorated the demand for sovereignty. On the evening of the day of the attack, the community, although devastated, called a meeting for the purposes of political reorganization. After the traumatic event, Arantepacua decided to reject and effectively expel political parties and the local police. Community members stayed on guard for several nights in case the police came back. On April 7, a barricade was built at the entrance of the community and on April 8, at 12:30pm, the community patrol, the *kuaricha*, was founded. The state

of Michoacán officially recognized the community's decision to adopt self-government in 2018; but Arantepacua still demands that those responsible for the April 5 attack are brought to justice.

The aftermath of these events might be irreparable, but the way this moment in history is narrated and remembered can either be empowering or defeating. Resisting being silenced is as important as resisting repression. As Michel-Rolph Trouillot points out in *Silencing the Past*, history is the fruit of power, and there has always been unequal access to the production of historical narratives. But this condition can be challenged, I argue, by dismantling and subverting the perpetrator/victim, victor/defeated, and oppressor/oppressed dichotomies, through re-enactment, performance and the dramatic use of violence and destruction; by adding a decolonial *how* to Peter Burke's important question about the politics of memory—*who wants whom to remember what and why?* Who gets to narrate and *how* are both questions about power, since the latter implies questioning-imposed modes of memory-making that need to be disarticulated in order to break the silences, and delink and reclaim power.

Last year I was commissioned by the XIV FEMSA Biennial to develop an art project in Michoacán, central México. The resulting project/art installation is titled *Kurhirani no ambakiti (burning the devil): since that's the only way they listen to us* and was co-authored with Arantepacua's Communal Indigenous Council. This project brings together performance and sound with local, traditional textiles, pottery and woodwork, in order to craft a retelling of the events of April 5 from the perspective of the community, in support of their ongoing fight for justice. *Kurhirani no ambakiti* proposes a decolonial deconstruction of silences through the affective use of violence and destruction, tactility and orality, as materials for communal memory-making.

Archivo Bordado de la Resistencia ('embroidered resistance archive')—to which the images and quotes in the first section of this chapter belong—comprises two parts: a



Documentation of the burning of El Rinoceronte (the rhinoceros), Arantepacua, December 4, 2020.
Photos Marco Antonio López Valenzuela & José Luis Arroyo Robles.

sound piece that weaves narratives generously shared with me through interviews, and 25 cross-stitched textiles crafted by female embroiderers from Arantepacua and the neighbouring town of Turícuaro. The photographs and video stills used as reference were sourced from Arantepacua's Indigenous Communal Council's archive and comunero Auani Pascual, who has consistently documented the community's and the Teachers' Union struggles. The interviews conducted with *comuneros*, *normalista* teachers, council members, embroiderers, and *kuaris* (members from the communal security of the town) were assembled chronologically, narrating the events that led to the attack, its aftermath, and its consequences. This cascade of voices forms the contextual basis of the installation presented at Centro Cultural Clavijero, in Morelia (December 2020–March 2021) by providing intimate, first-hand, unfiltered narratives of the events. Based on the communal archive, the embroideries also develop a chronology that, besides illustrating the oral narrations, adds tactile, sacred, feminist, and critical layers to the events represented.

Despite its colonial origins, embroidery has been subverted by many indigenous communities by becoming a tool with which to conceal and preserve their culture, traditions, identity, and narratives. It has been a device for epistemic decolonisation usually deposited in the hands of women. Photographs and still images from videos taken by community members became “pixelated tactile images” reinterpreted by female embroiderers who, through their labour and affect, transformed them into tools for remembering and resisting, against silence and repression, and into pulsating artifacts of collective memory.

The main component of *Kurhirani no ambakiti* is a life-size papier-mâché rhinoceros that functions as a stand-in for the “rhinoceros” tank used by the police forces and that allegorically embodies the harm and evil inflicted in the community of Arantepacua. Made by a collective of pyrotechnicians or *coheturis* in Cherán—the first and largest P'urhépecha community to gain political

autonomy back in 2011, through an armed movement led by women—the effigy was carried in a procession along the same route of the yearly commemorative procession of the April 5 events. Afterwards, the rhinoceros was destroyed with fireworks and burnt in the main plaza of Arantepacua, while local *pireris* (traditional P'urhépecha musicians) performed compositions that narrated the events of 2017 and the community's subsequent fight for self-governance. For the finale, the *coheturis* cut off the animal's head, which was then hung as a trophy, accompanying the video documentation of the performance, at Centro Cultural Clavijero.

Pyrotechnics were introduced in the sixteenth century in what is now Mexico by Franciscan priests, as spectacular and violent components of *Autos sacramentales* or conversion plays that were crafted to spiritually conquer the indigenous peoples and convert them to Catholicism. Fireworks were used as a tool to frighten and punish; as a sensorial representation of hell and suffering. But, since then, pyrotechnic effects have been integrated into popular festive traditions in Mexico and other parts of Latin America as a form of catharsis, purge, celebration and even criticism and protest, which reveals, I argue, that the violent tools of the oppressor have been subverted and turned into tools for resistance. Anchored in popular culture and in cultural traditions from the margins, from the subaltern, popular effigy-burning rituals such as the *Burning of Judas* are self-determined, self-organised, and community-funded celebrations in which social roles and rules are challenged to allow new and empowered narratives to emerge. They are subversive carnivals, similar to what Mikhail Bakhtin describes in his *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics*; celebratory political acts of resistance to what Aníbal Quijano calls the coloniality of power, through a performative, immersive, cathartic, excessive, destructive, and disobedient decolonial aesthetic experience.³ These rituals allegorically eliminate evil, harm, and treason collectively, using violence and destruction as materials to purge but also to make visible and remember.

According to Trouillot, “any historical narrative is a particular bundle of silences, the result of a unique process, and the operation required to deconstruct these silences will vary accordingly.”⁴ I argue that a first step with which to deconstruct the bundle of silences brought by assault and oppression is to reject “the victim” as a disempowered political figure, since victimization is a strategy of control and oppression, as Daniele Giglioli in his *Critique of the Victim* points out. Against victimization, I propose challenging the monopoly of violence—the exclusive use of physical force by the State now turned duopoly through its extension to organized crime—by using dramatic violence as decolonial *aestheSis*. According to Walter Mignolo decolonial *aestheSis* (with a capital S for emphasis) “is an option that delivers a radical critique to modern, postmodern, and altermodern *aesthetics* and, simultaneously, contributes to making visible decolonial subjectivities at the confluence of popular practices of re-existence, artistic installations, theatrical and musical performances, literature and poetry, sculpture and other visual arts.”⁵ In my work, I use dramatic violence and destruction to make visible, remember, and purge, but also to delink. I argue that when violence is torn from the dominant and colonising discourse, its aesthetic, ritual, collective, and affective potential can be unleashed, challenging overpowering dichotomic categorizations that lead to victimization. Dramatic violence pushes against hegemonic *formal* means for the production of historical narratives, by adding performative layers to the narrations: it allows a shift from recounting to re-enacting, from the verbal, to the embodied, thus delinking from Western canonical modes of retelling and remembering.

The aesthetic violence of the burning of “the rhinoceros” in Arantepacua was intended as a form of purging, of catharsis, but above all, it sought to undermine the politics of memory, empower community members, and support the healing of collective trauma by dismantling the oppressor/oppressed, perpetrator/victim, victor/defeated dichotomies.

It used dramatic violence to challenge state violence by making visible the excessive use of force by the police. Destruction was used as a memory-building artifact to contest and subvert physical, ideological, and structural violence, and to recover and celebrate situated narratives. The aesthetic and affective potential of violence was employed as a tool for epistemic decolonisation and liberation, to delink from the conventional (Western) construction of historical narratives, to carnivalize victimization, against silences, and for a restructuring of the politics of memory, considering that, as Frantz Fanon maintained: “decolonisation is always a violent event.”⁶

♦♦♦

The project is dedicated to the memory of the four victims of the attack: student Luis Gustavo Hernández Cohenete, *comunero* Francisco Jiménez Alejandro, nurse José Carlos Jiménez Crisóstomo, and *comunero* Santiago Crisanto Luna.

♦♦♦

Menkixi uantakuriakaxi ka noxi meni kuantantojka kuapini juchari ambe

We will always raise our voices in the face of injustice, we will never get tired of defending what is ours

AUTONOMY, SELF-GOVERNMENT AND
FREE DETERMINATION

NOTES:

- 1 All italics are quotes from personal communications with *comuneros*, teachers, council members, embroiderers, and *kuaris* (members from the communal security) of Arantepacua, August, 2020. Translations are mine.
- 2 Peter Burke, *Varieties of Cultural History* (NYC: Cornell, 1997), 56.
- 3 Anibal Quijano, “Coloniality and Modernity/Rationality,” *Cultural Studies* 21, Nos. 2–3 (March/May 2007): 168–178. <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/09502380601164353?journalCode=rcus20>
- 4 Michel-Rolph Trouillot, *Silencing the Past: Power and the Production of History* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1995), 27.
- 5 Walter Mignolo and Rolando Vazquez, “Decolonial AestheSis: Colonial Wounds/Decolonial Healings,” *SocialText online* (July 15, 2013). https://socialtextjournal.org/periscope_article/decolonial-aestheSis-colonial-woundsdecolonial-healings/.
- 6 Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth*, 27.