



'La víbora de cascabel,' *El Mosaico Mexicano* O Colección de amenidades curiosas e instructivas (México: Ignacio Cumplido, circa 1830s). From the collection of the Biblioteca Francisco de Burgoa, Oaxaca, Oax, Mexico Photograph by Dianna Frid with Carla Nappi

El Mosaico Mexicano was a periodical published in installments by Ignacio Cumplido in the 1830s. The photographed volume is in the collection of the Biblioteca Francisco de Burgoa in Oaxaca, Mexico. This image/text work is part of a collaboration and forthcoming book by Nappi and Frid titled *How to Peer Through a Wormhole*. The artists acknowledge the Biblioteca Francisco de Burgoa's largesse for granting them unrestricted access to their holdings.

How to Peer Through a Wormhole

Dianna Frid

In 2014 I started my visits to the Biblioteca Francisco de Burgoa in Oaxaca, Mexico, in search of wormholed books. The Burgoa Library houses pre- and early modern texts, many of which are marked by wormholes from ancient larval incursions. Most of the Burgoa holdings are deaccessioned volumes from regional convents and monasteries. Those convents were built by the Dominican order starting in the 1500s and were part of colonial and religious activities by European settlers. As the monasteries closed, the books were more or less abandoned in storage for decades. My speculation is that, during this period, different species of insects came to metabolize, feed and reproduce within their pages. Instead of seeing the books as damaged, over time I have come to think of their wormholes as compelling facts of matter and as invitations to

consider and detect what reading, metabolizing and annotating texts could be when we understand these holes as signs. To continue to explore this idea, in early 2020 I began to search for books at the Newberry Library in Chicago (where I live) where library holdings are mostly intact or 'repaired.' By examining 'repaired' copies of these titles in the Newberry Library, we begin to detect which letters, words, and fragments of engravings, are missing in the Burgoa books. These Newberry books reveal what the worms consumed as they carved holes that resemble present-day hyperlinks.

In 2019, after visiting the Burgoa Library together, Carla Nappi and I teamed up to read and interpret wormholes in books. Larval carvings are surprising and often beautiful. There is a thin line between seeing previously infested books as destroyed and seeing them as imaginatively legible. Our investigation raises questions around this fragile tension. We believe it is possible to reimagine the reading of books like these as non-linear collaborations between species and matter. This project, while recognizing the need to care for and preserve books, is also an acknowledgement of the amazing and a-moral life-force of creatures that are born, live, and thrive in old books. ■

The Cascabel Butterfly

Carla Nappi

Shortly after the library acquired the complete set of Ignacio Cumplido's masterwork *El Mosaico Mexicano* – and no one quite recalls how or when that happened – the worms found it. It had begun subtly. Pinholes in the binding. Tiny caverns burrowed in the spine. Barely noticeable. Larval punctuation. Some volumes were spangled with constellations made of long burrows that let the light in and through and out again, some volumes remained pristine. (Who can understand why a creature chooses a particular story in which to make its home?) In any case, no one had submitted a request to see the work, and so the covers stayed closed and the librarians went on with the rest of their business.

In 1838, after spending the year cobbling together what savings he could from friends and relatives (and from accepting printing jobs that are...perhaps best left undescribed in these pages), Cumplido had purchased state-of-the-art printing equipment through an intermediary he had been referred to through a friend of a colleague. The equipment was meant to be shipped to the printer in Mexico. It didn't make it. Instead, he traveled to New Orleans, where it was unloaded and kept for him in the shop of an herbalist until he arrived to claim it.

No one knows what happened to the equipment, there. (Perhaps no one has asked the right questions.) In any case, the equipment was used only to print one set of one text – Cumplido's *Mosaico* – and it was lost or destroyed soon thereafter. The volumes found their way into the library as the result of an anonymous donation. And that is where they stayed, on a low shelf, in the smallest room of the library, for years. Decades.

What came next didn't quite match what anyone in the library knew about insects or their life cycles, but no one had paid much attention in any case, and so no one thought much of it.

At some point, a library patron, a writer who was working on a paper about the snakes of Mexico, requested one of the volumes.

The librarian who retrieved the volume from its shelf in the small room didn't notice anything amiss. (There had been no occasion to open the binding beyond the front cover to scan it for circulation. She could not be blamed.) That wasn't until later, when she checked in on the writer in order to recover the volume. (It was a small city, the book was overdue, the writer could not be reached by phone or email. Sometimes one needs to take matters into one's own hands. The writer lived not far from the library. It was almost on her way home.)

By the time the body was found, covered in tiny puncture marks, the only traces left were small, rattle-shaped bells strewn across the furniture and the tile and the wood floor. Where the volume of Cumplido's work lay open, an intricate pattern appeared to be chewed from the text, extending down into its body in caverns walled in sedimented pages. The librarian asked the landlord to phone the proper authorities, and gently closed the book, and popped a bell in her pocket, and left the flat.

The next few years brought the next few occasions for the librarian to gradually come to terms with this new companion that lived in the small room just steps away from her desk. Sometimes it was a matter of discretely handling another accident offsite. (She had always volunteered to personally track down this particular volume when it was overdue. It was never any other volume of the *Mosaico*. Whatever reason her neighbors had for suddenly taking an interest in local vipers, that reason had eluded her.) She thought about contacting the entomological authorities. (Whomever those authorities might be.) She had collected pockets full of bells and tiny glittering fangs off of carpets and wood floors. She had learned how to read the progress of the slight wiggles of the book – that was the best way to describe it, she decided – in late March or early April.

She found that singing to the book seemed to calm it, and to calm her, when the light got longer and the pages seemed restless. And over the years, a whisper networked formed, and the librarian found herself as a part-time, seasonal rattlesnake-butterfly charmer.

She would slip little cards in the books of favorite library patrons while she was helping them to check out. Only a date, a time, a location, and a name: *The Cascabel Butterfly*.

Once a year, after the library closed, and the lights were shut, and she had eaten a light supper, she would gently lift the book from the shelf, and wrap it in a scarf, and carry it into the main reading room of the library. One after another, she answered a series of short knocks against the library gate and offered silent admission into the room. When everyone had arrived, the librarian locked the gate and stepped to the front of the room and opened the book and began singing.

Softly, the butterflies lifted from the pages, disoriented at first but quickly finding their bearings. It was warm, and the air was close, and they scented the people, and shook the bells at the ends of their wings. But something about the voice of the singer drew them in. The patrons watched, rapt, as the creatures covered her skin, some momentarily baring the fangs on the tips of their antennae, before eventually retracting them and settling into the song.

This was the least she could do, she felt, for these creatures who lived only hours after they emerged from the book. Make something for them, with them. Witness their coming, mourn their passing. Mark the beauty in the loss. When she felt them getting tired, she would move her voice into a long lullaby, and guide them softly to a final sleep. When the cascabel butterfly passed on, it left very little trace. She collected what she could of what remained, and on her walk home in the early hours she sprinkled it at the base of the trees that kept her company.

Over the years, she thought she occasionally glimpsed words on the leaves of plants that lined the walk between her home and her work. Sometimes she would write them down, when she arrived at the library in the mornings, and she kept a book of the story that the green was gradually telling her. Perhaps another, after she was gone, would find it. But that's another story for another time. ■



For *Inscription 2* we commissioned an Augmented Reality collaboration between Dianna Frid, Carla Nappi and Ian Truelove

