

Thorbjörg Jónsdóttir & Karina Rovira in conversation with Erin Honeycutt

Zoom, Reykjavik / Berlin, March 13, 2022

EH: A brief introduction before I begin recording: Thorbjörg I met in Iceland years ago. She is an experimental filmmaker and video artist who teaches at the art academy in Iceland. I had seen Thorbjörg's previous film, A tree is like a man, and her exploration into elf lore in Iceland. There is a certain sensibility to the lore of the landscape as a visual language in itself, that also tends towards ethnography, but an ethnography that uses the language and the lens of the subject matter.

I first met Karina in a bookshop in Berlin, Hopscotch Reading Room. I remember taking a photograph of her holding books she had just purchased – photography books. We had a conversation about her studies in Savannah, Georgia at the art school there and talked about that part of the world where we both grew up. I had a sense of her work from our conversation and when I went to her website, it was confirmed. It was especially the 12 Tribes photography series shot on 35 mm of a religious community in Savannah that made me think of Thorbjörg. There was also a particular show by Karina that we had talked about called Refraction, about the invisible threads that connect us intimately.

And now after recent research trips and family visits to Colombia (Thorbjörg) and Puerto Rico (Karina), the artists are back home in Reykjavik (Thorbjörg) and Berlin (Karina) with reflections and pieces of ongoing research into these distant places that hold special significance to them.

ThJ: Would you consider living in two places, Karina, between Puerto Rico and Berlin?

KR: Yeah, I am really considering this and I talked to my grandparents in Puerto Rico when I was there and told them that this is what I would like to do: live part-time in Berlin and Puerto Rico. I need to have more consistent work and connections in Berlin before I do that because if I just go now it would be difficult to find work and stuff when I come back to Berlin.

ThJ: That's what we experienced also because we were going back and forth for a few years between Los Angeles and Iceland after we had our son. It sounds really fun and cool, and it is, but we also never built up enough projects, so we were always really broke. That's how we ended up staying here in Iceland longer after doing that for a few years.

KR: Having something to do in Puerto Rico would of course be helpful; which is what I did this time. It helps, like you said, with housing that is more secure and consistent, such as knowing I can live in one place without my rent being raised.

ThJ: Is there rent control in Berlin?

KR: Yes and no.

EH: In addition now everyone knows that the basic things that you pay for utilities are about to go up a lot, but not just Germany.

ThJ: Yes, everywhere. Travel is going to go up everywhere and from Iceland for example, there's no alternative to flying. I've been thinking of buying tickets now because if not, I won't be able to travel later which is a really shallow thing to be thinking about now because there are people like me with kids my son's age who are refugees now – it's so messed up.

EH: I know a lot of people in Berlin who are hosting refugees at the moment. It's alarming that it is coming to the hands of the people to house over 300,000 refugees in two weeks. And where was all of this help in the numerous previous refugee crises?

KR: The movement is quite intense.

EH: I've been reading: How to Love a Homeland (2020, Kayfa Ta) by Russian writer and philosopher Oksana Timofeeva. It's a lot of musings about the homeland and the difficulty of specifying it to one country or even the borderlands of an official state, but it's also about modeling our sense of rootedness to place on plants and animals, making new homelands, taking homelands with you...

'But the idea that a human being has genuine, authentic roots that precede any movement, in reality, does not correspond to anything. However, it does not mean that the tradition of refrains for a small homeland should be discarded. It is quite the opposite. Homeland was sold out too hastily to those who are always ready to grab it, mark it as their own, build a wall, and start a war. They also appropriated the principle of rootedness, linking it with the alleged authenticity of origin as what was here before us: someone has already declared this land their territory, and we can only grow into it as dead bodies. In fact, we do not yet understand what the plant, the nutritive soul, is and what it is capable of.'
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I think what we first started talking about is so relevant to this exhibition, this notion of splitting your homeland and where does that feeling come from. So that's just to say, we can talk about anything – I think everything we are navigating is very relevant. What Timofeeva writes about this sense of the rootedness of plants and how they navigate and about this difficult relationship between the sense of nationhood and of having her motherland be Russia.

ThJ: What's happening now did not spring out of the blue.

EH: Yeah, so she was writing about this idea of loving your homeland like a plant loves its homeland. It's something that you can pick up and plant anywhere and it's not so tied to territory or geography. So I was thinking about this documentary you are working on Tobba, Coca dulce tabaco frío...

ThJ: It means 'sweet coca, cold tobacco'.

EH: And you've been going back and forth how many times now to Colombia?

ThJ: Maybe six or seven times, but the first was in the year 2000 and that's when I first met Don William and first learned about the plant medicines: the coca and ayahuasca and tobacco. I became friends with Don William who is an ayahuasca shaman and then I didn't go back for eleven years. While I was there we were kind of just getting to know each other. I had always wanted to come back and make a film or some kind of work with him because when I was there for the first time I had my

video camera. We were shooting together and taking walks and just shooting trees and the landscape around his house mostly. I returned in 2011 and started making this documentary that I finished now called *A Tree is Like a Man*. I went a few times to the Colombian Amazon for that work and now I am beginning this new documentary work for which I went last year to continue my research. I hadn't been in a few years because of Covid and other things. No, mainly because of Covid.

EH: That big thing that doesn't seem as big right now...

ThJ: You know they opened up everything in Iceland – no restrictions, no masks, no nothing – you don't even need to be isolated if you have Covid. This meant that all of a sudden there were like 3,000 people per day getting infected which is huge here. It used to be like 100 people getting infected, and then 1,000, and now it's like the weather is like this today, bla bla bla, 3,000 people infected, bla bla bla. Now it's totally gone from the news because of this other crazy thing happening.

KR: And how was it going back after these two years, going back to Colombia?

ThJ: I've been there so much that it's really comfortable to come back and it's a place that I yearn for when I'm not there. I don't want to move there and obviously, I don't have connections there as you have in Puerto Rico, Karina, with your grandparents. But I yearn for it and think about it, not just the people, but also the place. I'm ambivalent also though because it's hard for me to be there because it's so hot, not to sound like a wuss, but... I think you know, Karina... So, when I go back it's always amazing but this time was just really crazy to hear about how Covid affected them. This town where I stay was closed off from the world for eight months; no flights, no boats, and they were starting to experience a severe lack of things that are not grown there like oil, sugar, and coffee. There's fish and fruit and vegetables that grow there so they weren't going hungry but certain things were not available. I was thinking so much about how it affected certain places more like a war would.

EH: Did you notice that people were more interested in cultivating these native plants, tobacco, and coca, with a renewed interest?

ThJ: That's like a century-old tradition. Those plants are really sacred in their belief systems as they have been cultivating them and using them in their daily life and ceremony for thousands of years. So the plants are obviously present when they're dealing with things like this pandemic and also when they're dealing with their everyday life like deciding whether to change work or leave their wife, or whatever. A lot of people told me that when Covid started hitting them, they developed their own remedies from the knowledge of the plants. They were treating their own people with their own plant medicine that was actually working. It was getting people better and keeping them from dying. They completely shut down the town. You were obviously supposed to be isolated if you had Covid, but then also the hospital and other places were overflowing but no one was supposed to go visit people who had Covid so you didn't spread it. But the indigenous people were still doing it and just really took matters into their own hands in this very effective way. I thought it was so inspiring how they looked to their old wisdom, their plant wisdom, and pulled from things they already knew or researched, essentially.

EH: Was the vaccine available?

- ThJ: By the time I got there it was available, but this was earlier on. They're still treating people with these plant medicines. It was a high level of infection and most people got vaccinated really fast because the indigenous people are more susceptible to this. They were one of the first in the area to get vaccinated.
- EH: That's been another wild thing that has come up in the last few years – this idea of a health passport. How taking part in a pharmaceutical company or not decides your movement. Not that I'm anti-vax but it's a troubling conundrum.*
- KR: There are already so many restrictions depending on your passport and other reasons keeping you from going to certain places, so this vaccination adds to those restrictions that are already there and mainly to people already having a hard time accessing these places. I'm not against vaccination either but having this restriction that limits people, even more, is not an exciting thought. And I think with indigenous people, for example, the ones you were with, it seems they were willing to do it, but perhaps other indigenous groups are not as willing but are forced to be able to get supplies or things they may need because of that. And with a group that's already marginalized, it's troubling.
- ThJ: It can be a slippery slope...
- EH: We're on a lot of slippery slopes right now...*
- KR: I thought it was interesting you said they were finding their own remedies through the knowledge they already had, to be able to take care of themselves before the government or other people, or already finding a way to help themselves. I also found this with my grandparents in Puerto Rico, for example, who live way up in the mountains, very isolated. Also as isolated people, there is a sense that they know they will take care of themselves and have to, to a certain extent. There's a sense that they can trust the land around them and their immediate community to find out what they may need. This was such a different conversation than the ones I was having in Berlin where it was always a conversation about what the government was saying, what are they doing now, what are the regulations. For example, in my flat of six people what can we as individuals do to help each other? It always began with what the government regulations were saying at the time but in Puerto Rico, it was a much more specific community deciding together to help the situation. I think the questions depend so much on your location.
- EH: And how long had it been since you had been back to Puerto Rico?*
- KR: It had been almost a year – I went to Puerto Rico two months before Covid. I booked the flight months in advance. I remember reading about a virus in Wuhan on the flight and while I was there for a month I was hearing all the updates. I ended up changing my flight two days earlier because everything was shutting down. I didn't want to get trapped in New York, so I got one to Spain, then Germany. It was one of the last flights because within a couple of days everything was closed.
- EH: I'm looking at the date right now and it's March 13th and that was the day everything changed, at least here in Berlin in 2020.*
- ThJ: So your grandparents have always lived in this place where they live now, up in the mountains?

KR: They got the land there in 1994 which was a year before I was born. They grew up in Caguas, which is where my dad, aunt, and uncle grew up. I don't remember exactly why but they both had a very serious urge to move up to the mountains. They've been living there ever since. They went in and out of Florida a lot because my dad and some of my cousins moved there or bounced around there so there were years in which my grandma and grandpa lived in Florida taking care of them which is also something I learned a lot about while I was there. I didn't realize all the years they really put their whole lives aside to help their family, even once their children were grown. I think it's only been the last four years that they have actually stayed in the mountains and really haven't been moving around helping my family. I think they're really happy there now.

EH: And really cultivating this land, right?

KR: Yes, but also just letting it be, my grandfather only cultivates on a really small section, the rest is just forest. My grandparents wake up at 5:30 every morning, and grandpa goes out and is just cultivating the land, taking care of the land till noon, because afterward, it gets too hot. My grandparents didn't grow up farming or growing food but you can tell how important it is to them and how it's become a part of them, something they hold dear. When I spend time with my grandparents there and we are doing something together, memories of their past come up, and they share them with me. Hearing all these memories and how they bring it to how they're living now is really beautiful to see. This wasn't their life before. My grandfather worked for a metal company – a German metal company. My grandfather told me the few words he remembers in German (laughs). My grandmother was a stay-at-home mom and so it's a world in the mountains that's really important to them now but it wasn't always the life they lived. My friend visited with me this time – the first time I had a friend visit, actually. The first time she met my grandfather she was like, he is such an artist! He's such a creative being – such an artist! Just making things out of random objects. Once she said that I realized I had never noticed it before but it's true.

EH: Shall I share some of the photos through screen-sharing so you can see Tobba?

ThJ: Ok.

EH: So, here is the largest papaya you've ever seen.

KR: There's a couple of papaya trees in the back of the house – papaya trees, avocado trees, cinnamon, lemon – lots of lemons, bananas...

EH: And what were you shooting it with – 35 mm?

KR: Yes, Ilford 35 mm all black and white.

ThJ: I want to see more!

EH: There he is (the grandfather) – what did your dad say when he saw this photo of his father?

KS: He said this photo reminded him of the classic *jibaro* – the Puerto Rican classic image of the humble farmer, not the farmer who dismantles the whole land, but the farmer who does just what he needs for his family and community.

ThJ: It's beautiful.

EH: I love the sun. He looks so in his element.

KR: This is him eating cane sugar. This was a lovely moment. I didn't know this vine that was falling and twisting was cane sugar. We had just spent a couple of hours planting things and I'm like, what is this shapely vine all around us?

"It's sugarcane! Just sit there and we'll have some."

Then he just chopped it up and took the whole outer edge of the cane and ripped it with his teeth. I've never seen my grandfather do this before so I was just in awe. Then we sat there and had some sugar cane for a long time and he told me about his mother and father. His father is from Spain and his mother is from Puerto Rico. There's a term – *Borriqueño* in Puerto Rican. For my grandfather's mother, he was saying the family line is so far back in Puerto Rico that you don't know exactly where they're from. Puerto Ricans are Spaniards, Africans, Indigenous Taíno, and I think those are the main three but at a certain point it's really hard to know exactly where the person was from, so he was calling her *Borriqueño*.

ThJ: And is that something that people are proud of to be considered that term? I'm just trying to figure out what this word means. Is it a sense of pride to be that much of a Puerto Rican that your family has been there so long that you don't even know?

KR: I think it does depend on who you're talking to – I think there is a certain point where that doesn't matter at all how far back the family roots have been there. *Boricua* which is the term I am more familiar with is something to be very proud of. Puerto Ricans call themselves *Boricua*.

ThJ: Is it a word that you can't even conceive the meaning of if you're not from there?

KR: It's a word that is rooted in Puerto Rico because it is from the word *boriken* from the language of the Taíno that was used to refer to the island before the Spaniards came. Family lineage in Puerto Rico can come from many different places but they all call themselves *boricua*, and are proud to say it! To me, that is a word that respects all the different places people's families can come from and acknowledges the history and mixture of Puerto Rico.

ThJ: Ah, I see. I was just wondering if it's something like it is in the States where someone's three generations down saying, "I'm Irish."

EH: Is it a conversation that you have when you meet someone new in Puerto Rico?

KR: No, I never had these conversations with people, only now with my grandparents because I want to learn more about the relationship Puerto Ricans have with this identity because when I was growing up it was really weird, you know, you had some people who were super proud to be *boricua* and from Puerto Rico and then you had another half who were like, we're not *boricua*, we are Americans and really wanted to be Americans. So I'm more interested in learning about this relationship we have about being Puerto Rican and how we view that and how it is measured, but it's not a conversation you just have with people. At least, when I was growing up, you never questioned how Puerto Rican someone is, you just are, you never question these things.

EH: Or would it be a conversation you have just to find common roots in a community?

KR: I think the roots are like, if you're in Puerto Rico, then you're Puerto Rican. That's enough connection – you wouldn't ask where your family is from and these lines blur so much that I think even most Puerto Ricans wouldn't be able to tell you where their families are from.

EH: I was thinking about the Icelandic context for that, Thorbjörg.

ThJ: Yeah, we are so monocultural and everyone is just from here. Not everybody in Iceland is from here, obviously, but Icelanders don't have this variety of backgrounds.

EH: I remember often witnessing when two Icelanders would meet for the first time they would try to find a common ancestor or landscape – like do you know this little part of the land behind that mountain or that coast... and then realize they're cousins.

KR: I guess you would have these conversations but more within the islands – you would ask are you from Caguas or Ponce, but I wouldn't hear anyone going beyond that.

ThJ: Can I see more pictures – I'm so excited to see them.

EH: What is your grandmother's name, Karina?

ThJ: That's your grandmother?

KR: Jenny is her name.

EH: Wow, so you're really in a mountain valley.

KR: It's like mountains and then when you go down beyond that cove there is a cliff that leads straight to a river.

EH: Is your grandfather splitting cane sugar here?

KR: He's splitting banana leaves because you use a lot of banana leaves in Caribbean dishes, using the banana leaves to wrap the food in. Here he is cutting the leaves.

ThJ: There's so much warmth and love in these photographs, Karina. I like the one of your grandma in her kitchen and him in his yard. They're so loving.

EH: Absolutely, you can just feel this – knowing it's your grandparents. Here is the last one: the beans.

KR: Yeah, the beans. Cutting beanstalks and then spending three hours doing them.

ThJ: Like, opening them?

KR: You know, doing them! I don't know either. This is also something that just popped into my head just now – there are so many of these terms in which my grandparents and I don't really know what we're doing – it's not like generational learning of these things up in the mountains. There's a certain connection that you feel from the act while doing it... like, I don't know the term for opening

these beans up but the feeling of spending hours opening them up with my grandparents is such a nice feeling that you don't question it at all. It's so nice to go back to it.

EH: I love your grandma's smile – so endearing.

KR: She's the sweetest. The amount of care she puts into everything she does is quite overwhelmingly inspiring. Overwhelming because I don't know how I can be as selfless and caring in my life as she is.

...

EH: One other thing, we need a title, or two titles, or a sentence...

ThJ: That's hard...

EH: What if I do a blind dip in this book?

ThJ: Stop. ... ok, now Karina...

KR: Stop.

EH: Oh woah, is this a Deleuze quote?

*KR: I recently got really into rhizomes. I just found out about it a few weeks ago and that's why Erin was sharing this book with me – *How to Love a Homeland*.*

ThJ: When you start thinking about it, everything is a rhizome. I was also obsessed with it for a while, it was really good in making art practice conclusions – and that's the rhizome because of the rhizome because everything is a rhizome.

EH: Ok, I'll read the quote:

*'The Deleuzian thinker declares an endangered species or persecuted tribe his homeland: "He becomes Indian, and never stops becoming so – perhaps "so that" the Indian who is himself Indian becomes something else and tears himself away from his own agony. We think and write for animals themselves. We become animals so that the animal also becomes something else. Becoming is always double and it is this double becoming that constitutes the people to come in the New Earth.'*¹⁺²

¹⁺² *How to Read a Homeland* by Oxana Timofeeva (2020, Kayfa Ta)

Thorbjörg Jónsdóttir is an experimental filmmaker and video artist from Iceland who holds an MFA degree in filmmaking from California Institute of the Arts and a BA in visual arts from the Iceland University of the Arts. Her films and videos navigate between ethnography and abstract formalism, exploring preternatural states where oral-mythology and landscape collide. Thorbjörg's films have screened at galleries and film festivals such as CPH:DOX, IMAGES Festival, JEONJU Film Festival, FID Marseille and LACMA. Thorbjörg's most recent film *A tree is like a man / En la maloca de Don William* (2019) was one of the winners of FOGO Island Art Film Weekend in 2019. It premiered at CPH:DOX where it competed in the NEXT:WAVE section and has since toured the festival circuit.

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Karina Rovira is a visual artist and analog photographer born in Florida to Puerto Rican parents. She holds a BFA in photography from Savannah College of Art and Design and is currently based in Berlin. Karina works primarily with 35 mm, 4x5 film and often carries a camcorder. She wants to learn and explore the nature of human connection and communication in her work. Under everything, there are floating meanings and figments of feeling that crave to be understood. Karina teases out these fragile lines of thought and catches them in the light, always with a sensibility of quiet noticing.

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Erin Honeycutt is a writer, bookseller, and curator based in Berlin. She writes poetry, exhibition reviews, and a variety of texts, often in collaboration with artists. She was nominated for the Broken Dimanche Press art writing prize and has been published in SAND Journal, BARAKUNAN, and Neptún Magazin among others. She studied Art History (MA, University of Iceland) and Religion (MA, University of Amsterdam) and now lives in Berlin.

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in conversation with is a curatorial format aiming at bringing people together through conversation and subsequent collaboration. Artists are invited to engage in dialogue with curators, authors, other artists, art historians, journalists or scientists and to develop an exhibition from it. The conversations are documented in writing, serving as text material accompanying the exhibition. They enable visitors to develop a deeper understanding of the artists' methods and of the artworks. in conversation with is based on the premise that it is the artists themselves who can best provide information about their works, their methods, their ideas and inspirations. One simply needs to ask. The project was initiated in early 2018 by Katharina Wendler in Berlin and is guest of various (project) spaces.

Exhibition

Karina Rovira & Thorbjörg Jónsdóttir

Dulce Tierra

April 1–3, 2022

Opening: Friday, April 1, 7–10 pm

Gerichtstr. 45, 13347 Berlin, backyard

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