

Reseña.

Alive in their garden.

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Alive in their garden

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Project

Alive in their garden

Project Directors

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Project URL

<https://aliveintheirgarden.com/>

Project Reviewer

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Project Overview**Mary Pena and Yomaira Figueroa-Vásquez**

Alive in their garden is a multimodal work of curation and community-centered engagement that spans digital and geographic spaces. The project comprises a physical and digital exhibition centralizing visual productions of the Black Latinx diaspora, an artist workshop, virtual conversations, and scholarly publications. This work first emerged as a physical exhibition situating gardens and plant life as land-based sites of diasporic imagining, mounted at the LookOut Gallery in March 2023 at Michigan State University (MSU). Upon its closing, the exhibition became digitally accessible on our website and enlivened by a two-part virtual conversation series with artists and community organizers from the Caribbean. This curatorial project aims to support the expanding work of Black Latinx artists and amplify public engagement with diasporic cultural production through artist-led workshops, transnational dialogue, and cross-disciplinary publications created in and across knowledge communities.

The exhibition stages a dialogue with four artists — Joiri Minaya, Star Feliz, Felli Maynard, and Nitzayra Leonor — to explore how plants entrenched in varying histories of colonialism and Black and Indigenous subversion shape diasporic material and visual culture. Each artist offers gravity to this question in unique and densely layered ways, exploring plant materiality and aesthetics as life-affirming portals of gender subversion, ecological justice, ancestral knowing, and healing. Through photography, video, sculpture, installation, and printmaking, the exhibition considers animate crossings of medium and material, crafted from the vantages of Afro-descendant, queer, and gendered subjectivities and embodiments, as well as the contextual specificities of being situated within Black diaspora from US Latinx and Caribbean locations. Foregrounding artists' *locations*, the project strays from nation-centric narratives of history and place and the flattening of artworks by AfroLatinx artists as mere depictions of identity to forge multitudinous narratives of historical experience.

Our website offers visitors a virtual tour of the exhibition space using Able Eyes technology. It allows 360-degree navigation of the gallery floor, comprising 13 artworks, including two newly commissioned works by Star Feliz and Nitzayra Leonor. Hovering pins invite visitors to view individual artworks more closely and read artists' biographies. The site is designed on Cargo, a customizable site-building platform, with alterations to HTML and CSS. It presents multiple "clickable" points of entry, such as a homepage featuring a two-toned, split screen with parallel vertical scrolling, within an interface that reflects the aesthetics of gardens as spaces of imagination, refusing enclosure and linearity in a sensuous figuration of what Yomaira Figueroa-Vásquez calls "worlds/otherwise."

Unifying a multifaceted initiative, *Alive in their garden* also serves as a launching project for the AfroLatinx Microlab, an evolving collaborative space within the Open Boat Lab, under the Diaspora Solidarities Lab (DSL) — a multi-institutional Black feminist partnership directed by Figueroa-Vásquez and Jessica Marie Johnson. The exhibition draws its name from a memoir by Dedé Mirabal, invoking the legacy of struggles against gender-based state violence in the Dominican Republic as part of the Microlab's commitment to address the systemic silencing of femicide in the Caribbean and its diaspora.

Since the project's start, the Microlab has organized several accompanying online and in-person programs, including an exhibition opening with MSU faculty and students and a sustainable photo printing workshop with Felli Maynard. In May 2023, a virtual artist conversation on Zoom teased out core exhibition themes of ancestral plant knowledge, gardens and plantation geography, queer histories, and archival practices, followed by a dialogue between community organizers working against underreported femicide cases of Black cis-gender and trans women and femmes in Puerto Rico and the Dominican Republic. The project will culminate with a risograph-printed exhibition text published by Michigan University Press, among other articles and publications.

Alive in their garden is a collaborative effort that continues to unfold. Figueroa-Vásquez initiated the exhibition as the first in a series of exhibitions organized under the DSL with grant funding from the Mellon Foundation. Mary Pena curated the exhibition and led website and publication design in collaboration with LookOut Gallery team members Dylan Miner, Steven Baibak, Kristin Phillips, and Morris Arvoy. Co-founders of Able Eyes, Evan Winter and Meegan Winters, provided their expertise and technical support to create a 360-degree virtual tour. In a future iteration, the project will branch further into a digital storytelling archive that honors the experiences of families affected by femicide along with resources and ephemera led by graduate students ("Solidarity Fellows") Melanie Rodríguez-Vásquez (MSU), Jennifer Mojica Santana (MSU), Aurelis Troncoso (UMich), and Ayleen Correa (UMich). This community-informed digital archive will eventually expand to invite broader participation in the form of public submissions of stories and ephemera from personal and family collections.

Project Review

Gimena del Rio Riande

The virtual exhibit *Alive in their garden* takes its title from the memoirs of Dedé Mirabal who wrote about the legacy of her sisters María Teresa, Patria, and Minerva. The three sisters, also known as *las mariposas* (the Butterflies), were activists who opposed the dictatorship of Rafael Trujillo and his violent regime in La República Dominicana. The International Day for the Elimination of Violence Against Women — November 25 — is observed to remember the assassination of the three Mirabal sisters ordered by the Dominican dictator in 1960.

The Mirabal Sisters Home Museum is an actual place and garden in La República Dominicana and, at present, the three sisters rest in peace there. *Alive in their garden*, curated by Mary Pena, is a virtual exhibition. It was developed and sustained by the Afro-Latinx Lab under the Open Boat Lab research grouping within the [Diaspora Solidarities Lab](#) (DSL), which is directed by Yomaira Figueroa-Vásquez and Jessica Marie Johnson. The DSL receives financial support from the Mellon Foundation.

This virtual garden broadens the Mirabal sisters' legacy through different virtual art exhibitions that follow a common narrative thread based on life/death, nature, gender celebration, and ancestral knowledge. The project site's aesthetics are simple and minimal, reflected in the use of pleasing colors and fonts, created on the Cargo platform, a dynamic site builder with a strong art and design focus.

I first entered the garden using the lower menu area — a dot — and visited different individual exhibitions by four Black Latinx diaspora artists: Joiri Minaya, Felli Maynard, Star Feliz, and Nitzayra Leonor. These exhibitions take visitors out of the site and to the artists' external portfolios where images of their works of art, installations, wallpaper prints, and photographs can be found. However, *Alive in their garden* reinforces the idea of live virtual exploration through an exhibition of the above-mentioned artists. Either using the tab "Visit" or the "See all works" one, visitors can go on a live walk inside a virtual exhibition developed with AbleEyes technology and in a Matterport virtual reality site. Both technologies let them view and share the different works of art. The best way for viewing the exhibition is through the full screen option, as it recreates the physical space of the gallery, and it also enables enlarging the images. The virtual reality option is available for viewers with VR headsets. The *Alive in their garden* exhibition was also open during Spring 2023 at Michigan State University, a collaborative effort between the Afro-Latinx Lab and the RCAH (Residential College in the Arts and Humanities) LookOut Gallery.

There are two tabs in its main menu that provide more information about the projects and its members, namely "Info" and "Lab." Visitors are given the opportunity to read more about the goals and the people who curated and collaborated in this project, and to learn about the evolving collaborative space of the Afro-Latinx Lab that is devoted to the storytelling, documenting, and archiving of the Black Latinx diaspora.

Virtual exhibitions are both complex and very ambitious projects in which visitors can get lost in multiple possible entry points and links. *Alive in their garden* solves this problem by offering visitors two different paths to follow the artists' exhibitions: either their external portfolios or the live exhibition in Matterport. One experience completes the other, and both live in the Cargo site of the project. Although I can't say this is an absolute solution to complexity in virtual exhibitions, one strength of the *Alive in their garden* experience is its aesthetically minimalist and simple design. It is perhaps that minimalism that makes the site so meaningful and so visually powerful, highlighting the invisible ties between life, death, nature, gender, and race.