

**Tinker Grant Report 2023: "Caring for Palm Trees: The Gendered
Politics of Plant Reproduction and Assisted Pollination in Colombian Oil Palm
Plantations"**

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Thanks to the 2023 Tinker CLAS Summer Research Grant, I continued advancing in my doctoral research project. For two months, I traveled to Tumaco (Nariño, Colombia) to examine how a plant disease affecting the oil palm monoculture has impacted and changed the lives of local farmers, workers, and rural communities. The plant disease, called bud rot, interweaves environmental, biological, economic, and socio-cultural dimensions. I had the chance to analyze these patterns more carefully through participant observation, archival research, and interviews. It is essential to mention that oil palm plantations in Tumaco are located in rural spaces, so I moved constantly between the city and the country during my fieldwork. It is possible to go to some areas by car, usually buses or taxis. Nonetheless, getting to many oil palm zones required fluvial transportation. Both terrestrial and fluvial transport is pretty expensive in Tumaco, especially the latter. I had to rent a boat, buy gasoline, and pay someone to drive. I am sure I would not have been able to conduct my 2023 summer research without the financial support that the Tinker Grant and CLAS, Berkeley, gave me.

I visited some oil palm companies, where I interviewed experts and plant scientists working on controlling, preventing, and eradicating bud rot. I learned about the most noteworthy measures companies have implemented to avoid bud rot spreading. Experts created a new palm species “capable” of resisting the disease. This new palm is a hybrid (OxG (*Elaeis-Oleifera* x *Elaeis-Guineensis*)) that has then replaced the previous palm tree (*Elaeis-Guineensis*). However, like many crossbreed species, the hybrid requires human labor; it can only bear fruits if human hands spray synthetic hormones on its sterile female flowers. I also had the opportunity to visit the oil palm “fincas” of small growers. They shared with me valuable information about how they have experienced the more critical moments of bud rot and what are their most significant current challenges. They told me how taking care of the new palm species has implied more financial sacrifices and labor time for them due to the high costs of assisted pollination. Finally, current and former plantation workers generously let me know how their livelihoods have been deeply affected since bud rot emerged. Former workers said they lost their jobs, migrated to

other regions, or changed their labor expertise. Current workers underscored that pollinating the new palm species is difficult. It is hard work that requires a lot of discipline, physical effort, and patience.

I conducted ten interviews, and I am now transcribing them. Once I finish, I will focus on the process of coding and organizing all my qualitative data, which includes not only the interviews but also photographs, videos, archival documents, company bulletins, and academic papers. I spent some days in three places in Tumaco doing archival research about Tumaco's history. "La casa de la Cultura," "La Diocesis de Tumaco," and "La casa de la Memoria." By doing so, I gained knowledge of how plantations arrived in the region, what were the first companies, and the political and land conflicts between local inhabitants and oil palm enterprises.

My next steps are to visit other oil palm zones and follow bud rot's social trajectories. For my dissertation project, I will conduct a multi-situated ethnography of how bud rot's disease has significantly shaped plantation ecologies, economies, labor relations, and technoscientific speculations. I plan to revisit Tumaco and continue my preliminary ethnographic fieldwork in Puerto Wilches and Magdalena, two other oil municipalities deeply affected by bud rot.