

About toilets and sorrows

Through the art facility *El baño de los recuerdos (Toilet of memories)*, sociologist Ángela Santamaría succeeded in having 77 indigenous women from Amazonian ethnicities explore and express their sorrow from various episodes of violence suffered throughout their lives. The play, which originated in a personal process of the researcher and promoted collective healing, is part of the work done by the Universidad del Rosario for constructing indigenous memory.

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Photos: Milagro Castro, 123RF

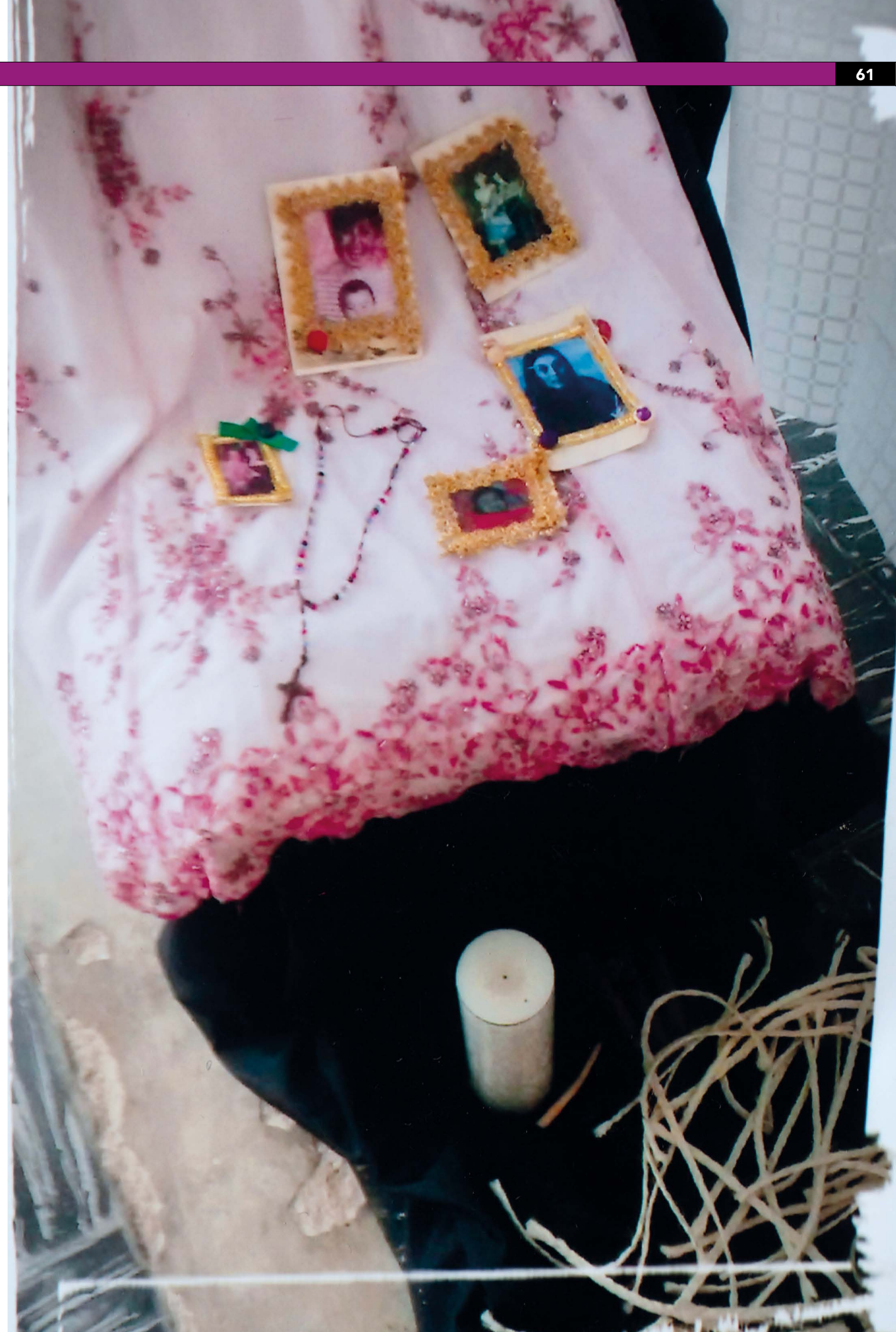
When, at the age of 22, **Immaculée Ilibagiza**, a young Rwandan woman who was studying for a degree in electrical and mechanical engineering at the National University of Rwanda, decided to visit her family in her home village during the Easter break of 1994, the horror changed her life forever.

On April 6, 1994, the plane in which the Rwandan president and his Burundian counterpart were flying, members of the Hutu community, was shot down over Kigali, Rwanda's capital city.

In response to this double assassination, the Rwandan government undertook the extermination of the Tutsis, the tribe

that was accused of the attack and to which Ilibagiza and her family belonged, and the tribe who automatically became the target of death squads that did not leave any village exempt from massacres.

To protect his only daughter from rape and murder by the extremists, Ilibagiza's father asked her to run away and shelter in the house of a minister friend, who took her in along with seven other women and hid them in the bathroom of his house. To avoid any suspicions, he sealed that room and did not tell his own family about it. Thus, in a one-square-meter bathroom, the eight women remained huddled together silently for 91 days, awaiting the end of the brutal nightmare.



At the end of her dramatic confinement, and with only 29 kilos between her chest and back, Ilibagiza came out to tell the world about the miracle of her survival and how, with the healing of time and the joy of her Catholic faith, she found the consolation and inner peace to forgive the murderers of her parents, two of her siblings and her people.

Her story has inspired millions of people around the world, including Ángela Santamaría, who for more than a decade has been working with indigenous communities at the Center for Conflict and Peace and the Center for Intercultural Studies of the Universidad del Rosario. This lawyer, with a master's degree in philosophy and a PhD in sociology, used the overwhelming experience of those Rwandan women in a tiny bathroom to create a similar space and invite dozens of indigenous women to go deeper and, if they so wished, to share their own stories of suffering and pain.

This project had roots in Santamaría's process of catharsis and her search for methods to address her conflicts and sorrows in an incessant inner work. Here the context and details of this intimate and intimist exploration are given.

Advances in Science: How did “El baño de los Recuerdos (Toilet of memories)” come about as an art facility?

Ángela Santamaría (AS): I participated in a creative workshop with Rita Miranda, a contemporary art teacher. We met every Monday in a process of inner search and construction of our own memories of pain. We began to elaborate several objects and work on my painful memories of the discrimination I experienced as a teenage mother.

Through the pieces we created, I began to delve into all my experiences of abandonment and violence. On this journey, I designed a dress that symbolizes the resignification of the experience of my first marriage, and I linked it to the shocking narrative of Immaculée Ilibagiza, which I read during the workshop. Her resistance and the bonds she built with the other women touched me. It became intertwined with my personal story and inspired me to create an artistic installation in the hope of reproducing that experience with indigenous women, with the illusion of the wish of a teacher.

I built a portable toilet and took it to different indigenous populations in the Amazonia so that women from native communities could enter the toilet and share their experiences based on pain and the violence they had been subjected to. Thus, through this toilet of memories, we created a fabric in which we explored not only our sufferings, but also the gifts that came with them: discovering



Researcher Ángela Santamaría comments that indigenous women “are the representation of Mother Earth, nature. In most cultures they are the human expression of the spiritual force and the Earth as planet and energetic element.”



our political and spiritual power. The facility turned into a collaborative work of healing.

What did the structure of the toilet look like and what objects did it have?

AS: In a very simple PVC structure, I reproduced the measurements of the toilet in which Immaculée was confined. I covered it with plastic curtains—an element that entails a world of insinuations and glimpses—and I placed several pieces inside: my wedding dress created in the workshop, candles, medicinal plants, tobacco, and an altar with photographs that I collected while visiting different places in the country, evoking diverse types of violence against women.

What was the reaction of the indigenous women?

AS: They came in groups of nine and none of them lasted more than three minutes; they came out quickly when thinking about those Rwandan women who had to cry together, menstruate together, sleep together, breathe together... all of it. We worked on the sense of suffocation, anguish, and confinement. I clearly remember Guaira Jacanamijoy of the Inga people and leader of the women in Caqueta because she started smoking tobacco to cleanse the pain of the Rwandan women, my pain, and the pain of the other women there. It was a very beautiful, collaborative healing exercise. It was overwhelming to have several stories of suffering squashed. However, it was also touching and drove us to action because we always ended up thinking, “what can we do” and “how can we solve this.” I was also impressed that most of the women insisted that white women also suffer. In the collective imagination, there is a tendency to think that women having certain privileges do not suffer and have no connection with the others. However, I think we managed to work a lot on the issue of empathy. When they left the toilet, each one designed an altarpiece with drawings that told their stories; I collected them and placed them on the altar that I had set up inside the toilet.

In how many villages the facility was installed and for how long?

AS: We visited Florencia (Caquetá) and Araracuara (Amazonas). Indigenous people from 14 communities (Piratapuyo, Piapoco, Puinave, Desana, Curripaco, Guanana, Cubeo, Ka-



mentsa, Huitoto, Miraña, Ticuna, Cocama, Yanacona, and Carapana) took part in the project, and the facility stayed in each of these communities for a week. Every two or three months, we returned to the territory; we paid five visits to each village.

Eight professors from the Universidad del Rosario from different areas of knowledge (four women and four men) participated in this project executed between 2010 and 2015. We are all part of the unit called UR Intercultural, which includes the Intercultural School of Indigenous Diplomacy, the agency we used to work with the communities in the territories.

This project stemmed from a catharsis process of yours. What motivated you to do the same with indigenous women and involve your personal history?

AS: Before working with other people, I had to perform experiment on myself to determine how I could generate a mechanism of dialog concerning those sorrows. The question behind is how we can come together as white-mestizo, indigenous, Afro women, and women from different backgrounds. That is a difficult thing to do. My concern was, and still is, how and in what way we can come together, looking for our synergies instead of delving into what sets us apart.

Why do you have such a close bond with indigenous populations?

AS: It has always been a blind urge, which I felt it since I was 13 at the Liceo Francés, where I studied. Thanks to a nice archaeology class, in which I learned about anthropology and native peoples. I felt that I wanted to dedicate my life to them because



Indigenous women from 14 communities in Caquetá and Amazonas got involved in the project by sharing their experiences based on pain and violence.

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in Colombia we come from indigenous peoples. I followed that urge and had the opportunity to meet indigenous students at the Javeriana—where I studied for a master's degree in philosophy—and later at Rosario. After that, I made friends with different indigenous women and committed myself to their struggle. Today, the most important relationships in my life revolve around them, particularly with my dear friends Dunen Muelas, Fanny Kuiru, and Obdulia Hernández.

What do indigenous women mean in your life?

AS: For me they are the representation of mother Earth and nature. In most cultures, they are the human expression of the spiritual force and the Earth as planet and energetic element. I think because of this, they are so strong in their struggles as well as tenacious and powerful not only in a political sense but also spiritually. They have the ability to be “bio-centered.” They earn deep admiration and fascination for what they have done so far.

Did you manage to heal your own wounds through this project?

AS: Yes, it was a very beautiful experience to create this facility and share my experience. Obviously, you continue living and new sorrows appear, but that is how life goes. I saw my strength in them, when all rural and indigenous women who were completely isolated, not recognized, have little support and resources but have an impressive strength to stand up with their heads high and up. Their healing processes and struggles are moving.