



Carolina Caycedo,  
*Serpent River Book*,  
2017, artist's book,  
72-page accordion  
fold, offset, printed  
canvas hardcover,  
elastic band, 86 × 612  
× 546cm. Courtesy  
the artist

## When Walls Become Rivers: Carolina Caycedo's *Serpent River Book*

– Lisa Blackmore

In 1982, the Brazilian writer Carlos Drummond de Andrade published a full-page poem in the newspaper *Jornal do Brasil*. In this heartfelt elegy, titled 'Farewell to Seven Falls' ('Adeus a Sete Quedas'), he paid tribute to the Guaira waterfalls near the border of Brazil and Paraguay. This stunning hydro-geological formation was situated at a narrow gorge where the Paraná River was funnelled into eighteen cataracts clustered in seven groups that

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### Lisa Blackmore examines dynamics of hydropower and its contestation by visual, spatial and participatory means in the work of Carolina Caycedo.

ascended down more than one hundred metres. Such was the power of the Sete Quedas that the sound of the water could be heard 20 miles (32 km) away. However, to create a huge dammed body of water that would feed the Itaipu hydroelectric plant – a joint venture with General Alfredo Stroessner's dictatorship in Paraguay and

still the second largest plant in the world – Brazil's military dictatorship mandated the flooding of the land where the falls were located. Once submerged, the Brazilian government exploded the waterfalls' rock face to ensure smooth passage for any vessels across the reservoir. A natural monument had been reduced to rubble. The river had become a wall.

In his poem, Drummond de Andrade lamented the waterfalls' destruction, criticising the instrumentalisation of the falls as a mere resource, its flows reduced to a series of numbers for electricity generation. By appropriating and inverting the transactional language of costs and benefits used to justify infrastructural projects, he countered the hydroelectric company's claims that the dam was 'building the big Brazil' and instead alleged that the loss of Sete Quedas was detrimental rather than favourable to well-being:

And [this monument] crumbles  
due to technocratic intervention.  
Here seven visions, seven sculptures  
of liquid profile  
dissolve among computerized calculations  
from a country that is no longer human  
to become a chilly corporation, nothing more.

Movement becomes a dam,  
from the agitation comes corporate  
silence of a hydroelectric project.  
We will offer every comfort  
provided by the light and energy sold  
at the expense of a priceless good  
that cannot be rescued, impoverishing life  
in the fierce illusion of enriching it.<sup>1</sup>

The poem describes how the concrete wall that dammed the River Paraná stunted its free flows and replaced their thundering noise with 'corporate silence' as the reservoir drowned geology, communities and the ecosystem in the name of national progress and development. The engulfed landscape lost beneath the reservoir is what Rob Nixon in *Slow Violence: Environmentalism of the Poor* calls the 'submergence zone', a political and spatial realm created through the physical and imaginative displacement of communities considered out of sync with industrial and urban modernity. Reading the rise of megadams as the symptom of a drowned commons, Nixon criticises the 'discourses of environmental and



cultural utilitarian control, whereby the convergent unruliness of “irrational” river people and an “irrational” river must be straightened out and channeled into a national culture of rational development.’<sup>2</sup> The developmentalist ideology that justifies the treatment of river communities as anachronisms that inhibit globalisation and economic growth is buttressed by the military-industrial complex of visibility, a set of optical technologies and modes of representation that render the landscape as *terra nullis* – an unpopulated resource carved up by maps, plans, and satellite photographs that reflect the high modernist optics of macro-planning and the legacy of colonisation.<sup>3</sup> Today, there can be no doubt as to the enduring hegemony of hydropower. The cumulative weight of dams has tilted the planet’s axis, generating perhaps the most compelling proof of the impact of the Anthropocene. At the same time, catastrophic failures of dam infrastructure, like the twelve-million-cubic-metre river of mud unleashed by the fatal collapse of the Brumadinho tailings dam in Brazil in January 2019, call for a revision of human impact on the environment and the role of transnational capital in ecological disasters.

In her ongoing project *Be Dammed*, the Colombian artist Carolina Caycedo intervenes in the submergence zones and visual regimes linked to megadam projects, exploring the politics and economics of hydraulic systems in her native Colombia and in other Latin American countries, as well as in the global context of transnational capital and the international development agencies that finance major projects in the Global South. Interwoven through her practice are a variety of media, including performance, installation and collaborations with social movements and communities affected by dam projects and infrastructural disasters. Caycedo seeks to decolonise river ecologies by creating countervisualities to the imaginaries that frame rivers as passive resources to be commodified and put to work by human capital and labour. The immersive audio-visual works, performance-based and tactile works insist on the ways that disobedient bodies act as counterflows to structures of containment mobilised by regimes of extraction and mechanisms of social control writ large. Caycedo’s work brings to the fore an understanding of rivers as dense liquid ecologies where human and more-than-human material worlds are entangled and where indigenous knowledges persist even amid the imposition of Western ‘reason’.

Carolina Caycedo,  
*Serpent River Book*  
(detail), 2017.  
Courtesy the artist



Carolina Caycedo, *Serpent River Book*, 2017, artist's book, customised table, 86 × 612 × 546cm. Installation view, 'A Universal History of Infamy', Los Angeles County Museum of Art, 2017-18. Courtesy Museum Associates/LACMA

Walls and rivers are motifs for thinking hydraulic order in an expanded sense that goes beyond their literal physical condition. Systems of flow control invite reflection about the built infrastructures that regulate the movement of bodies and matter; the economic models through which capital flows, trickles down or stagnates; and the structures and disciplines through which ideas and media circulate. At the same time, thinking about hydraulics calls attention to those marginal communities and residual ecologies that exceed dominant socio-spatial structures and circuitries that channel material, economic and cultural flows.<sup>4</sup> This tension between containment, overflow and counterflow runs through *Be Dammed*, where apparently solid and structured walls and masses repeatedly take fluid forms of 'rivers' that overflow the logics of hydraulics and productivity. In the performance work *Beyond Control* (2013-16), even as a group of people is corralled tight into the corner of the gallery, individual bodies continue to agitate and move together.<sup>5</sup> In the *Geochoreographies* (2014), a series of community initiatives intersecting 'social justice and environmental practices with creative, collaborative and aesthetic praxis', bodies occupy river spaces in leisure activities orientated toward solidarity not profit, and leisure not work.<sup>6</sup> Rivers are also made to defy containment in the series of *Water Portraits* (2016) where they appear in mirrored photographs printed onto long draped canvases that cascade and unfurl into the gallery space, and in the video work *Land of Friends* (2014) where a hand traces a line of ink over a satellite view of a river's course to signal its detours and alternate routes beyond the fixity of the photograph.<sup>7</sup>

The physical and metaphorical transformation of walls to rivers is precisely the premise of one of the most widely exhibited works from the *Be Dammed* project.<sup>8</sup> *Serpent River Book* (2017) is a two-sided artist book that condenses years of materials Caycedo has accumulated through her fieldwork, archival practice and research into dams and other forms of social control. Unfolding as two streams of pages, where the top side is mainly formed of images and the bottom of texts, its contents range from satellite photography, infrastructural plans and corporate documents related to dam building worldwide, through to poems, origin myths and photographs of the *Geochoreographies*. The book is multi-lingual - with texts in Spanish, English, French and Portuguese - and plurivocal, including the voices of the artist, of poets, activists, people affected by dams and non-human beings that populate rivers. Its form was inspired by an accordion-fold map of the Berlin Wall held in an archive in Germany, which, when folded, reconstructs as a paper circle the perimeter of the wall, signalling the presence of sanitation pipes that ran through it, connecting East to West. Caycedo explains that she immediately thought of rivers when she began manipulating the







Opposite:  
Carolina Caycedo,  
*Serpent River Book*,  
2017, artist's book,  
customised table,  
86 × 612 × 546cm.  
Courtesy the artist

Previous spread:  
Carolina Caycedo,  
*Serpent River Book*  
(detail), 2017,  
artist's book.  
Courtesy the artist

map because of the meandering form it took: 'And I said, "I have to appropriate this format to do a river book," and what I did is that the middle page of the map – it's a 72-page accordion fold – the middle page I did 180 degrees so that the map instead of closing on itself, it opens, so from a wall it became a river'.<sup>9</sup>

The 'river' unfurls as a linear hydrology as the book's component sections move from the sources, through the upper, middle and lower courses, to a delta. These sections in turn move through different epistemologies that shape human relations to rivers, beginning with ancestral Amazonian mythology, in which the river is one of the four serpents that make up the universe, traversing the cosmos, air, water and the underworld. The next section centres on peasant knowledge and artisanal industries linked to indigenous traditions while developing small-scale extractive enterprises such as panning for gold and fishing, which are displaced by large-scale infrastructure projects and industries. The next section shifts to a corporate vision of territory comprised in conventional maps, structural plans for dams, and images of real infrastructure such as the contested El Quimbo dam in Huila state. The subsequent chapters trace ruptures in extractivist engagements with rivers through images of collapsed dams and rivers that breach their banks, followed by documentation of community initiatives that contest the instrumentalisation of environmental resources by big businesses and nation-states.

This linear unfolding of the river, however, is open to constant negotiation, since the book's reception cannot be governed by a single logic. Its form encourages interactive engagement as a mode of exploring unpredictable flows, since the pages can be variously configured –

folded and unfolded, stretched out or closed, or pleated along triangular folds to bring the book's two sides together. As Caycedo explains, this means 'that anyone that grabs the book and plays with it can imbue their own narrative into the book', bringing images of Amazonian sources into contact with photos of ruptured dams, for instance, or artisanal fishing into dialogue with images of anti-dam resistance. The book's ludic and shape-shifting dimension is announced from the outset

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through a series of tongue-in-cheek 'instructions' provided inside the hardback cover. These prime the 'reader' with the challenge of creating through the publication a form of 'hydrocommons' – that is, to confront through embodied experience of the printed matter the question that *Serpent River Book's* instructions set out: 'How can we make sure the river is not *my* river or *your* river, but the river of everyone, the river of no one?'

This question speaks to timely environmental issues that traverse a range of disciplines, from creative practices and natural sciences through to post-humanist philosophy and climate activism. In the latter, Vandana Shiva has called for a water culture based on 'ecological democracy' where all life, not just human life, has its rightful share in the planet's water.<sup>10</sup> Imagining rivers as simultaneously everyone's and no one's contravenes the logic of capitalist commodification that approaches the environment as a repository of resources for profit generation. It also denaturalises the idea of 'natural' resources by drawing attention to the way that the cultural meanings and economic regimes attached to rivers are themselves the products of the socio-symbolic processes of resource-making, initiated in the *longue durée* of colonial capitalism and intensified in the extractivist economies that dominate the Global South to this day. The *Serpent River Book's* form and content engages with the extractivist matrix in which water, along with minerals and fossil fuels, are imagined as passive matter that requires human intervention to be commodified and traded to synchronise territories with the speed-time of modernity.

Against the visual regime of hydropower that reduces rivers to stream flow records, used to predict optimal energy production capacity, the *Serpent River Book's* pages hold within them the densely layered cultural meanings sedimented in rivers. The book foregrounds the indigenous knowledges in which rivers are sacred spaces and deities, attesting to their endurance in (rather than replacement by) modernity. In so doing it exposes the 'epistemicide' enacted by the 'cognitive empire' that, as Boaventura de Sousa Santos writes, imposed through violence Western rationalism on indigenous knowledges of the South.<sup>11</sup> One example of how this strategy of decolonisation plays out on the book's pages occurs in a series of black and white

photographs of the River Magdalena – a long-standing industrial artery for the Colombian economy – which is overlaid with a photograph of a snake, along with a meandering sentence in which the *Yuma* (the indigenous name for the Magdalena) speaks in the first person of its course from the Andean highlands to the Caribbean Sea and the diverse cultural meanings it holds along the way. Against the abstract notions of space and time that shore up industrial capitalism, Caycedo uses digital collage as an aesthetic strategy to compose an alternate temporality, one in which the present terrain is represented by satellite images over which phrases like ‘*Soy el hilo dorado que conecta a los ancestros con los que han de nacer*’ (‘I’m the golden thread that connects ancestors with those who are yet to be born’) snake along the page, connecting ancestral past, to present, to future.

Details such as these can be grasped by looking at the pages of *Serpent River Book* laid flat, but the book is designed to become a series of folds. This adds further complexities to its visual and temporal logics, as well as to the ways in which bodies interact with its pages. Contrary to conventional imagery and Heraclitean philosophy, rivers do not only flow forward. They loop back, eddy, ramify and dry up. They overflow and burst through channels designed to contain them. Hence a river’s movement and temporality are not linear but turbulent and unpredictable. In *A Thousand Plateaus* Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari argue that State power works to ‘subordinate hydraulic force to conduits, pipes,



embankments, which prevent turbulence, which constrain movement to go from one point to another, and space itself to be striated and measured’.<sup>12</sup> It is this striation and flattening of the space-time of rivers, their inhabitants and knowledges that the folds in the *Serpent River Book* interrupt. In one of the folds, for instance, a hand-drawn, diagram and notes about the Doctrine of Prior Appropriation (the US legal instrument that determines that the first person to use or divert water can acquire individual rights to it) appears, when folded, alongside the first-person testimony of Francisco Cabrera, a family of artisanal fishermen on the *Yuma* whose land was expropriated by Emgesa (the Colombian hydroelectricity company) to flood the El Quimbo reservoir, and topographical diagrams of German hydraulic infrastructures. Enfolding and bringing into contact these geographically remote sites – the US, Colombia and Germany – evinces the global dimension of the flow control imposed on the world’s rivers, two thirds of which are subject to hydroengineering.

Nearly half a century after the Itaipú dam trapped the Paraná River behind a wall, the final pages of *Serpent River Book* revisit that same river delta, selecting a richly detailed satellite image of its meandering courses to depict the end of the river’s course overland as it splits into myriad channels, each seeking out the ocean. The gaze moves along the sinuous lines of the sediment-loaded waters, tracing their nomadic flows in and out of each other, here joining together, there looping back to form islands. Caycedo selected this image to evoke a continuous water cycle and sacred union, which reframes the river’s outlet into the ocean not as an end but as an instance ‘when two bodies of water connect and touch and become something else or become bigger’.<sup>13</sup> It is not only an aquatic encounter staged here. Emerging from the satellite image are the eyes of a jaguar, embedded digitally into the image in a transparency that makes its presence subtle and easy to miss. The image is followed by a quote – ‘I am the jaguar, and when I look into your eyes, you stop being prey and become

*Serpent River Book* workshop with community members of Sabanalarga town affected by the Hidroituango hydroelectric project on the Rio Cauca in Antioquia, Colombia, January 2018. Courtesy Movimiento Rios Vivos Colombia and Movimiento Rios Vivos Antioquia

another jaguar’ – that borrows from the anthropologist Eduardo Kohn’s book, *How Forests Think* (2013), which moves beyond anthropocentric anthropology to explore more fluid ontologies of human and non-human lifeforms.<sup>14</sup> The inclusion of the quote and the jaguar’s gaze suggest the need for a paradigm shift in the ethics of care where human exceptionalism yields to horizontal modes of co-existence. In Caycedo’s words: ‘We cannot remain in this Western tradition that says: “I think, therefore I exist”, which means that you don’t need anything else in the world to be a human, when actually it’s the total opposite. We need the other to exist. It’s only until [*sic*] the jaguar looks into your eyes, when the river touches your body, when you breathe the air, when another entity of the territory perceives you, that’s the moment when you become’.<sup>15</sup>

The river, released from the stasis of the wall, has come a long way in the *Serpent River Book*. More than a physical hydrology, its intersecting waters have served as a figure of thought, an environment in which to liquidise the anthropocentric thinking that renders water and other non-human lifeforms as resources and commodities; a medium to loosen the hold that Western epistemologies of reason have had on forms of knowledge that resist reduction to the binary strictures of human/animal or nature/culture. If dams are the tombstones of rivers, the delta is an opening onto liquid ecologies that seek new routes through the philosophical and material worlds we inhabit.

Special thanks to Carolina Caycedo for her receptivity to dialogue and for her generosity in sharing ideas, research materials and images.

1 This fragment from the original poem in Portuguese reads as follows:

*E desfaz-se  
por ingrata intervenção de tecnocratas.  
Aqui sete visões, sete esculturas  
de líquido perfil  
dissolvem-se entre cálculos computadorizados  
de um país que vai deixando de ser humano  
para tornar-se empresa gélida, mais nada.*

*Faz-se do movimento uma represa,  
da agitação faz-se um silêncio  
empresarial, de hidrelétrico projeto.  
Vamos oferecer todo o conforto  
que luz e força tarifadas geram  
à custa de outro bem que não tem preço  
nem resgate, empobrecendo a vida  
na feroz ilusão de enriquecê-la.*

See Carlos Drummond de Andrade, ‘Adeus a Sete Quedas’, *Jornal do Brasil*, Caderno B (9 September 1982), p.8. Translation the author’s.

2 Rob Nixon, *Slow Violence and the Environmentalism of the Poor*, Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2011, p.164.

3 On these optics, see Nicholas Mirzoeff, *The Right to Look: A Counterhistory of Visuality*, Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2011.

4 I have developed these ideas in a series of recent texts, including: ‘Colonizing Flow: Hydropower and Post-Kinetic Assemblages in the Orinoco Basin’, Jens Andermann, Lisa Blackmore and Dayron Carrillo Morell (ed.), *Natura: Environmental Aesthetics After Landscape*, Zurich: diaphanes, 2018, pp. 171-197; ‘Contraflujos: Orden hidráulico y ecologías residuales en el paisaje dominicano’, *Iberoamericana. América Latina - España - Portugal*, 19, no.72, 2019, pp.57-80; and ‘Hubristic Hydraulics: Water, Dictatorship and Urban Modernity in the Dominican Republic’, *Latin American and Latinx Visual Culture* no.2, 2020, pp.115-125

5 Videos of the performance *Beyond Control* are available at <http://carolinacaycedo.com/beyond-control-2013> (last accessed on 14 March 2020).

6 Carolina Caycedo, ‘Be Dammed’, MFA thesis, University of Southern California, 2014, p.iv.

7 All of these works can be viewed on Caycedo’s website at <http://carolinacaycedo.com> (last accessed on 14 March 2020).

8 As well as shows at the Royal Academy, London and LACMA, Los Angeles, recent exhibitions include the solo show titled, like this article, ‘When walls become rivers’, curated by the author at Art Exchange, University of Essex from February to March 2020, to mark the acquisition of the *Serpent River Book* by the Essex Collection of Art from Latin America (ESCALA), following a successful proposal by students from the MA in Curatorial Studies and MA in Art History and Theory.

9 Interview with the artist, 28 September 2018. For a full record, see Lisa Blackmore, ‘When walls become rivers: Interview with Carolina Caycedo’, available at <https://vimeo.com/381328453> (last accessed on 14 March 2020).

10 Andy Opel and Vandana Shiva, ‘Dr Vandana Shiva, an interview by Andy Opel. From Water Crisis to Water Culture’, *Cultural Studies*, 22, no.3-4, 2008, pp.498-509 and 501.

11 Boaventura de Sousa Santos, *The End of the Cognitive Empire. The Coming of Age of Epistemologies of the South*, Durham, NC and London: Duke University Press, 2018.

12 Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus*, London: Bloomsbury, 2013, p.363.

13 Interview with the artist, 28 September 2018.

14 Eduardo Kohn, *How Forests Think: Toward an Anthropology Beyond the Human*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2013.

15 Interview with the artist, 28 September 2018.