



**Main  
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***For Us, By Us* curated by Geneviève Wallen**

Andre Baynes, Lwrds duniam & Aemilius Milo, Dana Prieto with Chandra Maracle,  
Rowan Red Sky, Sheila Sampath

**January 12<sup>th</sup>- February 10<sup>th</sup>, 2018**

Two summers ago, I had a visceral desire to not only access more green spaces on a daily basis, but to also cultivate the land- planting my feet in the dirt. I needed to feel grounded in my environment, to feel the soil underneath the pavement- and so I moved into an apartment with a backyard. Gardening allows me to tap into different kinds of self and communal care, and to reconnect with ways of knowing that are deeply buried. Working on this small plot of land nurtures me and gives me hope for a brighter future, one where we are granted more agency. When equating food and liberation, I see the will and the means to define our own food systems. The exhibition *For Us, By Us* stems from a wish to contemplate decolonial practices via the ways in which we produce, consume and share goods. Each artist and designer who is part of this exhibition was already bridging art and design with decolonial practices and is curious about medicinal plants, gardening and/or food culture. While creating their works - Andre Baynes, Dana Prieto, Chandra Maracle, Lwrdx Duniam, Aemilius Milo, Rowan Red Sky, and Sheila Sampath- were asked to think about where food, agriculture, and decolonial practices collide in accordance to their respective positionalities and geographical contexts.

As the body of works evolved, the following themes strengthened; plants and food are used as access points to re-imagine reciprocal relationships, cooking as medicine, and cultural sustainability through agriculture.

Interested in biomimetic and speculative designs as well as afrofuturism, Andre Baynes is developing prototypes for urban gardening. For Baynes, growing food at home symbolizes sovereignty, which ultimately equals self-sufficiency. Constantly reminded of our reliance on a flawed food system, the young designer discussed how perversely colonial dynamics are still operating in Canada's agricultural market. He says, "looking specifically at the Island my parents are from, St-Vincent, where their entire economy [when it was colonized] was built on slave labour feeding Western Europe and North America with tropical goods; and instead now Caribbean labourers feed systems such as the Canadian agricultural industry."<sup>1</sup> Since the late 1960s, Canada has been hiring temporary workers from the Caribbean and couple of years later, from Mexico through the Seasonal Agricultural Worker Program (SWAP), which turned 50 in 2016. Due to overwhelming factors such as massive rural exodus, drastic cuts in Federal aid for farmers after the Second World War, and international competition, farmers have turned to programs like SWAP and the Low Skilled Workers program as a means of accessing an infinitely replenished pool of employees.<sup>2</sup> At the end of the harvest season, this system grants more flexibility to the employers as temporary foreign workers do not have the same rights as citizens. Migrant workers are paid lower wages, risk deportation and have no healthcare support; the economy of Ontario region is partly built on modern slavery. After looking into modes of democratizing knowledge and functioning outside of a broken agricultural market, Baynes has developed a prototype of a low-energy growing pod made with affordable

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<sup>1</sup> Andre Baynes (artist) in discussion with the author, October, 2017. All citations were taken from

<sup>2</sup> For more in depth details about the works conditions of migrant workers, please visit this website : [www.harvestingfreedom.org](http://www.harvestingfreedom.org)

materials. This piece of engineering can replicate the same environment conditions of an extracted piece of land. Monitoring humidity, light, and water levels, this small machine is currently growing basil; there is, however, potential for this design to grow in size. Imagining the impact a device like this one can have in sustaining year-long growing cycles is incredible.

In conversation with Baynes' work, Rowan Red Sky highlights the devastating consequences of the continuous colonial laws on the environment. Sky's mural, *Spirit of the Forest* (2018), demonstrates the intricacy between ancestral gardening methods, bodily nourishment as revered acts that simultaneously feed the soul. This installation is a continuation of previous works underlining the sacredness of land and water. As Sky articulates, "I believe land is the richest thing a person or a community can control, because control of land creates food independence from almost nothing. From literal dirt."<sup>3</sup> Sky has hybridized traditional Oneida symbols with pop culture motifs, illustrating their commitment to the right to food, sharing access to resources, and establishing reciprocal relationships with all organisms and spirits. The composition in *Spirit of the Forest* hints to past and present experiences within the natural world, tying their personal growth to newly acquired knowledge. The mural also conveys an active process of reviving practices and know-how that have been interrupted with colonization and displacement of Indigenous nations. The improper use of natural resources and asymmetric relationship with the land that came with the occupation of Turtle Island has deep repercussions on preserving the health of all beings and natural course of caring for this land. In showing the interconnectedness between spirit, body, and land, each segment of the mural becomes a guideline in restoring traditions that have been lost, thereby ensuring a prosper future for Indigenous peoples and the guest on the Dish With One Spoon

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<sup>3</sup> Rowan Red Sky, Instagram statement dated from September 7, 2017. This excerpt has been revised and approved by the artist.

territory. Looking at the hand planting beans, corn, and squash (the three sisters) indicates a deep understanding of the possibilities that lie within the intricate ecological system of the Great Lakes area. The cartoonish ghost figures appear to be healers ensuring the transition between death and what is to come, echoing a necessary shift from colonial, capitalist systems of extraction to sustainable practices. Tending to the bleak landscape, these spirits work in tandem with the smoke billowing from a Haudenosaunee long house ensuring the continuation of agricultural knowledge transmission.

*Kernel Footsteps* (2018) is a multi-textured installation by Dana Prieto and Chandra Maracle. Through working with distinct edible and medicinal plants, Prieto and Maracle reflect on the potential of re-imagining and enacting Indigenous-settler reciprocal relationships. Maracle comments on the collaborative nature of the project as, “being an indication of a larger relationship initiated at contact and that is an ongoing process. We both come with our worldviews and ways of knowing, and how things should be done. If you respect the person, you have to compromise and come to an agreement.”<sup>4</sup> Heavy stacks of braided blue and white corn hang along a carefully painted blue (with homemade purple corn ink) motif suggesting a Two Row Wampum design. Within the blue-ish lines, we can find delicately aligned rows of threaded corn kernels and dried plantain bunches. These threads refer to Haudenosaunee Invitation Wampums, originally composed of a stringed arrangement of shell or glass beads, are offered to mark a contractual relationship during important ceremonies uniting two entities. Prieto and Maracle’s invitations symbolize the same code of conduct as observed by the Haudenosaunee culture consolidating the respect of the rights and responsibilities endorsed by a particular agreement. The choice of material wasn’t a coincidence. Prieto explains that plantain represents a medicinal support system for throat

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<sup>4</sup> Chandra Maracle (artist) in discussion with the author, January 2018. All citations were taken from recorded sessions in Toronto. This excerpt has been revised and approved by the artist.

infections and that it is a powerful medicine to take when encountering arduous or splintering subjects to discuss and communicate with others. Moreover, she mentions that the plant, often growing in tight bare spaces and bringing nutrients to the soil, has been naturalized anywhere it happens to grow, and has been described by Robin Kimmerer as an “immigrant plant teacher”, by pledging Indigenous laws of reciprocity.<sup>5</sup> As for Maracle, Alex Jacobs’ poem, *The Law Is In The Seed*, has stayed with her for the last twenty years and has shaped her relationship with Haudenosaunee white corn. This important piece of writing highlights the physical and metaphysical place that this staple ingredient and power-food holds in terms of maintaining cultural sustainability for many Indigenous nations. Yet, rather than trying to cook up an all encompassing recipe for decolonization and risk flattening the complexity of settler-Indigenous relations, their plant offerings intentionally encourage the viewers to participate in the piece. By taking with them a postcard, like the invitation Wampum, they are called to observe and respect the laws of the Dish With One Spoon Treaty.

Also using *llantén* (in English, Broadleaf Plantain), *lwrds duniam* & Aemilius Milo seek to bridge their knowledge of the land, stories of migration, and histories of colonial encounters between Chinchaysuyo (territory now known as Peru) and Tkaronto. The two-part project, entitled *Palo Santo Con Llantén* (2018), is comprised of a number of sculptural elements and cooking performance. The sculpture’s base, made of steel wire mesh, is used as a vessel to hold loose dried plantain leaves. A few *llantén* bundles sit on a shelf to the left of the sculpture, along with pieces of Palo Santo, a clay rendition of a *llantén* leaf and dried seed pods. Clay replicas of plantain seeds pods sit below on the floor on a bed of more *llantén* bundles. Easily overlooked, this medicinal and edible plant originates from Europe and Northern/Central Asia, but is also found in the Americas, hence the

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<sup>5</sup> Dana Prieto (artist) in discussion with the author, December 2017 and January 2018. All citations were taken from recorded sessions in Toronto. This excerpt has been revised and approved by the artist.

name, “white-man’s foot.”<sup>6</sup> Palo Santo and llantén are used in this exhibition context as cleansing materials with the capacity to clear out physical and spiritual blockages. Primarily used by Indigenous communities across the Americas as well as herbalists, one can say that these items may be used with the intention of detoxifying from intergenerational trauma. Duniam and Milo agree on the idea that, “llantén is highly symbolic of our experiences with displacement, migration, and cultural hybridity. For us, this plant exemplifies resistance, in using it we’re trying to remember inherited knowledges and connections.”<sup>7</sup> Although many communities are still foraging llantén, the artists commented on the fraction of knowledge in how the plant can be consumed, which is consequential to scientific and capitalistic division of value. Lwrds notes that, “llantén has been colonially designated a weed, yet this plant is highly regarded for its healing properties. Part of living decolonially requires us to work at shifting our beliefs about, and our interactions with non-human beings, in order to recognize that everything around us has value.”<sup>8</sup> Plantain leaves can help with blood disorders, arthritis, skin conditions, and it contains many rich nutrients such as magnesium and zinc. It can be used fresh, blanched, or dried; applied directly to small wounds or insect bites, used for teas, tinctures, soups, stews, salads, and more. On Saturday February 10th, 2018, Milo and Duniam will cook a dish that includes broadleaf plantain leaves, share stories about the plant, and re-imagining ancestral applications.

Similarly to Milo and duniam, Sheila Sampath’s video series, *Vata* (2018), focuses reconnecting with ancestral knowledge and decolonizing one’s

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<sup>6</sup> CABI, 2018. Invasive Species Compendium. Wallingford, UK: CAB International.  
<https://www.cabi.org/isc/datasheet/41814>

<sup>7</sup> Lwrds Duniam and Aemilius Milo (artists) in discussion with the author, January 2018. All citations were taken from recorded sessions in Toronto. This excerpt has been revised and approved by the artist.

<sup>8</sup> *ibid*

body through traditional medicine. Mainly capturing her hands, the forty minutes video-performance features four parts, in each of which Sampath is featured creating the recipe for the first time. Through the captions, the viewer can sense the uncertainty in the gestures and the doubts she encounters throughout the process. In the first segment she is attempting to make clarified butter, *ghee*, which is an integral part of all of her mother's cooking and also serves as a restorative massage ointment for hair and skin. The artist has seen her mother making ghee from scratch but has never been shown how to do it herself. The second part of *Vata* documents the artist's journey in preparing Ayurvedic Medicine.<sup>9</sup> The artist blends *Ashwagandha* and *Shatavari* with honey and turmeric. Ashwagandha is beneficial in managing stress while regulating your cholesterol and sugar levels. Shatavari, also known as asparagus roots, is a reproductive tonic. The third segment of the video records the artist mixing dates, saffron, and ghee. As someone who is dealing with health problems for the past couple of years, Sampath's has been dedicated in learning ancestral healing traditions that are beneficial to her constitution. The artist's mother is a gatekeeper of a vast array of medicinal and culinary expertise that she consciously kept from the artist. Sampath comments, "My mother's internalized colonization framed these practices as unscientific or "non-sense". I've had to re-learn these practices through friends, South- Asian healers, and the Internet. There is uncertainty and doubt in the practice of making, but my body feels at home."<sup>10</sup> The fourth segment of *Vata* showcases the artist ingesting the medicine with milk, eating the dates, and finishing with a hand massage.

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<sup>9</sup> Ayurvedic Medicine is one of the world's oldest medicinal systems. It originated in India more than 3,000-years ago, and remains one of the country's traditional health care system.

<https://nccih.nih.gov/health/ayurveda/introduction.htm>

<sup>10</sup> Sheila Sampath (artist) in discussion with the author, December 2017 and January 2018. All citations were taken from recorded sessions in Toronto. This excerpt has been revised and approved by the artist.

*For Us By Us* is a cross-disciplinary exhibition featuring the works of emerging artists and designers, exploring ideas of decolonial and alternative futures through food. Each artist and designer examines strategies for communal empowerment while engaging with the conditions within which food is grown, produced, consumed and shared. Looking at their ancestral knowledge, positionality and geographical context, the selected practitioners propose to reconsider and deepen our (the viewers) relationship with consumed goods. More specifically, in the context of this exhibition, food becomes an access point to reimagine settler and Indigenous relationships, food as medicine, embodied decolonial practices, emancipation and equitable food systems.

-Geneviève Wallen

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A special thank you to the artists for your valuable input in the formulation of this essay. I am humbled by your generosity in sharing knowledge with me.

For more information about the works, please check out the Xpace Cultural Centre Blog at [Xpace.info](http://Xpace.info), which will be populated with documents deepening the exhibition conversations. Each week, new articles and links will be shared. Stay tuned!