Introduction

I applied for the 2019 Expedition Fund to support a portion of a research trip to the Amazon Rainforest in Northwest Brazil during the month of August; a colleague and I applied and were accepted to take part in a ten-day artist residency called LABVERDE. We scheduled to spend a couple days on either side of the programme to become acquainted with the area’s geography, and to finish any further field notes before returning to the UK. I asked for funds to support accommodation within these timeframes.

LABVERDE is a short-term residency programme for artists working around environmental concerns. Its unique programming includes participants from all over the world who come together for an intense period of learning across treks, scientific lectures and talks by curators and other participants, artistic interventions, river travels, and a few (very) merry evenings.¹ The programme’s aim was to bring together knowledges and practices between artists and natural scientists, embedded within the context of the Amazon River and rainforest. Examples of natural science influence included a botanist who helped guide us in the first half of the trip, a series of talks on topics such as dendrochronology and the area’s environmental history.

¹ The caipirinha is Brazil’s national cocktail, made with made with cachaça, sugar, and lime. To make: squeeze and drop in 2/8 of a lime. Add 1 tsp sugar, crush and mix with a spoon. Pour in 70ml cachaça and plenty of ice. Stir well.
Figures 2 and 3. Amazon Rainforest tree canopy (left) and the vessel we called home the first half of the programme (right).

My time there was spent across two locations: a research vessel traveling up and down a section of the Amazon River, and the Adolpho Ducke Forest Reserve. While on the boat, we travelled to different parts of the Amazon and learned about its unique and varied ecology across a variety of settings. I did not have a lot of expectations going into the programme, and this was mostly because I had nothing to compare such an experience to. The expectations I did have were that I would probably be uncomfortably moist for the duration of the experience, having grown up in a similar climate in Florida. This expectation was met, and exceeded…

What I must impress here though was just how staggeringly wide the Amazon River really is. It is so wide to the point that when you are in the middle of it, the experience is akin to floating in an ocean. This, coupled with the fact the wet and dry season changes, create a naturally flooding landscape in which upwards of thirty metre trees are completely submerged under water for half the year. Photographs and words simply cannot do the feeling of awe justice to experience such a unique place. When I thought about the imaginary of the Amazon before this experience, I would have normally thought of parrots and monkeys hopping from branch to branch in the canopy. While it is true there was some of that, what I never considered was that this canopy is often around eye level, or just above. The majority of the trees — some as high as eighty metres (or more) — are submerged underwater during the wet season.
My other conscious reflection of my considerations going in was that I had expected to be constantly surrounded by gargantuan spiders and see venomous snakes at every turn. The second night, after arriving at Cuieiras Reserve, we were gathered under the pavilion serving as our meeting space (Figure 9) and warned (stricken with fear) about the dangers surrounding the area, or in their words, ‘everything is around’. While I certainly did not take any chances wandering off alone, the reality was that (during the day at least) the forest was quite quiet save for a small number of birds here or there, and I did not see much wildlife day-to-day beyond what must have been millions and millions of ants; but more on them later. Another participant was less fortunate. While sitting outside the bunks in the Ducke Reserve,
she had a tarantula fall on her head (Figure 6). Can you even imagine? I think her words were: “ok, I’m in the Amazon”.

Figure 6. A very large tarantula. Photo courtesy Herwig Scherabon. Anecdote courtesy Dr. Betty Sargeant.

Figure 7 and Figure 8. The Amazon River seen from above (left) and our group of 2019 LABVERDE participants. Photos courtesy Rogerio Assis.

Orienting LABVERDE

As I mentioned previously, LABVERDE is an annual artist residency programme facilitated by curator Lilian Fraiji. In order to take part, participants submit an application stating why they would like to attend and what kind of project they would propose the experience/context would help them create. I applied to work with a colleague collaboratively to extend a longer standing collaboration, with intent of drawing connections between the region’s history of resource extraction of various kinds of plants and other materials through the use of 3D capture technology (Figure 9). Our aim was to create a series of sculptures from these captures back in the UK. While this project is still being worked out, I had a much more personal development across my artistic and academic trajectory that I would like to focus on for the remainder of this reflection.
For the past couple of years, I, alongside many others, have taken part in the resurgence in popularity of houseplants. Earlier in the summer before the programme, my husband and I moved from a one-bed flat to a three-bed semi-detached house that had not been updated since the 1970s (this is relevant later). I began purchasing many more plants to fill the space, which involved a lot of further research into the care of these different plants in the context of an interior space. Through this action, I came to realise that many of the plants sold as houseplants are tropical and subtropical species. This was further compounded by seeing many of the same species I have in my home used to adorn the public spaces in Manaus, the city in which LABVERDE is based. This hints at an interesting global network of plants as commodities — some plants that are native to Brazil are not used in landscaping, and instead others are imported from elsewhere. And conversely, the same might be said for other regions of the world.

But why care about houseplants in the context of this residency programme? My interest was piqued purely on a base level of curiosity as to whether I might see any of my plants potted back at home growing unmanaged in any areas of the sites we would visit. And to my complete surprise, this was indeed the case (Figure 10).

Figure 9. Partial 3D scan of a philodendron billietiae. Image courtesy Herwig Scherabon.

Figure 10. Philodendron pedatum seen West of Manaus, Brazil (two left) and a cutting purchased online growing in my home (right).
And so, the more I spent reflecting on these circumstances while experiencing the programme, the more I began to examine my perhaps lack of criticality in keeping houseplants. Often people criticise taking animals from the wild to look after in their homes (e.g. tropical fish), but the same is much less often said for plants. I began to ask what it means to extract a botanical species from its native habitat: what are the environmental impacts? How do those who live in that environment relate to those plants? What more-than-human narratives and histories become lost through the practice of cultivation? How can the aesthetics surrounding houseplants be conceived of as a new sort of exoticism? While such questions are perhaps overtly critical, I think some celebratory enquiry may be had too. For example, what kinds of new relationships are being formed between humans and plants put into new domestic environments? How do humans and plants domesticate one another? What kinds of knowledge is being passed between plants from different geographies? What other kinds of species are the plants interacting with? What new forms of botanical research may be had in the unique environment varied domestic spaces afford? What sort of value typology might be construed?

Each of these questions leads into a multiplicity of rooty networks. What I want to consider here are three nodes...one, my work conducted during LAB VERDE; two, my personal relationship to domestic space; and three, where this project is going, and how it weaves in and out of my PhD research as well.

**More-than-human Domestication**

In terms of houseplants, I love the genus philodendron, which is in the family Araceae. They are just plain goofy plants, with their almost beast-like heads and growing pattern that seems to have them falling all over themselves and others. Many species in the genus are epiphytic, which means they grow on other plants. Throughout my time at LABVERDE, I set out to collect as many different Araceae as I possibly could, trying to suss out how to identify specifically philodendrons along the way. The result was a series of still-life photographs (Figure 11) of cuttings taken from various plants. I also created a visual research sketch (Figure 1) — I am not sure it is an artwork yet — exhibiting a species of philodendron clustered around an ant nest in the form of an excerpt from a two-channel video. The short clips depict two actions of domestication: one driven by a single human, and another by a population of ants. The audio played back is the recording of ants flooding over a microphone.

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2 An interesting note about many plants in the genus Araceae is that if you cut below a growth point (node), you can generally quite easily get the cutting to root and thus propagate a new plant.
Back to the ants: many species of ants have formed symbiotic relationships with philodendron plants. The philodendron will often secrete a sweet nectar-like substance that attracts the ants, who in turn build their nest around the roots of the plant and protect it from herbivorous predators. Even further, some ant species will actually take portions of plants up into the canopy of the trees and create their nest there, from which the plant will continue to grow. These formations are known as ‘ant gardens’ and are the reason I chose the heading ‘more-than-human domestication’. I argue we can think of the ant-philodendron relationship as a kind of co-domestication between the plants and the ants in a way that benefits both species.
It makes me wonder what kinds of other benefits and forms of relationships are being created through living-with these plants in the home.

**Domestic Space and Value**

I mentioned earlier I had moved into a much larger residence a couple of months prior to attending LABVERDE. This matters in the context of the programme and my reflections for two reasons: one, demolition; and two, wallpaper. All the wallpaper…the house had layers of wallpaper on literally every surface.

In terms of domestic space and plants in the context of LABVERDE, the research boat is a nice inclusion here (Figure 13). Someone on the boat thought enough of having greenery around a space to purchase artificial flowers while being surrounded by more diversity in plants than I could ever imagine. This artificial sense giving way to emotional sensibility is for me overshadowed by the flower’s materiality. They are plastic. This image creates an incredible juxtaposition in that we were in a context learning about the way in which the Amazon’s plants act as lungs for the Earth and help with filtration and cooling, and here is a clear example of an attempt to create a similar kind of ‘beauty’ that aids in dismantling these environmental services.

![My plant cuttings and artificial flowers on board the research vessel in LABVERDE.](image)

Shortly after returning from LABVERDE, we began the process of gutting the ground floor of our home (Figure 14). The experience of LABVERDE forced me to consider the nature of domestic space and waste, in this context, four skips full of debris and detritus. Often one’s experience of keeping plants in the home follows a similar pattern, whether that is in the form of plastic planters, plastic fertiliser containers, plastic bags full of compost material, plastic watering cans — plastic, plastic, plastic. Not to mention the shipping materials that are used to ship plants to the home as well.

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3 Not to mention fact the cuttings are also sitting in plastic cups.

4 While I have focused on plastic here…it is the least of our worries. Worse are the ever-growing number of composite materials that are equally improbably or impossible to break down.
Figure 14. In-progress photographs of my home being renovated.
What I became aware of was that at the moment, I put my feelings and emotions towards valuing these practices in order to create the kind of domestic space I thought best in order for myself and my plants to thrive. Such actions betray one of the core messages of LABVERDE around environmental services and the necessity towards protecting the Amazon. I do not have an answer in terms of how we might move forward, and obviously from the photos included, I have gone forward with the renovation of the space. What I would like to offer is that thinking through more-than-human co-domestication as a framework might highlight the importance of thinking about materials and domestic space in the context of multispecies thriving, and how such acts offer viewpoints into new futurisms and collaborative ways of being-with can be made possible. I would also like to offer a visual art project in the making, but more on that soon.

I spoke of the way in which I valued my own feelings and emotions over that of the larger framework of environmental sustainability. This process of updating and expanding domestic space mirrors the monster that is late capitalism. The environmental value these plants offer within their native habitat (and beyond) is ignored, and rather subsumed into the same capitalistic process. I am interested in how the growth in popularity of these plants is tied to an increase in monetary exchange value of these species driven by cross-continental trade, aesthetics, and media personalities. Take for example the scan of the philodendron billietiae. A plant of that size would probably cost upwards of two or three-hundred pounds. Multiply that number by maybe six if it contains a naturally occurring mutation known as variegation (Figure 15).

Figure 15. Cached Google screenshots of variegated philodendron billietiae for sale in the UK.
Equally, many houseplant species now part of this multi-billion-dollar industry were first introduced to the Global North through various imperialist expeditions, which gets us closer to speaking about the resulting project that I am currently pursuing. Enter: Royal Botanical Gardens at Kew.

Kew Botanical Gardens

Many of the plant species I gathered in Brazil, and those I keep in my home, were first collected by British botanists on expeditions funded in the name of imperial rule. Many of those original specimens brought back remain archived and grown in the Royal Botanical Gardens at Kew in Southwest London. I went one morning to try and identify as many philodendron on display at Kew as I could (Figure 16).
One of those, *philodendron squamiferum*, I have growing in my home; or rather a cultivar of it (Figure 17).

The plants Kew grows in the publicly accessible (with a fee) are a small fraction of what is cultivated in their private greenhouses. What fascinates me about the institution is its archive offers a rich history of when plants were identified, recorded, and brought back. On top of this, institutions like Kew matter because they hold a lot of power and sway into public opinion and perception of faraway geographies and their environmental importance; and this is not something that is built into Kew’s displays. These two factors offer a rich pool of information for the trajectory of the project I hope to have culminate from all of these reflections and growth points.
The Project

I mentioned earlier that as part of the application to LABVERDE, you must propose a project. This project can develop or change direction as a result of the experience, but everyone is offered the opportunity to publish their resulting works in the annual catalogue published alongside the programme. This year’s catalogue will be released in conjunction with Earth Day on April 22nd, during which they hope a series of events, exhibitions, and interventions will be put on by the LABVERDE alumni network. It is my goal to put on an exhibition of works that spans across this date.

The task at hand becomes creating a project that combines domestic space, colonial history, environmentalism, and value. My primary practice is printmaking, and hence the wallpaper I kept on about earlier becomes an important fact. It is also a historical signifier. I have recently contacted English Heritage and one of the curators has agreed to go through their collection of historic wallpapers early next year to see if any plants native to Northwest Amazonas were depicted for use in UK homes coinciding with periods of expedition and colonial rule. English Heritage has already published a book containing some forty wallpapers from their collection, which have since been redrawn and reproduced for sale by the company Little Greene. One of these wallpapers depicts clusia rosea, a popular houseplant and landscaping plant used in Brazil, and one of the plants I have in my home (Figure 18).

![Figure 18. London Wallpapers published by English Heritage detailing London-made historic wallpapers (left), one of the featured wallpapers reproduced by Little Greene Paint & Paper featuring clusia rosea (centre), and clusia rosea (right) growing in my home.](image)

By cross-referencing the dates plants were recorded with the production of British wallpapers, I hope a clearer picture might be had of the ongoing relationship between the aforementioned ideas of domestic space, colonial history, environmentalism, and value. In order to encapsulate these ideas in a visual form, I will be creating a series of to-scale still-life photographs printed onto ceramic slabs (a popular choice of houseplant pot). The photographs will contain layers of these historic reproduced wallpapers onto a purpose-built plastered wall, which will be peeled, cracked, and damaged. I have also been attempting to source the philodendron species I saw in Brazil from online sellers (such as the philodendron pedatum) and will use these plants to cast shadows in various forms outlining the plants onto the wall (Figure 19).
Concluding Remarks

Suffice to say, the experience of LABVERDE offered me the chance to further a research interest I have begun to cultivate, which is the cross-over between art and plants. Further to the artistic project outlined above, I am also in the process of organising an interdisciplinary conference to explore some of the themes I have engaged with here further from a variety of perspectives, which I intend to host at Queen Mary in the spring or summer of 2020. The experience offered new research interests to form while also relating to my PhD research of looking at organic commodities (gelatine and collagen) and the interaction between humans and nonhumans. There is also an artistic element to my PhD thesis, which I hope will partially be in the format of a film exploring the material and metaphorical role of jellyfish in the production of gelatine and collagen. Some of this research will take place in Japan, and meeting Yuko Hasegawa and her student and collaborator Seiha Kurosawa has been invaluable in this way. I look forward to connecting with them further in the future. To say the experience has been life changing would not capture all of the intricacies and complexities of personal and academic growth I have experienced as a result of this experience. I am so grateful to the Expedition Fund committee for seeing latent value in my proposal, and I hope I have been able to fulfil their own expectations.

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5 My Geography MA dissertation at Queen Mary, University of London focused on the relationship between the human-plant and plant-human care in the context of participatory art practice.