



A True date with a Palm Tree

Victoria Ahrens

Abstract:

This is a visual essay that meanders. It is based around my encounter with palm trees and my grandfather's silver print photographs, collated in an album that dates back to the 1930s. Henry Richard Ahrens was a keen photographer, though I had never seen any of his images until 2010 when I was given one of his albums by a relative who knew I was a photographer and writer. He died before I could get to know him. His photographs have a particular sensibility to them, with a multitude of self-portraits, and often, a hand written phrase to go with them. I am told he developed his films himself. He is often pictured next to palm trees in his photographs. These palms he photographed are particularly fascinating to me. They represent one of the few genus that extend back to the late Cretaceous period, a dinosaur of a plant species. With their many variations, they take on a poetic and utopian presence, their seeds having been disseminated through colonial exchanges, botanical curiosity and commercial interests. Found in so many surprising corners of the world, the palm expresses our need to explore, while becoming a symbol of resistance to discourses of nationalism and anti-immigration sentiment. This essay reflects a personal ethnography through the interconnected and material presence of the palm in London, Buenos Aires and in the photograph itself.



True date Palm Tree, Burgess Park, Islamic Garden, 2019

Author's own photograph

In a hidden corner of Burgess park, South East London, dates grow from orange fronds under a fanning palm tree in the middle of a tiled water feature in Chumleigh Gardens. No one very much goes there. It is empty, and on a hot Summer's day, I come across this peaceful place. Built in response to a site where alms houses used to reside before the Second World War, in 1995 a 'multicultural garden "was designed "to reflect the area's diversity" (Bridgetonowhere.org.uk, 2019). This Palm Tree sits at its centre, presiding over the African, Oriental, Mediterranean, Islamic and English Garden. With their dates and coconuts, wax and oils, palm trees have come to colonize the four corners of the world. Native to the Middle East; spread by the Romans as far as the Mediterranean; taken and transplanted by early Spanish colonialists from the Canary Islands to the Americas, and distributed by European botanists to and from colonies in Asia, Africa and the Antipodes, and back to Europe, palms have become the symbol of



successful uprooted-ness: synonymous with tropical views, pre-lapsarian lands, and exotic holidays.



Palm House, Kew Gardens, London, 2019

Author's own photograph

The deepest part of us knows that here in London their presence is surely odd. In the Palm house in Kew Gardens, the dense tropical air that keeps them alive is contained. As you walk through it, you are transported immediately to other climates, to a jungle of moist fronds, impossibly coloured fruit pods, and signs that classify each species: “A living laboratory (...) [in which] to glimpse the magic of the rainforest” (Kew Gardens, 2019). Momentarily, in the dripping atmosphere, you forget you are in London. Palm fronds reach up to the iron framed glass house ceiling, seeking out the light and humidity. Walking up the Victorian spiral steps you gaze over the canopy, breathing in the hot temperatures. It is otherworldly, exceptional, and contains species that are endangered or extinct in the wild. You sense the increasing importance of it all. Those early 19th century botanists could never have known how valuable their seeds might become.



Barbican Centre, Palms, 2019

Author's own photograph

But here, in the middle of the brutalist architectural project of the Barbican Centre, in East London, they are far from their native lands, from their sun-soaked panoramas. Yet city palm trees, swaying in the Summer breeze, incongruous amongst the British ferns and chestnut trees, go barely remarked upon. Their palms fan out, hands that reach up into the grey skies, promises of another landscape beyond our vision, taking the view upwards to other perspectives. Tall and elegant, in clusters, they show a united front- we survive, even your harshest Winters, but we are not from here, they say.



Palm tree in Wimbledon, suburban garden, 2019

Author's own photograph

Even in the suburbs of Wimbledon, in English gardens, along the hedgerows, amongst the robins, finches and sparrows, palms inhabit these spaces, unnoticed amongst the greenery. They blend in, foliage that helps to keep the nosey neighbours at bay, that fills a gap in the fence, that creates fronded shadows in the afternoon sun. These are *Trachycarpus fortunei*, considered the most common palm trees found in the UK, where they are, according to the horticultural society, “becoming increasingly popular with British gardeners due to their exotic appearance and increasing availability at affordable prices” (Culham Research Group, 2019).



Henry Richard Ahrens, Palermo, Buenos Aires, *circa* 1930

Henry Richard Ahrens, photograph from his album

My grandfather was particularly fond of them. It is next to a Palm tree that he stands in this silver print from his archive of Buenos Aires at the turn of the century. A self-portrait, his Leica camera positioned, arms crossed, hat titled to the right. It is not, however, his shadow that looms, but the fronds of another palm- a triffid head making its presence known, foreshadowing the photograph, in place of the photographer. My grandfather was tall, dapper, dressed up to the nines (odd in a hot climate) and keen on gardening, on looking after plants and trees that reminded him of nostalgic memories of his temperate native lands, of Europe. Curious then that he chose the palm tree to frame this image. Centred behind him, the shadows of the palm leaves cascade all around, becoming a shadowy garland, a victory wreath, tentacles of a living species embracing the soil.



Canary Island Date Palms, Henry Richard Ahrens in
Buenos Aires, circa 1930

Henry Richard Ahrens, photograph from his album

In this image the palm trees have become the main protagonists. About as native a species as he was in that context. Maybe he felt an affinity to them, transported, transplanted to another cultural scene. Both palms are imposing, framing him, obscuring him in the midday sun. These palms are canary island date palms, a relative of the *Phoenix Dactylifera*, taken over to the Americas as an ornamental plant by botanists in the early 1900's (Zona, 2008). Perhaps they were still considered new, and certainly exotic when my grandfather photographed them. As they say, birds of a feather, pinnate (feather palms), flock together.



Henry Richard Ahrens, park in Buenos Aires, circa 1930

Henry Richard Ahrens, photograph from his album

Note the palm trees on the left, he wrote on the back of this photograph. Why was he pointing them out all the time? What did they mean to him? I will never know. Yet there he is again, in a garden in Palermo, in Argentina- *el ingles*, the Englishman, with his accent, taller than most others at that time at two metres, like a palm tree himself (not these small bush-like ones) but long limbed, with large hands, and a coconut head. He stood out; So do the palm trees, in this landscaped garden, with its manicured pines and geometric features. By 1910 the *Phoenix Canariensis* was “listed in the catalogue of plants at the botanical garden of Buenos Aires” (Thays, 1919).

Palm trees, of course, are not trees at all. They can be dated back to fossils that are 80 million years old, from the late Cretaceous period. They are dinosaurs of the plant world and have a multitude of variations. They are considered to be the most important plant species in economic and historic terms. Palm oil, for instance, can be found in all of our basic household products, from medicines, to face creams, to cooking oils. Palms and their produce insidiously permeate our world, invisibly present.



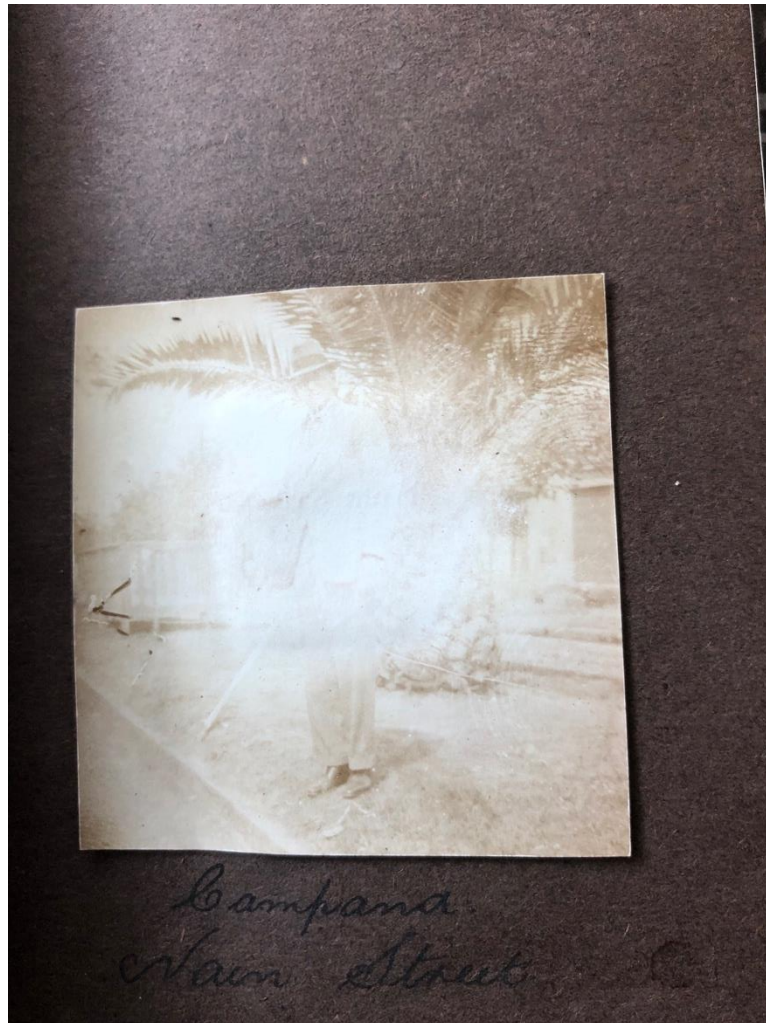
Palm Fronds- palmata, Palm house, Kew Gardens

Author's own photograph

I have some indoor palms that inhabit my sitting room. Two areca palms. Reminders of other landscapes, fronds that span out, increasingly, to find the sun that dapples the wooden floors through the open windows. They are small versions of Dominican palms, bearing tropical seeds. I speak Spanish to them, to remind me of other places, to create a dialogue through space and time with their variegated, feathered leaves- a kind of palm reading. They curve upwards, butterfly palms in multiple stems, that open out into fans, open hands. *Dypsis Lutescens*, evergreen in the grey sunless Winter, these and other species settling in for the duration. I care for them and tend them lovingly. These palms remind me of my childhood in Buenos Aires, of my grandfather, of afternoons sitting under them in a park in the city to get out of the scorching sun. I long for them in the cold of Winter. Some say they are 'going native' here in the UK. Climate change is ensuring they proliferate. Fashions and indoor gardens dictate their popularity.

I think of the artists who depicted Palms, and how relevant they seem now: Ed Ruscha's *A Few Palm Trees Series* (1971); John Baldessari's *Overlaps Series: Two Palm Trees and a person* (2001); Sigme Polke's *Palmen (Palm Trees)* (1968); Marcel Broodthaers,

Palmier A (1974) (*W Magazine*, 2018). These iconic Californian Palms era, I am told, now dying: a South American palm weavel and the *Fusarium* fungus, as well as old age, provoking their disappearance (Carrol, 2017). Nevertheless, no longer alien and invasive, but actively cultivated now in the UK, they have found their place inside the house, as 'plant-pets' to look after, to talk to. They provide company, oxygen, the semblance of an outdoor experience amongst the urban brick environment, hope of escape to sunnier climes.



Henry Richard Ahrens and Date Palm, Palermo, Buenos Aires, *circa* 1930

Henry Richard Ahrens, photograph from his album

In the end, though, my grandfather, uprooted, sent half way round the world to fulfil models of colonial economic expansion¹, understood his status, and translated this

¹ My grandfather worked for the Vestey Meat Company in the port of Buenos Aires, importing and exporting meat from Argentina to Europe, in particular corned beef that was given to soldiers in the first and second world wars.



through these and other self-portraits he took in gardens in Argentina: alien, yet settled; foreign yet native. In this photograph (above) the palm tree and the man, over time, are becoming one, the silver print degenerated, blending both into a seamless white imprint. One palm tree and a person, as a victory parade of sorts, a crown of fronds: symbolic of the alien taking root, going native, the colonizer as *criollo*², born and bred, beginning to feel at home. These species of migration, next to their native counterparts, are now part of the imagined views of these places, the longed for 'other' of tropical beaches, of hot climates, of *Robinson Crusoe* and *Lord of the Flies*. The fittest survivors. Yet, like the only surviving Mauritian *Hyophorbe Amaricaulis* palm, they are also at times endangered and unsustainable in equal measure- hence the palm house at Kew, the conservatory at the Barbican, future observatories of a longed-for landscape. Palm hearts, tinned delicacies- yet ironically, ripping out the heart of the palm species; Palm oil plantations decimating the soil, contributing to inexorable deforestation. In a climate of considerable push back on immigration policies, nevertheless, these *émigré* species, aliens of another time, colonial left overs, 'breadcrumbs' of the Columbian exchange, migrants with roots, are, at least for now, surviving (Norris, 2014). Some would say, as they walk around the palm tree of Chumleigh gardens, in an uncertain political landscape, these palms are defiantly here to stay.

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² *Criollo* is the name given to Latin American of 'pure' Spanish descent; colonial descendent born in Latin America (Criollo, 2019).

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