

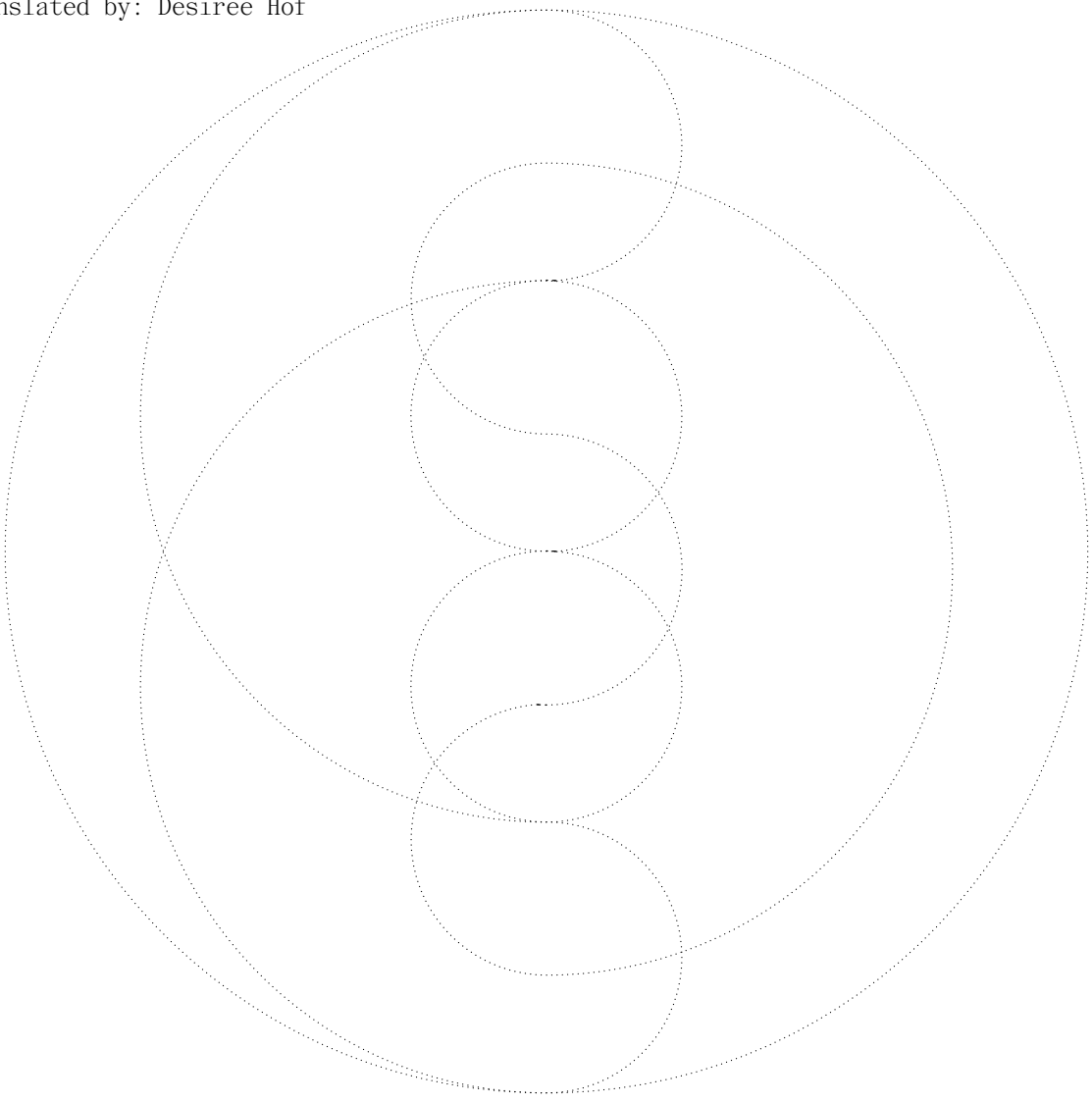


# THE LANGUAGE OF FLOWERS



– Tania Hernández Velasco

– translated by: Desireé Hof



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## THE LANGUAGE OF FLOWERS

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I.

*I arrive, I arrive laughing, me [the one] with a cheerful face:  
like flowers my songs are interwoven and unfold with them.*  
—Ajorca de Cantos Floridos, *Nahua poem*.

I don't speak the language of flowers, but a few years ago, thanks to my cousin M. who was interpreting for me, I interviewed a *Cosmos sulphurea*. I, who thought that this type of flower was seen as an invasive plant, took the opportunity to ask her if she actually was a weed. She replied bitterly with no, that she was a bee flower that had seeded herself. She also told me that she had no idea what her age was as she thought that she was «barely born». I still wonder what «barely» means for a flower.



Photogram from  
*Titixe* (2018), dir.  
Tania Hernández  
Velasco.

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The interview was a brief moment in Huaxcuaxcla, Guadalupe Victoria, Puebla, and was a gift from M., who was nine years old at the time. I had gone there to film my family's last harvest as a farewell to our small piece of land. My grandpa, the last peasant from our lineage, had died and there was nobody else who wanted to continue his work. While I was filming the final harvest of black beans, M. approached me to play with the camera and to teach me how to listen to the whispers of the tiny.

That moment reminded me of how a few months earlier, during the raining season, our planting was saved from an unrelenting hailstorm. It did destroy the cultivation of the neighbouring plot. In the days before the great downpour, the edges of the field were covered with some kind of yellow fence made of flowers. My mom was convinced that *somebody* had planted this fence to protect our beans. Could it have been my grandpa or maybe *somebody* else? We never knew the answer, it never crossed our minds to ask the flowers.





My mother was born in this place of both presence and absence more than half a century ago. Here, she helped with planting, tilling and harvesting every morning before going to school. This lasted until she, at the age of fifteen, moved to Mexico City. One by one, her brothers and sisters were leaving in search of a better life, they said, one that they couldn't find at the countryside. However, some time ago in Mexico City I promised my grandpa that I would return here to film his work. I recorded the interview with the flower as I tried to fulfill my promise.

Going back to this place that my family could no longer continue to inhabit, has not only allowed me to grasp what actually grows on this earth, but also to sense the more profound promise that's underneath it: the rural and de-indigenised roots that were forgotten in my upbringing in Mexico City. I can count on my fingers the amount of names, images and stories I know from the ancestors who preceded my grandparents' generation.

This shift did not start with the migration of my parents, but, as explained by thinkers such as Yásnaya Aguilar and Federico Navarrete, it is part of the historical process of consolidation of the Mexican nation-state: a project of whitening and cultural homogenisation, identity and the use of language under the ideal of the *mestizo*, Spanish-speaking and «modern». Generation after generation, the family's ties with our communities and origin stories were erased. The stories that shaped me have moved away from my ancestor's paths.

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Perhaps for that reason, one of the most cherished memories I have is that of a basket filled with flowers that I received as a child, on one of the few times we came to Huaxcuaxcla. It was a gift from my great-grandma Came, whom I learned to call «Abuelita Chiquita», not only because she was so small, but also because her smile and her eyes shone like those of a little girl. She picked each one of these flowers from the garden that she carefully tended. I remember the geraniums, black-eyed Susans, daisies and the *Cosmos sulphureas*, or autumn flowers that arrived uninvited to the orchards and fields in September.

My mom says that I remind her of Abuelita Chiquita, what makes me wonder about her all the time. But I rarely saw her and we spoke very little, and because of that I hold onto the memories of her flowers to get to know her better. I imagine her, like M., with the power to talk with flowers, sharing all her longings and pains with the buds in her orchard. Her life was filled with hardship and hard work, but to others she always was a person of great sweetness: candy, stories, cookies, food, and especially flowers. The flowers now found in Huaxcuaxcla are perhaps descendants of those with which Abuelita Chiquita spoke. If I would learn how to talk with flowers, what would they tell me about her? Could they sing me a song about her?

II.

*On your long hair*

*The cut flowers wail.*

*Some bear little daggers*

*Others fire and others water.*

—Federico García Lorca, Rosita the Spinster.

I would like to film the flowers in Huaxcuaxcla singing about Abuelita Chiquita, about my mom, my grandpa and grandma, about all the ancestors I cannot name. I wonder how the flowers from this specific region sing and so I start to come up with images and ideas.

It's easy for me to imagine anthropomorphised flowers, forming little mouths with their petals: every flower has a unique personality and a different voice. However, it saddens me to think of the parade of human clichés, brimming with prejudice, that I might awkwardly project onto the flowers. An example is how the flowers in Disney's version of *Alice in Wonderland* are projected. When they sing, a catalog of simplistic feminine archetypes are being displayed onto them: the stern mother, the unattainable white maiden and the gossipy and scandalous sisters. They remind me of the vehemence with which my friend B. once told me that she hated receiving flowers from male suitors. She thought that among the roses in the bouquet there would be an encoded message filled with expectations towards her: that she needs to be beautiful and quiet, like a flower that will be thrown out of the vase when its color is fading.

In different cultures and different times we have put various meanings and messages onto flowers. In Victorian England, for example, there was an obsession with creating secret codes that allowed lovers, enemies, friends and associates to communicate with each other. A mimosa could be a promise of chastity; a yellow rose could be a statement of jealousy; a poppy could indicate a membership in a political party. Nowadays, if you search the internet for «the meaning of flowers» you will find countless online flower shops showing off unequivocal guides on what flower to buy for which occasion and sentiment. To me, these dictionaries and codes seem insufficient. Not only because they are almost always based on Eurocentric standards, but also because they strip the flowers –already cut– of any possibility of replication.

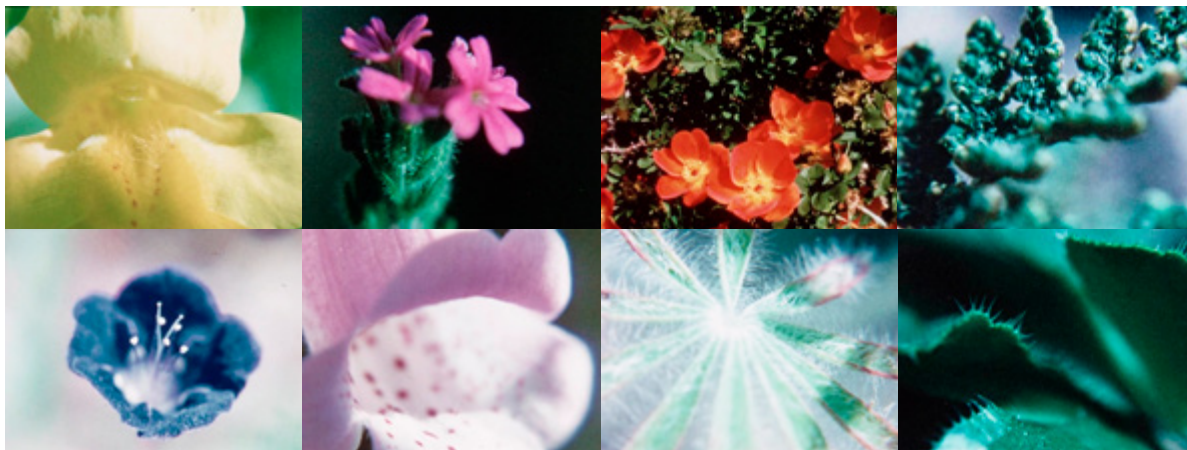
And the fact is that flowers before being cut are insubordinate, as stated by the Belgian playwright and poet Maurice Maeterlinck in *The Intelligence of Flowers*. Despite the fact that their root system constraints them from moving, they have developed complex survival strategies «to escape upward to the fatality below, to elude, to break the dark and weighty law, to free it-self, to break the narrow sphere, to invent or invoke wings, to escape as far as possible, to conquer the space wherein fate encloses it, to approach another kingdom, to enter a moving, animated world». <sup>1</sup> Flowers, in ways imperceptible to our eye, defy destiny.

Another example of this rebelliousness in flowers is displayed by the brilliant Georgian filmmaker Otar Iosseliani in *Song About a Flower*, <sup>2</sup> in which they raise their voices in a collective ballad against the crushing march of modern industrialism. Iosseliani's flowers are able to combat the asphalt, rising through its cracks in search of light. It gives us a peek into the future landscape in which the plant kingdom will reclaim the spaces covered with iron and cement, in a time in which people no longer live. They do not need a drawn on mouth in order to be able to sing. They only need a small breeze to make them tremble in all directions, to emit a song that can be heard and seen, but above all: it can be smelled.

This particular language was sensed by Hellen Keller, the luminous and passionate American thinker and activist, when she claimed her absolute belief that flowers can talk and that one day we will understand them. Keller, who was someone with sight and hearing impairments, obviously did not only refer to the floral display of colors and shapes and not only to a vibration that we could imagine as voice-like. She also referred to the alphabet of smells and textures that today only bumblebees, bees and butterflies are able to understand. In the movie *Her socialist smile*, director John Gianvito explores Keller's thoughts and imagination. It was the movie in which I got to know Keller's love for flowers. The filmmaker approaches nature as if he wants to touch it with his camera. This was how Keller received the messages from the flowers.

The sense of touch reminds me of another American whose work has had a profound impact on me since film school: avant-garde filmmaker Marie Menken. She allows herself to touch things with her camera and shows how things are touching her. Her approach to the world recognises the fragility and vitality of her own body by unfolding those that are crossing her gaze with intuitive, playful, curious and dancing bodily movements. In her *Glimpse of the Garden*, <sup>3</sup> a poetic film of five

minutes, Menken encapsulates and celebrates the energy and relief of the sounds, rhythms, colours, fragrances and textures that she encounters during her short visit through a garden. Menken communicates with the flowers by playing, dancing, moving without uttering a word, as if the only way to get in tune with them is by using her body language.



Photograms of *Glimpse of the Garden* (1957), dir. Marie Menken.

### III.

*The bleeding ancestry of flowers has committed me to life.  
Are you familiar with the bleeding ancestry of the flowers?  
—Forough Farrokhzad, It Is Only Sound That Remains.*

My sibling S. and I are co-writing a movie together. By doing so, we try to reimagine the archive of faces, landscapes, stories and songs which were displaced from our bodies as we were born and raised in Mexico City, where we inhabited patriarchal, racist and classist middle-class spaces. In our childhood and adolescence we were permeated by the hegemonic narratives these contexts transpired; during better times they did not represent us, during the worst they hurt us.

We resonate with the ideas of Dorotea Gómez Grijalva, a K'iche Mayan feminist, who recognises her own body not only as a place that is biological, but political as well: with «history, memory and knowledge, both ancestral and from [her] personal history». <sup>4</sup> S. and I long to explore our body-territory through film in order to sow in it the stories that were discarded from us and our ancestors.

But we cannot recover what we lost, nor do we wish to claim a political stance that does not belong to us. We wish, –inspired by speculative fiction and utopian geographies– to turn our bodies into a shared territory in which we create roots and ownership; a territory that walks and breathes with us and possesses all the colors of our skin; a territory in continuous transformation and without borders, shaped by the imaginary and real coordinates that form us.

One of these places is Huaxcuaxcla. Here, when there is no one to till the soil, or to pull the weeds from it, the land is filled with *Cosmos sulphureas* and other flowers that are perceived as invasive. Its abundance refers to the absence of all the people who up until now have cultivated that small piece of land. In the morning breeze, these flowers shake and tremble with secret rhythms and cadences. I don't speak the language of flowers, but I imagine them as antennas that receive and interpret messages from those who are no longer there. Sometimes, I imagine them sending out and receiving messages, like that one time they protected the land against the elements. In our movie, I said to S., I'd wish we could register the flower songs of Huaxcuaxcla. That maybe through them we can find echoes of those who know how to talk to them.

When I told S. this desire, they asked me if I could imagine what these flowers sounded like. I, intuitively, replied that I would like them to sound like the timbre of *Abuelita Chiquita*. «So do you think that our flowers should have voices that we could perceive as feminine?», asked S. to me, to then

add: «If that's the case, it would be lovely to think of our flowers having trans women's voices. Or even better, that they fluctuate between male and female voices, as some flowers actually do». S., who is a transmasculine non-binary person, proceeded to passionately share with me how they had recently heard some of Siobhan Guerrero's ideas. Guerrero is a brilliant Mexican philosopher and trans-Mexican biologist who inspired them deeply. Siobhan refers to the existence of protandrous flowers (which first function as male, to then change to female) and protogynous flowers (which have the opposite trajectory), to dismantle the biologicistic arguments that allude to the existence of trans people as an unnatural phenomenon. «Flowers also undergo transitions», said S. with a smile, «as surely many of our ancestors were unable to do so. Can you imagine any of them singing to us through a flower? Could we then sing something back to them?». Then S. composed a beautiful humming song, in which they mixed low and high notes indiscriminately, overshadowing for a moment a possible interpretation of the flowers' voices as both masculine or feminine. It took S. no effort at all to create this song, it was as if the exact vibrations were already waiting anxiously to come out of their vocal cords.

I don't speak the language of flowers, but I would like to believe that there are memories in my body that I can activate with my five senses to, at the least expected moment, enter into conversation with all the flowers of Huaxcuaxcla.

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Tania Hernández Velasco

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Photograms from  
*Titixe* (2018), dir.  
Tania Hernández  
Velasco.

## NOTES & REFERENCES

- <sup>1</sup> Maurice Maeterlinck, *La Inteligencia de las Flores*. Titivillus (editor digital), 1907, p. 6.
- <sup>2</sup> Otar Iosseliani, *Canción sobre una flor*, 1959. Available at <<https://www.cinematheque.fr/henri/film/70507-sapovnela-otar-iosseliani-1959>>.
- <sup>3</sup> Marie Menken, *Glimpse of the Garden*, 1957. Available at <<https://www.dailymotion.com/video/xf7dwi>>.
- <sup>4</sup> Dorotea Gómez Grijalva, *Mi Cuerpo Es un Territorio Político*. Brecha Lésbica, 2012, p. 6.