Museum Work as Protection Beyond the Human

Co-Curating Possibility at the Intersection of COVID-19, Race, and Environment

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Abstract How can museum collections foster practices of mutual protection beyond the human? This article considers insights from the creation of the Field Museum's Pandemic Collection: a project to record the intersections of COVID-19, race, and environment. The collection takes as foundational the inseparability of social justice and environmental protection work and draws on long-standing research partnerships with communities living in and caring for peri-urban ecologies shaped by the ongoing aftermath of extractive economies (including the Northwest Amazon and Chicago). The methodology informing this archive seeks to integrate community partners' historical critiques, creative forms of mutual aid, and emerging practices of more-than-human protection. The Pandemic Collection aims to take seriously the full spectrum of partners' ethical commitments—to one another, to home ecologies, and to complex multispecies networks of mutual care and protection. The project explores possibilities for museum praxis that reflect the intersecting vulnerabilities of racialized communities surviving the COVID-19 pandemic in postextractive ecologies and their expansive strategies of mutual protection. Approaching co-curation as a "care-full" relation of mutual accompaniment requires attention to the racialized structuring of vulnerabilities for partner communities and their home ecologies and the potential for public-serving collections work to support emergent relations of multispecies protection.

Keywords COVID-19 pandemic, co-curation, Chicago, Amazon, environmental justice

The Pandemic Collection Project

Determined to learn from past archival omissions of sociocultural responses to the aftermath of pandemic contagion, racialized violence, and extractive museology,

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the Field Museum's Pandemic Collection is a project that seeks to document responses to the intersection of the COVID-19 pandemic and movements for social justice, with community partners in Chicago, Native North America, Andes-Amazon, and the Philippines. Based on two years (2020–2022) of community-based research, collections, and curation work by an interdisciplinary team of museum researchers, this article reflects on insights and interventions from a comparative analysis of case studies from two regions: Chicago and the Northwest Amazon. As project coleads (Ana for Chicago, and Amy for Northwest Amazon) our backgrounds as sociocultural anthropologists working in places dealing with the aftermath of harm inform our approach to the Pandemic Collection. Our community partners in these regions live in and care for urban and peri-urban ecologies shaped by the ongoing aftermath of extractive economies, and their insights underscore how the COVID-19 pandemic has made clear how environmental protection and social justice work are inseparable.

Grounded in a co-curatorial approach, the Pandemic Collection's scope, presentation, and narrative analysis have been shaped by continuous conversations with our partners. The collection currently comprises more than one hundred objects including textiles, digital images and memes, song and dance recordings, mixed-media paintings and sculpture, and letterpress prints. These are accompanied by ethnographic materials from video interviews and postquarantine visits with fifty-five people, representing ten community partner organizations across the four regions in which the museum's conservation science action team has developed active partnerships over the past thirty years. This co-curatorial praxis has provided an opening for participants to reinterpret their pasts and engage in speculation about their futures.[1] The process has invited a deepened understanding of partners' ethical engagements in more-than-human relations that refract the entangled effects of the COVID-19 pandemic and offer a view toward possibilities for environmental protection work in support of social justice.

Reaching for Collections Work as Protection: Emerging Methodologies

As in related community-based research and conservation practices, co-curation is a community-engaged research strategy. It takes various forms, but all seek to go beyond a low bar of consent and involve community members in designing the scope, process, presentation, and analysis of collections as they create, give meaning to, and layer context for understanding materials. This methodology helps establish a dynamic record attached to objects that accompanies the material archive and generates a conversation among various interpretations of a given object, emphasizing multivocal rather than static, singular interpretations. Doing so challenges what Diana Taylor describes as two key myths of the archive: that it is unmediated, and that it resists change.[2] At the Field Museum, curators have developed collections praxis that uses consultations with

1. McLachlan et al., "Spectral Archives."
2. Taylor, *Archive and the Repertoire*, 19.

communities whose knowledge is foundational in creating collection materials to guide their activation and reinterpretation.[3] Although not without criticism, these projects are opening new pathways for expanding the relevance of museum collections work and for addressing the harms done through extractive collections practice.[4] The Pandemic Collection builds on this previous work, as well as recent approaches to co-curation that emphasize affect, kin-making, and attention to the role of objects in new knowledge production, to modify the power differences between museums and "source communities" by foregrounding relations based on sharing and accountability.[5]

Field Museum staff took the Pandemic Collection project as an opportunity to practice co-curatorial methods with partners in the Northwest Amazon and in Chicago, asking them to recommend materials to be included to document material and expressive cultural responses to their pandemic experiences. The question animating the collection quickly expanded from how to document the forms of mutual protection on which communities were relying to how to come to grips with what museum practice as a form of protection could mean under suddenly and frequently changing social and ecological conditions.

Working in the abrupt shift to pandemic-related restrictions, staff used remote communication to sustain what previously were in-person environmental conservation-based interactions with community partners in the Chicago and Andes-Amazon regions.[6] Endeavoring to sustain relations of support, as well as active research, museum scientists shared their experiences and learned about partners' well-being through video-conference interviews and text messages that revealed both shared and varied experiences with pandemic life. While museum staff faced the specter of furlough and future employment insecurity, they were able to continue their work from home and accessed food, medicine, and medical treatments without tremendous disruption. Many partners, on the other hand, were dealing with immediate job loss and insecure housing, increased risk of viral exposure, food and medicine shortages, and enormous barriers to accessing medical treatments. All were dealing with lack of information, conflicting information, misinformation, and disinformation regarding the viral contagion and public protocols for quarantine and treatment. Both Chicago and the Amazon were active sites of protests against state-sanctioned racialized violence.

The Present Has Precedent

Speaking from her South Side apartment during a December 2020 remote interview (fig. 1) about how the COVID-19 pandemic was reshaping her world, Chicago-based

3. Campbell et al., "Centering Communities"; Matherne and Quaintance, "Meaningful Donations and Shared Governance," 14–17; Wali, "Contextualizing the Collection."

4. Green, "Major Museum's Attempt."

5. Bell, "Making Kin"; Isaac et al., "Making Kin Is More than Metaphor"; Krmpotich and Sommerville, "Affective Presence," 178–91; Thorner, "Being Called to Action."

6. Burke et al., "Museums at Home"; Cameron, "Viral Agencies"; UNESCO, "Museums Around the World."

artist Makeba Kedem-Dubose pointed to a taro houseplant resting on a ledge behind her and offered this reflection:

> I am a lot more aware of my little botanical garden, you know, and I get really upset if something looks like it wants to die on me or it's sick, because I can't afford to lose any of them right now. It's . . . see, they're my family, you know . . . I do have children, but my children are ten years apart in age: one is thirty-one and one will soon be twenty-one. And they've got their own lives. And so . . . we don't see each other because we really shouldn't [because of social distancing during early pandemic quarantine].[7]

Makeba's response conveys a heightened awareness of well-being and fragility of life marked by pandemic time: "*I can't afford to lose any of them right now*." She lived alone and quarantined alone. While Makeba couldn't see her children, she did have her plant relations. Later she noted that caring for her plants required more than watering them and ensuring they had enough light; they also needed her to talk with them and play music for them. She searched YouTube playlists of "music for plants" to nurture and balance their growth, and she listened along with them.

Such plant companionship highlights shared vulnerability when faced with lack of sun, water, kinship. A mutuality is present; a plant might "look sick" or appear to be on the verge of death: a request for more care, some music perhaps. A person needs the plants to live "right now" when she is facing a deadly pandemic day after day, alone, without her people. An affective sonic space is created with music they listen to together. Makeba's experiences here are not constrained by taxonomic classifications; rather, they tell of "a place shared by all living beings,"[8] configured in part by an unwelcome virus whose live, silent, active mutation is potentially fatal to humans, but a place also given shape through human–plant relations and musical vibrations.

Makeba is a longtime member of Sapphire and Crystals, a Black women artists' collective established in the 1980s to foster mentorship and mutual support among members, and she described her taro plant's origins, which helps trace those relationships:

> My mama plant's over here, which was gifted to me by a Haitian woman by the name of Nicole Smith who owned the first gallery that represented me here in Chicago, Nicole Gallery. Yeah . . . she passed away around 2016. I was very much part of her life just before she passed. I helped take care of her. So I really love having that plant. And I've propagated quite a few of her babies and given them to friends and I probably have three or four around here myself. So if you ever want a plant, I can give you one of Nicole's babies.

7. Makeba Kedem-Dubose, interview, December 16, 2020.

8. See also Coccia, *Life of Plants*: "For the Aristotelianism of antiquity and the Middle Ages, vegetative life, psuchē trophukē (literally 'nursing/feeding/vegetative soul'), was not simply a distinct class of specific forms of life or a taxonomic unity separated from others, but rather a place shared by all living beings, regardless of the distinction between plants, animals, and humans" (12).

More aware of her interdependency with plants during the pandemic quarantine, Makeba introduced them via feelings associated with illness, death, and loss—the loss of physical contact between her and her adult children, and the physical absence of her friend and mentor, gallerist Nicole Smith. The cyclical yet unpredictable rhythms of "plant time" are akin to the recurring and uncertain human experience of grief time, that, in Makeba's telling, create a plant–human syncopated rhythm.[9] Her words also suggest that the plants' presence maintains a sense of her beloveds' presence even if the humans cannot be there in person. She alludes to the kin work enacted through her plants to how their circulation and propagation creates relations sustained across space and time such as that between Makeba and Nicole and that Makeba was now extending to Ana.

Months later and thousands of miles to the south, when asked by Amy about how COVID-19 was affecting his life, Shipibo artist-activist Alex Shimpukat described his community's efforts during the early pandemic to deliver plant medicines (*matico*, *Piper aduncum*, in particular) to relatives suffering through infections while isolated in Pucallpa, far from their home communities, and to care for community members with whom state pandemic authorities did not consult to coordinate pandemic protections. Describing how they had experienced state care for Indigenous communities as limited to "sending body bags" to riverine communities, Alex reflected on how his team chose a name for their organizing work:

> This was not the [Peruvian government-appointed] "Comando COVID-19" that gathered up the cadavers and put them in the grave and buried them. That was the "Comando COVID" that the state had made, along with the regional government and all of that. And now the name. We wanted to know the name: what name are we going to have? We said the "Comando Matico COVID-19" . . . But this Comando saves lives. It doesn't collect cadavers. Yes. So from there is where the name "Comando Matico COVID-19" was born.[10]

Determined to make Shipibo plant medicines and curing practices available to isolated kin and others, Alex's team established the Comando Matico as a plant medicine brigade charged with gathering, distributing, and eventually growing plant medicines (fig. 2) to protect against COVID-19 infection and offer relief from symptoms.[11] This work was physically and emotionally challenging:

> [Stress] grabbed them, it grabbed me: rising depression, anxiety, rising sadness, and all of it. . . . But the strength to move forward and to help continued through all that we've

9. Smailbegovic, "Quarantine in Waiting," 183–85; Makeba Kedem-Dubose, interview, December 21, 2020.

10. Alex Shimpukat, interview, August 18, 2021.

11. See Brañas et al., "Plantas y animales usados," for further description of Northwest Amazonian uses of plants to treat COVID-19 symptoms.

Figure 1. Makeba Kedem-Dubose interview, 2020. Screenshot by Ana Croegaert.

Figure 2. Comando Matico medicinal garden planting workshop. Photograph by Comando Matico.

> been through. We kept moving forward with all of those sadnesses. . . . To not be able to rescue someone, or save a patient's life; the family members cry, but we don't cry when we're there. We only cry after, when we're telling it, recently, when I'm telling you.[12]

Alex described how he and his community were gripped by a sorrow that could not be expressed while in the throes of their efforts to address rapidly encroaching illness and death. It is in the telling of those events, in the aftermath of the harrowing moment, that the feelings can be expressed.

Painful reflections on the echoes of historical experiences with and resistance to state violence emerged in partner recommendations for materials to include in the Pandemic Collection. Our co-curatorial priorities foregrounded partners' created works that they found aesthetically resonant or ceremonially meaningful in relation to pandemic responses and deemed appropriate to share in the museum's collections.[13]

A skilled artist, Makeba recommended her "Tangled Mass Triptych," a mixed-media collage she created during the early months of quarantine (fig. 3), a time that was permeated with pandemic death but also with the violent killing of Black civilians by police or self-appointed vigilantes. "I know [these pieces] were connected to Breonna Taylor, George Floyd, Ahmaud Arbery," she says when describing the three-paneled work. A self-described colorist, Makeba's art is inspired especially by the light refracted through the stained-glass windows in the Catholic church of her youth, including the absence of shades of brown among the people in the panels: "Where were the people who looked like me?" The triptych's themes and symbolism relate to ongoing cycles of anti-Black violence and uplifts opposition to such violence. One panel portrays the figure of a pregnant Black woman who is constrained between a white dancing couple and a white girl, referencing Black women's labor exploitation as the primary caregivers for white

12. Shimpukat interview, August 18, 2021.
13. Wali, "Listening with Passion," 174–190.

Figure 3. "Tangled Mass Triptych," mixed-media collage, 2020. Courtesy of the Field Museum, Cat. no. 362734. Photograph by Makeba Kedem-Dubose. COVID Series: Tangled Mass Triptych, Makeba Kedem-Dubose.

children at the expense of enslaved women's own children, a dynamic that did not end with the abolition of enslavement but shifted to Black women's labor segmentation to employment in the unregulated sphere of domestic work. In the same panel, Kedem-Dubose interrupts this waltz of racialized violence by including an image, clipped from an archival newspaper, of the shoes worn by a Black woman and girl at a school desegregation action. Another panel shows young Black men running in a street with the image of a colonial-era gun turned upside down and pointing toward them, "symbolizing the long history of militancy against Black communities in the Americas," which also compelled the 2020 street protests in Chicago and other cities. Makeba described the circles beneath the men's feet as "ancestral stones," a visual metaphor she has used in previous work.[14]

Alex's work in the plant medicine collaborative and his work as an artist were expressions of the same transformative relationship with ancestral plant beings. His formation as a painter was shaped by his mother's capacities as a traditional Shipibo textile maker and was an extension of her ongoing relationship to the plants that endow Shipibo women's textile work with aesthetic and ceremonial force. He described these practices as emerging from the particular pressures of family migration and the longer-term pressures of colonization and dispossession faced by the Shipibo community. His artistic practice had taken shape through his formation in visionary plant medicine ceremonies and his work to mobilize familiar plant medicines to mitigate the arrival of a previously unknown pathogenic agent in the form of COVID-19 was equally creative and intersubjective. "Making visible the beings that are plants" was the core of his practice as a painter (making images that translate the forms of ceremonial plant visions), as a documentarian (making images that translate Shipibo relations to plant

14. Kedem-Dubose interview, December 21, 2020.

Figure 4. Medicinal plant seedlings, 2021. Photograph by Comando Matico.

beings), and as a community plant medicine worker (fig. 4)—drawing plant relations into the foreground as a means of mutual aid and community survivance.[15]

Makeba's and Alex's plant relationships tell of deep human connection and loss. They tell of making relations of accountability, of the responsibility to pass on healing knowledge through sensitive expression and the practice of care in the context of shared—and simultaneously unequally distributed—vulnerabilities.[16] They tell of a heightened reliance on plant wisdom and plant–human relations in the time of COVID-19. What compelled Alex to disseminate *matico* to his community and beyond? Why did Makeba carefully select and play music for her plants? Why did they turn to plants for protection when facing terrible illness during a time of incredible social dislocation and grieving? The COVID-19 pandemic, we argue, created an opening for expanding understandings of environmental protection, for a conservation praxis that does not look away from deeply sedimented strata formed by the extractive relations of environmental violence, a praxis that uplifts, learns from, and teaches human–plant–material relations that are dynamic and care-full.

The COVID-19 pandemic has made painfully clear the inseparability of human and ecological fates, the interdependency of diverse human communities, and the potential of conservation work approached as a project of protection to affect us all. Industrialization

15. Vizenor, "Aesthetics of Survivance: Literary Theory and Practice."

16. See Tallbear, "Caretaking Relations," on reciprocity, and Sharpe, "In the Wake," on care as a generative affective mode: "to feel and to feel for and with, a way of tending to the living and the dying" (139).

and extraction have continuously aggravated the conditions for zoonotic disease emergence. To live in this "Pandemicene" means urgently attending to our porosity to, dependence on, and responsibility for all of the relations that sustain our lives, breath by breath.[17] It means foregrounding what plants can teach us about such breath work in toxic times: to center a "Planthropocene."[18] The complicated reckonings that are navigated through epochal nominalizations, for all their complexity, reflect the simple fact that the racialized violence of empire and capitalist extraction have produced radically unequal embodied vulnerabilities, environmental legacies that are visible in "a billion" traces in the geological archive.[19] Indeed, through our work with community partners in the Pandemic Collection, the multiple challenges of COVID-19 have offered us a clear view into our mutual dependency, our shared and unequal vulnerability, and our undeniable responsibility for one another.

Beyond acknowledging these links, our community partners have offered us a perspective from which the intersecting crises of the pandemic represent an opening into systemic transformations at the broadest and the most local scales. Our partners' insights throughout the shifting conditions of the pandemic have offered a critical invitation to conservation work that is grounded in a deepened ethics of mutual protection between diverse human and more-than-human communities. Museum work as mutual protection amid the continuing presence of COVID-19 represents an opportunity to transform the ecological foundations of social formations that are persistently undermining the health and life chances of us all and just as persistent in their unequal distribution. The challenges of the pandemic ask us (again) to consider what mutual environmental protection beyond an imaginary of pristine nature separate from human activity could look like and offer us examples in practice.[20]

Environment as Living Archive

Approaching co-curation as a relation of mutual accompaniment has demonstrated the importance of attending to the racialized structuring of vulnerabilities for our museum partner communities and their home ecologies, as well as the potential for public-serving collections work to support emergent relations of multispecies protection. This is an orientation toward conservation work that draws on local communities' existing capacities for ecological protection, includes a broad view of their entanglement with crucial ecologies, and has metrics articulated through partner communities' values and priorities.

Our community partners' insights during the pandemic collections processes have emphasized that—given the intensification of threats to human life and biodiversity at a planetary scale—it is not enough for conservation praxis to expand the scope or roster of rationalized decision making (i.e., to include "local stakeholders"). As the stakes

17. Yong, "We Created the 'Pandemicene'."

18. Myers, "Photosynthesis."

19. Yusoff, *Billion Black Anthropocenes or None*.

20. Murphy, "Alterlife and Decolonial Chemical Relations," argues for a conception of environmental relation that does not draw a boundary of privilege around the unaltered.

intensify, so must our imagination of possible approaches to include the most transformative possibilities. Our community partners have shown us that those must be founded, first, on an ethics of relation to more-than-human beings and lifeworlds beyond economizing logics, and second, on a political commitment to sustaining lifeworlds and animating future imaginaries of those who continue to bear the greatest burdens of environmental violence and its entangled catastrophes.

Drawing on the community-based collections and co-curatorial processes of the Field Museum's Pandemic Collection, our experience has highlighted the possibilities of conservation work as mutual protection across scales of impact and entanglement, and as inseparable from the work of social and environmental justice. Our community partners have made it clear that while we have inherited histories that have made us unequally vulnerable to one another and to the ongoing effects of some human activities at the planetary scale, our futures depend on recognizing our mutual dependency and responsibility to engage in mutual protection. Their creative practices of protection—for human and more-than-human lives—offer an opening to imagine what approaching conservation as multilayered protection could entail. Reflected in their creative practices of mutual protection and care, we can see an image of the COVID-19 pandemic as an opening to protecting our relations and turning historical injuries toward a more just future.

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