

# AGUSTÍN ORTIZ HERRERA TO NAME, TO OWN. CRITIQUE OF TAXONOMIC PRACTICE

## RESEARCH PROJECT

Agustín Ortiz Herrera's research project *To Name, To Own. Critique of Taxonomic Practice* focuses on taxonomy and the modern classification system for natural species developed by Swedish botanist, zoologist, and physician Carl Linnaeus (1707–1778). Linnaeus's most notable contribution to science was his invention of a system of binomial nomenclature for naming organisms. For example, the two-term name *Homo sapiens* describes the only living species of the genus *Homo*: humans. This convention became universally accepted and the nested hierarchy became quickly consolidated as the dominant cognitive basis of the Western worldview of nature.

<sup>1</sup> Linnaeus's 1735 volume *Systema Naturae* not only classified the natural world, it also gendered it and thereby conditioned an understanding of natural history as a highly patriarchal structure. This condition has transcended science and come to dominate other fields of culture and knowledge.<sup>2</sup>

Ortiz Herrera has carried out his

research in botanical collections, academic centres, and libraries specialising in Linnaeus's scientific work located in Uppsala, Sweden (where Linnaeus ultimately became rector of the city's university) and London (where the world's oldest active biological society, The Linnean Society of London, was established in 1788).<sup>3</sup> Honouring the Society's motto "Naturae Discere Mores" (To Learn the Ways of Nature), Ortiz Herrera furthermore connects Linnaeus's legacy with two key nodes of research in Spain: the Gabinet Salvador at the Botanical Institute of Barcelona and the former Museum of Zoology in Barcelona's Ciutadella park.<sup>4</sup> In doing so he aims to bring taxonomic paradigms into the present and to critique them against recent and emerging post-human, queer, feminist and decolonial theories.<sup>5</sup>

Taking up Teresa Castro's call for "queering nature" and "queering botanics", Ortiz Herrera's research refuses the anthropocentric and dualistic conception that has separated humans from non-humans in order to

go beyond the constraints of Western exceptionalism and its colonising grip.<sup>6</sup> Castro has identified a "plant turn" in current fields of knowledge and creation, where philosophers including Emanuele Coccia are inviting us to think about and with vegetation or fungi and to consider herbivorous or fungal relations and nonhierarchical modes of being. Such an approach chimes with the Brazilian anthropologist Eduardo Viveiros de Castro's call for "decolonising thought" and to contest the hierarchical relationships between "our" thoughts and those of others.<sup>7</sup>

Another important point of Ortiz Herrera's research has been foregrounding the scientific work of Lynn Margulis (1938–2011), the unorthodox scientist whose theories around evolution and symbiosis were often mocked and ignored by the male establishment for appearing to contradict Charles Darwin's dogma of natural selection. As a proponent of the endosymbiotic theory, Margulis posited



that simple life forms merged, forming cell organelles, like mitochondria. Life, she believed, is a symbiotic and cooperative union that allows those who associate to succeed, a theory that later has been widely accepted and substantiated.

Ortiz Herrera's research introduces queer epistemologies through a series of gatherings, an urban walking tour and a collective reading. The first will be a two-hour guided tour around Poblenou to identify and discuss plant taxonomy and its colonial provenance. A similar tour will take place the following day in Montjuïc's Botanical Garden, where Agustín will lead a discussion within the framework of a man-made "natural" environment.

A third activity, developed in collaboration with Hangar – Visual Arts Production and Research Centre in Barcelona as part of its "Fictions of Dis-order" programme, will consist of a collective reading of Derek Jarman's *Modern Nature*. Published in 1991, this biography is a diary of the British film-maker, artist and activist on his late years at Prospect Cottage, on the arid Kent coast in south-east England. Jarman purchased this fisherman's house in Dungeness in 1986 shortly after being diagnosed as HIV positive, with the aim of withdrawing in the years before his death (in 1994). The now iconic black timber cottage with yolk yellow window frames is overlooked by the imposing Dungeness nuclear

power station and surrounded by a vast shingle beach and a noteworthy garden, the boundaries of which he described as the horizon.

#### — Latitudes

<sup>v</sup> With its origins in the 17th century, the Gabinet Salvador includes the oldest known herbarium in Spain, as well as books, documents, collections of molluscs, fossils, and stuffed animals. The Zoology Museum of Barcelona was located in the Modernista building known as the 'Castle of the Three Dragons' between 1920 and 2010, when it was relocated and changed its name to Museu de Ciències Naturals de Barcelona (Museum of Natural Sciences of Barcelona, aka the 'Museu Blau').

<sup>vi</sup> Teresa Castro, "The Mediated Plant", *e-flux Journal* #102, September 2019, <https://www.e-flux.com/journal/102/283819/the-mediated-plant/>

<sup>vii</sup> Emanuele Coccia, *The Life of Plants: A Metaphysics of Mixture*, Polity Press, 2018.

<sup>i</sup> Linnaeus was the first to use it consistently throughout his book, although the system now known as binomial nomenclature was partially developed by the brothers Gaspard and Johann Bauhin 200 years earlier.

<sup>ii</sup> Linnaeus published 12 editions of *Systema Naturae* during his lifetime. The 10th edition from 1758 is considered the starting point of zoological nomenclature.

<sup>iii</sup> Sir James Edward Smith purchased Linnaeus's botanical, zoological and library collections for 1,000 guineas to found The Linnean Society of London in 1788. It was at a meeting of the Society in 1858 that papers from Charles Darwin and Alfred Russel Wallace outlining the theory of evolution by natural selection were first presented. <https://www.linnean.org>

<sup>iv</sup> The Salvador family were a dynasty of apothecaries and naturalists from Barcelona that between the 17th and 19th centuries collected over 14,000 specimens. The Gabinet Salvador is the most important example of a Cabinet of Curiosities or *wunderkammer* in the country, a presentation format which predates the invention of the modern museum and the separation between the sciences and the humanities.  
<https://museuciencies.cat/es/area-cientifica/colecciones/colección-salvador/>

## AGUSTÍN ORTIZ HERRERA

Barcelona, 1970) works between moving image and performance. He studied Fine Arts at the University of Barcelona (1998), film-making in New York (2003) and obtained an MA in Fine Arts at the Konstfack College of Arts, Stockholm (2016). Recent exhibitions include *Oblivion* at K.R.O.P.P., Uppsala Konsert & Kongress, Uppsala (2019), *Konst tar plats* at Österbybruk, Sweden (2018), *Potenciación a largo plazo* at Paratext 24, Hangar, Barcelona (2017) and *E/ umbral de primavera*, Madrid (2018). He is currently resident at Hangar – Visual Arts Production and Research Centre in Barcelona.