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HYDROCOMMONS CULTURES:  
ART, PEDAGOGY AND CARE PRACTICES ACROSS THE AMERICAS

LISA BLACKMORE & ALEJANDRO PONCE DE LEÓN  
EDITORS

## **LA ESCUELA\_\_ JOURNAL**

artistic research and learning

*LA ESCUELA\_\_ JOURNAL* is an academic digital publication dedicated to addressing current environmental and sociocultural challenges in Latin America from artistic research. LA ESCUELA\_\_ is a platform for collective learning and making in public spaces, involving editorial, educational, and research projects around art and education practices in Latin America.

The joint founders of LA ESCUELA\_\_ are the artist Miguel Braceli and the international nonprofit foundation Siemens Stiftung. The platform is developed in collaboration with a network of artists and researchers, as well as universities, institutions, and communities from across Latin America.



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# ***Hydrocommons Cultures: Art, Pedagogy and Care Practices across the Americas***

Lisa Blackmore & Alejandro Ponce de León, editors

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## **Hydrocommons Map** entre—ríos

## Toward *Other* Relationships through, from, in and with Water

Lisa Blackmore &  
Alejandro Ponce de León

*How to explain a song / born of the current? /  
A simple rhythm with no pretensions. / It's not a  
melody whispered by the mind, / the river itself  
speaks it to the heart. / The boga in his canoe  
sways alone, / water is the music, his voice. /  
Blending into landscapes in the mind [...].*

Víctor Hugo, "Aguabajo",  
from *Soy de río, soy de mar* (2017).<sup>1</sup>

To think about where the hydrocommons begin or end is a challenge full of possibilities. Water is an all-pervasive substance, as transversal and all-encompassing as air. It takes shape on dramatically disparate scales and in ever-changing physical states—from cells to tsunamis and from solid to liquid and gaseous. In the Afro-Colombian communities on the

Pacific coast, water is at the heart of all economic, social, and cultural activities. The "*aguabajo*," a downriver melody sung/chanted by the bogas as they row down the rivers, transporting people and goods down the Atrato River in the Chocó Department, are born from the rain and currents—from the very sonority of water. This is "the land of incessant rain," as Michael Taussig<sup>2</sup> would call it, where the

<sup>1</sup> Free translation, the song is originally in Spanish.

<sup>2</sup> Taussig, Michael. 2009. *My Cocaine Museum*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 23.

force of water carves the land, soaks the atmosphere, saturates riverbeds, inundates soil, and fertilizes worlds. Water is more than a resource or a feature of the landscape; it weaves, connects, and allows life to flourish across Latin America. The Brazilian Indigenous thinker Ailton Krenak speaks of water as a "magical force capable of energizing us,"<sup>3</sup> supporting biological life while filling us with vitality. However, the region currently faces a range of water stresses that are becoming increasingly frequent and notorious. These ecosocial upheavals arise at the intersection of coloniality/modernity and the processes of industrialization and urbanization, turning waterbodies into "organic machines," infrastructures at the service of human development; consequently, they become

vulnerable to diversion, contamination, and oblivion.<sup>4</sup> Turning water into a resource has acted to the detriment of the deep territorial connections in which—as Indigenous hydrocosmologies continue to insist—waters are wombs, kin, living worlds that gestate and teem with life. It is no coincidence, for example, that Afro-Colombian activist Francia Márquez's resistance to mercury and cyanide contamination from mining begins with the right to protect water and rivers "as a place for life."<sup>5</sup>

Attending to water as a supportive and connective fluid is an urgent challenge for the collective flourishing of life on the planet. We need actions that overflow the usual languages of water while enhancing *other* sensitivities

<sup>3</sup> Krenak, Ailton. 2022. *Futuro ancestral*. São Paulo: Companhia das Letras, 15. [Free translation.]

<sup>4</sup> White, Richard. 1995. *The Organic Machine*. New York: Hill & Wang.

<sup>5</sup> See: Goodman, Amy. 2018. "Afro-Colombian Activist Francia Márquez, 2018 Goldman Prize Winner, on Stopping Illegal Gold Mining." *Democracy Now!*, May 23 2018. Accessed November 11 2023. [https://www.democracynow.org/2018/5/18/afro\\_colombian\\_activist\\_francia\\_marquez\\_2018](https://www.democracynow.org/2018/5/18/afro_colombian_activist_francia_marquez_2018).



that help us remember our shared state of immersion. Etymologically, to remember is to bring, re-integrate into the body, knowledges that honor water as a vital substance. Aesthetics is fundamental to the transition toward other water cultures, since it is a broad field for fermenting speculative sensibilities that invite us and urge us to rethink and reconnect with water. In her book *Água Viva*, first published in 1973, Clarice Lispector devotes herself to—and spills over into—the process of weaving into words the ever-flowing, fertile, generative liquidity of life. In this text, which is neither a novel nor an essay, she combines felt and somatic experiences, which she verbalizes knowing that, just as words can freeze worlds, they can also conjure them. She writes:

«In this instant-now I'm enveloped by a wandering diffuse desire for marveling and millions of reflections of the sun in the water that runs from the faucet onto the lawn of a garden all ripe with perfumes, garden and shadows that I invent right here and now and that are the concrete means of speaking in this my instant of life. My state is that of a garden with running water. In describing it I try to mix words that time can make itself.»

She strives to weave a "pure present" in which words are bait for "fishing for whatever is not word" but a thinking-feeling, both ineffable and rawly material.<sup>6</sup> She senses into the intrinsic energy of water, engendering aesthetic worlds where liquidity opens up metaphors towards immanence, viscosity, and intense aliveness, seeking

<sup>6</sup> Lispector, Clarice. 2012. *Água Viva*, transl. Stefan Tobler. New York: New Directions.

out that which can never be fully captured in a fixed form. As *água viva* (“living water”), life is gestated, sustained, and expressed in the interpermeations between bodies of water, earth, plants, and light—that is, in the liquid ecologies that make up vital planetary enmeshments.

This collection of essays and projects shares that same concern for producing other ways of making, being, and relating to water, which break away from the paradigms that suffocate common waters. This first volume of LA ESCUELA\_\_ JOURNAL gathers pedagogical, aesthetic, and ecological practices that respond to contemporary hydrosphere with creative proposals that energize the hydrocommons cultures intertwined in territories across Latin America. We understand the hydrocommons as the emerging field of theories, practices, and actions that recognize water as the basic substrate of life and, in this capacity, it is a fundamental condition for more-than-human well-being.<sup>7</sup> Within this framework, we posed a series of editorial provocations to conjure alternative water worlds:

What artistic, inter- or transdisciplinary pedagogies allow us to learn from and with water, to identify common problems and propositional actions toward the care of liquid territories?

How do artists confront historical and enduring cognitive injustices by reclaiming and implementing ecoethical and relational bonds of Indigenous and Afro-

<sup>7</sup> Blackmore, Lisa. 2022. “Imaginando culturas hidrocomunes: investigaciones interdisciplinarias y prácticas curatoriales entre ríos.” *Revista Heterotopías* 5, no.10: 1-30.

Latin American and Caribbean hydrocosmologies?

What kinds of artistic, scientific, and activist coalitions are energizing the shift away from the extractive paradigm of exploiting water "resources" toward water cultures of abundance, resurgence, and more-than-human well-being?

*Hydrocommons Cultures* weaves, mobilizes, and brings together fields of knowledge, processes and territories that show the diversity of environmental, artistic, educational, and community initiatives summoned today by water and its vitality. These essays and projects also reflect the compass of LA ESCUELA\_\_, which aims to seek out and disseminate answers to shared dynamics and problems through the generative intersections of art and pedagogy. In the dialogues presented in this volume, we thus hear professor and researcher Astrida Neimanis celebrate the value of process-based work, which she learned from artistic practices, and we read artist Carolina Caycedo acknowledging the importance of pedagogy in the work she does articulating art spaces with environmental activism. These pollinations between art, pedagogy and activism are also displayed in the various and varied forms that the contributions to the volume take. While the recognition of art research as an academically rigorous practice is relatively recent, we know that art has always been a path to formal experimentation and invention. Not only does it share some empirical procedures with science—such as fieldwork or open-ended processes—but it

has also been an active partner in experimental processes.<sup>8</sup> Just as Clarice mixes words to seek forms for the "millions of reflections of the sun in the water," in the essays compiled here we encounter a wide range of voices and styles, including poetic passages, nonlinear and intimate texts, autoethnographies, among other writing experimentations, along with methodologies from fieldwork and scientific research. Such diversity attests to the pulsating urgency that drives creative-research processes as an experimental field that is responsive to our political and ecological present of "dissolution" (Stacy Alaimo), "porosity" (Nancy Tuana), and "immersion" (Emanuele Coccia), among other mutant forms.

Another remarkable feature is the ecofeminist energy fueling the initiatives of water care and community articulation gathered in this collection. The

intergenerational fabric that unfolds in these pages honors a long-standing tradition of ecofeminist artists and activists addressing water, fluidity, and world-making practices from radical aesthetics that criticize the extractivist, heteropatriarchal logics and racial injustice against black and Indigenous lives. It's worth noting that this perspective isn't intended to essentialize relationships between women and water—even though women are undeniable leaders and activists as advocates for the protection and fair management of water. Current and emerging discussions around the hydrocommons emphasize that water is the amniotic fluid shared by *all* planetary life. Neimanis' posthuman approach to this vital entanglement emphasizes that "gestationality" is not a characteristic of the female body alone, but one that also occurs in other lifeforms and in the constant interpermeations that imbricate us in more-than-human

<sup>8</sup> Pickering, Andrew. 2016. "Art, Science and Experiment." *MaHKUscript: Journal of Fine Art Research* 1, no. 1: 1–6.

hydrological cycles.<sup>9</sup> Hence the importance of thinking, in political-ecological terms, about the *coordinates and situated practices* involved in water management and care, as well as the discomforts somatized by water bodies, which enable us to probe the role of water as a vital connector in potential eco-ethical hydrocommons alliances.

The four sections of essays and the Hydrocommons Map that make up this edition of LA ESCUELA\_\_ JOURNAL are not intended to pigeonhole the selected texts and projects into a strict taxonomy. Rather, they offer paths to reflect on the ways and means that are energizing hydrocommons cultures in region. In this sense, the issue can be viewed as a mapping exercise that outlines a broad confluence of practices and knowledges at the hemispheric level. Spanning different latitudes, from southern Chile to Canada, the selection

of studies also represents our effort to emphasize the complexities, specificities, and diversities present in the various hydrocommons cultures across the Americas. By drawing hemispheric connections and resonances, the volume seeks to activate a scalar view that overflows the political-administrative borders of the nation-states, of north-and-south, the Andean world, and the Caribbean and transoceanic systems. Thus, we seek to decenter analytical attention, moving it away from the exclusively terrestrial or the exclusively maritime. To think of the Americas as a heterogeneous whole forces us to traverse and immerse ourselves in water systems that, as cyclones and atmospheric rivers increasingly show, exceed and connect different territories in still unsuspected ways.

In the first section, ***Liquid Pedagogies***, the focus is on

<sup>9</sup> Neimanis, Astrida. 2017. *Bodies of Water: Posthuman Feminist Phenomenology*. London: Bloomsbury Academic.

the question of *how we learn and how learning can enable changes that translate into actions*. To recognize that ecological impasses and water stresses are the result of structural forces that (un)make worlds, and that such forces impose hegemonic ways of constructing knowledge and engaging with others, is to know that there is still much to unlearn, relearn, and invent. Peruvian anthropologist Marisol de la Cadena argues that thinking begins by "not knowing," feeling the limits of what we think we know, and then "co-laboring" with others in areas that surpass our epistemological and disciplinary protocols and sociocultural contexts, in order to re-cognize ourselves in and from our differences.<sup>10</sup> In this sense, questioning *how we learn* is not a matter of identifying good practices

and methodologies in formal educational contexts, but of inquiring into/taking an interest in how to enable changes that can lead to *other* sensibilities and actions. Learning means embracing uncertainty, going through vulnerability, and opening up to change as a propositional action in contexts where epistemological anchors dissolve. The willingness to say "we don't know" and learn from that place is a way of resonating with the urgency of confronting the cognitive, socio-environmental, and racial injustices that structure the contemporary hydrosphere. To say it with bell hooks, we are in urgent need of a pedagogy that enables "transgressions—a movement against and beyond boundaries" of what we think we know, through experiences that open the mind and heart to individual transformation and by engaging with knowledge

<sup>10</sup> de la Cadena, Marisol. 2021. "Not Knowing: In the Presence of..." *Experimenting with Ethnography: A Companion to Analysis*. Andrea Ballesterio, Brit Ross Winthereik (eds). Durham N.C.: Duke University Press, 246-256.

communities where learning becomes a "practice of freedom" aimed at other ways of living together.<sup>11</sup>

The various contributions included in *Liquid Pedagogies* allow us to trace key question around *what we can learn from water*. Instead of establishing fixed forms, the selection attends to the ways water remains in flux and motion. As dynamic systems, rivers carve their paths and, in passing, they store the memories of their courses, apprehending the changing contours of their watersheds. From the experience of living in "dissolution"—as Stacy Alaimo has called the ecological present—learning from water poses the challenge of learning to read its watery movements and forms as communicative expressions in themselves, expanding semiotics beyond its logo- and

anthropocentric anchors.<sup>12</sup> In this spirit, the section opens with a contribution by **Cecilia Vicuña**, in which she presents six lessons learned from water in childhood experiences, through attentive listening and bodily immersions in its flows. Next, **Astrida Neimanis** shares a theoretical glossary for thinking about our co-constitution as bodies of water immersed in more-than-human hydrological cycles and reflects on teaching as a form of activism. **Lior Zisman Zalis and Guilherme Bento Lago Queiroz** dwell on the relationships between forms of water and forms of thought, pointing out how artistic practices mobilize, dilute, and interact in converging instances between the material and the epistemic. In her essay on the practice of weaving with the common reed (*Phragmites australis*, an aquatic plant that grows in wetlands), **Alejandra Ortiz de Zevallos** describes its

<sup>11</sup> hooks, bell. 1994. *Teaching to Transgress: Education as the Practice of Freedom*. New York: Routledge, 12.

<sup>12</sup> Alaimo, Stacy. 2016. *Exposed: Environmental Politics and Pleasures in Posthuman Times*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.

vegetal fiber as a teacher that invites her to inhabit a fluid and stretched temporality, where the patient negotiation of weaving it fertilizes other rhythms and shared existences. Finally, in their analysis of a digital laboratory they conducted at LA ESCUELA\_\_, **Elizabeth Gallón Droste and Daniela Medina Poch** propose embodied pedagogical practices in digital spaces as a valuable and versatile methodology for generating "aqualiteracies," articulated simultaneously across borders but in situated ways.

The second section, *Artistic Practices for Living Waters*, combines works involving movement, showing how art overflows and operates beyond conventional methods and spaces. From ecosomatic performances to the convening and articulating of activist groups, to pedagogical strategies activated through curatorial work, these "expanded practices" transgress disciplinary borders and build bridges

between divergent and distant universes. The texts gathered here urge us to consider art in close relation with society, revealing the authors' commitment to the communities and territories where their research-creative processes are woven. The section explores various iterations on the role of the moving artist, steering away from the historical forms of expedition and romantic contemplation, to submerge—in some cases, literally—into the waters and entwine distant geographies. Rather than seeking an immersion that fuses the territory with the female body—as can be observed in previous currents of ecofeminism, in works such as those of Yeni and Nan or Ana Mendieta—the practices gathered here reveal the artists activating their bodies, often in performative ways and through collaborative paths and strategies in which they negotiate with the communities and people who inhabit the places where the artists



come and go. Likewise, these contributions propose a self-reflexive relationship with conventional settings of galleries and museum as shown by **Carolina Caycedo's** practice, presented in the opening interview of the section, art practice serves as platform to insert into those institutional settings activist aesthetics and discourses produced by self-organized movements remote from the art world. In short, these essays consciously address the ethical implications between the body of the moving artist and its impact on the territory and art in circulation.

The texts in this section weave *alternate* cartographies, assembling bodies and territories, and questioning landscape as a genre by inventing practices that explore affective, economic, and ethical relationships with bodies of water. These practices examine how bodies of water feature in art and how art can be a place to conjure ethics and aesthetics

of resistance. **Elina Rodríguez and María José Trucco's** essay takes us to the province of Buenos Aires, an area disturbed by the overexploitation of water resources. Here, the Salado River appears as a local materialization of a global dynamic: a body of water in an extractive frontier that has been severely altered for profiting from its exploitation. Against instrumentalization, the authors suggest a territorial plan that allows liberating spaces and proposes an economy based on affective connections with the river. Similarly, **Camila Marambio and Carla Macchiavello** present alternative strategies for relating to bodies of water, in their case, the southern wetlands of Tierra del Fuego. Starting from a critique of agrarian colonization and the genocidal appropriation of Indigenous lands, the contribution unfolds a series of wandering, non-linear routes through the wetlands, seeking to mobilize affects and senses through playful invitations, where the seductive and sensorial are gateways to the harsh stories of

the region. In their essay, **Marina Guzzo and Kidauane Regina Alves** analyze collaborative performances where the act of crossing an urban bridge—which both connects and separates communities—encourages a mode of attending to this type of infrastructure as a materialization of socioeconomic hierarchies, offering through crossing a possibility to resignify bridges through self-conscious movement. Finally, **Luisa Fernanda Giraldo**'s essay narrates a series of journeys through different Colombian rivers that allowed her to establish communicating vessels between the experience of pregnancy and birth, the meaning of rivers as life-engenderers in Amazonian cosmology, and the consequences of the current desacralization of water bodies. At the intersection of

performative and collaborative movements, Luisa finds a practice that responds to the call of feminist and neo-materialist thinkers to open a new vein towards critique and re-enchantment of the present.<sup>13</sup>

The section ***Ecocritical Panoramas in Amphibious Worlds*** gathers explorations of the aesthetic mediation of oceans, rivers, and (human) bodies of and in water in contemporary artistic practices. It focuses on how these practices mobilize submerged and re-emerging perspectives to address enduring acts of violence that allow, sustain, and affect the occupation of maritoriums and watery territories. These essays make a valuable contribution to the critical turn in the landscape genre, a key gesture in recent discussions of cultural studies and art history.<sup>14</sup> To question

<sup>13</sup> See, for instance, Federici, Silvia. 2020. *Reencantar el mundo: el feminismo y la política de los comunes*. Madrid: Traficantes de Sueños, or Bennett, Jane. 2001. *The Enchantment of Modern Life: Attachments, Crossings and Ethics*. Princeton: University of Princeton Press.

<sup>14</sup> A classic study is Mitchell, WJT. 2002. *Landscape and Power*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press; from a Latin American

cartography and landscape in art contexts involves examining the relationships between the position of the observer, visual technologies, and the power structures that undergird these perspectives. During the colonial and postcolonial maritime expeditions that established the boundaries and functions of bodies of water in the Americas, only certain groups (white, affluent men) participated in the construction of a "visible empire," which constitutes a visual epistemology where aesthetic artifacts also establish the power structures.<sup>15</sup> Spanning a variety of bodies of water, from Canada to Chile and across the Atlantic, the artworks analyzed in this section are aesthetic and visual artifacts that configure an extensive panorama—hemispheric and transoceanic—revealing structural forces of cognitive, racial, and territorial

violence by experimenting with diverse perspectives, positions, bodies, and devices in the process of cartographic capture. Furthermore, the ecocritical perspective of these essays allows us to examine how artistic practices challenge the human assumption of mastery over matter and the power structures that uphold this assumption, focusing on other visualities that emerge in the encounters between bodies and territories.

In the opening essay of this section, **Tatiana Flores** problematizes the "we" within the premise that we are all bodies of water. By tracing a reinsertion of black bodies within maritime representations of the Caribbean, she makes a critical move that emphasizes the specificity of the sea—as Derek Walcott would say—as

framework, see Andermann, Jens, 2007. *The Optic of the State*. Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, and Andermann, Jens. 2018. *Tierras en trance*. Santiago de Chile: Metales Pesados.

<sup>15</sup> Bleichmar, Daniela. 2012. *Visible Empire: Botanical Expeditions and Visual Culture in the Hispanic Enlightenment*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

"history."<sup>16</sup> Tatiana insists on the impossibility of ontological universalism and the need to recognize specific experiences, especially those of bodies marked by the traces of slavery and its contemporary legacies. **María Paz Amaro Cavada** also plunges underwater, in her case, through her analysis of Ariel Guzik's Laboratory of Resonance. She explores how Guzik's instruments facilitate interspecies communication with marine animals, highlighting the importance of media experimentation in raising awareness of ecological issues. **Katie Lawson** reflects on how Maria Thereza Alves, Ogimaa Mikana, and the CoLaboratory Kitchen collective confront the colonial usurpation of Indigenous lands. Her text investigates the resilience of ancestral metabolic relationships between land, water, agriculture, and food as a way of recovering fair and eco-conscious lifestyles. Finally, **Camila**

**Stipo** sets "modern water" and the privatization of water resources in Chile (a remnant of the Pinochet dictatorship) against a performance work of Seba Calfuqueo. To this end, Camila analyzes how Calfuqueo, submerging their non-binary body in the Cautín River, articulates a queer ecology that challenges heteropatriarchy and its ontological and identity hierarchies, while also resisting the pressure of monoculture in the region.

The last group of essays revolves around ***Actions toward Hydrocommons Ecologies and Economies***, grounding different modes of water management and ecological restoration that produce and enhance life. The emphasis here is not so much on flows and mobility but on the roots and kinships that the actions outlined cultivate in specific communities. In this section, the body is not so much a bridge or platform for

<sup>16</sup> See the poem "The Sea Is History."

connection and enunciation but a catalyst—the agency that propels tangible changes in spaces of co-responsibility with water worlds. Here, we are especially interested in considering the crossovers between Indigenous peoples and their hydrocommons cultures with contemporary care practices. In this vein, from his role as a Mayan community leader and curator, **Diego Ventura Puac-Coyoy** shows how the inclination toward water care is not a recent matter in Guatemalan history but rather part of a very concrete tradition of ancestral thought, which emerges both in governance and in visual practices. This allows us to see that water care and the understanding of its role as a connector of lives at multiple scales is part of the political thinking of Indigenous peoples. Focusing on Mexico, Guatemala, and Costa Rica, this section emphasizes Central American contexts where ancestral knowledge and local practices intersect with modern economies and local dynamics.

This is the case of the text by **Diana Barquero**, who reviews the historical meddling of the United Fruit Company in the Térraba-Sierpe National Wetland, on the southern Pacific coast of Costa Rica. In the face of the global market and monoculture modes of enclosure, such as, the aggressive use of pesticides and fumigation, Diana listens to testimonies from inhabitants of the wetlands and the dynamics of the ecosystem to identify forms of resistance. In the traces of pollution in the wetland and strategies of symbiotic coexistence that fisherpeople and peasants maintain with their ecosystem, she finds evidence of a community network that takes daily care of its amphibious world. She shows how this wetland world continues to exist in constant fluctuation, under the current public policies and economic dynamics that also transform it.

In Mexico, **Elisa Silva**, in **collaboration with Ellie Bailey**, explore hydrocommons

relationships from the drying up of the Prieto River in Agua del Espino, Oaxaca, understanding the decrease and restoration of the river's flow as rhythms of the same pulse, which attests to local economic dynamics and community fabric. The essay describes the traditional small-scale production of mezcal as a deeply-rooted practice that respects and protects the health of the ecosystem through the sustainable farming of agave and the protection of the forests that keep the water in the watersheds. This cohabitation system is contrasted with the boom of agave monoculture sparked by a growing global market. They recount the negative impacts the expansion of the mezcal industry has had on soil and climate. Framed in this context, they recount the collaboration that Elisa has established between university design courses and local people and organizations, where teaching works as a ferment to restore the ecosystem and, thus, sow water. Closing this section, **Mauricio Patrón**

**Rivera and Ana Emilia Felker** give an account of their experience founding Topote de Acahual, an educational program implemented in the Los Tuxtlas Biosphere Reserve, in Veracruz, Mexico. This program brings together artists, *ejidatarixs* (people with access and legal rights to communal lands known as *ejidos*), farmers, forestry technicians, nursery growers, and biologists to work on the reforestation of the rainforest and the preservation of its water supplies. Mauricio and Ana raise the importance of non-productive zones as alternatives to the productivist thinking that seeks to expand unceasingly the frontiers of extraction. The essay shows that collaboration and regenerative complicity between different kinds of knowledge is fundamental to forge other modes of existence, as is evident in the ways that the speculative and experimental processes implemented in the program have sought to establish relationships with the forest as affective cartographies. Rather than departing from techno-

scientific expertise alone, this text invites us to recognize the eagerness of the amateur—a lover of knowledge mobilized by the desire to learn—as a key to transformation and cultivating a sense of territorial and water co-responsibility. Ultimately, this section evidences the importance of multisectoral complicity and interdisciplinary collaboration in communities that come together and are activated through socio-technical relationships committed to the flourishing of life.

The volume closes with the *Hydrocommons Map*, which features a selection of initiatives, collectives, and communities that are actively involved in the care of different aquatic ecosystems across Latin America. The Map compiles an index of actions that span research, activism, and dissemination strategies, aimed at raising awareness and mobilizing people in their localities. The categories of actions the Map indexes emerged from the projects featured and present a taxonomy

designed to seed a growing directory of hydrocommons practices, to track synergies and synchronicities, contacts and connections between projects. In creating this map, we aimed to foreground what we see as a resurgence of water cultures in the region, energized by affective connections with territories, principles of solidarity, and the coming together of diverse people and knowledges. In this sense, the Hydrocommons Map is a counter-cartography to the hegemonic ways of thinking, visualizing, and shaping "water resources" and territories under paradigms based on borders, separations, and properties. Instead, it proposes a hemispheric map where the borders of nation-states give way to a vast hydro-social territory of living watersheds and active communities throughout the Americas. Each project is presented as a downloadable, individual record, that allows delving deeper into emerging and established projects and, hopefully, to dream of new ones.

We hope that this first issue of LA ESCUELA\_\_ JOURNAL will encourage thinking-feeling about the multiple scales, contexts, textures, and practices from which hydrocommons forms can be woven. This is an invitation to attend to specific water dynamics of the Americas while recognizing that these are also intertwined on a planetary scale, in which the global and the microscopic become indistinct. Hemispheric waters are an entanglement through which atmospheric rivers form, accumulating drop by drop in the Pacific, then cascading into northern California to transform into glaciers, before eventually irrigating fields and becoming oranges in northern Mexico. These expanded perspectives

require us to cultivate simultaneously ecocritical and interdisciplinary approaches emerging from academia, artistic and pedagogical practices born from and woven into territories, as well as translocal mappings created by specific care-taking initiatives. Like watersheds and their rivers, hydrocommons principles operate fractally—through shapes whose different scales create intersections where the distant and the intimate converge, where unexpected encounters and actions can emerge. Such is the fabric we imagine and encourage in this volume: a translocal, hemispheric, and planetary entanglement that leads us to explore new forms of interaction in, from, through, and always with the waters.

**Lisa Blackmore.** Ever-flowing body of water. She works at the intersections of creative practices and academic research, combining writing on the arts, ecology and history, with curatorial, audiovisual and editorial projects. Since 2018, she has been directing entre—ríos, a research and artistic platform that invents participatory and interdisciplinary methodologies, both online and in person, that



connect knowledges and communities to bodies of water. She received her PhD in Latin American Cultural Studies from Birkbeck College in 2011 and is currently a Senior Lecturer in Art History and Interdisciplinary Studies at the University of Essex, UK. Lisa is the author of *Spectacular Modernity: Dictatorship, Space and Visuality in Venezuela 1948-1958* (2017), and co-editor of *Natura: Environmental Aesthetics After Landscape* (2018) and *Liquid Ecologies in Latin American and Caribbean Art* (2020), among other publications.

**Alejandro Ponce de León.** Researcher. His work stands at the intersection of environmental humanities and technoscience studies. He is the founder and co-editor of the Latin American Platform for Environmental Humanities, a collective that fosters dialogues on environmental thought across the Americas. His work has been published in *Cultural Studies*, *Journal of Latin American Cultural Studies*, *Humanidades: revista de la Universidad de Montevideo*, *Revista Tabula Rasa*, *Revista Endémico*, *Diffractions*, *Tapuya*, *Sociological Forum*, among others. Alejandro has a degree in Political Science and Cultural Studies from the Universidad de Los Andes (Colombia). He also holds a Master's degree in Sociology from the University of Texas at Austin, and is currently completing a PhD in Cultural Studies at the University of California, Davis.

LIQUID  
PEDAGOGIES

## El agua enseña (seis reflexiones desordenadas)

Cecilia Vicuña

1.

Primera enseñanza.

El agua no es el agua, es el canto del agua.

Del agua y sus criaturas.

El canto del oído que la oye silencioso.

Crecí escuchando el canto de la acequia desde la cuna,  
arrullada por sapitos de cuatro ojos que calculaban  
el cambio de la luz.

Apenas caía el sol, empezaban a cantar.

Su canto y la luz conversaban.

El sonido del agua y los sapitos me educaba, y yo solo  
debía seguir su enseñanza.

Saber ser era estar en éxtasis, en arrobos cotidianos  
frente a su beldad.

¿Qué era más hermoso: el sonido de las aguas que  
corrían cerro abajo

o el canto que bailaba junto a sus olas azoradas?

2.

Segunda enseñanza.

Antes de que nadie dijera “eso es el mar” yo ya sabía que las olas eran seres juguetones que revolcaban a las niñitas que apenas caminaban con sus propios pies, y entraban en la marea para ser revolcadas y tragar arena.

Nada me gustaba más que ese azote caricioso que me lanzaba al fondo. Rodillas y manos, nalgas y piernas se aventuraban en el goce.

La niña huía radiante por haberlo gozado.

3.

La enseñanza de los sentidos dice:

Sense, from Latin *sensus*, to head for, go.  
Old English *sendan*, to send, message,  
messenger, godsend.

Sense is the message.  
Water is the messenger of the senses.

Sensing water, the message begins.

El ser del agua desea ser  
en todos sus sentidos.

Oír su deseo, es empezar a oír.

4.

To sense water in us  
is to feel what unites us  
to all that is.

*The role of water in photosynthesis is to supply electrons  
for the light reactions.*

Water is us.  
We are water.  
Seeking light.

Water hears us.

“We are water” says the soul, and people  
say: “We are water protectors against the  
oil pipelines.”\*

El agua no muere, se transforma.

5.

Water is not fully known.  
Two molecules that can never be together  
have joined.  
Their polarity attracts them.

Her quantum life  
Her state of interaction, our cellular life

now constantly subjected  
to destructive technogenic acts.

El agua nos llama  
and we don't hear.

Water is leaving us.  
Cut and dry.

Can we move her again, to sing with us?

Can we plead for her return?

6.

El ruego es el riego.  
Rogation is irrigation.

Cecilia Vicuña  
New York, August 2023

\* Sources: *We Are Water Protectors* is a 2020 picture book written by Carole Lindstrom and illustrated by Michaela Goade. Written in response to the Dakota Access Pipeline protests, the book tells the story of an Ojibwe girl who fights against an oil pipeline in an effort to protect the water supply of her people. See: [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/We\\_Are\\_Water\\_Protectors](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/We_Are_Water_Protectors)

Cecilia Vicuña (Santiago, Chile, 1948) Poet and artist based in New York and Santiago, Chile. Her work is noted for themes of language, memory, dissolution, extinction, and exile. Vicuña began creating “precarious works” and quipus in the mid-1960s as a way of “hearing an ancient silence waiting to be heard.” Her multi-dimensional works begin as a poem, an image that morphs into a film, a song, a sculpture, or a collective performance. These ephemeral, site-specific installations in nature, streets, and museums combine ritual and assemblage. Vicuña has authored over 30 books of poetry and art. She is the co-founder of oysi.org, a nonprofit educational organization dedicated to indigenous oral tradition. Retrospective and solo exhibitions of Vicuña’s work have been organized at a number of major institutions, including, most recently, the Museo de Bellas Artes, Santiago de Chile, Chile (2023);



Kingdom (2022); Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, New York, USA (2022); Museo de Arte Miguel Urrutia (MAMU), Bogotá, Colombia (2022); Centro de Arte Dos de Mayo (CA2M), Madrid, Spain (2021); CCA Wattis Institute for Contemporary Art, San Francisco, USA (2020); and Museo Universitario de Arte Contemporáneo, Mexico City, Mexico (2020). Her work has been featured in numerous group exhibitions, including in documenta 14, Athens and Kassel (2017), and the 59th Venice Biennale (2022), and is part of major museum collections around the world.

## Learning with Water

### Dialogue with Astrida Neimanis and Lisa Blackmore

**Lisa Blackmore (LB):** *It's a real pleasure to talk with you. Knowing that some readers might not be familiar with your work (yet), I wondered if we might start with some insights into these key concepts at the heart of your work: bodies of water, the more-than-human hydrocommons, and hydrofeminism. In ontological terms, what does it mean to say "we are all bodies of water"? In what ways can we notice the flows and structures of the hydrocommons in specific places we inhabit? And, how does hydrofeminism shape your practice?*

**Astrida Neimanis (AN):** A great way to start! At the same time, I am reluctant to offer precise definitions—these are concepts I have been developing and

working with for fifteen years. I invite readers to take them up in ways that are useful to them. That said, I think it is important to say that all of them come out of my commitment to intersectional feminist ways of understanding human relations to watery worlds. Although we cannot (and should not) control how our scholarship is taken up, I hope these concepts retain the tether to these feminist beginnings, and that they are used in service of building more just and flourishing worlds.

To say “we are all bodies of water” is to remind us that as human bodies, we are mostly made of water. This puts us into a reciprocal and material relationship with our environment. We are made up of what is out there. What is

out there makes us. Hopefully this helps dismantle the idea of humans as separate from nature. What kind of ethics would we cultivate if we paid attention to our watery origins? How could we reimagine kinship and connection if we recalled this inescapable network of animals, plants, rivers, clouds, and oceans, but also sewage plants, tailings ponds and dirty dishwater, that circulate through us? It can suggest different kinds of accountabilities.



Photo courtesy Astrida Neimanis.

This network is what I also call the hydrocommons. It's like the hydrological cycle we learn about at elementary school, but just more layered, more complicated. Waters circulate at different speeds, with different rhythms. Some waters get stuck at the bottom of the ocean, unmoving, for tens of thousands of years. Others are frozen in ice cores. These are watery archives that can tell stories about deep pasts. Other waters move very quickly, evaporating from a hot sidewalk in seconds: poof, it's gone! Some waters get stuck in concreted drainage systems or moved too quickly from fresh to salt. The hydrocommons is not just things, but it is pattern, movement, time, speed, transformation. When these processes are out of whack, they can compromise the way that the hydrocommons (and we as part of it) can fulfill our responsibilities to all the beings we are connected to. The hydrocommons circulates across generations in the form of memory and speculative futures, too. We can imagine

it as a wild and wonderful map of connection. We all need to be custodians of the hydrocommons.

Hydrofeminism is perhaps the most difficult to define. I keep learning about what it is and can be, all the time! On the one hand, hydrofeminism reminds us that environmental issues such as rising seas and drought and pollution are feminist issues, because the drivers of these problems are the same colonial, patriarchal systems of power that denigrate feminine, trans, and non-binary human bodies (that are always racialized, too). Hydrofeminism is also about expanding and deepening feminist praxis by paying attention to what water teaches us. Some of these lessons include non-human gestationality (all bodies of water can be the conditions or milieu that can help other bodies grow and flourish), or the importance of intimacy without mastery (just because my body is intimately connected to your

body via watery flows doesn't mean I can fully know your body or that I should seek to control it. Water always eventually moves on and overflows...) I also want hydrofeminism to be an action concept: I want us to be more hydrofeminist, and act in hydrofeminist ways. It is a concept that we should do, not just know.

***LB:** This edition of LA ESCUELA\_\_ JOURNAL is weaving conversations between the guest collaborators about their practice, and the critical, creative and pedagogical genealogies that seeded their collaborations with bodies of water. Thinking and doing, as we know, is always a relational process—a thinking-with-many. Who are the thinkers, makers and—if this is the case—specific water bodies that inspired your engagement with liquid realms?*

**AN:** One of the beautiful lessons, of course, of water is that it reminds us that we are always accumulating, and we are

always leaking, so nobody, no body, arrives just preformed, so we are always sponging up various materials, matters, and meanings. Thinking about this question, I went back to the beginning of my PhD project on *Bodies of Water*. I began this as a student of Social and Political Thought at York University. I had applied to do a project on embodiment and feminist theory. My training up to that point in the late 90's had really been in poststructuralism and anti-essentialism. And the simple answer to your question stems from this: feminist theorist Luce Irigaray, the poststructuralists Deleuze and Guattari, and the French existential embodied phenomenologist, Maurice Merleau-Ponty.

But the more accurate answer is about the professors who taught me then—Barbara Goddard and Samuel Mallin. They were the people who introduced me to these thinkers. It was in the space between their offerings that I started to make weird



Photo courtesy Astrida Neimanis.

connections, and think about and experience embodiment as a kind of pooling, or a kind of confluence of things that shouldn't fit together, but did: feminist concerns with power and difference, lineages of embodiment and thinking through bodies, but also a Deleuzian dissolution of what we think a body is.

I'm almost embarrassed to recount this, since it's such a white, such a European, lineage, but it's also honest,

because that's where it started. Luckily though, one of the things that were coming up through phenomenology was an instruction to pay attention to the world *as it is experienced*. When you do that honestly (and that is really where the bodies of water work came from, paying attention to my own body as a watery entity, where that comes from, where that goes, how that implicates me in the world) you see that this European lineage is just one version of a very big story. So, very quickly, those influences became multiple and manifold.

I'd also like to acknowledge people like Rita Wong, a Canadian Chinese poet who lives on the West Coast of Canada, who I worked with on a couple of projects early on, and who really taught me a lot about scholarly solidarity across difference. Rita at the time was working with Secwepemc and Syilx filmmaker Dorothy Christian, from whom I also learned quite a lot about thinking with and alongside

Indigenous cosmologies of water. At the time, I worked with two very dear colleagues of mine who I don't really work with much anymore, Janine McLeod (a cultural studies grad student at the time) and Cecilia Chen (an architect). We edited *Thinking with Water* together. I could name twenty other people, but I think why I choose these is because they were there from the start, and it shows the real diversity of people I like to think with.

I was also, at the time, moving around the world already quite a lot —both by choice and not by choice. My ancestry is from Northern Europe and the Baltic Sea. My family came to Canada as refugees after the Second World War, moving across the Baltic Sea to refugee camps in Germany, then having to make the journey across the Atlantic by ship, arriving on the East Coast and making their way down the Saint Lawrence Seaway to wind up in a place we know as Southern Ontario on Anishinaabe and Haudenosaunee lands.

This is the Great Lakes-Saint Lawrence basin, full of amazing bodies of fresh water. I grew up in Hamilton, Ontario, right on the edge of Lake Ontario—but this was a body of water in which I never could swim, for being too polluted by the steel industry. I grew up surrounded by water that was too damaged to swim in, drink from, eat from. There were these journeys across big bodies of water in my own family, and then, also winding up in this place where water was so



Photo courtesy Astrida Neimanis.

prominent but so damaged. This might be why I think about water as connecting, unevenly cared for and distributed, and part of the stories of heteropatriarchal colonialism.

*LB: It's seven years since Bodies of Water was published. In that time, we have seen a boom of interest in human-water relations, manifesting in art exhibitions, symposia, publications, and other formats. The popularity of your work and its impact on increasing attention to water in the Environmental Humanities, Cultural Studies, artistic practice and public programs is obviously really positive, but I wonder if there are also risks that its critical and thick thinking are absorbed by neoliberal academia's susceptibility to intellectual fads and thus simplified as buzzwords. In the book itself you identified a further risk of thinking with the hydrocommons, noting how "In acknowledging our commonality, we risk succumbing to the idea that*



Photos courtesy Astrida Neimanis.



*our embodied debts are fully knowable [and that] We are all part of the same big happy family tree, and we all know each others' secrets"—an idea that reminds us we need a knowledge ecology to grapple with our common waters. In this context, what ideas, practices, and realities are important to ensure the hydrocommons retains its critical and speculative energy mobilized by cognitive justice and situated and ecopolitical practices, where the balance of power shifts toward a reinvigoration of the politics of the commons?*

**AN:** There are a couple of ways I'd like to answer this question. One of them is a gentle and generous critique of academia, a situation in which I find myself and from which I've benefited immensely. In the neoliberal university, we are rewarded for coming up with and branding the newest shiny concept, theory, or word. It's so sad and so troubling to me. So, I feel absolutely no grief or concern that there's all this

thinking around the idea of the hydrocommons (which we should care for and replenish together!). If there is a concern, it's about the commodification of the idea within academic contexts.

You mention colonial, capitalist, extractive modes, which of course pertain to lands and waters but also to thinking, knowledge, and ideas. If we had a different approach to knowledge within academic institutions, we could think about concepts as something we can also care for through our own practices, whether we're thinking through human geography or gender studies or art practice. It would be an idea that could invigorate, enrich, and deepen our practices. To think "as a body of water" is an idea that's easily available to all of us.

But although I'm very sad about the way that intellectual fads drive us to try to brand and copyright ideas, I temper that with my feminist concern about citation practices. Some of



Photo courtesy Astrida Neimanis.

my own work has traced the incorporation and forgetting of feminist, decolonial, and anti-racist scholarship in the building of the contemporary Environmental Humanities. There are lots of feminist, decolonial, and anti-racist ideas within that body of thought, but they are not always acknowledged and named and cited as such. People take up the word, but not the political commitment that drove it, that was its engine. That part gets left behind... But I do believe strongly in epistemological and intellectual generosity, and I think it's wonderful to see such an upsurge of interest in water and relations that are born through thinking with water.

**LB:** *You were involved in the Shanghai Biennale: Bodies of Water, in 2021, and regularly collaborate with creative practitioners. Could you reflect on the specific affordances of artistic practice and institutions in energizing (re)connections to bodies of water?*

**AN:** I've always been a bit amazed and delighted by the uptake of my work within artistic communities. I reckon that my own thinking as a phenomenologist, which means that I make theory starting from honesty about lived experience and how things appear in the world and really practice deep attunement to that, is shared or connected to the practice of many artists. When I write, this is a material practice that begins by trying things out—also what artists do. This is what I've learned from working with artists: the idea only works or doesn't once it's in the world, once it's out of your head. So, I think there's this reciprocal feedback loop that

I'm starting to notice between what I learned from artists and how then my work speaks to artists in a way that they relate to. My thinking is very much embodied; it comes from, again, testing out ideas through my body and in the world. I try not to be universalistic as a phenomenologist and think instead very much about situated practice. I think good art is similar; it speaks from very a situated, materially grounded place, but extends outwards to be able to speak to a diversity of experiences. In addition to trying ideas out in the world, I've learned about risk-taking from art practice. I've also learned about trying to make your work connect to other bodies on multiple levels.

It's interesting that one of my main intellectual sources, as I mentioned, was my Merleau-Ponty professor, Sam Mallin. I disagreed with Sam about many things, but he nonetheless taught me to think through engagement with artworks.

One of his teachings was that you know a strong artwork will engage you at several embodied levels. So, it will engage you through your cognitive and rational meaning-making mind, but it will also engage you sensually and through your sensory apparatus. It will also engage your body as something that moves in relation to other bodies. When you are in the presence of a really strong artwork, these different modes of engagement will gear into each other. I learned this from Sam, practicing by engaging with artworks, but then, without really realizing it, I think I took on that same desire as a writer and as a theorist. I want my theory to engage at various levels, through different kinds of bodily avenues. It's not good theory if it is just logically sound. It also should engage a body and a reader at different experiential levels. Sometimes people refer to me as an artist and I do collaborate with artists, but I certainly don't see myself as an artist. But then I think, "maybe I am an artist, and

my medium is academia." So, I make art through the production of academic work, and, in that sense, I would understand myself as an artist.

*LB: I think academia can be so much more creative than sometimes we give it credit for. It's about finding those spaces of movement that exist if you make a case for their existence. This links to what I want to ask you about pedagogy. You devote a lot of time to thinking about pedagogy and how to enable participation and difference in the classroom. In "Composting (in) the gender studies classroom: Growing feminisms for climate changing pedagogies," which you published with Laura McLauchlan, you emphasize the need for "accountable and responsive pedagogies" that have focus on intersectionality.<sup>1</sup> Could you share some thoughts on your approach to pedagogy,*



Photos courtesy Astrida Neimanis.

<sup>1</sup> Neimanis, Astrida & Laura McLauchlan. 2022. "Composting (in) the gender studies classroom: Growing feminisms for climate changing pedagogies." *Curriculum Inquiry* 52: 218-234, 219.

*how it "composts" water matters with social justice?*

**AN:** The other day I was riding my bike home from work along a bike trail that is covered in bitumen. I had just been interviewed by one of the media people at my university to do a profile, and she had asked me, "how is your work important?" I'm not always good at answering that question, but as I was riding along the bike path, it struck me that I live in this very dry place, high country desert in the Okanogan, the interior area of British Columbia, and this bike path was covered in bitumen. When it rains, the water just flows right off and doesn't soak into the ground. We know that in concrete and asphalted cities their mostly impermeable coverings don't allow water to soak into the ground as it so desperately needs. As I was riding along this path and thinking about that, I understood that what I'm trying to do in my pedagogical practice—which is also my research practice—is to chip away at the bitumen of our

own bodies and prepare them to receive something different to a model of education or research that is just about downloading information into our brains. That model doesn't work. We make decisions, we are inspired, we are driven and motivated by deep feelings. We sometimes justify those through logical, practical, and rational reasons, but really we do things because we feel strongly about something (which includes having a strong urge to do nothing). The only way that we can shift how we feel about something is to be a bit vulnerable or a bit awkward in a felt sense, so that we can open ourselves up a bit and become a bit more porous. That's when we can take on some of these different ideas that come from being in a classroom, or collaborative research environment.

Even though the university is still quite an elite place, in my classrooms, there's so much difference: different backgrounds, different

languages, different cultural heritages, different genders, different bodily capabilities. I try very much to make room for those things. You need to work at the level of the body, chipping away at those bitumen surfaces and the Western understanding of how knowledge is transmitted to make our bodies ready to take on something a bit new, different, even contradictory, to what we've grown up thinking we know. That [moment on the bike] is an example of how I really pay attention to the way that water moves through the world. I've spent two decades learning from water and how it works because I think it teaches us everything. Whether we're looking at a river or paying attention to the ecotone, at the shoreline of an ocean or even just paying attention to the way water moves through our own physical bodies, the way water has memory or the way water picks things up and deposits them elsewhere, or the way that there's this really complicated hydrological cycle that keeps

replenishing: all of this is a lesson in how to live, to survive, to flourish. There are so many lessons in this, and I've certainly taken this idea of absorption into how I think about pedagogy and difference, and I think that we need to find these rivulets of connection between our bodies.

As a feminist scholar, there's a very tricky balance that I'm constantly thinking about, which is how to hold on to the necessity of unassimilable difference at the same time as we find channels of solidarity and connection between these different bodies. If we just remain in this idea that we are so fundamentally different (by species, race, geography,



Photo courtesy Astrida Neimanis.

gender, class, or even life experience), and forever separated from each other with no hope of connecting, it's very difficult for me to imagine a successful, joyful, social justice project that can move forward. At the same time, to just forget about difference and be one amorphous puddle of sameness, all pooling together, would be destructive. So, how do we learn again from water about the way specific bodies retain water, but are nonetheless connected through seepages and leaks and cycles of precipitation and evaporation—all of these ways in which waters are always feeding one another and connected to one another. That seems to me like a really useful lesson in social justice politics.

*LB: That's so important, isn't it? And, to think the hydrocommons as a verb, a series of actions that cycle differently and have their rhythms and densities*

*and volumes. It's certainly not a blanket term, if we understand it through water's own cycles and situated practices. That's why water's such a good teacher, perhaps, because it has so much complexity and is so multiscalar and, like you say, has memory.*

**AN:** Yeah, this is why water is particularly useful. Even though we are water, water also appears in a way that feels quite separate from us (drips from the tap or rain from the sky), so this means we have some capacity for meta-reflection on water in a way that we don't quite have with other elemental properties like carbon. Water is a material, sensual thing in the world. In general, as humans, we love it. So, it is also something that we can observe and learn from at the same time as it's entirely what we are. I think Gayatri Spivak's concept of "planetary" is so right here.<sup>2</sup> When I read that line from Spivak in her essay where she talks

<sup>2</sup> Editor's note: See Spivak, Gayatri Chakravorty. 2015. "Planetary' (Box 4, WELT)." *Paragraph* 38, no. 2: 290–92. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/44016381>.

about planetarity as complete alterity but also that which is us, I thought "that's water, exactly."

**LB:** *And in that sense, working with water is also about remembering those deep sociocultural and sacred connections. I'd like to talk about the way you work in contexts that are shaped by settler capitalism, violence and cognitive injustices, and how it's so important to go into wells of deep connections to water that remember relating otherwise to and through it. You work in both Australia and Canada, in contexts of settler capitalism and indigenous water cultures. Could you talk about these intersections of hydrofeminism in the ethics and legacies of colonialism in those contexts? And, do you have any thoughts on the pertinence of your work in Latin America, especially in relation to hydrofeminist practices and anticolonisation struggles?*

**AN:** It's such an important question. In my bid to be very

honest, it's not really a place I started to think about this project from. Over a decade ago, I was thinking from a very privileged position and not really understanding how as a white settler my relationship to water was quite specific in many ways. Over the last fifteen years or so, I've been so grateful to work in collaboration with and learn from so many teachers, in what we now call Canada, in Australia, and elsewhere in the world. In my own practice and as a non-indigenous person who will always be a guest, invited or uninvited, I'm not asking, problematically: How can I adopt an indigenous understanding of water in a cooptive, extractive way? My question has to be instead: How am I situated in relation to these waters and what is my specific accountability and responsibility that can support and, somehow, be in solidarity with the water knowledge and practices of the place in which I am? In Canada, where I live and work now on Syilx territories, this is very much about paying attention to and



learning from the water keepers who have placed water at the center of their community, social and political work. It's such an amazing privilege to live there and work with such deeply grounded and advanced water knowledges and practices. In Australia, it was different; learning from people who have sea country, and thinking about sea country as what, in our terrestrial mind frame, seems something out there, rather than as a kind of "Country" that sustains us.

Before I moved back from Australia to Canada, in 2021, I worked on a project called *The River Ends as the Ocean*, in association with the Shanghai Biennale, in collaboration with artist Clare Britton and Aunty Rhonda Dixon Grovenor.<sup>3</sup> We convened a community walk along what is known to settlers as the Cooks River, but which is called by different Aboriginal

names as it moves along. It starts in a sort of drainage ditch in a golf course, and it ends at the Pacific Ocean. We slowed our bodies down and walked at the speed of the outgoing tide, to follow this river over the course of a whole day out to the ocean. This is Aunty Rhonda's country, and so any she began the day by talking to us about this river and this country and what it means to her, particularly in the highly urbanized, colonized place that is Sydney, Australia. One thing that Aunty Rhonda said that really sticks with me is that if you slow down and pay attention to this water and this country, you cannot help but love it—even this drainage ditch river that is concreted and culverted and redirected, reengineered to change course to make room for the international terminal of the airport. It's a river that has been through so much, but just by slowing down and paying

<sup>3</sup> Editor's note: Rhonda Dixon-Grovenor is a Gadigal/Bidjigal/Yuin Elder and Traditional Descendant from the Sydney (Warrane) and saltwater basin and the South Coast of NSW. She is the daughter of First Nations activist and advocate, Dr Charles "Chicka" Dixon. For *The River Ends as the Ocean*, see: <http://clarebritton.net/a-week-on-the-river>



Aunty Rhonda Dixon Grovenor, Clare Britton and Astrida Neimanis:  
*The River Ends as the Ocean*, Sydney, 2021. Photos: Lucy Parkhina.



Aunty Rhonda Dixon Grovenor, Clare Britton and Astrida Neimanis:  
*The River Ends as the Ocean*, Sydney, 2021. Photos: Lucy Parkhina.

attention to it, walking alongside, you are learning to love it in a way that then asks you to care for it.

That simple practice is a nucleus of so many of the kinds of practices and research that I try to do and support. I've worked with many other amazing artists and scholars, but I have done little work in Latin America (although I have enjoyed some great collaborations with Chilean-American artist and curator, Camila Marambio). Although I would love to.

I'm 50 years old now and I'm realizing that relationship to a place takes a long time to develop. It is also inseparable from relationships to people and to bodies of water, and to all of the vibrant ecologies that make those places what they are. And I need to just slow down a bit and cultivate some of the relationships I already have.

***LB:** That's really interesting and it's something I discussed with Carolina Caycedo in our*

*dialogue for this same edition of LA ESCUELA\_\_ JOURNAL. We were talking about experiences of moving around a lot and cultivating relationship to more than one place. There are so many diffractions and mirrorings to be found in bodies of water across the world, and shared sociopolitical, economic and cultural processes we can trace through rivers, even if they are in vastly different places and those phenomena are manifesting in very historical chronologies. I wonder if you have thought about the tendency to idealize local place as the only place where research and activist work can take root and the affordances in understanding critically global connectivity and the translocal solidarity, as is evident in the powerful networks that water defense movements cultivate and sustain.*

**AN:** One hundred percent. I've always understood the concept of bodies of water and hydrocommons as transnational and translocal, but in my most

recent work I am trying to be much more in place and localized and thinking about situated relationships to bodies of water that sustain where I am at a given time. But your question, of course, brings us back to the question of the translocal. I would like to link this to earlier questions about artworks and artistic practice, because one of the powers of artwork for me is as cultural interface and, therefore, also as a translocal interface. A strong artwork can bring you in contact with the place across times, across geographies, across dimensions, that you don't necessarily have immediate material access to yourself. The artwork is literally a portal that can bring you to learn about that place. Even thinking about Carolina Caycedo's work, her *Water Portraits* (2016) are so intimate and sensual and evocative and, I think, an excellent example of a water artwork that has no water, no H<sub>2</sub>O in it, yet strongly evokes aspects of wateriness through other means, teaching

us something both about water and the places those waters came from, and the way they are carrying the imprints of both the beauty of and the damage to those bodies of water.

I think art is such an important way of thinking translocally, and here I don't want to privilege visual art or performance practice or film or writing, poetics and other kinds of writing. All those creative practices make a body porous. Good creative practice brings out the porosity of a body so that the body can soak up new ideas and knowledges and create connection to those places. Everything I know really about South America comes from artworks. Artworks can do things at that multi-modal level, both in terms of knowledge I glean, but also feelings and sensory experiences that I can absorb.

*LB: What's really interesting in Carolina's work is the way that it has this double movement of critiquing the optics of the*



Photo courtesy Astrida Neimanis.

*military industrial complex and centering lived, embodied experiences of—and relation to—bodies of water to insist on how those affinities bind together local and mobilized communities. This is an important critical move because it counters the commodification and objectification of water as a resource. I'm interested in the extent to which feeling and activism show into your pedagogy and practice?*

**AN:** Embodied, experienced feelings are at the center of everything I do. A feeling body is a motivated body, a body that is receptive, a body that is sometimes discombobulated because we don't always have pleasant feelings; sometimes they're quite difficult feelings. But through that discomfort or difficulty, we often also open to the possibility of change. So, I'm really interested in feeling as a subject matter, as content,

how feelings are interesting phenomena in the world, but I'm interested in feeling as part of a pedagogy and a methodology for change and activist practice. Activists are activists because they feel so deeply. I don't believe there are many activists out there who are just motivated by a logical question. You might learn something, but it invokes such deep feeling in you that you are spurred to do something about it.



Photo courtesy Astrida Neimanis.

Feeling is a feminist question. Unfortunately, in Western academic context we've inherited this hugely damaging understanding of feeling as the opposite of knowing and of the emotional body as the opposite of the rational body, which of course lines up with the opposition of nature and culture, and feminine and masculine, and racialized and white. All these binaries are so problematic, and with feeling relegated to that denigrated side, we have missed so much opportunity to really understand feeling as such a powerful motivator. Unless we address feeling, I don't believe we will ever really understand how power works. Power says it all because environmental crisis, climate crisis, the cis-heteropatriarchy, white supremacy... These are all about power and they're all, therefore, about feeling and about all the irrational and illogical things people will do not to relinquish power or not to feel vulnerable. So feeling is an important political question. (The book I am currently writing,

incidentally, is called *The Feeling of Water*.)

In terms of activism, I think I participate in activism on various registers, but my primary focus is the classroom. As professors, we sometimes don't acknowledge the immense power we have when we stand in front of hundreds of people on a weekly basis and offer them something. It's a power that's very often abused and an opportunity that is squandered so much. I think anybody who says teaching shouldn't be political or activist is just kidding. We're kidding ourselves. Knowledge is political. What we teach and what we don't teach is political. What we decide is the canon. What we decide is foundational knowledge. What we decide are the modes through which students should be thinking and writing and producing work. All of these are very political questions, so I quietly but very determinedly understand being in the classroom as the most important activist work I will ever do.

You are not always, as the saying goes, just preaching to the converted. You often have students from very different life experiences, and you have an opportunity to create situations where they can learn from each other's experiences, and explore their own doubts and fears in a safe and supported way. We can't expect students to come into our classrooms with all the right words and all the right ideas and politically correct terminology. They come in with all kinds of influences. How do we hold that and allow it to shift and change? I think it's really sacred, that responsibility. I've been so blessed to learn from some amazing teachers about pedagogy and, after twenty years, I've had the opportunity to develop my own pedagogies, learning from those others and from my students all the time. I think it is such a powerful, activist, transformative space. And we know this. We know this when students write to us or talk to us after class and say, "this changed my life," or,



"I had no idea; I think about this completely differently now."

I know in the neoliberal Academy we are asked to provide impact metrics about our research and they judge our teaching on what students say. But the impact that we are having on these students as they go into the world and its snowballing effect is so incalculable. I guarantee, though, that this is the most impact we will ever have as academics, so I take that very seriously.

*LB: One of the first things I have my students do on an interdisciplinary course on water is to drink a glass of water and write about it. This exercise is inspired by your writing and it's so simple but so transformative for them because it opens up an entire world through their bodies. It's beautiful to see them suddenly notice all the water*

*in and around them, where it is, where it's not, and the infrastructures that support that or don't. It gets them thinking politically and that's very subtle but very effective as a way of creating a space to mobilize curiosity, empathy and, I hope, solidarity.*

**AN:** It breaks my heart that there's such a stress on career readiness and the practical application of university education these days. Of course, this humanities work is also being career ready and it's practical, but it's not seen that way by university administrators. I think these kinds of magical, transformative experiences that can happen in the classroom need to be talked about more because we can't cede this ground. If we cede this ground to a neoliberal regime, it will be devastating.

Editor's Note: This dialogue took place via Zoom on 11 July 2023.

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## On the Forms Born from the Waters

Lior Zisman Zalis and

Guilherme Bento Lago Queiroz

### Abstract

This essay explores the relationship between aquatic landscapes, artistic practices and ways of thinking that move imaginaries, memories and ontologies. Through the analysis of works by contemporary artists, following the flow of water from the river to the mangrove and from the mangrove to the sea, we suggest a reflection on the importance of water in culture. From Giuseppe Penone's practice and the Amazonian swirls to Walter Benjamin; from the work of Davi de Jesus do Nascimento and Josué de Castro; from Mangubeat to the schools of the mangrove and the Atlantic Ocean in the work of Susana Pilar, Beatriz Nascimento, and Édouard Glissant, we propose a way to think about cultural forms born in the waters. Thinking along these policies and poetics is to guide ourselves based on how the aquatic serves the imagination.

*And the waters prevailed upon the earth.  
(Genesis 7:24)*

*Then sertão will become sea and the sea will  
become sertão.<sup>1</sup>  
(Antônio Conselheiro, 1833)*

## Speculation I

For the Judeo-Christian tradition, without Noah everything would be water. Some might say that without him not even the land that would emerge later could even be speculated, due to the lack of beings to imagine it. The flood came to “destroy all flesh, wherein is the breath of life, from under heaven; everything that is on earth shall die.”<sup>2</sup> Noah rescues lives by creating a refuge from the waters. His ark was the salvation of the dry ones in a wet world. Without Noah, all thought would be marine, guided by the subterranean oceans, the flooding of rivers and mangroves. And the islands, invaded by the sea.

At the founding of the Canudos settlement, Antônio Conselheiro

is said to have prophesized the transformation of the Sertanejo desert into the sea. The utopia that was promised to the thousands who came there in search of “their highest aspirations” (Cunha 1902)<sup>3</sup> was a marine one, a new society that was organized in the antipodes of the desert, in the abundance of waters, where the imagination breaks away from gravity and allows to design other ways of existing. Or when the flood is a revolution and a world to come.

## Introduction - Being a Landscape

This work seeks to recover certain images born from landscapes and geographies marked in different degrees by their water presence. As

<sup>1</sup> *Sertão* is the predominant landscape of Northeast Brazil. Surrounded by humid rainforests, it is a unique semiarid tropical desert. Classically associated with drought and poverty, it is nevertheless the cradle of most northeastern folklore and traditions. This quotation is adapted from the original one, cited in Euclides da Cunha's *Os Sertões*, where Antônio Conselheiro prophesized that the sertão “will become a beach.” However, popular tradition replicated this prophecy with “the sea” instead of “the beach,” which we opted for in this text.

<sup>2</sup> Genesis 6:17.

<sup>3</sup> Cunha, Euclides. 1902. *Os Sertões*. Brasília: Editora UNB, 151.

a thought resource, these concepts work not only as water movements, but as ways of life linked to what comes from the water, and how it encounters other landscapes. We are talking about a being-landscape that takes geography and imprints it in her own ontology, a figuration close to the one proposed by Donna Haraway (2004)<sup>4</sup> when she talks about the cyborg as “a creature of social reality, [...] a fiction that changes the world.” In this figuration development, the fundamental issue involves this ability to re-elaborate consciousness starting from an imaginative exercise, since “the bodily imaginary is fundamental to the worldview and, therefore, to political language” (Haraway 2004, 31). Haraway bets for a “reflexive artifactualism”<sup>5</sup> as a way of elaborating and coining concepts that develop contact points between theory and

science fiction, where the act of imagining is directly linked to the capacity of the body to inhabit other possible realities.

The figure is thus an unprecedented possibility of inhabiting other worlds. The subject is always a fictional narrative of herself, forming her own imaginary geographies. In this paper, we present some aesthetic experiences that expand figuration not only as a field to invent theoretical horizons but also to invent possibilities of being. In its encounter with the waters, a hybrid language emerges, creating its own mythologies: boat-subjects with ropes as umbilical cords, beach-bodies, insular thoughts, crab-like beings who walk sideways and make from mud their insurrection.

Thinking underwater is an orientation on the field of forms,

<sup>4</sup> Haraway, Donna. 2004. “A Manifesto for Cyborgs: Science, Technology and Socialist Feminist in the 1980s.” In: *The Haraway Reader*. New York: Routledge, 7.

<sup>5</sup> Haraway, Donna. 2004. “The Promise of Monsters: A Regenerative Politics for Inappropriate/d Others.” In: *The Haraway Reader*. New York: Routledge, 64.

it is about becoming familiar not only with the movements of these landscapes, with the sea currents and underwater soils, but also with their spills, their flow and where the water itself finds its way, its irrepressible path. It is also necessary to point out the violence, contamination, drying out and desertification processes. Here, epistemicide is everything that prevents water from flowing: "This heartbeat is what dam structures alter and stop" (Blackmore 2020).<sup>6</sup> This is an exercise in confluence with others that, in the past, have also drowned their thoughts. In *Thinking with Water* (2013)<sup>7</sup> Chen, MacLeod and Neimanis propose, within the *blue humanities*, to go beyond "thinking about

water," a way of thinking that encourages relationships and connections, as revealed by "theories based on notions of fluidity, viscosity and porosity" (12). Lisa Blackmore and Liliana Gómez (2020)<sup>8</sup> delved into "liquid ecologies" to explore its ramifications in Latin American and Caribbean art, and how this ontological humidification is reflected in the region's artistic and political production. In a future of universal flooding due to rising sea levels, Elizabeth DeLoughrey (2019)<sup>9</sup> refers to an "ontological turn," speculating oceanic futures. Moving "human roots away from the earthly soil," she goes back to Maori and feminist epistemologies to show a complex network of inter- and multi-species

<sup>6</sup> Blackmore, Lisa. 2020. "Turbulent River Times: Art and Hydropower in Latin America's Extractive Zones." In: *Liquid Ecologies in Latin American and Caribbean Art*. Abingdon, UK: Routledge, 18.

<sup>7</sup> Chen, Claudia, Janine MacLeod and Astrida Neimanis. 2013. "Introduction: Toward a Hydrological Turn?" In: *Thinking with Water*. Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 3-22.

<sup>8</sup> Blackmore, Lisa and Liliana Gómez (org.) 2020. *Liquid Ecologies in Latin American and Caribbean Art*. Abingdon, UK: Routledge.

<sup>9</sup> DeLoughrey, Elizabeth. 2019. *Allegories of the Anthropocene*. London, UK: Duke University Press, 135.

ontologies, following Povinelli's geontological path (2016),<sup>10</sup> aiming at the aquatic future.

This essay does not intend, however, to speak directly about geopower narratives, territorial conflicts or concrete evidence. Like a psycho-topographic exercise that flows from the source to the sea, the proposed movement implies the poetic dimension of the flow, seeking examples that not only “think with water” but “think as water”: emulating gestures, dissolving in currents and mud, revealing themselves as ocean. The cases we present are not intended to be neither solutions nor paradigms, but speculative tools to fill the political imaginary of landscape-beings, assuming an aquatic ontology *de facto*, clinging to the field of flowing images and gestures, rather than anchored words and ideas.

Therefore, we selected some works by contemporary artists

that assume an aquatic body of Atlantic proximity, in fluid and porous dialogues that expand their interpretation, and in a path that follows the currents from upstream to downstream. We start with *Essere Fiume* [To Be a River] (1981), by Giuseppe Penone, as an incorporation of the river gesture, going through synchronisms between the Amazonian swirls, Walter Benjamin, to the works of Davide Jesus do Nascimento as a true “river-body” in a direct dialogue with the São Francisco River. In the path from the river to the sea, at the Northeast area of Brazil, it is in the mangrove that we find the crab-men of Josué de Castro and the Mangubeat, with echoes in the Guinea-Bissau mangrove schools, where mud merges with flesh to speculate other becomings. Finally, at sea, we think about what it means to “be Atlantic,” based on Paul Gilroy and Beatriz Nascimento, the boat-beings and island-

<sup>10</sup> Povinelli, Elizabeth. 2016. *Geontologies - A Requiem to Late Liberalism*. London, UK: Duke University Press.

bodies in Susana Pilar's works and Édouard Glissant's archipelagic gestures.

In a kind of indecent exercise of thinking underwater, drowning the thought to see what survives, we propose an attempt to intertwine epistemology, memory and wet landscapes. An exercise in a mythical settlement that recovers hybrid creatures—survivors or unaffected by the flood—that accept the dismantling of terrestrial flesh and merge with a more adapted epidermis. Creatures that emerge from the poetics of a flooded thought, oriented or derivative from what establishes an affective neighborhood with the several forms of water and what is born from them.

### To Be a River

The work *Essere fiume* (1981) by Italian sculptor Giuseppe Penone talks about the poetics of water in a dialogue about beginnings and endings. Penone removes a stone from the river and tries to reproduce its erosion on another stone taken from the same landscape, suggesting an empathy between the river processes and the sculpture processes. It is not, however, a search for reproduction, but a poetic process in which the artist makes the river gesture survive, it is about decomposing materialities. A way of visualizing how the river works and participates in the memory of the stone, both in its mountain and sand conditions.

«The river carries the mountain. The river is the vehicle of the mountain. [...] To extract a stone that the river has



carved, to go back in the history of the river, to discover the right place in the mountain where the stone comes from, to extract a new block from the mountain, to reproduce the extracted stone in the new stone block, is to be a river. [...] To actually carve the stone, you have to be a river» (Didi-Huberman 2009).<sup>11</sup>

To be a river, therefore, is to participate in the “material ontogenesis of form, a dynamis of the river itself” (Didi-Huberman 2009, 47) or to “surrender to the intrinsic *dynamics* of formation processes, of physical morphogenesis,” (48) as Didi-Huberman wrote about Penone's work. From the source to the sea, the river is understood as a vehicle that drags sediments until they are settled at the bottom, only to later reappear due to this flow, a movement that keeps interrupting.

“Rio-enigma” [Enigma-River] is how Álvaro Maia (1956)<sup>12</sup> used to call the Madeira River, which “of apparent serenity and wild currents, brings in the rebellion of the river waves” a singular bond of snows, rivers, *igapós* (blackwater-flooded forests) and *igarapés* (small freshwater stream), “in whose waters they dissolve, as offerings to other people, the clay from the flooded banks [...] and even the trailblazers' bones, lost in the graves washed by the floods.”

In this haven erosion, in the appearance of the river waves, it is impossible not to bump into the fragments

<sup>11</sup> *apud* Didi-Huberman, Georges. 2009. *Ser crânio: Lugar, contato, pensamentos, escultura*. São Paulo: C/Arte, 49.

<sup>12</sup> Maia, Álvaro. 1956. *Gente dos Seringais*. Brasília: Borsoi.



© Giuseppe Penone: *Essere fiume* (1981).  
River stone, quarry stone. 2 elements  
16 × 16 × 20 in. each. Photo: © Nanda  
Lanfranco.

of a bank where, according to Sampaio, Nogueira and Pissinatti (2021), they tried to bury in oblivion “the other: Quasimodo / indigenous / *beiradeiro* / black.”<sup>13</sup> The authors warned that this is where the river deceives and recovers its survival spirit: “Rivers tug at the banks... And as the waters swirl, everything that was once hidden can be brought to the surface. Touched by some deeper movement around it, the hidden is revealed, it resurfaces and can no longer be denied. In

this way, what was previously hidden, now is reborn, and tries to show itself through voices and whispers, in a corner that claims its original place” (10).

In a similar way, Walter Benjamin (1984)<sup>14</sup> conceives an Origin that “is a swirl in the river of the future. It drags along with its rhythm the matter of what is about to appear. It asks to be recognized, on the one hand, as a recovery, a reparation, and on the other hand as something that is therefore unfinished, always open.” Applying his theory of memory to the hydraulic movements of rivers, Benjamin transforms the waters not only into a movement of thought but of time itself. We recover his aquatic thinking as a fundamental starting point for thinking about memory and time. For the author, therefore, it is in the interruption of a present

<sup>13</sup> Gomes Sampaio, Sonia Maria, Mara Genecy Centeno Nogueira and Larissa Gotti Pissinatti. 2021. *Escritos das Margens e suas Vozes*. Porto Velho: Edufro - Editora da Universidade Federal de Rondônia, 10.

<sup>14</sup> Benjamin, Walter. 1984. *Origem do drama trágico alemão*. Translated by Sérgio Paulo Rouanet. São Paulo: Brasiliense, 67-68.

that does not recognize it, that the swirls guide emergencies and appearances, a past whose critical structure reveals the flow of the river itself.

How not to think about this maelstrom that shakes up the course of things, that “drags [...] the matter of what is about to appear,” that suspends the thought to begin again? The Origin, far from being a concept, is a presentation of time. We experience another temporality, different from the chronological and historical one, this heterogeneous temporality that seasons the present with the past and the past with the future, a whirl temporality. A time that is made of hydraulic movements carries a “secret index” (Benjamin 2013),<sup>15</sup> which, when awakened in the present, manages to bring a dialectical approach to its pre- and post-history.

This *appearance*, in the swirling waters, is a movement of rupture. Georges Didi-Huberman, another aquatic theorist, links the appearance of the origin in Benjamin with the catastrophe, in its morphological sense, that internal structure that affects the appearance or externalization of the river itself. For Benjamin, according to Didi-Huberman (2009, 53), there are no rivers without their own maelstroms, *appearances* in the calm waters that flow without ceasing. A disturbance, an insurgency that transforms the very substance of these waters.

The so-called *hydraulic thinking* in Benjamin takes another status when confronted with an artistic practice based on concrete rivers. The work and research of Brazilian artist Davi de Jesus do Nascimento starts from his body as a river-body. Coming

<sup>15</sup> Benjamin, Walter. 2013 [1940]. “Teses sobre o conceito de história.” In: *O anjo da história*. Translated by João Barrento. Belo Horizonte: Autêntico, 10.

from a fishermen's family from Pirapora, Minas Gerais, on the banks of the São Francisco River, he uses his body as a mediality announcing his formation as a river-being. He defines himself as a *barranqueiro artist* (from the riverside) who sails "in a deep dialogue with current flows and crossings of memories. The totality of daily life and riverside ancestry. Dense nostalgia, that aspires to awaken, preserve or bring back personal rivers. Running shallow between the stones" (de Jesus do Nascimento 2018).<sup>16</sup>

Penone's artistic practice is a process of memorial excavation, crossing the layers of time engraved in matter; the waters are the processes that design a way of being. When he tries to reproduce the material process of the river, he finds a similarity in gestures, where being human is an attempt to be a river. On the other hand,

Davi de Jesus do Nascimento runs to the river as existence and vitality. The river is not the process of working on memory, it is memory itself, and it is his duty to find these "still waters, patches of memories wherever there is bathing and flaking" (de Jesus do Nascimento 2018).

The deep relationship between waters and memory runs through a personal archive project of family photographs. Memory is understood as stored water, time made of a river, including not only water but everything that lives in it. We see this in



Davi de Jesus do Nascimento: *Oratórios* (2019).

<sup>16</sup> de Jesus do Nascimento, Davi. 2018. *Águas guardadas*. CBHSF. February 16, 2018. Accessed May 21, 2020. <https://cbhsaofrancisco.org.br/noticias/destaques-capa/aguas-guardadas/>.

the works made from these waters of time, these “fragments of wet text-delirium” made of a “medium body, confronted and confused with nature. An aquatic, muddy and silent nature. It can be read as bait, fish and stone” (de Jesus do Nascimento 2018), bodies of water, river, stone and clay.

In his works *Corpo-embarcação* [Vessel Body] (2019) and *Braços de romaria fluvial* [River Pilgrim Arms] (2017), we note this body transmutation into boat and river. Using the figure of the *carranca*, his work aims to re-announce a field of river archetypes, where river beings visit and mediate relationships. Davi visits a riverside mythology while he is part of a river spirituality, whose sacred supports are made with the elements used by those who inhabit these geographies. The *carrancas* are wooden figures placed on the bow of the boat, that scream three times when

the boat is about to sink and scare away bad spirits. They are figures of the São Francisco River, “*old Chico*,” that wet landscape that hosts his work.

As the artist states, “the mythical river entities are with me all the time, which allows me to continue building altars, nativity scenes, waterbeds and peace for my ancestors” (de Jesús do Nascimento 2019).<sup>17</sup> This architecture of a sacred river echoes in his works *Braços de romaria fluvial* (2017), with a fish and roots in his hands, and *Oratórios* [Oratories] (2019), made from bows of vessels sailing upwards. According to Davi (2019), “I feel seduced by the autonomy of being able to name and inaugurate my languages. The body that is not an offering is also a shattered shipwrecked body. It is always a ritual of water and delirium. My work is a scream. A scream for the life of the São

<sup>17</sup> de Jesus do Nascimento, Davi. 2019. “Tener el ombligo plantado en una corriente de agua dulce.” Accessed May 21, 2020. <https://terremoto.mx/article/tener-el-ombligo-plantado-en-una-corriente-de-agua-dulce/>.

Francisco River, Piraporense people from the North of Minas [Gerais] and for my own life. This sacred river is something that formulates an identity born of the turbulent waters of a mythical river.”

Davi composes his subjectivity from a prosthesis or an element attached to the body, a primal inseparability that makes up this being in the river, “be a body that carries the weight of the river on its back” (de Jesus do Nascimento 2019).

## Being Mangrove

«The mangroves came with the rivers, and with the matters they brought, the mangroves laboriously built their own soil, fighting in a constant struggle against the sea. They came as if they were occupation troops and, in contact with the sea, silently and progressively built this immense flooded lowland, today cut by countless rivers and densely populated with men and crabs, its inhabitants and worshipers» (Castro 1967).<sup>18</sup>

From the geological continuity of waters in the merciless confrontation between landscapes, the kingdom of mud emerges. Josué de Castro, a doctor from Recife who revolutionized the global fight against hunger, returns the mangrove to its mythical status as the womb that gave birth to hybrid beings. In the complex landscape of clay made of fresh water, salt water and land, the crab-men intertwine in root vegetation and feed themselves

<sup>18</sup> Castro, Josué de. 1967. *Homens e caranguejos*. São Paulo: Brasiliense, 15.



intermediate space. While the mangrove takes over the lives of these beings, a “slow, tenacious, definitive possession,” they also take over the mangrove, building their “Stubborn Village” against the installed power.

In Castro, there is a strange geopolitical theogony of the waters. He writes about the history of the beginning: “The mangroves were the first conquerors of this land. They were, to a large extent, its creators”(14). On the border between land and ocean, mud is the hybrid materiality that builds its own figurations. Biblical mud is the beginning of the human race. Adam, the first man, was made of soil and animated by the breath of God. In Recife, mud is also a cultural transformation.

This other origin is a story made with river water that once whispered to Castro, in the

sweet language of “its waters passing frightened through the ashes grey sea of the *sertão*, flowing through the green sea of the endless sugarcane fields and backwaters through the mud sea of the mangroves, until falling into the arms of the sea” (18). A secret story that only the river can tell. That is why he writes that the river was his “first teacher of Northeast history, of the history of this land with almost no history” (18).

At this mangrove school, “the first lesson was how to walk. If you walk straight, placing your heel first on the ground, you will immediately slip and fall [...]. You need to lower your body, bend your knees, stick your fingers vertically in the mud and extend your arms forward in a conscious and present movement. In the mangrove school, it is the whole body that learns”(Ascensão 2022)<sup>19</sup>. The

<sup>19</sup> Ascensão, Joana. 2022. "A Cinemateca com o DocLisboa: A questão colonial." Folha de Sala - Cinemateca Portuguesa - Museu do Cinema. October 15, 2022. [http://www.cinemateca.pt/CinematecaSite/media/Documentos/2022-10-15\\_NOSSA-TERRA-NAVIGATING-THE-PILOT-SCHOOL-MANGROVE-SCHOOL.pdf](http://www.cinemateca.pt/CinematecaSite/media/Documentos/2022-10-15_NOSSA-TERRA-NAVIGATING-THE-PILOT-SCHOOL-MANGROVE-SCHOOL.pdf).



words are from Filipa César and Sónia Vaz Borges, *Skola di Tarrafe* (2020) directors, a short film about the schools that the PAIGC (African Party for the Independence of Guinea and Cape Verde), inspired by Amílcar Cabral, founded in the Guinean mangrove. On Recife's Atlantic counterface, the mangrove was literally the school where children of liberated Guinea-Bissau—hidden from Portuguese air raids among the bushes, roots and mud—planned another future, free from the ideological constraints of European colonialism.

*Skola di Tarrafe* was the result of one of the many activities



Filipa César, Sónia Vaz Borges: *Skola di Tarrafe / Mangrove School* (2020). Film still.

carried out by the onshore media library,<sup>20</sup> a cultural platform based in Guinea-Bissau that activates community dynamics through the intersection of artistic, agroecological practices or traditional knowledge.

“Onshore,” between waters and in front of the mangrove, the media library remains on the path of revolutionary and transformative education with a direct connection to reality, approaching the archive and memory as inventors of futures and enhancers of the present.

Back in Recife, Castro's crabmen also rebelled and tried to imagine another future, breaking into an armed struggle against the oppression of urban manhood. In the novel, the rebels are buried by mud, continuing to feed the crab cycle. And as in all cycles, once again they uprising.

In the 1990s, Recife germinated the Mangubeat movement, under the voice of Chico

<sup>20</sup> <https://www.mediateca-onshore.org/>

Science & Nação Zumbi, Lamento Negro, Loustal and Mundo Livre S/A. Influenced by the muddy mythology of Josué de Castro, Chico Science sings in "Da Lama ao Caos" [From Mud to Chaos] (1994): "I am, I am Mangueboy/ Recife, city of mangroves, where the mud is the insurrection/ Where the crab-men are."<sup>21</sup> Taking the mangrove as a space of tension between poverty, daily survival and the geographic and cultural potential of that space, Manguebeat already comments on real estate speculation, in a Recife victim of the "metropolis myth" (Zero Quatro 1992)<sup>22</sup> and the filling of its rivers and estuaries. Coincidentally, when, in 2016, Recife-born filmmaker Kleber Mendonça Filho registers this same conflict, the building that resists the shadow of the metropolis is called *Aquarius*<sup>23</sup>— the water that, even when

enclosed, insists on not letting itself be forgotten.

The cultural claim passes through the mangrove, which is why Fred Zero Quatro writes the "Caranguejos com Cérebro. Primeiro Manifesto Manguebeat" [Crabs with Brains. First Manguebeat Manifesto] in 1992, which as always, starts with the landscape. The geographical description of the mangrove is itself the announcement of a cultural figuration, a symbiosis in which the symptoms of geography are intertwined with the symptoms of culture. Therefore, they develop the solution to the "chronic depression that paralyzes citizens" (Mendonça Filho 2016): "Just inject some energy into the mud and stimulate what remains of fertility in Recife's veins," whose fundamental symbol is a "satellite dish stuck in the mud"

<sup>21</sup> Chico Science & Nação Zumbi. 1994. "Antene-se." In *Da Lama ao Caos*. [CD/LP]. CHAOS. Free translation.

<sup>22</sup> Fred Zero Quatro. 1992. "Caranguejos com Cérebro. Primeiro Manifesto Manguebeat".

<sup>23</sup> Mendonça Filho, Kleber. 2016. *Aquarius*. [MOVIE]. Brasil: Vitrine Filmes.

or a “crab remixing Kraftwerk’s ‘ANTENNA’ on a computer.”

The mangrove, in the middle between river and ocean, is, along with Mangubeat, an electric mangrove that extends Donna Haraway's cyborg to the figurative statutes of landscapes, multiple electrogeographies that energize water and its derivatives.

### To Be an Ocean

After the mangrove we reach the ocean. In Recife, the Atlantic is born from the union of the Capibaribe and Beberibe rivers. As a landscape, the ocean guides a somewhat particular reflection regarding memory. In *Black Atlantic*, by Paul Gilroy (2014),<sup>24</sup> the Atlantic is the space of thought in which a cultural critique of the concept of identity is developed, within the limits of Nation-States, and a proposal for the construction of other analytical models of

cultural subjectivities, where Gilroy intends to “develop the theory that cultural historians could take the Atlantic as a single complex analysis unit in their studies of the modern world and use it to produce an explicitly transnational and intercultural perspective” (30).

The Black Atlantic is precisely the transit space of a culture with transnational structures formed and deformed by the systemic violence of the slave trade and the colonial and capitalist expansion project. The political and cultural specificity of a hybrid modernity called the Black Atlantic is precisely the desire to occupy the space between identities or demonstrate their continuity as a challenging, even hostile, act of political insubordination—the space *between* (Gilroy 2014, 13). As a field where the “fractal patterns of exchange and cultural and political transformation” (40) exist, the

<sup>24</sup> Gilroy, Paul. 2014. *Atlántico negro: modernidad y doble conciencia*. Madrid: Akal.

sea is a founding, crossed, marked and imprinted element in countless cultures.

In this sense, Gilroy opts for the image of the moving boat as a concept to analyze this space of circulation. The figuration of the boat as a chronotope, “a micropolitical and microcultural system, alive and in motion,” (17) draws attention to the diasporic element, back and forth, forced and voluntary, dominant or resistant, that illuminates the political possibility of the ocean. It also draws attention to the exploration of “articulation of discontinuous stories [...] and their interrelations” (32) with the different Atlantic points. Thus, the boat is, first and foremost, a project of orthodox reconceptualization of modernity, a sign of the multiple stories spilled into these waters.

As the black Brazilian intellectual Beatriz Nascimento (1983)<sup>25</sup> stated, “I am Atlantic.” In

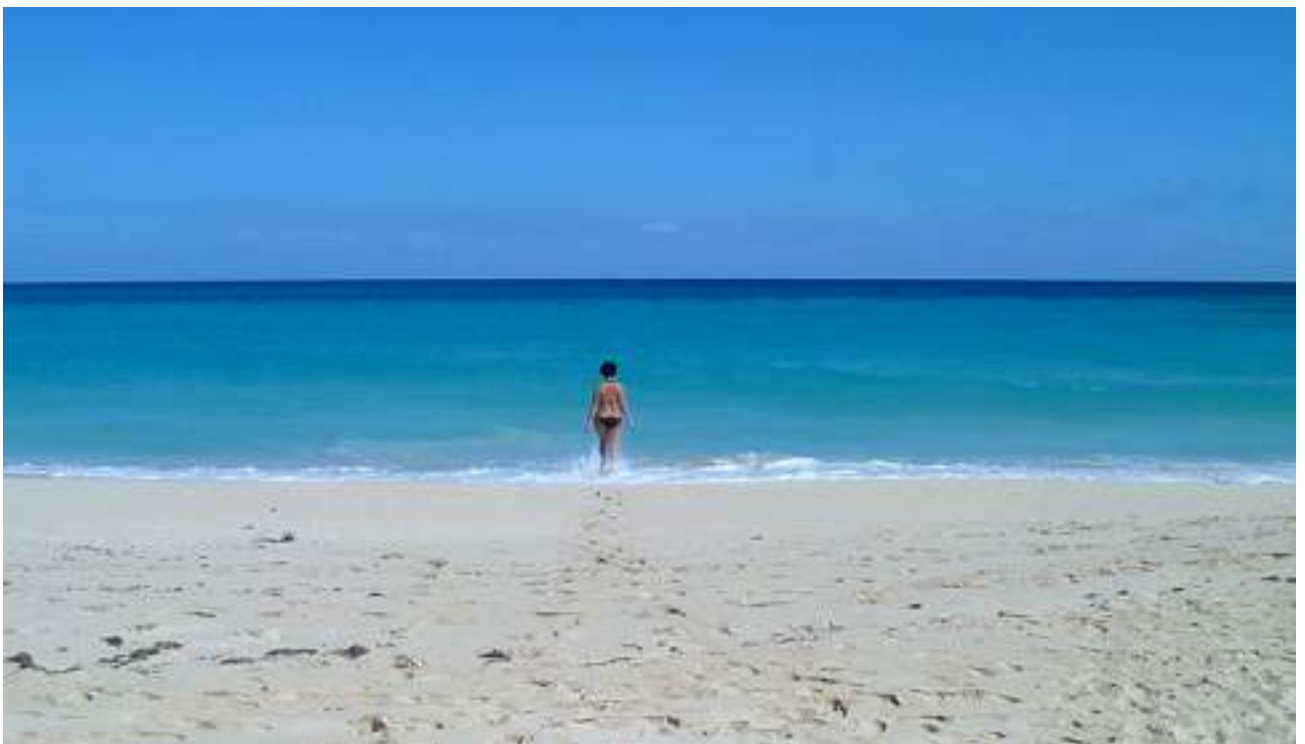
a dialectical existence of comings and goings, the author recognized herself in this “fragmented history,” reaffirming the importance of the ocean as a builder, not only of her own identity, but of a global oceanic identity: “All national constructions are geopolitical contours, they were nothing until they had a name. Only the ocean is real” (204).

Embedded in the prosthetic meaning of the boat, the Cuban artist Susana Pilar Delahante Matienzo creates her work *Dibujo Intercontinental* [Intercontinental Drawing] (2017), in which she appears tied to a rope connecting her to a small boat. Walking slowly through a square, her movements are conditioned by the weight of the boat. Thinking about the boat and the sea, we understand how identification is subject to external devices. If we talk about the sociocultural and historical-political formation of

<sup>25</sup> Nascimento, Beatriz. 1983. *O Negro Visto Por Ele Mesmo*. São Paulo: Ubu, 204.



Susana Pilar: *Dibujo Intercontinental* (2017).  
Photo: Marnix van den Berg.



Susana Pilar: *Islas* (2014). Video installation. Dimensions variable.

the Americas (North, Caribbean and South), we cannot ignore the role of the Atlantic Ocean in cultural formation; a space itself called a geocultural triangle (Nascimento 1983, 73). Although it is evident the constitution of her subjectivity as a sailor—being half Cuban, half Chinese—the artist's physical body appears as an entity where the boat is a fundamental element. Just like the boat, the body also navigates. The rope is an umbilical cord for those born from boats, of sailed identities, which, between memory and oblivion, between destruction and construction, need to be reborn as others.

Another of her works is titled *Islas* [Islands] (2014), a video installation where the artist appears diving in different Caribbean islands and other parts of the world. The images are similar, as the landscapes. A dive, a border landscape between two ecosystems, a

being-between that transits, without being able to separate itself from this transit. In her work, we can notice this dimension of the sea as a border in the construction of an identity, beyond oceanic, fundamentally insular. Looking at this landscape, starting from her Cuban identity, *Islas* is a desire for recognition in that space, a familiarization of the being as part of the landscape. At the same time, the sea always evokes this place of displacement, a drift that is established as a return to the beach. In front of the sea, everything can be an island: “enter and leave the sea or, enter and leave islands” (Susana Pilar 2014).<sup>26</sup>

Édouard Glissant's work is remarkable for this insularity as a space for articulating thought, when he states that “we ordinarily pronounce insularity as a mode of isolation, as a neurosis of space. In the Caribbean, however,

<sup>26</sup> Susana Pilar. 2014. *Islas*. Video.

each island is an opening. The Outside-Inside dialectic resumes the Land-Sea assault. [...] The imagery of the Antilles frees us from suffocation” (Glissant 1989).<sup>27</sup> His thinking, fundamentally geocentric, tries to take the archipelago as an image of thought, as a reading of a world with different, though related, intensities. Such a relational mode, in which the subject cannot be thought beyond hybrid, creolized forms, is the landscape of an insular epistemology. For Glissant, there are not only continents but archipelagos, islands in relationship that will result in what he calls the Poetics of Relation, an *aesthesis* that takes place and expresses itself in the movement of a relational chaos of the subject. “The poetics of Relation (which is, therefore, part of the *caos-monde* aesthetics) feels, assumes, opens, gathers, spreads, continues and

transforms the thinking of these elements, these sources, and this movement” (Glissant 1990).<sup>28</sup>

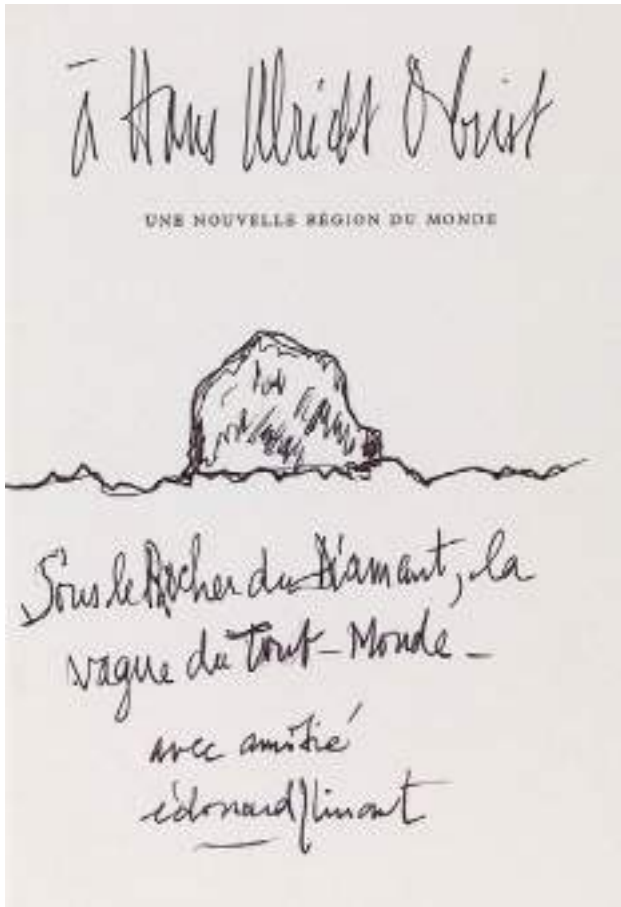
If the island is an opening for thinking, concepts participate in its ecosystem, reimagining the subject within an island thought.



“To Hans Ulrich Obrist. The archipelago is a passage, not a wall. Fondly, Édouard...” Édouard Glissant & Hans Ulrich Obrist (2021). *The Archipelago Conversations* (ISOLARII, 2021).

<sup>27</sup> Glissant, Édouard. 1989. *Caribbean Discourse: Selected Essays*. Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 139.

<sup>28</sup> Glissant, Édouard. 1990. *Poetics of relation*. University of Michigan Press, 94.



“Under the rock of the Diamond, the wave of the Total World. With friendship, Édouard...” Édouard Glissant & Hans Ulrich Obrist (2021). *The Archipelago Conversations* (ISOLARII, 2021).

Being an archipelago, as Glissant might say, means being in fragmentation or in constant connection. This poetics of relationship is an exercise in decolonizing a continental

imaginary to think of history as a sea. The sea, therefore, as a methodology for analyzing times, the image for history’s thought.

The explicitly insular geomorphology of Glissant's thought relies on a nomadism of forms, on a relational exile in which the language, the subject, the culture and the national and identity feeling are conditioned by the sign of an archipelago that always depends on its surroundings, a wandering that is, itself, a “search for freedom within a particular environment” (Glissant 1990, 20). In Hans Ulrich Obrist's book about Glissant (2011),<sup>29</sup> we can see in his dedications some images of his insular thinking, chaotic wet drawings. “Under the rock of the Diamond [Martinique], the wave of the Total World”—we see it scribbled on the first page of *Une Nouvelle Région du monde* (2006)<sup>30</sup>. Later in the text, he

<sup>29</sup> Glissant, Édouard y Hans Ulrich Obrist. 2022. *Édouard Glissant & Hans Ulrich Obrist - The Archipelago Conversations*. Isolarii, 6.

<sup>30</sup> Glissant, Édouard. 2006. *Une Nouvelle Région du Monde*. Paris: Gallimard.



would rescue the memory of this Caribbean rock, which “enshrines before you, wherever you are in the world, the same land-sea sign, of islanders who will soon be transported far away and of the inaccessible obscurities that will raise from the bottom, and which reinforce and carry your pain. The chaos of signals is then reinforced before slowly reaching clarity or density of meaning. The Rock emerges from the waters” (13).

## Speculation II

Those who treat the abyss as a line forget those who live in it. These abyssal lines are also a geographical landscape inhabited by the deepest abysses on the planet: the abyssal trenches.

Ocean soils are divided into four categories, each oriented by depth or topography. The continental shelf is where rivers flow and mangroves form. These are the beaches, the exit and entry points to dry areas. Going

a little further, they are spaces where light still penetrates. They represent a little in terms of proportion of what the ocean is, even though they are the best-known areas.

Then, the continental slope, a continuity of this geography up to a thousand meters deep. They say it is the place of the borders between what is above and a region that portends abysses. Rivers flow into the seas. Flows of water within the water, movements typical of a marine river system that circulates multiple decompositions, animals and other still unknown beings. The place where things drain to the back.

Most of the oceans are abyssal plains, places of wet darkness, immense and little-known voids, populated by sediments from other parts of the sea. It is a place where waste accumulates, where many sunken ships and submarines end up, that is, everything that can no longer float. On this ocean floor, the

so-called abyssal trenches lie dormant, the deepest places on the planet. Depressions of land and water, abysses within abysses. Originally formed by the fracture of continents, today they host their own ecosystem.

The abyss beings depend on their self-generated luminescence. Abyssal ecosystems are made up of animals that feed on what decomposes on the surface, or what is closest to it. The particles of death, the remains of other beings, and everything that falls and sinks serve as food for the inhabited abyss. Those who think that one cannot be on both sides of an abyssal line, should immerse themselves more deeply in the geopolitical possibilities of the abyss, in the oceanic cavities where solitary beings wander. Endowed with bioluminescence, abyssal beings have strange bodies, often monstrous, small or giant—there is a phenomenon

in the abyss called abyssal gigantism, animals that gain a very large proportion, such as squids or giant octopuses—which can be associated with a prehistoric, distant time as if the abyss concentrated its own temporality, its own history, stagnant in its darkness.

For Jacques Derrida (1995),<sup>31</sup> the abyss is “the opening of a place ‘within’ where everything would come at the same time to take *place* and *reflect* (because they are images inscribed there).” It not only sinks, but also guides positions. It is “a certain order of discourse composition” that affects the “forms of a discourse about places, especially political *places*, a politics of places that are entirely controlled by the consideration of sites.”

The ocean rises. Soon, everything will be water. A new flood will come as if Noah never existed.

<sup>31</sup> Derrida, Jacques. 1995. *Khôra*. Translated by Nicia Adan Bonatti. Campinas: Papirus Editora, 32-33.

## Conclusion

From the waters that flow from the river to the mangrove and from the mangrove to the sea, not only subjectivities and collectivities emerge. Thoughts are created, as well as tactics and imagination resources. Next to the waters, we propose this essay as an analysis based on what comes from them. In the wet geographies of thought, in the cultural forms that underlie it, and in the artistic practices that fuse with water, we notice sensitive and, therefore, aesthetic processes.

It's not about creating inspirational cartographies, but about subjective formulations that, together with the worlds we list, found their own ontologies. In this sense, the artistic and theoretical practices that we unify here based on a water culture, suggest a symbiosis between bodies and territories. Based on this inseparability, in which the subject cannot be thought of as separate from the

historical, cultural and natural context where it lives, symbiosis expels its own paths of thought.

In the proposal to think underwater, drowning out conventions and realizing the pelagia of cultural forms, we are challenged to rethink not only our relationship with water, but also with the forms of life that are oriented from its movements and other beings that inhabit it. The selection of works by contemporary artists, with their aquatic corporeality and fluid dialogues, serves as an anchor point along this path of reflection.

We begin with Giuseppe Penone, whose work *Essere Fiume* invites us to incorporate the gesture of the river, following the course of the waters in an uninterrupted movement. We continue through the intricacies of the synchronisms between the Amazonian swirls and Walter Benjamin, delving into the works of Davi de Jesus do Nascimento and his "river-body" next to the

São Francisco River. On the path that takes us from the river to the sea, we encounter the crabmen of Josué de Castro and Mangubeat, whose echoes resonate in the mangrove schools of Guinea-Bissau, where mud intertwines with flesh, and radical pedagogies find refuge in its vegetation. Finally, in the vast Atlantic Ocean, together with the "Atlantic being" in the light of the reflections of Paul Gilroy and Beatriz Nascimento, we explore boat-beings and island-bodies in the works of Susana Pilar and in the archipelagic gestures of Édouard Glissant. Speculating with these geographies and ontologies, along with these

bodies and memories, is to delve into the political and poetic possibilities of what the aquatic allows the imagination.

If the waters energize humanities and thought, following their movements is also being attentive to their orientation of differences. Therefore, a journey through its forms of flow and dam, recognizing the possibilities of habitability and life that are based on it, is also a journey over worlds that have long multiplied. While seas, rivers and mangroves guide stories, bodies and vitalities, diving in their waters is recognizing that there are many worlds within this world.

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Translated from Portuguese by Sylvia Monasterios.

# Weaving Lessons with the Common Reed: Hydrocommons Resilience and Inner Listening

## Alejandra Ortiz de Zevallos

### Abstract

What does reed teach us about hydrocommons? This text explores the rich knowledge I have gained through interaction with the common reed (*Phragmites australis*) and my intention to share it through weaving workshops. Engaging in the learning process with this plant creates a sensory connection that highlights the importance of listening as a form of presence and attunement with the material. Reed is a resilient plant that reproduces in seemingly inhospitable terrain, even in polluted water, demonstrating an inner strength. This is similar to ancient weaving practices, which face challenges in a modern market focused on speed, but which survive thanks to the inheritance of knowledge. Working with cane is an exercise in recognizing and valuing the properties of the plant and the relevance of continuing to use ancestral textile practices.

The ancestral technique of *q'eswa*, evidenced in the construction of the Andean bridge of Q'eswachaka, is an example of perseverance. In 2020, I applied this technique to the reed leaves on the coast of Lima,

where I live. I began harvesting the reeds from specific areas of the city where the Surco River passes, a pre-Hispanic canal that today is buried by urbanization. This experience allowed me to revitalize the connection with the territory and understand its hydrological cycle, remembering that both the reeds and I are bodies of water that share the same hydrological origin.

The purpose of this text is to share my experiences and teachings with the reed, delving into its artisanal and constructive uses throughout the global history, as well as its bioremediation properties, which offer a valuable alternative to the current—and future—water scarcity crisis. Finally, I highlight the importance of recognizing and sharing this knowledge, emphasizing that learning to twist the reed is not only an opportunity to learn about the plant and its properties, but also an invitation to immerse oneself in a physical process of inner listening and meditation.



Alejandra Ortiz de Zevallos: *Regresar – Simbiosis*, 2022. Sculpture woven with reed leaves (120cm x 60cm x 40cm) on display at Galería del Paseo.



*Phragmites australis* (common reed) is a type of cane that grows along the edges of rivers and lagoons. In recent years I have dedicated myself to observing, harvesting, washing, twisting and knitting it. In the process, I have come to understand the ancestral value of the practices of plant and human coexistence that have survived throughout history. In today's fast-paced world that prioritizes instant productivity, creating a sense of urgency and the feeling that we are always on the run, artisanal practices are a phenomenon of resilience and an opportunity to restructure our value system.

Twisting the reed began as an exercise in reconnecting with the place where I live, allowing me to approach and understand the invisible network of water that nourishes this city and our bodies. I currently give workshops in which I teach the *q'eswa* (rope) Andean

technique, an invitation to inner listening and synchronization with the plant. It is a process that proposes reconnecting with the body and its learning rhythms through an ancestral movement that lies deep in the memory of our DNA: the rope was one of the first technologies developed by humans. In addition, the fiber opens up a space for questioning and understanding the functioning of the water cycle that generates and regulates our interactions between species.

Merleau-Ponty reminds us that the body is the medium through which we interact with the world and acquire knowledge about it. Perception is not simply a cognitive process that occurs in the brain, but a bodily experience that embodies knowledge (Merleau-Ponty 1945).<sup>1</sup> In the act of weaving, knowledge is produced and internalized through the body, and this knowledge is kept alive as the practice continues over time.

<sup>1</sup> Merleau-Ponty, Maurice. 1945. *Fenomenología de la percepción*. París: Gallimard.

In the present moment of ecological and human crisis, we urgently need to restore the link with nature by training ourselves in sensory listening, in the sense that we need to regain the awareness of being part of nature in order to make ethical decisions that take care of ecosystems, and ancestral practices can guide us on that path.

### The Q'eswa and the Q'eswachaka

Santiago Pilco taught me how to make the *q'eswa*, which means 'rope' in Quechua, with *ichu*—Peruvian feather grass (*Stipa ichu*)—fiber. Santiago is a farmer and weaver from the community of Kacllaraccay in Maras Cusco, I met him through Mater Iniciativa during the Khipuy project.<sup>2</sup> The *ichu* is a type of pasture or grass that belongs to the grass family and grows in high mountain regions, between 3,000 and

4,600 meters above sea level. It is a perennial grass that has adapted to the extreme altitude and cold climate of the Andes. It is used as fodder for cattle, to give consistency to adobe, to make roofs and to build bridges.

When I returned to Lima, I applied this knowledge to the



Alejandra Ortiz de Zevallos: Q'eswa, 2022. Drawing of the q'eswa on butter paper on cardboard (15cm x 15cm).

<sup>2</sup> In 2020, Chazz Design Studio commissioned me to create a textile sculptural piece in collaboration with the community of Kacllaraccay through Mater Iniciativa, for the KHIPU exhibition at the Museo de Arte de Lima (MALI).



Santiago Pilco teaching the *q'eswa* technique. Moray, Cusco, 2020.  
Photo: Alejandra Ortiz de Zevallos.

leaves of the reed, a plant that grows in disturbed areas of the city, where its roots only need some access to underground water to reproduce rapidly.

Santiago took a moment to remember the movement his grandfather had taught him as a child. He told me that houses were once structured with the *q'eswa*. Sticks were placed in strategic places in the wall, and with the rope, those anchor points were unified, making the wall more resistant; but that

type of construction is no longer done, so he'd forgotten. Besides, it was much easier and faster to buy rope at the hardware store.

In the Quehue district of the Canas province, the technique is still used to build the *Q'eswachaka* bridge, which is a four-hour drive from Santiago's community of Kacllaraccay. The Ministry of Culture acknowledged the bridge as Cultural Heritage in 2009, and four years later, UNESCO added the knowledge, techniques, and



Both weavers meet halfway across the bridge, thus concluding their work. Source: Roel et al. 2015, 174.

rituals related to its restoration on the Representative List of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity (Roel et al. 2015, 10).<sup>3</sup>

The bridge is located between two hillsides and allows the crossing of the Apurimac River; it is part of the Qhapac Ñan road network.<sup>4</sup> Every year, during the second week of June, the four communities of the district—Huinchiri, Chaupibanda, Chocayhua

and Ccollana Quehue—come together to renovate the 28-meter-long bridge.

Construction takes about a week. The new bridge is woven on top of the old one, and after braiding and weaving, the old bridge is cut (Roel et al. 2015, 10).

First, a ritual is performed for the Pachamama and to obtain the permission and protection of the Apus. Then the medium-size ropes, called *q'ewaskas*, are made. Afterwards, the work is divided to make the components of the bridge, such as the *duros* (three braided *q'ewaskas*) that will be used for the bridge deck and the *makis* (two braided *q'ewaskas*) that will form the handrail. The basic structure of the new bridge is installed, and the old bridge is cut up and thrown into the river. Then

<sup>3</sup> Roel Mendizábal, Pedro, Miguel Ángel Hernández Macedo and Ingrid Huamaní Rodríguez. 2015. *El Q'ewachaka de Canas: Ingeniería y tradición en las comunidades de Quehue*. Lima: Ministerio de Cultura.

<sup>4</sup> During the Inca Empire, the Qhapac Ñan road system created territorial links between communities, exchange and trade of resources between the coast, the highlands and the jungle. Its extension reached Argentina, Bolivia, Chile, Colombia, Ecuador, and Peru.



Third day. The *Chakaruwaq* usually finish the construction of the bridge around mid-afternoon. Source: Roel et al. 2015, 173.

a mat of branches and leaves is made to cover the ground, and the *chakaruwaq*—men who specialize in this type of weaving—weave the bridge deck with *q'eswas* and *cayapos*. At the end of the construction, the mat is placed over the bridge and the authorities cross the *q'eswachaka* (Roel et al. 2015, 177-185).

The renovation of the bridge is a true act of transformation, requiring great physical effort and the synchronization of many bodies to perform the twisting, braiding and weaving in a coordinated manner. It is a choreographic act in which each part must play its part to achieve the result.

Today, the bridge has more symbolic than practical importance for the community, since not far away there is a cement bridge used by the local people. The persistence of this tradition for more than 600 years, with the exception of the year of the pandemic (2020), is a cultural heritage of the Andean communities. The annual renewal of the bridge is maintained in the search for a balanced relationship with nature and to thank Pachamama for her generosity. The time of its construction is linked to the agricultural cycle and the preparation of the new planting season. The persistence of this ritual over time shows

the strength that comes from committed, sustained, and organized collective work.

This testimony demonstrates that weaving itself is a symbolic act of continuity, it is so inherent to our nature as human beings that it may be with us forever; it is not only an activity that solves practical problems, but it brings us together and invites us to connect in an integrated and cohesive way.

### Lima: Surco Canal

When I returned to Lima after my stay in Cusco with the Kacllaraccay community in 2020, I wanted to apply what I had learned to a fiber from the coast that had a similar resistance to *ichu*. I decided to work with reed, a plant I already knew from previous research I had developed in the

Surco River. Before entering into the reed, I would like to introduce the context of the Lima ecosystem to visualize the presence of this plant as part of the hydraulic cycle.

Peru is one of the most water-rich countries and, paradoxically, one of the most water-stressed, because we lack the infrastructure to make it drinkable, to transport it and to guarantee its quality. Without the technology to treat wastewater and use it for irrigation, it ends up in the sea. The main problem is distribution: the Peruvian coast concentrates 70% of the population, but has only 1.8% of the water (Ramírez 2022).<sup>5</sup> Lima has only 9 mm of rainfall per year, so it depends on the rains that fall between December and March in the Andean highlands to supply its inhabitants, and on water from melting glaciers, which

<sup>5</sup> Ramírez, Edith. 2022. "Día Mundial del Agua: entre 7 y 8 millones de peruanos no tienen acceso a agua potable." *Conexión Vida*, March 22. Accessed August 15, 2023. <https://conexionvida.pe/2022/03/22/dia-mundial-del-agua-entre-7-y-8-millones-de-de-peruanos-no-tienen-acceso-a-agua-potable/>.

studies estimate could disappear before 2045 as a result of climate change (Laurie 2017).<sup>6</sup>

In the city of Lima, the demographic growth of the last five decades has buried the irrigation canals built by the inhabitants of the Ychsma (or Ichma)<sup>7</sup> culture more than 2,000 years ago. The only two canals still in use are the Surco and the Huatica. The Surco Canal begins in the Rimac River and runs 29 km to La Chira beach in Chorrillos; since 75% of the route is underpassed, the citizens, especially the young, are not familiar with it. Most of the sections have been channeled under the pavement (Lizarzaburu 2018).<sup>8</sup> Informal wall constructions, garbage dumping, and the lack of an urban and



Network of canals built by ancient Peruvians in the Rimac Valley. Source: Lizarzaburu, Javier. 2018. *Canales Surco y Huatica: 2000 años regando vida*. Lima: Limaq Publishing.

ecological plan generate constant fires and disputes. Some sections are uncovered, and in other cases the cement has worn away over time, leaving the watercourse in direct contact with the earth; in this scenario, the reed grows there (Lizarzaburu 2018).

I was born and raised in the city of Lima, and it was not until I was 20 years old that I learned that

<sup>6</sup> Laurie, Angus. 2017. "Lima y el estrés hídrico." *El Comercio*, January 1st. Accessed August 15, 2022. <https://elcomercio.pe/lima/lima-estres-hidrico-angus-laurie-156727-noticia/>.

<sup>7</sup> The Ichma were an ancient pre-Inca civilization that inhabited the region of the central coast of Peru since the 10th century AD. They were later conquered by the Incas in the 15th century and then by the Spanish in the 16th century.

<sup>8</sup> Lizarzaburu, Javier. 2018. *Canales Surco y Huatica: 2000 años regando vida*. Lima: Limaq Publishing. Accessed May 4, 2023. <https://www.comisionsurco.org/historia>.



Alejandra Ortiz de Zevallos: Photograph of a section of the Surco River where I harvest reeds. Av, Paseo La Castellana, Lima, 2020.

there was an underground river that flowed a few kilometers from my house. Since then, I have been researching, listening, and visiting the waters of the Surco River in the few small stretches that remain unexplored. In 2019 I facilitated participatory workshops around the river as part of *Surcosonante*, a video-documentary project I developed with my colleague Josué Arispe, which aimed to recover the voice of the Surco River through underwater recordings and testimonies of memories from neighbors who live at its ends, in the neighborhoods of Santa Anita and Chorrillos. The project lasted four months, and during that

time we were able to measure the complexity of this channel within the political agendas and neighborhood discrepancies. But we also witnessed the emotional bonds that the presence of water created in each testimony. Especially when we invited them to listen to the underwater sounds we had recorded, the memories came alive.

The Surco River changed my idea of motherhood. I discovered that there is a way to connect with the waters that we do not see, but we know are alive. In the process of *Surcosonante*, I spent many hours listening to the underwater recordings, so many that at one point I could feel them inside me; I was able to recognize the river as a place or a state to which I could return at any time. I would listen mentally to the memory of the sound, and the sensation in my body would come alive. I could stay there for a long time. This made me understand that in each of us there is a remembrance with water that goes back to the womb, and by





Alejandra Ortiz de Zevallos: Photograph of the reed harvesting process in La Castellana Av., Surco, Lima, 2021.

returning to it a kind of sensorial connection is restored. The most important lesson I was able to take away from this process was that the body is the true field of learning. What is experienced with the body is not forgotten, just as Santiago Pilco's hands were able to remember the twisting movement that his grandfather had taught him when he was a child.

### My Approach to Reed

I was once asked, "Are you sure you are weaving with the

reed or is the reed weaving you?" This question, every time I remember it, brings me back to a perspective that I find very healthy, because it makes me wonder if I am the one who has agency over the reed as a material or resource, or if it is the one that transforms something in me when working with it. The answer is probably somewhere in between.

My sculptures have a memory of the river; sometimes I think of them as embryos that are growing, while at the same time



Alejandra Ortiz de Zevallos: Q´eswa made of reed, 2021.



Alejandra Ortiz de Zevallos: Crochet structure with the reed q´eswa, 2021.

they are a matrix that holds and generates life. It is a relationship of symbiosis: I weave, letting the material itself lead the way. I do not work with a preconceived image, but try to cultivate an active listening, leaving enough space for the forms to emerge and speak for themselves. It is an intuitive process in which I realize that the message is gradually configured until it takes on a certain specificity and the piece can exist on its own.

US American astronomer Carl Sagan reminds us that we are the result of single-celled organisms coming together to evolve. "About three billion years ago, several single-celled plants came together, perhaps because a mutation prevented a single cell from separating after dividing into two. The first multicellular organisms emerged. Every cell in our bodies is a community of parts that once lived freely and came together for the common good" (Sagan 2009, 54).<sup>9</sup>

Our bodies are the result of this imprinting of life. We house about around 30 trillion cells that are constantly changing. It can be difficult to have an evolutionary perspective when we are so used to the forms we see because we identify with them, but I think it is necessary to remember that we are only a moment in an evolutionary process. The common reed came to this planet long before we did. How many years did it take for the reed to evolve into the shape of knuckles on the cane? How many years did it take for the knuckles in my hand to look like they do now? How will we look in a million years? Will we have evolved together?

### **Evolving with the Common Reed: Craft Uses and Bioremediation Properties**

*Phragmites australis* can be found on almost every continent. It is native to Europe and, like the *ichu*, belongs to the grass family,

<sup>9</sup> Sagan, Carl. 2009. *Cosmos*. Barcelona: Planeta.



Alejandra Ortiz de Zevallos: *Regresar – Simbiosis*, 2021. Sculpture woven with reed fiber (120cm x 60cm x 40cm) on display at Galería del Paseo.

which includes some 600 genera and 7,500 species that have played an essential role in human development. These plants are the most numerous on our planet and have been the staple food of mankind throughout time. Civilizations have developed in regions where grasses are abundant, and it is likely that human populations would not have reached their current levels without their presence (Gerritsen 2009, 186)<sup>10</sup>.

When I started giving workshops, I began researching other uses of common reed in different cultures, with the intention of broadening the conversation and exchanging information that participants might bring. For example, I learned that in Africa it is used to cut umbilical cords and to make smoking pipes. In Romania and Poland, it is harvested in large quantities as a raw material for the paper and

chemical industries. In Mexico, it is used to build adobe houses and to make rings for funeral wreaths, crosses, baskets, and frames for fireworks. The tender stems can be boiled and used to make flour, and the rhizomes have been used in Chinese medicine for respiratory ailments. In other parts of the world, it is also used to make musical instruments, handicrafts, and for hunting (Gerritsen 2009, 190).

In Peru, the common reed and *caña brava* (*Arundo donax*), a similar species, have been used since pre-Columbian times and during the viceroyalty for adobe walls, and to this day, on the coast, they are used for the construction of mats for walls and temporary roofs in dwellings. In Santa Rosa de Chonta Cieneguilla, southeast of Lima, along the banks of the Lurín River, reed is used to make basketry, baskets

<sup>10</sup> Gerritsen, Peter R. W, Claudia Ortiz-Arrona, Rodolfo González Figueroa. 2009. "Usos populares, tradición y aprovechamiento del carrizo: estudio de caso en la costa sur de Jalisco, México." *Economía, Sociedad y Territorio*, n.º 9: 189-191.

called “platanera,” “guanera,” and “papera,” as well as traditional mats and traps used to collect shrimp (Ríos Acuña 2019, 88-98).<sup>11</sup> Unfortunately, in recent years this activity has declined significantly, as the villagers prefer to work in



Shrimp trap and household baskets of “platanera,” “guanera,” and “papera,” types. Vegetal fiber weaving. Marcos Chumpitáz Hidalgo. Santa Rosa de Chontay-Huaroquí, Lima, 2003. Source: Ríos Acuña, Sirley. 2019. *Artesanías del Perú: historia, tradición e innovación*. Lima: Ministerio de Comercio Exterior y Turismo.

something that is less time-consuming and has a more immediate economic return.

Sabina Chumpitaz, daughter of a weaver father, is a great example of resilience in the face of forces that displace the value of artisanal processes and ancestral knowledge. She has continued to weave with reed, sacuara, and rush that she brings from Huaura, north of Lima, to make baskets and lamps. She currently receives some orders from people in the area and sometimes from Lima; her commitment to weaving keeps the tradition of this area alive.

The versatility of reed use in the world shows that societies have evolved around the plant throughout history. They have found in its structure a rich utility to adapt to the territory and to generate culture from it, establishing a close relationship and symbolizing a network of ancestral knowledge. In

<sup>11</sup> Ríos Acuña, Sirley. 2019. *Artesanías del Perú: historia, tradición e innovación*. Lima: Ministerio de Comercio Exterior y Turismo, 88-98.

addition to its applications in construction and handicrafts, this plant is currently being used in the process of water purification, which could have a significant impact in addressing the water shortage crisis. This suggests that we will continue to find opportunities to collaborate on the plant, promoting a collaborative and continuous evolution, not only for constructive use, but also through remediation.

Bioremediation is a biotechnological process that uses living organisms—such as bacteria, fungi, plants or other microorganisms—to break down chemical contaminants or toxic substances in the environment. The roots of reeds can accumulate and metabolize a variety of pollutants and sediments present in water, heavy metals such as lead, zinc and mercury, as well as



Sabina Chumpitaz's stall in Santa Rosa de Chontay Cieneguilla, 2023. Photo: Alejandra Ortiz de Zevallos.

nutrients, hydrocarbons and organic compounds (Torres et al. 2015).<sup>12</sup>

Likewise, the presence of reeds in wetland ecosystems becomes relevant due to their ability to reduce the velocity of water flow, which allows

<sup>12</sup> Torres Guerra, Jocelyn D. et al. 2015. "Evaluación de la eficiencia en el tratamiento de aguas residuales para riego mediante Humedales Artificiales de flujo libre superficial (FLS) con las especies *Cyperus papyrus* y *Phragmites australis*, en Carapongo-Luriganchu." *Ciencia, Tecnología y Desarrollo*, n.º 1: 42-46.

the deposition of suspended sediments, favoring the retention of carbon and other elements. In addition, it exerts its influence through mechanisms such as the transport of oxygen through the stem and the creation of habitats for microorganisms in its root system, which contributes to soil regulation and fertility (Torres, et al., 2015). In this way, reed also plays an essential role in the conservation of wetlands, consolidating itself as a vital component in mitigating the effects of climate change and the sustainability of aquatic ecosystems.

However, reed is not always perceived as a pleasant species; in fact, many people view it as an enemy. In workshops with participants from different parts of the world, I have found that there are contradictions in how the presence of this plant is perceived. It is important to note that *Phragmites australis* is considered originally from Europe, so in much of the world it is considered an “invasive”

species, and in many contexts it is a threat to native plants due to its rapid reproduction. Its height can deprive other plants of light, and the strength of its roots can limit or even eliminate the growing space of other species, affecting the biodiversity of the ecosystem. For this reason, many people want to eradicate it from their environment, which is not an easy task: it involves a lot of pruning and a high economic budget, in addition to the use of chemicals that can be very polluting for the environment.

The reed provides an opportunity to sit with this tension, between those who want to get rid of the plant and those who recognize its nobility and usefulness, precisely because of its dense population and rapid reproduction. It is interesting to have this conversation during the workshop and to practice a listening that takes into account the different positions, giving space to know more deeply each testimony and the complexity of the ecological relationships.



The reed reproduces so quickly that the plant is hardly implanted once and then renews itself autonomously by lateral growth through stolons. The initiating organ is a piece of rhizome, which is an underground stem capable of sprouting vertical aerial stems (the canes) and roots. The rhizome serves as a nutrient reservoir and is the heart of the cane. Once placed in the soil and given the right conditions, the rhizome begins to expand (Valdez 2010, 24).<sup>13</sup> The runners act as botanical bridges that, organized and committed, expand with the intention of ensuring their survival.

### Workshops: Twisting the Reed, Q'eswa

The reed teaches me and I teach through the reed. I have often wondered what it is that I like about teaching, and this has led me to ask myself if the will to "teach" is something inherent to human beings, as a vital aspect of our ever-evolving condition. Catalan philosopher Marina Garcés says that education is an invitation to think together:

«[...] what if bodies are neither together nor separate, but place us in another relational logic that we have not known how to think? Beyond the union / separation duality, bodies continue. Not only because they reproduce, but also because they are finite. Where my hand does not reach, someone else's reaches. What my brain doesn't know, someone else's does. What I do not see

<sup>13</sup> Valdez, Carlos. 2010. "Caña – Carrizo." Universidad de Alas Peruanas 73-74. Accessed June 10, 2023. [https://www.academia.edu/27985847/Ca%C3%B1a\\_Carrizo](https://www.academia.edu/27985847/Ca%C3%B1a_Carrizo).

behind my back, someone else perceives from another angle... Finitude as a condition not of separation but of continuation, is the basis for another conception of the we, based on the alliance and solidarity of singular bodies, their languages and their minds» (Garcés 2013, 30).<sup>14</sup>

This quote from Garcés helps us to recover the idea that we need each other because we complement each other. Education is usually understood as a vertical dynamic, with those who know on one side and those who do not know on the other. This is a crass mistake that frustrates any possibility of generating knowledge, because learning happens when we face the other and grow through it. This means replacing judgments, stereotypes, and preconceived notions with free curiosity, and being able to recognize that we grow through the “other,” forming a unity.

adrienne maree brown, activist and author, shares nine principles for “awakening to the sacred systems of life around us” in her book *Emergent Strategy*. She generously shares the lessons she has learned from working with groups as a facilitator. When I read her book, the principle that stuck with me for a long time was an invitation to listen for the real potential content of a conversation: “There is a conversation in the room that only these people can have right now. Find it” (brown 2017, 27).<sup>15</sup>

<sup>14</sup> Garcés, Marina. 2013. *Un mundo común*. Barcelona: Edicions Bellaterra.

<sup>15</sup> brown, adrienne maree. 2017. *Emergent Strategy*. California: AK Press, 27.

How to do it? Listening is a complex and significantly underestimated challenge. It may seem that we are doing it, but often we are just waiting for the other person to finish speaking in order to express our idea. In order to achieve the kind of solidary alliances that Garcés mentions, which can lead us to more sustainable ways of living together, we must first learn to listen at the most intimate and closest level. It is in silence that one can hear more subtle messages that otherwise go unnoticed.

It means paying attention not only to who is speaking, but also to the environment, to nonverbal communication, and to how our presence relates to our surroundings. In many cities around the world, such as Lima, this sensory reading has been lost because it seems less “necessary.” Urban dynamics have been modernized to the point where it is difficult to distinguish the smell of the earth, to hear when the water

rises in the river, or to observe the interaction between plants. Priority has been given to social development within a kind of protective bubble, thus creating the idea of a separation from the natural environment that is nothing more than an artificial construction. However, inevitably, today cities are seriously affected by the climate crisis through floods and fires, phenomena that demonstrate our fragility and ecological interdependence.

Twisting the reed leaves is an invitation to pause. In this sense, the plant is a vehicle to sensitize us and reactivate that sensual and subtle listening that emerges in a natural way when we encounter the material. In the moment of torsion, one gets to know their texture, resistance, fiber quality and hydration states, and at the same time, one learns how much the rope should be tightened with the body through the foot, thigh or hip, whether the fingers and palms are wet enough for

the fiber to turn easily, and what is the most comfortable and constant rhythm to move forward. Continuous repetition of the action brings us into a state of relaxation and fluidity. We must avoid thinking about the movement and trust the body to find an organic rhythm of learning. It is like breathing: if you focus on trying to rationally understand or control the breath, you can become tense. On the other hand, if one observes the breath and simply feels its presence, it is very pleasant; by remaining a companion of the natural rhythm between inhaling and exhaling, a deeper relaxation is achieved.

*Q'eswa*, as we have seen, means "rope" or "to twist the straw," and *Quechua* is the name of the Andean language. They are neighboring words with a phonetic similarity that may not be a coincidence, somehow both concepts are charged with the same intentionality of creating union. Just as the Andean weaver twists the straw (*q'eswa*)

to create bridges, he creates the language (Quechua) to be able to communicate. Within the Andean cosmivision, weaving has a very deep meaning, it is a structure of thought through which life is understood and experienced.

For example, the warp is technically the arrangement of vertical threads that structure a loom, but in the Andean cosmivision it is more than that, it is the mental image of a matrix of invisible threads that respond to a cosmic order of which we are only partially aware. Roberto A. Restrepo A., a self-taught biologist, anthropologist and UNESCO consultant, summarizes from his perspective how this dialogue with nature is experienced in the Andean world through the concept of the weave, understood as the network through which interactions take place. He mentions that the weave is formed when living beings travel the paths of the territory, connecting levels and valleys. This cohesion is

central to the original idea that the world is a web of connections.

Horizontal displacement creates networks of territorial and cultural diversity, where ritual, territory and culture are intertwined.

«Dialogue is listening to the other with all the senses and letting our voice be felt, not as a position of authority, but as an exemplary expression, of our own experimentation, which functions only as an example to be considered; we dialogue with the sacred through ritual, with nature through know-how, and among ourselves through the spoken word, which weaves relationships, particular examples, and the possibility of sharing experiences in a world-weaving in which we are all threads and stitches intertwined» (Restrepo).

I have recognized the conscious dialog that Restrepo is referring to, throughout different weaving encounters. When I began giving workshops in Lima with the harvest from the Surco River, a conversation began around the water flows channeled through the city.

From the moment we became aware of these seemingly invisible connections (in many cases the participants were unaware of the river's existence), we experienced a sense of interconnectedness. Over time, more opportunities have arisen to teach in other places, in different ecosystems and landscapes, where the reed also grows, but under very different conditions, as was the case in Amsterdam and, more recently, in New York.

I will tell a little more about the experience in this second place.

On June 29-30, 2023, I was invited by the collective Ensayos, led by Camila Marambio and Christy Gast, to give a weaving workshop for the Wassaic Project community in New York, in collaboration with the Conservation and Climate Smart Communities Advisory Council of the City of Amenia. We spent two days talking about the wetlands



“Fen & Friends” workshop carried out at Wassaic Project, NY. Photo: Alejandra Ortiz de Zevallos, 2023.

that Amenia is home to, the importance of the carbon pool in peatlands, and climate change. While we were learning to twist the leaves, the ash from the Canadian fires began to arrive, thickening the air, and we had to move into a building to continue the conversation about more sustainable ways of living. We had participants ranging in age from eight to fifty, educators, scientists, and artists, each finding their own rhythm and discovering that the more they let go of their bodies, the better the fabric came out. Stuart Findlay of the Cary Institute of Ecosystems Studies, also invited by Ensayos, presented the conflict that this plant represents. Near the train station parking lot, we could clearly see how the *Phragmites australis* population was spreading over the wetland, threatening other species. Findlay told us that there is no easy solution to managing the population of this plant and asked us what we would do if this was our land and we had the power to act:

would we leave it free or would we take some restrictive action? During the workshop we sat with the tension inherent in this question and, not wanting to have a definitive answer, listened to the different opinions. At one point, someone said, "We probably won't find a specific solution to this, but I'm sure it's a start, sitting down and working with our hands as we talk about questions that have no single answer."

## Conclusion

The serious environmental consequences we are experiencing, with rising temperatures, fires, floods and water shortages, cannot be thought of separately from a human crisis, because the over-exploitation of the planet has its origins in a disconnection from nature, which in turn implies a disconnection from ourselves. We have alienated ourselves, interpreting nature as a resource rather than as a reality or dimension of which we are a part.

Making the *q'eswa* with the reed opens up the possibility of restoring order and tuning in. Through the encounter with the material and the experience of bodily learning, it is possible to enter a dimension of non-verbal communication that returns us to a very primary state, maintained in silence as a way of being and existing. Throughout the text we have seen that this plant has evolved with civilizations, serving different constructive methods, which in turn have served the cultural and identity production of a place, in addition to its ability to respond to the water crisis. This is an invitation to continue learning with the plant as a strategy for inhabiting and adapting to the territory.

Peru is a country with a rich textile tradition. For centuries, textiles have played a crucial role in the social, political and economic life of Andean communities. Until the arrival of alphabetic writing with the Spanish, textiles and ceramics were the only means of storing

and transporting information. In the Andean cosmovision, the creation of a textile corresponds to a structure of thinking about life itself; it is an intangible value that goes beyond a finished product and that, unfortunately, is not sufficiently valued. Today's world prioritizes immediacy, and in this sense, manual and artisanal processes face a strong contradiction on the market: on the one hand, they are carriers of a heritage that they seek to preserve, and at the same time, they compete with other, more immediate production alternatives. Q'éswachaka, on a larger scale, as well as Sabina

Chumpitaz and Santiago Pilco, in their uniqueness, are examples of resilient forces that have managed to remain over time, giving continuity to a legacy despite adversity. Traveling from the capital to regions where textiles are deeply rooted to learn new techniques has given me a deep appreciation for the sense of community and an awareness of the challenges that local indigenous knowledge faces in the face of globalized demands. I feel honored by the generosity I have found in great teachers and, in response to this, I have decided to teach what I have learned.

**Alejandra Ortiz de Zevallos** (Lima, Perú, 1995) Textile artist. She holds a BA in Sculpture from PUCP. In her teaching and weaving practices, Alejandra seeks to stimulate dialogues that arise from an ethic of care, both of oneself and the environment. She has worked with the Surco canal in Lima since 2019; she now teaches weaving workshops with reed harvested from its riverbanks, using an Andean technique she learned in Cusco, during a residency with Mater Iniciativa in 2019. She presented her first solo exhibition, *Flujos como cuerpos como nudos*, at SED - Dédalo in 2022; she also participated in the PaRC PINTA art fair and was awarded an Honorable Mention in the 12th BCRP National



Painting Competition. In 2021, Alejandra participated in the group shows *La posibilidad de lo común*, at Galería del Paseo, and *Simbiosis*, at the Andamio residence. In 2020, she participated in KHIPU, and exhibition at the Museo de Arte de Lima. Currently, she is a member of the entre—ríos collective and is pursuing the Confluence MFA program at the University of New Mexico.

Translated from Spanish by Diego del Valle Ríos.

Flying Rivers. Condensations of the  
Laboratory “Aqualiteracies:  
Feeling-thinking With the Waters”  
Elizabeth Gallón Droste  
& Daniela Medina Poch

*the rain, piercing my body, flooding me with cold,  
activating my drool, my snot, my tears, this rain that  
softens the earth.*

Fragment of “Fantasmas de humedales en la lluvia,” a  
video-essay for the session of experimental approaches  
from video performance during the laboratory by  
Verónica Rincón, 29.11.2022.



Verónica Rincón: “Fantasmas de humedales en la lluvia,” 2022.  
Video still.

## Abstract

The laboratory *Aqualiteracies: Feeling-thinking with the Waters. A Fluid Archive of Interspecies Communications in Hybrid Temporalities*, was carried out through the Zoom platform, from November 29 to December 13, 2022, in five sessions entitled “Ojos de agua” [Water Springs], “Confluencias” [Confluences], “Estuarios” [Estuaries], “Desembocadura” [Mouths], and “Acuíferos” [Aquifers]. Each session was conducted through a different focus and medium, interwoven procedurally and sequentially. More than 30 people remotely connected from different contexts and situations in Latin America joined us. *Aqualiteracies* was a free educational program open to a diverse audience willing to experiment and collaborate within the framework of LA ESCUELA\_\_,<sup>1</sup> an artist-run platform for radical learning in public spaces. Throughout the process, we sought to catalyze feeling-thinking with the waters through different artistic approaches, in order to contribute to the promotion and weaving of hydrocosmic cultures between bodies of water. In the following pages, we share how the laboratory was created and carried out, and we reflect on the processes and exchanges that took place during the digital meeting spaces, as well as the lessons learned, challenges and potentialities that this type of cross-border hydro-educational process leaves us with.

<sup>1</sup> La Escuela\_\_. 2023. Accessed June 26, 2023. <https://laescuela.art/es/about>.

## Emergence of the Laboratory of Aqualiteracies: Feeling-thinking with the Waters in the Latin American Context

How to face the water crisis from the everyday relations we have with water? How to recognize ourselves as bodies of water, not from the separation of human bodies that need water, but from the indivisibility of our wateriness? These were some of the questions that accompanied us during 2020, and with which we began to collaborate artistically around water in the Latin American context, from a common interest in the sensibilities, relationships, practices and critical reflections around water. Having gone through the experiences of migration, of coming and going between Europe and Latin America, and the mobility restrictions of the pandemic, thinking about and with water in Latin America was a place of encounter and reconnection with the water bodies of some of the places where we had grown up.

From a reflexive point of view and from a new perspective offered by the combination of affective memory, exposure to referents of territories and water practices of the places where we lived, and their socio-political and cultural conjunctures, new possibilities and perspectives emerged.

The year 2020 was also the year in which water began to be traded on the stock market, already reflecting a struggle over inequalities in access to drinking water and commercial interests to co-opt and capitalize on water relations. In parallel, for some years now, several processes have been articulated in defense of rivers and water bodies, leading to the recognition of the rights of nature, as in the case of the Atrato River in the department of Chocó, Colombia, in 2016. These processes have begun to show the possibilities and limits of this figure.

On the other hand, an increasing number of people and artistic-cultural initiatives have been

woven around the central theme of water and rivers and their emergency situation. The exhibition frameworks and spaces for conversation and exchange in the Colombian context, such as the Mercado de saberes *A contracorriente de las inequidades. Bogando por el presente hacia (otros) futuros posibles*;<sup>2</sup> the 46th National Artists' Salon *Inaudito Magdalena*;<sup>3</sup> the Sydney Biennial *Rivus*,<sup>4</sup> curated by José Roca, and the entre-ríos platform, directed by Lisa Blackmore, are some examples. As multidisciplinary researchers and artists, both our biographies and our practices have also been nourished by these conjunctures, and from personal and collective research we seek to contribute to these reflections. As a collective

process, our artistic research *Intersecting Mediterraneans* (2020 - 2023), in addition to the proposal of aqualiteracies, has been interested in decentralizing the European view of the Mediterranean through its regional rivers, recalled and activated by voices that invoke myths, songs, affections, relationships and memories. For the *Aqualiteracies* laboratory, we proposed to move from a focus on everyday relationships with water, through artistic exercises such as video essays, fabulative writings, sound ecologies, collective collages, and speculative rituals, to feminist-post-humanist positions such as those of Rosi Braidotti (2022).<sup>5</sup> She proposes that what has been considered as nature is not instrumental for the benefit of humanity,

<sup>2</sup> A Contracorriente. Mercado de conocimiento y no conocimiento útil. Accessed June 26, 2023. <https://www.acontracorriente.co/>.

<sup>3</sup> Artes Visuales - Programación SNA46. Accessed June 26, 2023. <https://artesvisuales.mincultura.gov.co/sna46/programacion/>

<sup>4</sup> Rivus-Biennale of Sydney. Accessed June 26, 2023. <https://www.biennaleofsydney.art/>.

<sup>5</sup> Braidotti, Rosi. 2022. *Posthuman Feminism*. Cambridge/Medford: Polity Press.



Elizabeth Gallon Droste and Daniela Medina Poch: *Intersecting Mediterraneans(s)* from its Regional, 2021-2023. Video still.

recognizing that one is part of an interdependent system of relations between different entities, that is, interspecific.

The "post," according to Braidotti (9), refers to this movement of decentering the human, fostering alternative and transforming relationships through the common, intergenerational and transversal, recognizing the non-commons and heterogeneity that

trigger other possible worlds based on solidarity, care and compassion.

We respond to this call to act in other possible ways, taking responsibility from situated knowledge and experience (Haraway 2016)<sup>6</sup> in relation to the current water crises that are the result of activities based on neo-colonialism and extractivism, with

<sup>6</sup> Haraway, Donna J. 2016. *Staying with the Trouble. Experimental Futures*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.

severe repercussions of drought and pollution in river territories such as the Atrato River, poisoned with mercury and cyanide by gold mining, the Cauca River facing drought caused by Hidroituango, and the diversion and drought of the Bruno River in La Guajira caused by the coal mining of El Cerrejón, among many others, which propitiated this laboratory as a space-meeting from a digital platform. Building on the impulse, intuition and immediacy of embodied experiences, we called for participation from a theoretical-practical and interdisciplinary approach, experimentation and collective learning. The intention was to catalyze feeling-thinking with the waters, from the recognition of the different experiences and daily relationships with them, in their multiple phases, as well as in their absence, contributing to the promotion and weaving of

hydrocommon cultures among the bodies of water, as suggested by Astrida Neimanis (2018).<sup>7</sup>

We responded to the invitation to weave ourselves and situate ourselves in conversation with the positionings of the cosmovisions of Abya Yala that emerge on the margins of scientific and economic rationality, seeking to reconnect the link between nature and culture, mobilizing other ways of working for the preservation of life in the world, as described by the anthropologist Arturo Escobar (2018).<sup>8</sup> Our interest was that this reconnection as bodies of water would be given from the daily relationships in and with the territories where we live and exchange with the waters, since bodies are permeated by the contexts that cross us and are reflections of the relationships between social

<sup>7</sup> Neimanis, Astrida. 2018. "Bodies of Water, Human Rights and the Hydrocommons." *Topia. Canadian Journal of Cultural Studies* 21: 161-182. Accessed August 1, 2023. <https://doi.org/10.3138/topia.21.161>.

<sup>8</sup> Escobar, Arturo. 2018. *Otro Posible es posible: caminando hacia las transiciones desde Abya Yala/Afro/Latino-América*. Bogotá D.C., Colombia: Ediciones Desde Abajo.

bodies and the environment (Forst, V., Bäckström, Å. & Pink, S. 2013, 163).<sup>9</sup> In this sense, both water as a complex environment that crosses a city or marks a landscape, as the water that comes out of the pipes and comes into contact with bodies, or the water we drink, as well as the water in our bodies that inhabits our memory and affective memories, are impregnated and permeated by complex assemblages in their becoming. This is reflected in Verónica Rincón's quote at the beginning of this text, where she expresses that the rain softens her body, her fluids, the earth, being a manifestation, continuity, and memory of the wetland. By narrating how the waters pass through us and how we become with them and the waters become with us, both individual

experiences and the realities of the different territories and waters of Abya Yala come to light.

The understanding of waters as living archives of knowledge situated in intertwined temporalities is inspired by relational and political ontologies in Colombia, Muisca cosmovisions, current ways of inhabiting and defending the aquatic territories of the organizational processes of the Colombian Pacific. We put these experiences in dialogue with the proposal of *corpoliteracy* by the Cameroonian curator Bonaventure Soh Bejeng Ndikung (2020).<sup>10</sup> which he defines as "an effort to contextualize the body as a platform, stage, place and means of learning, a structure or organ that acquires, stores and disseminates

<sup>9</sup> Fors Vaike, Bäckström Åsa, Pink Sarah. 2013. "Multisensory emplaced learning: resituating situated learning in a moving world." *Mind, Culture, and Activity*, 20(2), 170-183, <https://doi.org/10.1080/10749039.2012.71999>.

<sup>10</sup> Ndikung, Bonaventure Soh Bejeng. 2020 "Corpoliteracy — Envisaging the Body as Slate, Sponge, and Witness." In *IN A WHILE OR TWO WE WILL FIND THE TONE: Essays and Proposals, Curatorial Concepts, and Critiques*. ARCHIVE BOOKS.



knowledge" (89). Inspired by what Bonaventure proposes about the body, and by what we had articulated earlier, we began to define aqualiteracias as: *the recognition of caring relationships with waters as living beings, in all their states, phases, and rhythms. Thinking about aqualiteracias has to do with understanding reciprocal affective relationships with and toward them in everyday life, in their transformations over time, and in relation to our own bodies. Aqualiteracias emerge from the capacity to feel, learn and imagine with the waters, and to receive, re-code and interpret the information they contain. The water of the present is a living archive of the web of relationships in multiple temporalities. It contains information about the places and bodies to which it*

*has been related. Thus, through water we can access times, ancestral technologies and the web of its relational cycles.* From this common definition, Daniela Medina Poch expands the concept of aqualiteracias by describing its five investigative lenses in her textual and lecture performance "Aqualiteracias: Understanding (and Sensing) Water as a Hybrid Data Carrier."<sup>11</sup>

Daniela's five lenses of inquiry contributed to the laboratory proposal, in dialogue with Elizabeth's years of research in anthropology and multimodal ethnography, navigating the relational affective ecologies interwoven with rivers in landscapes where socio-environmental disasters re-emerge.<sup>12</sup> The laboratory developed jointly by Daniela and Elizabeth is an expansive

<sup>11</sup> Medina Poch, Daniela. 2021. *Aqualiteracias: Understanding (and Sensing) Water as a Hybrid Data Carrier*, COVEN Berlin. Medina Poch, Daniela. 2023. "Aqualiteracias: Entendiendo y percibiendo las aguas como dispositivos de datos híbridos." Accessed October 09, 2023. <https://entre-rios.net/acualiteracias/>.

<sup>12</sup> Among these are the book *Útica. Bajo el arrullo de las aguas* (2023); "Embarcarse a navegar con el Atrato: Diario de campo

framework for recognizing affective relationships with water as a living being, where we invite you to reflect together on how to situate and transit within a context that decenters the human (Braidotti 2022) and fosters relationships of care in everyday Latin American life.

### Pluri-aquatic Entanglements: Contexts and Warps with which We Nourish Ourselves

Aqualiteracies dialogues with the invitation to think with water (Chen, McLeod, and Neimanis 2013)<sup>13</sup> to recognize the watery aspects of our lives. Based on everyday relationships, we

emphasize feeling-thinking because it is more than rationalizing—it has to do with experiences that pass through the body from an ecosystemic and affective relationship. Feeling-thinking is a way of inhabiting and relating to the ecosystem of the fishermen near San Martín de la Loba, on the San Jorge River, on the Atlantic coast of Colombia. This is what the Colombian sociologist Orlando Fals Borda learns when he studies human social relations with bodies of water, especially rivers, which he explains as the *foundations of amphibian culture* (1979)<sup>14</sup>. Fals Borda shares what he has learned about the

multimodal” for entre - ríos: <https://entre-rios.net/atrato/>; and “vocear ríos” her doctoral research based on the Atrato River defense process that has expanded to multimedia installation and listening sessions such as “leakages” with Pablo Torres in ~pes. Accessed 09.10.2023. <https://pesss.net/leakages>. A summary of the research can be found at: Gallon Droste, Elizabeth. 2023. “voicing ~ listening to rivers of gold.” In: *Wasser Botschaften*. Museum am Rothenbaum - Kulturen und Künste der Welt -MARKK-, 248-265.

<sup>13</sup> Chen, Cecilia, Janine MacLeod y Astrida Neimanis. 2013. *Thinking with Water*. Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press. <https://doi.org/10.1515/9780773589339>.

<sup>14</sup> Fals Borda, Orlando. 1979. *Historia doble de la costa, tomo I: Mompox y Loba*. Bogotá: Carlos Valencia editores and Fals Borda, Orlando. 1984. *Historia doble de la costa, tomo III: Resistencia en el San Jorge*. Bogotá: Carlos Valencia editores.

importance of feeling-thinking with the earth, that is, thinking with the heart and feeling with the head, thus breaking the "reason-body" dichotomy.

To continue the proposal of reconnecting reason and emotion, as well as body and mind, we draw on thinker Sara Ahmed (2004),<sup>15</sup> who argues that "[...] knowledge cannot be separated from the corporeal world of feelings and sensations; knowledge is connected to what makes us sweat, shiver, tremble, all those feelings that are felt, crucially, on the surface of the body, the surface of the skin with which we touch and are touched by the world" (259-260).

Sentient thinking is also an invitation to polyphonic listening to the more-than-human relationships in and with the

ever-evolving landscapes, between and with the bodies of water and the many beings that inhabit them. Following Anna Tsing (2017),<sup>16</sup> we emphasize landscapes for their dynamism, where multiple temporalities and polyphonies converge, rather than as inert objects. As expressed by fishermen who know how to relate to temporalities, waiting when there is drought, fishing when there is abundance of fish, living with the rhythms and memory of the river, from community life, seeking balance even when it is difficult.<sup>17</sup> We could say that sensitivity and attunement to symbiotic rhythms are inherent aspects of the aqualiteracies.

From a research based in feeling-thinking with the territories and local Afro-descendant and Indigenous struggles of Abya

<sup>15</sup> Ahmed, Sara. 2004. *The Cultural Politics of Emotion*. Edinburgh University Press.

<sup>16</sup> Tsing, Anna Lowenhaupt. 2017. *The Mushroom at the End of the World*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.

<sup>17</sup> "Orlando Fals Borda-Concepto Sentipensante." Accessed August 6, 2023. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mGAy6Pw4qAw>.

Yala, a proposal emerges to take into account the political activation of relationality and the goal of transit to the pluriverse: a world where many worlds fit (Escobar 2014 and 2015; Blaser and de la Cadena 2018),<sup>18</sup> inspired by the decolonial Zapatista proposal of 1996, promulgated in the “Fourth Declaration of the Lacandon Jungle.”<sup>19</sup> In the Colombian case, there are, among many others, the long-standing processes in defense of the Atrato River in Chocó, recognized as a subject of rights in 2016, the Cauca River, recognized as a victim of the armed conflict in Colombia by the Special Jurisdiction for Peace (JEP) in 2023, as well as the mobilizations in defense of the Bruno River that have been taking place in Guajira.

In proposing aqualiteracies in a pluriverse perspective to contribute to hydrocommons based on everyday relations with water, it is important to emphasize *partial connections* (de la Cadena 2015) and *non-commons* (Blaser and de la Cadena 2018), to continue to inquire about heterogeneity as a basis for negotiating symmetry, and to recognize such from an intersectional perspective. The concept of partial connections is not only an analytical but also a political tool, as it does not hierarchize, erase or exclude. Rather, through relationality—understood as an intrinsic aspect of entities—it is possible to see them in themselves, remaining dissimilar without exclusion (de la Cadena 2015, 33). In the same vein, Blaser and de la Cadena

<sup>18</sup> Escobar, Arturo. 2014. *Sentipensar con la Tierra: Postdesarrollo y Diferencia Radical*. Medellín: Universidad Autónoma Latinoamericana. Escobar, Arturo. 2015. “Territorios de diferencia: la ontología política de los ‘derechos al territorio.’” In: *Desenvol. Meio Ambiente*, 5 (35), 89-100. de la Cadena, Marisol and Blaser, Mario. *A World of Many Worlds*. New York, USA: Duke University Press, 2018. <https://doi.org/10.1515/9781478004318>.

<sup>19</sup> Cuarta Declaración de la Selva Lacandona. Accessed August 6, 2023. <https://enlacezapatista.ezln.org.mx/1996/01/01/cuarta-declaracion-de-la-selva-lacandona/>.

(2018) respond to the idea of the "national common good," which they understand as an imposition, since it implies the destruction of everything that the state and modernity cannot recognize. That is why they propose the *non-commons*, as heterogeneous bases where the negotiation of the common is a continuous achievement and a constant process (19). In this sense, to recognize that the hydro-commons are a constant process of heterogeneity, and a field of contestation for the decentralization of public policy.

In order to propitiate *feeling-thinking* during the laboratory under the theoretical frameworks presented, we combined performance methodologies and multimodal ethnography, generating a sequence of exercises inspired by the different stages of a riverbed, from its source to its mouth. Thus, the experimentation was opened from known experiences and

languages, from corpoliteracies and relations with the situated—and therefore not common—waters, from the situationalities of relations with the socio-cultural, territorial, ecological and historical weft that has crossed and forged the bodies.

The invitation to experiment from an interdisciplinary approach allowed to undiscipline and going beyond certain modalities and approaches already known. Drawing on some of Judith Butler's (1990)<sup>20</sup> ideas about performativity in the development and maintenance of identities, the use of the medium of performance as a research method allowed us to de-neutralize certain aquatic associations and practices that are normalized and sedimented in many occasions and contexts, in order to rethink them in an expanded way.

To carry out this laboratory as a trans-boundary hydro-

<sup>20</sup> Butler, Judith. 1990. *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*. New York: Routledge.

pedagogical process on digital platforms was to generate *meeting-spaces*. On the one hand, it is important to emphasize that spaces in general are dynamic and emerge from the simultaneous coexistence of social relations and interactions at all spatial scales, from the most local to the most global (Massey 1993, 155).<sup>21</sup> In this sense, digital meeting spaces in the lab are not preconfigured containers for activity. They should be seen “as processes and in process” (Crang and Thrift 2000, 3)<sup>22</sup> and as encounter spaces (Kanngieser 2012).<sup>23</sup> In terms of how spaces constantly emerge and transform, the co-locality of people in digital

spaces is increasingly embedded and integrated into our everyday practices, making the oscillation between on/offline space and state increasingly less perceptible (Pink et. al. 2016; Postill 2016).<sup>24</sup> It could be argued that we are in a perpetual hybrid space-state.

In this way, the Lab finds the conditions for its emergence in the digital space, as has been increasingly happening since the COVID-19 pandemic within the pedagogical proposals of digital environmental humanities focused on rivers and water bodies (Blackmore & Heffes 2023).<sup>25</sup> The challenge for us in developing the lab was to

<sup>21</sup> Massey, Doreen B. 1994. *Space Place and Gender*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.

<sup>22</sup> Crang, Mike, & Thrift, Nigel (Eds.). (2000). *Thinking Space* (1st ed.). Routledge. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203411148>.

<sup>22</sup> Kanngieser, A.M. 2012. “A sonic geography of voice: Towards an affective politics.” *Progress in Human Geography*, 36(3), 336–353. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0309132511423969>.

<sup>24</sup> Pink, Sarah, Heather A Horst, John Postill, Larissa Hjorth, Tania Lewis, and Jo Tacchi. 2016. *Digital Ethnography: Principles and Practice*. Los Angeles: SAGE. Postill, John (2016). “Remote Ethnography: Studying Culture from Afar.” In: *The Routledge Companion to Digital Ethnography*. New York: Routledge.

<sup>25</sup> Blackmore, Lisa and Gisela Heffes. 2022. “Latin American Environmental Research and Practice.” *Journal of Latin American Cultural Studies*, 31:1, 105-114, DOI:10.1080/13569325.2022.2084720.



Elizabeth Gallón Droste and Daniela Medina Poch: Collage, 2023.

foster embodied, intimate, and sensitive approaches to digitality. These artistic approaches were collectively documented in a Padlet, a digital platform that can be accessed to navigate and digest what is shared in more personal rhythms. By archiving the process, the Padlet<sup>26</sup> began to become a collective

multimedia diary, integrating the internal and external personal worlds and the conversation between them, as well as the collaborative processes. In this way, we became contaminated by the plethora of experiences, memories, affections, and even waters that were evoked and invoked in the sessions.

<sup>26</sup> Padlet: Accessed June 26, 2023. <https://padlet.com/acualiteracias/acualiteracias-sesiones-mxj39ayptlcza65p>.

In each session, we navigated through themes and artistic media that were conceived in relation to the waters of *identities, imaginaries, hybrid communication in the present and towards the future*. Below, we present how the digital meeting spaces were, as well as some of the exercises developed during the lab to shed light on the process, the challenges we faced, and the lessons we learned.

### Flying Rivers, Cross-border Navigations in Digital Meeting-spaces

The massive air currents of water in the form of steam coming from the tropical Atlantic Ocean and fed by the moisture evaporating from the Amazon are called “flying rivers.” In their ephemeral and material form, these bodies of water present in Latin America move quickly, almost imperceptibly, connecting different territories and places. As a manifestation of ecosystemic and interspecific

interrelationships, they are the constant process and flow of exchange between the subterranean and the floating, confronting linearity. The laboratory began to follow these principles by presenting ourselves in relation to the bodies of water that crossed us, invoking and geolocating them in a collective map that we all had access to, as seen in the collage. “Crossing” involves passing through the body, an aspect we consider significant because it implies an immersive gaze from where each person is located.

When we interact through digital technologies, we are mediated in a “third place,” in a remote co-presence that does not correspond to anyone's location, but is created through the interaction between the platform and each person's situation when we meet (Fors V., Bäckström Å., Pink S. 2013). Likewise, one is not only in this third place, but through the evocation of experiences and memories, through the



narration of ourselves from the experiences that run through us, we are, like the flying rivers, immersed and interwoven at the same time in multiple places and temporalities, from which one constantly enters and exits, contaminating and transforming oneself. Narration, in this sense, is the desire to give a meaning to what has been lived, according to the philosopher Adriana Cavarero (2000),<sup>27</sup> because it is the reflection of what has passed through the bodies, as an embodied history, from where one transits and is immersed in these digital spaces-encounters.

This condition of being everywhere at once, and at the same time-sharing a certain digital proximity, generates a particular relationship between individuals; meeting-spaces where proximity and alienation coexist, a certain ubiquitous intimacy. We try to meet at a distance from co-locality by evoking bodies of water that

can inhabit our bodies and memories and at the same time are in different geolocations. In this way, we wanted to get to know each other from the particular relationships and experiences of each body, to begin to evoke resonances and encounters, from memories and affections, as a process of building hydrocommons and recognizing ourselves as bodies of water. Becoming aware of what it means to connect from geographically distant places, we create a hybrid space with close imaginaries and concerns, witnessing the fluid connection of the flying rivers. The flying rivers, in this sense, have managed to weave us with the waters of digital navigation and its constant spillage on the webs, being these means to transit these spaces, managing to reach places/spaces that would have been inaccessible before.

During the laboratory, through moments of exchange, group

<sup>27</sup> Cavarero, Adriana. 2000. *Relating Narratives: Storytelling and Selfhood* (1st ed.). Routledge. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315824574>.

work and conversation spaces, we tried to generate a common and safe space out of the non-common and partial connections (Blaser and de la Cadena 2018). In order to carry out creative learning processes that start from intimate experiences, it is necessary to create spaces of care and containment; this is a continuous learning process. To get to know each other, at the beginning of each session and through playful dynamics, we tried to create complicity by sharing each other's experiences with the waters that traverse us, and also continuity, since we would be sharing for five sessions. It was also very important for us that the meetings did not have the character of a master class, so we promoted horizontal conversations within which we established different moments of exchange and feedback;

spaces-meetings where we could also immerse ourselves in experimentation.

This was also the way we found to take care of this space, where we were both leading and participating. This is an ethical and political position, since we establish the encounter as a space of mutual exchange where we recognize ourselves as learners in the process. It is a position that resonates with ethnographic research methodologies, where one is not an observer, but a participant and therefore a learner (Guber 2019)<sup>28</sup>. Since these are issues that interest and intersect us, we seek in the same way, from the collective participatory action, to go further through the body, to learn with the (contra) expertise (Svampa 2019)<sup>29</sup> from the embodied experiences of all the participants in the space-

<sup>28</sup> Guber, Rosana. 2019. *La etnografía: Método, campo y reflexividad*. Argentina: Siglo XXI Editores.

<sup>29</sup> Svampa, Maristella 2019. *Las fronteras del neoextractivismo en América Latina: Conflictos socioambientales, giro ecoterritorial y nuevas dependencias*. Bielefeld: University Press/CALAS Collection.

meetings, thus contaminating ourselves and allowing ourselves to be affected by what was experienced together.

### To Be Affected by the Expressive Diversity of Waters: Methodologies from Sensoriality

Taking into account the heterogeneity, the non-commons and the partial connections, we proposed intuitive exercises with little time for preparation during the sessions, such as documenting an introductory process in video performance format, doing automatic writing exercises in relation to objects and bodies of water, among others, which encouraged us to let ourselves be led by the experiences, to trust in the immediacy, to let go of control and to let the water finally guide the what and the how. In this way, the heterogeneity of each body and each experience



Mateo Ayala: "Nave de Agua," 2022. Video still.

was maintained, while we all immersed ourselves in order to establish sensory conversations through the media and technologies that are part of everyday life, as proposed by David Kolb (1984),<sup>30</sup> who advocates the importance of experimenting in order to learn and thus generate knowledge by passing through the body. In the laboratory, experimentation and open sharing of each person's knowledge and expertise were of paramount importance. With this type of exercises, we also sought to decentralize water from explicit aesthetic

<sup>30</sup> Kolb, David A. 1984 [1939]. *Experiential Learning: Experience as the Source of Learning and Development*. Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall.

fixations, from dark ecologies (Morton 2016),<sup>31</sup> and thus attune ourselves to its multiple expressions and filtrations. The exercises proposed in each session sought to evoke the body as a device and aquatic medium, and also as a repository of memory, from the corpoliteracies. In this way, the access to the imaginaries of the bodies of water was extended from the situated memory and imagination to the waters narrated by others.

In Session I: “Identities - Water Springs: Experimental Approaches through Body and Action,” participants were asked to make a video essay of a presentation of the human body in relation to the body of water with which they had identified themselves at the beginning of the session. This was an invitation to feel the

body as a container in which the waters manifest themselves. For this, we proposed as a methodology a kind of research-experiment from performance and multimodal ethnography, which Isaac Marrero and Gabriel Dattatreyan (2019)<sup>32</sup> describe as: beyond textual it is sensorial, more than representational it seeks to perform, and more than descriptive it is inventive. Within the framework of this exercise, the participating artist Mateo Ayala generated and presented a video sequence in which he connected the water coming out of the faucet of his house—whose output is controlled by a rotating faucet, where water functions as a resource to satisfy the consumer's need—with the water outside his house, which falls under its own agency as part of the condensation of the clouds in the form of rain, and which is dammed up in the

<sup>31</sup> Morton, Timothy. 2016. *Dark Ecology: For a Logic of Future Coexistence*. New York: Columbia University Press.

<sup>32</sup> Dattatreyan, E. Gabriel and Isaac Marrero-Guillamón. 2019. “Introduction: Multimodal Anthropology and the Politics of Invention.” *American Anthropologist*, 121(1), 220-228.

holes of the streets in the form of puddles, where it no longer has a function that can satisfy the needs of a consumer. In this way, he alludes to a break with the aesthetics and imaginaries of water for purification at the service of humanity, responding to the idea of water as simple H<sub>2</sub>O and inviting to dream waters, as proposed by Ivan Illich.<sup>33</sup> This video, whose sequence is more sensorial than textual and whose events do not represent but experience, exemplifies the investigative-immersive methodology proposed during the laboratory.

By paying attention to the representations of water in art, music, poetry and literature, images and sayings, as suggested by anthropologist Veronica Strang (2011),<sup>34</sup> we can see through these different

languages the multiple meanings and values that we imagine or project in and with water, learned, codified and transmitted over generations. Through the relationships that are established with them, they are impregnated and determined in a constant negotiation of who or what the waters are.

### The Transformative Mandate of Halophiles

In *Reassembling the Social: An Introduction to Actor-Network-Theory* (2005)<sup>35</sup> French philosopher and sociologist Bruno Latour describes the need to liberate objects from objectivity through actor-network theory and object-oriented ontology. Latour's work often explores conventional distinctions between subjects and objects, describing how objects and non-human entities

<sup>33</sup> Illich, Ivan. 1987. *H<sub>2</sub>O and the Waters of Forgetfulness*. Berkeley, California: Heyday.

<sup>34</sup> Strang, Veronica. 2011. "Representing Water: visual anthropology and divergent trajectories in human environmental relations," *Anuário Antropológico* [Online], v.36 n.1 | 2011. <https://doi.org/10.4000/aa.1175>.

<sup>35</sup> Latour, Bruno. 2005. *Reassembling the Social: An Introduction to Actor-Network-Theory*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.



Marianela Díaz Cardozo: "Halophiles," 2022.

can play an active role in shaping human experiences and societies, blurring the boundaries between human and non-human agency.

The second exercise of the laboratory was to bring in "objects" imbued with information about some of the inherited perceptions and associations in relation to local and transgenerational water bodies, and how these have changed over time. We decoded and interpreted information from these objects that intertwined personal and collective experiences, associations, and imaginings through writing exercises that assumed shifting

points of enunciation, thus dissolving notions of the object and engaging in experimental object-subject conversations.

One of these object-subjects activated during the lab were halophiles, which participant Marianela Díaz Cardozo describes as "species that live happily in salty environments. The leaves of the sea grape (*Coccoloba uvifera*), for example, transform salt into sweet fruit. The sea (water) has the ability (perhaps also the mandate?) of transforming all matter that immerses in it" (Díaz Cardozo 2022). Thus, writing from the perspective of stones, sticks, and leaves, they were recognized as actants and, in this way,



Tatiana Saavedra: "Cuerpo de Agua," 2022. Video still.

as bodies of water (Neimanis 2017), as membranes and liminal ecotones in tension, where two complex systems meet, embrace, collide, and mutually transform each other (105). This is something that happens equally in estuaries, mudflats, and wetlands. This is an example of those object-subjects with agency who are part of the processes-transformations in the ecosystem and with whom conversations have been established.

### Condensation of Flying Rivers, Navigations From the Gaseous to the Liquid, As Conclusions

Dispelling abstract, idealized and homogeneous visions of the waters, we evoke the relationship and thus the conscious contact with it also from the polluted, stagnant and absent waters of our immediate surroundings. Thus, during the laboratory, a common space was created to share the personal immersions that were remembered and

revealed through this sensitive and attentive lens. Through a multidisciplinary framework, a partial selection of media-digital tools and possibilities were used in each session.

Collective experiments and evocations were made around sound, static visuals, moving visuals, ritual and writing, and our relationship to water in everyday life. This focus on media tools allows us to frame digital platforms not only as distant meeting devices, but also as tools for experimentation, learning, and working through which we weave ourselves with and through the flying rivers.

From a feeling-thinking process with the flying rivers, we tuned in to the coexistence of multiple waters in everyday life and their non-linear interrelations, from the seemingly ephemeral to the material. Converging in space-meetings to undiscipline and contaminate ourselves with the multiple expressivities, materialities, intergenerational

memories of and with the waters; so that the daily relations could be expressed and registered, conversed and sensorially manifested as ecopoetics and micropolitics of care.

Through the exercises, the flying rivers present in the memories, experiences, lessons learned, and affections were condensed and found, spilling out in rains, clouds, and puddles, infecting and impregnating the meeting-spaces.

They were invitations to “pansthetic attunement” (Carbonell, Tsing and Tsai 2021)<sup>36</sup> in everyday life, which requires perception with all the senses, with the whole body, and leads to detuning in order to meet the frequencies and rhythms of the ecosystems that often go unnoticed in everyday practices, from where the waters

express themselves. To be touched. Intense and brief at the same time. From the “complex we” (de la Cadena 2019),<sup>37</sup> as an invitation to live together, decentering the human to build hydrocommons.

As a space for experimentation and creation, it was possible to perceive how the water absorbs and accumulates stories that affect and transform the bodies, impregnated with experience and memory. The corporeality in cognitive processes, the understanding of the body as a living archive in a wider network of bodies, the bodily and situated knowledge that happens through direct contact with the water and that questions the supposedly objective and detached colonial lens, were central axes in the exchange proposed by the laboratory. In this way, one's own body is a

<sup>36</sup> Carbonell, Isabelle, Anna Lowenhaupt Tsing, and Yen-Ling Tsai. 2021. “Attunements.” *Fieldsights*, Accessed 14 September 2023. <https://culanth.org/fieldsights/attunements>.

<sup>37</sup> de la Cadena, Marisol. 2019. “An Invitation to Live Together: Making the ‘Complex We.’” *Environmental Humanities*. 1 November 2019; 11 (2): 477–484. <https://doi.org/10.1215/22011919-7754589>.



means of learning about bodies of water and vice versa.

As suggested by Marianela Díaz Cardozo, a participant and member of LA ESCUELA\_\_, “during the laboratory it was not a question of thinking about the waters, but of thinking *with* them and even *like* them.”

And this, in fact, was one of the collective conclusions of the process. A dynamic that proposed a flow from one body to another, opening up the possibility of assuming ourselves and recognizing the water present in its different forms and materialities, in an intimate exchange where there is a shared familiarity.

As heterogeneous and moving waters, the recognition of the confluence of affective and multi-aquatic networks ultimately led us to try to contribute with tuning and future-oriented responses, as proposed by the pluriverse, with respect to the multiple water and climate crises that cross us. As Sara Ahmed (2004) reminds us:

“Emotions also open up futures because of the way they imply different orientations towards others.” In line with this idea, from the reflections, imaginaries, daily and ecopoetic practices, and from the affections and emotions that they arouse, we want to contribute to amplify the invitation to aquify ourselves, to continue weaving hydrocommon cultures from affective daily practices, art and education.

Despite the physical distance and the short time we had for the ambitious variety of exercises and approaches that we proposed, the co-creation of the digital space-meetings also leaves us with the desire to meet and exchange in person, to generate larger space-meetings, so that the exchanges and conversations are not subject to such limited times and thus perhaps achieve continuities of the common that was generated.

Several of the participants thanked us in the closing session and later for the collective

process, for bringing back memories of bodies of water, family rituals, and relationships with the territories that ran through them, which, as Verónica Rincón shared with us about the Bogotá River: “I want to go back to that place with different questions and intentions, to listen to what they have triggered in me” (Rincón, December 2022). In this way, the floating rivers, through

digitality, allowed us to connect territories and water practices that might seem disconnected, recognizing ourselves in our situated aquosities that nourish hydrocommons. We thank all the participants for sharing and weaving us through water practices and relationships, spreading translocalities and encouraging other practices and views that lead to a constant rearticulation.

**Elizabeth Gallón Droste** (Bogota, Colombia, 1991) Artistic researcher based in Berlin. She develops fieldwork-based research by combining different media. Her work focuses on the stories told and sung by the territo-rivers and the ecosystems they weave, composed of multiple beings, materialities, traces, and layers. Based on relational temporalities, dream and sensory realms, memories and affection, as well as practices and repertoires that enact multiple worlds, Elizabeth builds listening processes that contextualize and respond to socio-environmental conflicts from everyday life and networked actions and potentials, to nurture imaginaries of care, reparation and alternative becomings. She is currently a PhD candidate in Anthropology at the Freie Universität Berlin, with the project "Vocear Ríos" [Voicing Rivers]. Elizabeth has participated in artistic research spaces such as Meandering at TBA21 Academy in Cordoba (2023), documenta15 in Kassel (2022), and ars electronica in Linz (2022). Among her recent publications is the book *Útica, bajo el arrullo de las aguas* (2023).

Currently, with ~pes, they activate listening sessions, participatory actions through hydrophonic tuning and mimetic acts of reciprocity with bodies of water.

**Daniela Medina-Poch** (Bogotá, Colombia, 1992) Artist and researcher. Through an intersectional gaze, her work seeks to contribute to the production of ecocentric narratives to balance some of the asymmetrical power relations in the understanding and administration of environments that have been historically extracted. She has a degree from the Escola Massana UAB in Barcelona and a master's degree from the Art in Context program at the Universität der Künste Berlin. She has exhibited her work in venues such as Center for Contemporary Art Berlin, the 22nd Cerveira Biennial, fridays for future-documenta fifteen, The I Listening Biennial, SAVVY Contemporary and FLORA ars+natura, among others. She has published essays in platforms such as Contemporary& Latin America, The Listening Biennial reader, entre-ríos and A\*Desk. Her works are part of the permanent collections of the Museo de Arte Moderno de Bogotá, and of the digital platforms of the Museo de Memoria de Colombia in Bogotá and Collecteurs: The Museum of Private Collections. Her essay The Land of Thunder and Lightning was recently favorably reviewed by The Wire magazine, issue 471, May 2023. She has received the DAAD STIBET Fellowship, the Rhizome NY, and the Goldrasuch Fellowship.

Translated from Spanish by Diego del Valle Ríos.

ARTISTIC  
PRACTICES  
FOR LIVING  
WATERS

## “We Have Enough Walls, Now We Have to Build Bridges” Dialogue with Carolina Caycedo and Lisa Blackmore

**Lisa Blackmore:** *It's been almost a decade since you wrote your MFA thesis BE DAMMED at the University of Southern California, which has become the central pulse of your practice. Reading your thesis, it seems to me that it achieves something that many artist-researchers and people working in Environmental Humanities and Cultural Studies are striving for: rigorous research and writing, supported by a critical bibliography, fieldwork, and archival research, as well as an aesthetic approach to writing which includes other voices and poetic and non-human registers that disrupt the conventional academic format. What was your experience of the interrelationship between*

*artistic practices and academic methodologies and forms?*

**Carolina Caycedo:** At that time [during my master's program], I didn't feel part of a community interested in river issues, nor were my classmates interested in environmental issues or have much knowledge of anything outside the United States or their artistic practice. So I looked for mentors outside of the university's Art Department. That's where I met Macarena Gómez-Barris, who was in Ethnic Studies and became my thesis advisor. I took classes in Visual Anthropology, which shaped my approach to audiovisual media. I also participated in the Student Environmental Council, which was interesting because

I saw how young people were concerned about the lack of a viable future due to the fact that we are destroying the planet. The MFA gave me tools to make aesthetic decisions in a more conscious and rigorous way. Those three years (including the time I took off to do the DAAD residency in Berlin) were really the birth of BE DAMMED. Being in that academic environment, doing research, writing the thesis, and getting advice from different disciplines—like Visual Anthropology and Feminism—



Carolina Caycedo: *Aguas Para A Vida* (2016). Geochoreography. Public performance at the São Paulo Biennale 2016. Courtesy: Carolina Caycedo.



“Aguas para la Vida” banner in La Jagua, Huila. Installed during the *Geochoreographies* process in 2014. Courtesy: Jaguos por el Territorio.

brought more rigor to my practice. It also made me more aware of my fieldwork and archival research methodologies, both working with and against the archive and learning to identify colonial structures within institutions.

*LB: In the same decade that you began your work with rivers, there has been a great deal of academic and curatorial interest in water, not only in the Latin American context, but also in global events such as Bodies of Water<sup>1</sup> (the Shanghai Biennale*

<sup>1</sup> Bodies of Water: <https://biennialfoundation.org/2020/05/bodies-of-water-the-13th-shanghai-biennale/>

*in 2021), Rīvus<sup>2</sup> (the Sydney Biennale curated by José Roca in 2022), and research platforms such as TBA21<sup>3</sup> and Ocean Space.<sup>4</sup> In this context, where do you see successes, challenges, and perhaps problems in the rapid growth of this interest? When you take part in exhibitions, do you see a real commitment with the realities and socio-environmental conflicts of grassroots communities?*

**CC:** My work gets a lot of attention because it touches on “hot” topics, and this means I’ve had to learn how to navigate all the invitations I receive and figure out which of those institutions or people I’m about to establish a relationship with are deeply committed to the issue, if they really walk the talk. I still don’t think there’s a very transversal approach to the issue. Since all this interest in water started, I’ve often been



*Atrarraya (2014 to present). Performance view at ArtBo October 2016. Courtesy: Carolina Caycedo.*

labeled as “the artist who talks about water.” And I always say: “My work is not about water.” It’s about the relationship we humans have with water, the relationship between humanity, community and water; it’s not about water *per se*. I’m not interested in perceiving nature as a separate entity with no relationship to a community, to humanity.

**LB:** *Of course, because water refracts many of the structural problems of how the modern world is formed and its amnesia*

<sup>2</sup> Rīvus: <https://www.biennaleofsydney.art/biennale/23rd-biennale-of-sydney-2022/>

<sup>3</sup> TBA21: <https://tba21.org/>

<sup>4</sup> Ocean Space: <https://www.ocean-space.org/>



Carolina Caycedo: *Más Allá Del Control* (2019). Public performance. *Arte en Colombia S. XXI*, Museo de Arte Moderno de Medellín, 2019.

*of so much other water-related knowledge and watery life, which is ultimately a form of cognitive violence.*

**CC:** Yes. One of the affordances [of the current interest in water] is that it creates platforms to talk more about these issues. Also, more Indigenous, peasant, ancestral and Afro-descendant voices, figures and knowledge are joining the discussion. However, one of the

challenges is the translation of unwritten knowledge that does not operate in more Western structures. So we fall into this cognitive violence. What is even worse, though, is that this kind of knowledge, which holds so much intellectual, spiritual and embodied power, gets lost in these translations. This knowledge, that is so deeply connected to the body and to ritual, loses its power to change the world, to hold up the sky,<sup>5</sup>

<sup>5</sup> Editor's note: See the book by Indigenous Yanomami thinker, Davi Kopenawa, and anthropologist Bruce Albert, *The Falling Sky* (Cambridge, MA.: Harvard University Press, 2013).



or to avoid environmental catastrophes. The foregrounding of Western ways of seeing and understanding—which are very visual—to the detriment of more performative or ritual actions is a challenge. There is still a denial, a segregation of more ritual spheres of knowledge, because many academic and cultural institutions don't know how to deal with works or projects from these ancestral and traditional worlds, either out of ignorance or fear of political incorrectness. This is also a missed opportunity.

Another mistake is that it is still down to us as artists to distribute or redistribute the cultural and monetary capital that is accumulated with these projects. As an artist, I'm often asked if I redistribute or give back to the community the part of its capital that I use. This question often comes from the institution itself, which also gains cultural capital. So I always come back to them by asking: How do *you* give back? What are *you* investing? Because at

least I go back and meet with the communities. That's what I mean by walking (or not) the talk.

**LB:** *Can you identify practices or gestures that work at the level of this eco-ethical commitment?*



Carolina Caycedo: *Serpent River Book* (2017). Artist book, 72 page accordion fold, offset, printed canvas hardcover, elastic band. Numbered edition of 250. Installation view at *The Moment of the Yagrumo*, Museum of Contemporary Art Puerto Rico, 2021. Photo: Raquel Pérez Puig. Courtesy: MAC Puerto Rico.



Carolina Caycedo: installation view, Sydney Biennale 2022. Photo: Document Photography.



Carolina Caycedo: *Serpent River Book* (2017). Artist Book, 72 page accordion fold, offset, printed canvas hardcover, elastic band. Numbered edition of 250. Colombian community sharing, February 2018.

**CC:** There aren't many that come to mind... But *Ensayos* and the Chilean pavilion, *Turba Tol*,<sup>6</sup> at the Venice Biennale, are important references because they led to the signing of the Venice Agreement<sup>7</sup>—an agreement to protect peatlands at the international level. In

Tierra del Fuego, I saw firsthand the care taken by the team and the artists to ensure that this scientific and Indigenous knowledge would be present in Venice, allowing people defending peatlands from all over the world to come together. *Rīvus*, the Sydney Biennale, and the work of José Roca were also important, because there were local artists and cultural workers from different backgrounds involved, both in the biennale and in the educational work of the public program. There is also the Toronto Biennial<sup>8</sup> and its two exhibitions, *The Shoreline Dilemma* (2019) and *What Water Knows, The Land Remembers* (2022),<sup>9</sup> in which Indigenous artists participated. The biennial

<sup>6</sup> Editor's note: The pavilion (<https://turbatol.org/>) is the result of the transdisciplinary research practice of *Ensayos*, which rethinks the role of art as a contribution to the germination and maintenance of communities oriented to the care of biodiversity. See Blackmore, Lisa. 2023. "La investigación artística y la participación pública como estrategias para la resiliencia territorial." *Tábula Rasa* 46: 89-110.

<sup>7</sup> Venice Agreement: <https://turbatol.org/venice-agreement.html>

<sup>8</sup> Toronto Biennial: <https://torontobiennial.org/programs/water-kinship-belief-reading/>

<sup>9</sup> Editor's note: *The Shoreline Dilemma* (2019) ([https://torontobiennial.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/09/TBA\\_Guidebook.pdf](https://torontobiennial.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/09/TBA_Guidebook.pdf)) was curated by Candice Hopkins and Tairone Bastien; *What Water Knows, The*

had the same team and some of the same artists working on the two successive editions. I think this was a wise decision because it respected the real timeframes of the communities and artistic processes, which can be expansive. It enabled the public to see the progress, unfolding, and evolution of a process. It's an institutional flaw to work on very isolated projects without any follow-up. Para la Naturaleza,<sup>10</sup> in Puerto Rico, invites artists in residence to stay for a year, and you become part of their *alumni*, which allows you to come back. This idea of being an alumnus of a place—an institution—in a long-term relationship is very hard to find in museums.

**LB:** *Thinking about an aesthetic and ethical genealogy of the hydrocommons, in Latin America, there is a whole generation of women artists who have worked*

*with water, often using their bodies to resist the extractive and patriarchal forms that objectify non-human life. These practices are strongly protest-oriented, even if not all of them are born out of activism. I think of artists like Cecilia Vicuña in Chile, Yeni and Nan in Venezuela, María Elvira Marmolejo in Colombia, and many others. What artists have inspired you? Contemporary references are also valid.*

**CC:** I really like the work that María Buenaventura<sup>11</sup> is doing in Colombia because of her personal way of working, her involvement with communities, how she accompanies processes of resistance, care, seed preservation, and decolonization of flavors and cuisine. María is someone I admire and respect very much. She has also worked around the Bogotá River and its emblematic Capitán fish

*Land Remembers (2022) ([https://torontobiennial.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/03/Mar-16-2022\\_Opening-Week-Release.pdf](https://torontobiennial.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/03/Mar-16-2022_Opening-Week-Release.pdf)) was curated by Tairone Bastien and Katie Lawson. The former was dedicated to the land and the latter to the water.*

<sup>10</sup> Para la Naturaleza: <https://www.paralanaturaleza.org/>

<sup>11</sup> María Buenaventura: <https://mariabuenaventura.com/>

(*Eremophilus mutisii*, an endemic species that was once essential in the diet of the Muysca people, which has now been declared endangered),<sup>12</sup> so we share the issue of rivers. There is also the Colombian artist Bárbara Santos,<sup>13</sup> who has been committed for a long time to the knowledge of the Pira Paraná River. Her work is a very clear example of how fully territorially engaged knowledge and the embodied experience of it can be translated respectfully and in collaboration with the community into Western formats such as books.

Although Lygia Clark does not address particularly environmental themes, her work has always been very influential to me in her use of the body, going from the personal to the public. In her later years, she was a pioneer in Latin America in

using art as a space for healing. I constantly revisit her work and it informs my thinking as well as my approach to form. Also the political power of ritual that is really clear in Cecilia Vicuña's work. The way political force emerges through spiritual practice was ignored for so many years, but now we are seeing more spaces in art opening up for this, although there is still a lot of hesitation about it. Cecilia's practice inspires me and gives me the confidence to enter into these ritual spaces in my work. I am encouraged by the fact that she uses her voice to bring people together and create community through song and poetry. It is an inspiration that Cecilia, as a mestizo woman, transcends—obviously in a very beautiful and intelligent way—both colonial and Indigenous knowledge. She has every right to do so from her position as a mestizo woman who

<sup>12</sup> Ciromar Lemus-Portillo, Mónica Echavarría Pedraza, Carolina Avella, Wendy López, Patricia Useche; Iván Mojica, Diana Villamil, Oscar Chaparro, Hernando Baquero Gamboa, Kelly León, *Programa nacional para la conservación de la especie endémica de Colombia pez capitán de la sabana (Eremophilus mutisii)*, Bogotá: Universidad Manuela Beltrán, 2017.

<sup>13</sup> Bárbara Santos: <https://quiasma.co/>

is deeply rooted in the ancestral practices and Indigenous knowledge of Chile, as well as of the south of Latin America.



Action with participation of the Oporapa community during the *Geochoreographies* process in 2014. Courtesy: Jaguos por el Territorio.



Displaced Mohan, 2014. Performance view of the *Geochoreography El Pital*. Courtesy: Jaguos por el Territorio.

Of course, she uses the language of contemporary art and its codes, but she always adds a very personal touch. You always know where Cecilia stands in relation to her *mestizaje*,<sup>14</sup> support, solidarity, or righteous anger in relation to specific problems, whether it be violence occurring in Chile or in other parts of the world. She had a very early awareness of eco-social problems, also threaded through the genealogy of environmental and feminist art in Latin America. The political force of ritual and *mestizaje* in her work allows her to speak from different worlds and to accompany different worlds.

Even though she has lived in diaspora for most of her life, just like I have, she has such a strong connection to her territory. She is an example that, no matter where you are, you can still be very much connected to a place, to a particular river, a mountain,

<sup>14</sup> Translator's note: *Mestizaje* here is referred as an anti-colonial political position that understands mixed identities in former Spanish colonies as a possibility of reencountering Indigenous kinship moving away from whiteness related to the nationalisms that underpin nation-states.

a swamp. I absorb a lot from Cecilia's strength, which isn't so much materially visible as an invisible energy found in those little pieces of trash she collects and that make you wonder: where did that come from? How did it pass through her hands? Even though she is so petite and so fragile, and has the softest voice, everything she says is incredibly powerful. You can see how she manages to create works on different scales, from her precarious pieces to the *Quipu Menstrual*<sup>15</sup> or *Brain Forest Quipu*<sup>16</sup> (2022-23), which she exhibited at Tate Modern.

**LB:** *It's interesting to think about being in relation to lots of places. In your thesis, BE DAMMED, you explain how the project came about when you read a news story about a river where your family had a history and on whose banks you had got muddy. We know that stripping places of their*

*affective attachments is a colonial and enduring way of turning them into terra nullius—land available for the extraction of value. Therefore, the affective fabric between places and their inhabitants is a key part of resistance against dominant powers and the possibility of imagining other ways of being together through abundance, and not only just through the critique of extractive systems. In your work, you manage to mobilize these affects on a hemispheric scale. And because your ties are not just with one place, you avoid the notion—which can be very conservative—of the local as the only place from which kinship and belonging, justice and healing can be generated in response to socio-environmental injustices. How do your relationships with rivers play out? How do you relate affectively to the places where you work, even if you are not from those places?*

<sup>15</sup> Quipu menstrual: <http://www.quipumenstrual.cl/>

<sup>16</sup> Brain Forest Quipu: <https://www.tate.org.uk/whats-on/tate-modern/cecilia-vicu%C3%B1a>

**CC:** That's one of the easiest criticisms I get. "Why are you talking about that when you're not even from there?" Or, "Why are you always talking about Colombia when you're not experiencing firsthand what we're going through here?" Or, here in California, "Why are you talking about Californian issues if you're not from here or you're not an Indigenous woman?" A book called *Create Dangerously: The Immigrant Artist at Work* by Edwidge Danticat helped me a lot to reconcile these issues. It is a short text written from her personal experience as a Haitian woman living in New York at a time of deep crisis: the earthquake happens, her family is there, she comes and goes. She receives criticism from both the Haitian community in New York and the Haitian community on the island, so she talks to a mentor who tells her: "You have one foot in New York and one foot in Haiti, so you have the right to talk about both places and to criticize and praise both places." She says more than that,



Carolina Caycedo: *Agua Pesada / Alma' Althaqil* (2023). Sculptural installation, dimensions variable. Installation views at Sharjah Biennale, 2023.



Carolina Caycedo: *Agua Pesada / Alma' Althaqil* (2023). Sculptural installation, dimensions variable. Installation views at Sharjah Biennale, 2023.



Carolina Caycedo: *Patron Mono* (2018). 3 channel HD video, color, sound, 4 min 32 seconds. Installation view: Midnight Moment, Times Square Arts, NYC, 2022. Photo: Michael Hull.

of course, but for me that book was key to me being able to say: "Wherever I tread with real and honest commitment, I have the right to talk about that place; I have that right because I have experienced something personal in that place." After all, I am a transnational subject and always have been. I was born in London, my parents are Colombian, my friends are from Egypt, Syria, Portugal. I came to Colombia, I studied in Bogota, I had a daughter in Puerto Rico, then I lived in New York, now I am in Los Angeles, and I have spent time in Brazil, Guatemala, Mexico... So, I understood that a lot of my work as an artist is building bridges between these places. I mean, we have enough walls, now we have to build bridges. Bridges have always been there because there have always been connections between people globally and throughout the Americas so we have to remember these bridges always existed and rebuild them.

I think it's also part of *mestizaje*. It may sound very romantic,

but I don't feel like a stranger in places that seem remote. I've experienced this in the Arab world, for example, or when I approach a purely Indigenous or Afro world and feel that I recognize many of the attitudes and idiosyncrasies that exist in those territories and communities. Of course, that's also because there are similar problems in those places, for women, for artists, for people who are on the front lines; I can recognize those stories and put them in dialogue.

Right now, it's important to think about global connection, not in terms of globalization but in terms of solidarity. This has been very clear in the work of Cecilia [Vicuña]: the practice and the concept of solidarity. This motivates me a lot too: how can we, from contemporary art, accompany processes of struggle and resistance, of environmental justice? How can we create images to accompany those processes and connect communities that have things





*Arpilleras by Movimento dos Atingidos por Barragem (MAB) exhibited in Water Messages, MARKK Hamburg. Photo: Carolina Caycedo.*

in common or similar struggles? This is important to me and this is the work I am doing now; it's my dream. When you think about The International, about countries, communities, and labor unions in solidarity, it feels like something that's been lost in this world, which has led us to

this feeling of disconnection, of being at a loss in the battle. But when you realize that there are more people in tune with you, with common struggles, that gives you strength.

I have to say that I rely a lot on affective networks and bridges

that already exist, and my job is to create reminders that they exist. The fact that I've been able to visit and work closely with so many communities is because another community or another person referred me to them and I came with their recommendation. Part of my work is to nurture that network, to keep it healthy and strong. Also, in my methodology, I have always called my fieldwork "spiritual fieldwork" precisely because it is fieldwork that, even if it is productivist (because, of course, I am collecting testimonies and images), it also allows me to collect experiences that inform me not only as an artist but also as a person, as a woman, as Carolina. From a pedagogical point of view, these experiences have shaped me ethically, because fieldwork teaches me what my failures and mistakes are, and what I have to improve, because the people, places, and rivers I encounter have grounded me again. Instead of distancing myself from the object of study, placing an

objective lens on it, it's quite the opposite, I'm putting a subjective lens on it. This practice is about creating a relationship with a meander in a river, with a stone, with a tree; it is about empathizing with the community when their forest is cut down to fill a dam. So fieldwork, for me, is a way of creating and maintaining relationships.

**LB:** *How does this happen in practice?*

**CC:** It means staying in contact with those networks, redistributing contemporary art resources to communities, opening up the more institutional spaces of contemporary art so that representatives of these communities can access them and share their knowledge there, and also bringing artworks from these communities into contemporary art spaces so they can dialogue with other artworks. For example, I started a relationship with the Movimento dos Atingidos por Barragens [Movement



Carolina Caycedo: *Pagamento Vigil* (2021). Public vigil. *Estamos Bien*, La Trienal, El Museo del Barrio (2021). Photo: Michael Palma.

of People Affected by Dams] (MAB) in Brazil in 2016, through the São Paulo Biennial, but I was referred to MAB in Brazil by Ríos Vivos, the movement of people affected by dams in Colombia. So, I arrived with a letter of recommendation from Ríos Vivos and started working with MAB, which is a Brazil-wide organization that has different regional hubs. From the central hub, I was able to visit Minas Gerais, where the tailings dam

in Mariana had collapsed, and the state of Paraná, where the struggle against the Belo Monte dam on the Xingu River was taking place.

That connection is still alive and has led to many collaborations. The most recent was an invitation from the Markk Museum in Hamburg, for me to be a consultant for the exhibition *Water Messages* (2023).<sup>17</sup> I proposed the *arpilleras*,

<sup>17</sup> *Water Messages*: <https://markk-hamburg.de/veranstaltungen/water-messages/>.

which are embroidered and appliquéd textile pieces made by the women in the MAB resistance to illustrate the socio-environmental problems they face and their forms of struggle. We managed to arrange this loan and now there are several *arpilleras* in the exhibition. We were also able to contact the Guardians of the Atrato [in Colombia] and they lent us the installation they'd created a few years back for the Museum of Memory. So, the idea is to infiltrate the spaces that I have access to as a contemporary artist, so that these other languages and visualities can exist there and dialogue in contemporary art contexts, energizing them and updating them on what is happening.

**LB:** *What does art offer to these dynamics of solidarity that other platforms, such as NGOs, do not?*

**CC:** Firstly, access to other audiences who are more interested in aesthetic issues and who suddenly encounter

these questions of political self-organization. Secondly, disseminating a message in different circles, bridging the gap between academic art contexts and activist contexts. The fact that community-based arts expressions can enter a contemporary art museum builds bridges between the rural and the urban, between scholars and activists, and between struggles and resistance movements that take shape in different ways.

On the other hand, every community and culture in the world has an artistic expression, so an artist's work in a community strengthens that by increasing their awareness of the aesthetic and communicative power of their own expressions. After working with communities in Colombia, I'm really excited to see how they've strengthened their visual production to make it much more conscious and aligned with environmental struggles. Corporal, visual and performative creative work have very clear political

affordances. When members of a community participate in structured artistic processes—a workshop, performance, or giving a testimony—they have the opportunity to express themselves, to describe themselves, to talk about their connection to territory, to vent their problems, to denounce. This enables them to see themselves, to analyze themselves, and to invite others to see and understand them. After experiences like this, it is much more likely that those people will get involved in organizational work. I feel that art as a platform helps individuals and communities to practice and reflect on their cultural, economic, and environmental autonomy. This is the contribution of socially-engaged art to political self-organization and the construction of dignity in societies.

Art also allows for intergenerational and gender dialogues in communities, which are issues that can be very complicated in some

frontline contexts where women and transgender people are more vulnerable. It creates more equitable platforms and workspaces where everyone can participate and where these frictions within the community can be discussed, or at least different people can begin to relate to each other without stigmas between them. Although it can also go the other way and create more stigmas.

***LB:** That is a great description of pedagogy. It's not so much about the idea of teaching but of the transformations that can arise from spaces where knowledge is shared and exchanged, spaces that are committed to dignity, as you say, and to socio-environmental justice. I'd like to ask you how pedagogy features in your current project, *We Place Life at the Center—Situamos la vida en el centro*, which you'll present in 2024. In this project, you are operating on the most ambitious scale of your work to date, linking*

*groups focused on just energy transitions from Patagonia to the Pacific Northwest coast of the United States, playing the role of mediator, weaving together communities of people protecting restoring, and caring for rivers on a hemispheric scale. By addressing the dismantling of dams, the restoration of ecosystems and biocultural rights, this work presents us with a shift in your practice towards a more propositional and post-extractive context, emphasizing the creative energies generated by resistance and activism. In terms of intersecting art and pedagogy, what are your strategies and expectations in terms of how that intersection might strengthen the proposals that are being developed?*

**CC:** *We Place Life at the Center* is a project that has been underway since 2020. It consists of multiple platforms: an exhibition at the Vincent Price Art Museum in Los Angeles, a book, a course, and a series of virtual and in-person encounters with communities on

the frontlines of environmental justice across different parts of the Americas, from Northern California to Tierra del Fuego in Chile, to Mexico City, Puerto Rico, and Colombia. We seek to build a toolbox that brings together different practices of ecosocial transition and how this transformation is being embodied and integrated from hemispheric, ecofeminist, and ancestral perspectives. *We Place Life at the Center* speaks of the practice of caring for life, which is the feminist practice par excellence. This is what we have in common with the people and communities participating in this dialogue: we place life at the center.

We are very mindful of the protocols, permissions and ethics of participation and collaboration with communities; these are important elements of the pedagogical aspect of my work. Collaborative pedagogy also runs through the exhibition, the book, the course, and the knowledge encounters we will facilitate.

We are proposing the course as a *Practicum* for students from different disciplines at East Los Angeles College, where participants will create a log of observations, experimenting with different forms of visual, textual and audio documentation, which can then be incorporated into the exhibition and/or the book, seeking to break the hierarchies of who generates information, who holds knowledge, who is the author or artist. The idea is that everyone can participate in these platforms.

Both in the exhibition and the book, we are also including works and publications created by the communities, so that they occupy a space that is often

exclusive to contemporary art. I mean, I don't want to make an exhibition of my work on these processes, but rather that the artistic and conceptual expressions of these transitional processes can be in dialogue with my work. For instance, we will exhibit a series of *arpilleras* embroidered by the Movimiento Social en Defensa del Río Sogamoso y Chucurí,<sup>18</sup> from Santander, Colombia, which function as an inventory of the biodiversity of their territory. We will also create a collaborative mural with Colombian rural collective Los Jaguos por el Territorio<sup>19</sup> and Los Angeles-based collective People Not Pozos,<sup>20</sup> also led by young people. Both initiatives

<sup>18</sup> Movimiento Social en Defensa del Río Sogamoso y Chucurí:  
<http://veredasogamoso.blogspot.com/>

<sup>19</sup> Editor's note: The Jaguos por el Territorio Association is a non-profit civil organization whose mission is to contribute to the care, recovery and defense of the community of La Jagua and all the territories and ecosystems that make up its environment, in addition to the integral environmental, social and cultural training of its inhabitants. Through the management of innovative processes, combining the integral formation of people, the generation of productive agro-ecological projects and the recovery of local ecosystems as a strategy to remain in the territory in the face of pressures to move. See: <https://descolonizandolajagua.wordpress.com/>

<sup>20</sup> People Not Pozos [People Not Oil Wells] is a grassroots campaign

are fighting to stop or dismantle energy infrastructure in their rural as well as urban territories. The pedagogy also reaches out to the public. We want people to be able to read these community works as rigorously as any other work of contemporary art. So, this also means educating the public and the institution itself to open up to these visualities that do not necessarily arise within the contemporary art sphere, but are just as valid and important. There are some vernacular visual strategies that we can learn from in terms of communication, abstraction, materiality, and collaborative practices and ethics.

Along with the catalog, there are many other publications made by the communities themselves—from manuals on how to build a biodigester to highly sophisticated campaigns for social networks—where symbolism and abstraction are handled in complex ways. The

case of the “climate emergency” in Medellín, for example, seems important to me. It comes from the Movimiento de Laderas de Medellín, an umbrella movement of three neighborhoods in Comuna 8. It is a simple, striking design that sticks in the mind: an hourglass in which the sand represents the planet Earth, which is being crushed and depleted. We are running out of time. With this campaign, Medellín was able to declare a climate emergency as a framework for building public policies that allow organizations to do environmental disaster management by and for their communities in response to climate change, rising temperatures, more rainfall, and increasing landslides. So the question is: how do we communicate to a contemporary art audience that there is a high level of sophistication in the visualities and aesthetic works of these communities of resistance? For me, this is an

that prioritizes people over corporations. It seeks to promote a healthy environment for life.



important aspect of the book and the exhibition.

Finally, the meeting seeks to bring together representatives of all these communities and host them here in Los Angeles to talk, to create a non-productivist space for reflection. Part of the pedagogical strategies is to think about how we can escape this productivist theoretical framework that everything must have an outcome. This meeting is important for me because I feel that with this project and the resources I am channeling, I can make a contribution and accompany these processes. The aim is to make it possible for the representatives of these communities to have time away from their territories, to take a break, to see what is happening from a different perspective, to dialogue with other people experiencing environmental conflicts, and to contrast strategies, rituals, knowledge, the positive and negative aspects of the process in order to strengthen this network of

solidarity. This creates a brave space, a space of courage, where we also have the confidence and comfort to share the challenges we have in a community, and to be able to return home with renewed energies. This is nurturing the network.

Ultimately, this is the aim of the project. I believe that the pedagogies that interest me most today, and to which I submit myself, are those that help me come out loving myself more and understanding that my commitment is important and valid, those that affirm me in my process. In other words, what are the pedagogies that reaffirm us, that strengthen us, that fill us with confidence and love for this and other struggles?

***LB:** That's definitely the way to go. The question around pedagogy is not to think up ways of transmitting information, but to think of how changes take place, how energies can be galvanized allowing people to identify with each other in*

*solidarity. It is not about the transmission of knowledge, which is a model that has long been harmful. And that's why I highlight something you said earlier about the gaps that exist between academia and activism, which art is helping to bridge, because in academic environments, there is pressure to be able to quantify the transfer of knowledge between professors and students.*

**CC:** Yes, and when I consulted with the communities I've visited in my fieldwork and raised the idea of organizing a meeting, they all agreed that they didn't want to have another meeting where everyone gets 15 minutes to talk about what their collective or cooperative or association is, to say "everything is perfect, we are fighting against this and we have achieved this." This is the last thing we want to repeat, because that's what the majority of platforms do. Almost all the activists voiced the same concern: yes, they want to participate, but they don't want

it to mean more work for them or for their process, because they are already burdened with so much. So the question is: How can we open up a space that gives them encouragement rather than more work?

This is why we are republishing materials that already exist in the book, bringing works that are already made to the exhibition, and then approaching the meeting, the gathering, as an intimate moment of sharing light and shadow, a space for rest and empowerment in a brave place, to be able to breathe and reflect. All these people and processes deserve this pampering. It is also my way to say thank you and to redirect and redistribute resources in a less transactional and more loving way. If we're going to take care of something, let's take care of the people who really take care of the land and the forests and the rivers. Let's look after the people who are working the soil. Because I'm not on the front line, but I can take care of the people who are.

Editor's note: This conversation took place via Zoom on June 29, 2023.

**Carolina Caycedo** (London, UK, 1978) is a Colombian multidisciplinary artist based in Los Angeles. Caycedo is known for her performances, videos, artist books, sculptures, and installations that explore environmental and social issues. Caycedo was nominated for the Artes Mundi 10 Prize in Wales, and is currently a USA Artists Fellow and an Artist in Residence at the Getty Research Institute.

Translated from Spanish by Diego del Valle Ríos.

# Pedagogical Infiltrations of the Plains: An Artistic Maneuver to Catalyze Learning from These Lands and Overcome Inertia

Elina Rodríguez and María José Trucco  
(CENTRO RURAL DE ARTE)

## Abstract

For some time now, we have been visiting the Salado River, an extensive fluvial-lagoon basin that hydrates the Pampean plains of present-day Argentina. Since 2008, in the CENTRO RURAL DE ARTE (CRA), we have been working in a nomadic way in the conformation of interdisciplinary operational platforms that involve different actors and territories, and during several projects, we have approached these waters. In this article, we briefly describe the actions that led us to the Salado River Artistic Research and rehearse the next stage of this exploration. We are working on the “Comprehensive Master Plan WITH the Salado River Basin,” which responds to the ongoing official plan of modification and topographic depredation, focusing on the touching stories that the inhabitants of this region trace with the river. In understanding that a plan to exterminate the diversity of life that inhabits this region can only be carried out due to a lack of dissemination of information, presence, familiarity, and public affection toward these waters, our task as a collective is centered

on designing the necessary tools to collect and amplify these stories, to make them common. Within the framework of the article; we describe this territory; we review the dominant narrative that constructs the river as a problem; we cite the ongoing official plan; we review previous CRA actions; we transcribe a recent exercise formulated specifically for this text, carried out with ten people from the region; and we raise questions opened up by this exercise to continue a Plan WITH the river, on a different scale and with tools that have a direct impact on the territories. Thus, our goal is to create an artistic maneuver that functions as a pedagogical listening device that helps us recognize what this land teaches us, collectively reuniting us with the waters and the infinite secrets that the plains hide.



Elina Rodríguez: Salado River, middle basin (2023).

## Infinite

The immensity of the synthesis is the great cultural legacy that converges from the encounter between the ancestral populations and the geography of these territories.

Where are things born? Where do they end? What is a lagoon and what is a river? What are the milestones of this pampean environment? What is the scale? Here, the transitions between one thing and the

other are extremely gradual, subtle. The depth is horizontal and infinite, the waters are shallow. Such is the exposure caused by the plain that shelters an infinity of secrets.

The soundscape is an assembly of bird voices and insects that move in the environment guided by water and wind, through bushes that meander or cross, dens of cuis and snakes, sparse grasses, rough, cutting, soft, flexible, deep roots for sandy soil. The soil offers no

resistance to wind. Soil and wind are two places of support.

The water is continental and salty. Rivers are the blood of the earth, as the Querandíes used to say. The few features or traces that have been able to resist the invasion will be abundant to restart new cycles. The water, superficial, puddles everything, moistens everything, in lands of short gradient that allow the slow, slow drainage, drop by drop, towards the nearby napas that emerge a little further. The water reflects the immense and virtual concavity that extends beyond the tangible. Immersive skies, with no reachable radius, allow explaining the terrestrial movement through stars placed at variable distances.

Everything is extremely affecting and immeasurable.

Here the horizon can be experienced as a circle drawn around matter itself in all directions, where both the zenith and the horizon are mutable, not

fixed. Movement appears, relative positions and passing through.

## Naming

What are the narratives associated with the constant transience of water in the region? Urban development and the contemporary production model have completely ignored and neglected what it means to live in a semi-aquatic zone, with large chains of wetlands typical of the lowland rivers. Thus, the infrastructures that make up the territorial planning gradually implemented since colonial times have designed a series of "great public works" that alter the natural courses and whose main objective is to drain. Manipulations designed to respond to an agro-livestock exporting production model, which became more industrialized during the 20th century, until an extractivist mode based on transgenic monocultures was installed, with the application of agro-toxic technological packages, the emptying of the

soil, the overcrowding of animals and the expulsion of inhabitants from rural areas (Pengue 2017).<sup>1</sup> This series of management of the territory has forged narratives about the river that are precisely those that later allow social consensus to carry out drastic changes. It is striking to see how the news about the river categorically installs this idea. The headlines of the main graphic media are very explicit about how the narrative of the region is constructed, especially if we observe the repetition over time, in this case, the last two decades:

“The flooding of the Salado River has left thousands of hectares unproductive.” *El Cronista*, August 26, 2015.

“The region crossed by the Salado River concentrates 30 percent of the country's meat

and grain production.” *La Nación*, August 5, 2021.

“The drought and the low water level of the Salado River made it possible to find fossil remains more than 10 thousand years old in Junín.” *Infobae*, February 17, 2021.

“A Comprehensive Master Plan to widen its course and reduce the negative effects of flooding.” *Página 12*, August 5, 2021.

We must go through experiences that make us re-narrate these waters. From the CENTRO RURAL DE ARTE, we want to contribute to the re-sensitization of these social imaginaries that allow us to build narratives vital for survival. To undo the distance that the colonial culture has installed, to leave the otherness, the utilitarian, and the extractive

<sup>1</sup> Pengue, Walter Alberto. 2017. "Introducción" and "Hacia una comprensión del sistema rural y sus complejidades." In *El vaciamiento de las pampas. La exportación de nutrientes y el fin del granero del mundo*, 7-19. Buenos Aires and Santiago de Chile: Fundación Heinrich Böll Stiftung. Accessed July 3, 2023 <https://cl.boell.org/sites/default/files/libro-el-vaciamiento-de-las-pampas.pdf>



to meet with the elemental force of *hué*,<sup>2</sup> water, and the multiplicity of lives that live here.

The treatment of the basin in terms of otherness is directly related to the colonial history of these countries. In this sense, the contribution of Florentino Ameghino is of great value. In the mid-nineteenth century, he recognized the need to accept the nature of these waters at the time of the foundation of the white cities, and he produced several writings in which he explained the inconveniences of drainage (Ameghino 1884, 7-12)<sup>3</sup>. He resisted a new way of living that consisted of rigidifying the movement and the overflow with which the inhabitants were integrated before the invasion. An amphibious mode that could cross

water, navigate, walk, camp, wash children at birth, and return to the same places to bury the dead (Smith 2023).<sup>4</sup> The colonial view and management of the territories ignores and destroys the living-with, to go to the extreme of a utilitarian view that becomes even more extractive over time, leading to the desertification of relationships and distancing us from contact and its power.

How is a basin named? The lagoons, streams, canals, ravines, bays, watercourses, and marshes without official names, where local, colloquial names proliferate: who passes by, behind, towards, between, all these names without being compiled. What is it like to name the ways of life between these waters, to name the contacts, the memories?

<sup>2</sup> Word belonging to the Kagané Het language, used in the Querandí culture.

<sup>3</sup> Ameghino, Florentino. 1884. *Las secas y las inundaciones en la provincia de Buenos Aires. Obras de retención y no de desagüe*. La Plata: Ministerios de Asuntos Agrarios de la Provincia de Buenos Aires.

<sup>4</sup> Smith, Sergio. 2023. "Resistiendo el olvido. Los querandíes, sobrevivientes del silencio. Quiénes fuimos, quiénes somos y adónde vamos." Paper read at the 19th Congress on the History of the Peoples of the Province of Buenos Aires, Ensenada, June 12-13, 2023. Sergio Smith, interview conducted by the authors on May 16, 2023.



Patricio Gil Flood: "Las Re-vueltas" in *Prácticas de Periferia, Centro Rural de Arte* (2019).

### The Master Plan

In 1995, the provincial government decided to develop a water management plan. After an extensive evaluation period, the multinational consulting firm of Sir William Halcrow & Partners Ltd. was selected to undertake the design. The project was carried out over 26 months, ending in November 1999.

The plan consisted of a series of pre-feasibility studies that resulted in a set of recommendations for the

development of alternative actions and hydraulic works to improve the management of water surpluses and deficits, as well as measures to stimulate agro-industrial production, tourism, and preservation of the environmental heritage (Halcrow 2017).<sup>5</sup> The funding was provided by the International Bank for Reconstruction and Development and was therefore subject not only to relevant national legislation, but also to World Bank policies and procedures.

The work to channel and dredge the river began in 2003. At that time, the Province of Buenos Aires had already enacted Environmental Protection Law 11.723, which established the environmental impact assessment process to be followed for interventions such as those contemplated in the Salado River Master Plan. However, work began

<sup>5</sup> Halcrow and Co. 2017. *Plan Maestro Integral de la Cuenca del Río Salado. Evaluación de impacto Ambiental*. Buenos Aires: Ministerio del Interior de la Nación. <https://www.mininterior.gov.ar/licitaciones/descargar.php?i=38233>.



Martín Medina: Map of the Excavation Plan of Attack. Visit to the middle basin dredge (2021).

without the project having been submitted to the evaluation process and without any public participation and information process. Only sectoral public hearings have been held on specific interventions (construction of bridges), which have not been widely convened to duly exercise the right of participation.

The scope of the intervention involves a total excavation volume of 200 million m<sup>3</sup> over a distance of approximately 500 km. Such an earth movement is equivalent to 10 million

Caterpillar 769D (large) trucks full of earth. In other words, it would be a line of 70 thousand kilometers that would go around the planet one and a half times (Rastelli 2022, 15).<sup>6</sup> To give some examples, it is comparable to what was done in 1914 with the Panama Canal, one of the most outstanding engineering works in the world, with 183 million m<sup>3</sup> of earth moved along 80 km. And it is far superior to the Suez Canal (Egypt, 1859), which was the first excavation, with 50 million m<sup>3</sup> mobilized over 163 km.

Everything is extremely affecting and immeasurable.

During the quarantine, in the year 2020, the government of the Province of Buenos Aires decided to continue with the execution of the Middle Basin, which contemplates the last stage that has not been executed. This stage transforms 8.5 million hectares to incorporate them

<sup>6</sup> Rastelli et. al. 2022. Resumen Plan maestro. La Plata: FCAYGLP, UNLP. [https://www.fcayglp.unlp.edu.ar/uploads/docs/seminario\\_riesgos\\_hidrologicos\\_rastelli.pdf](https://www.fcayglp.unlp.edu.ar/uploads/docs/seminario_riesgos_hidrologicos_rastelli.pdf).



María José Trucco: Amphibious pipe.  
Visit to the middle basin dredge (2021).



María José Trucco: Soil removal. Visit to the middle basin  
dredge (2021).

to the agro-toxic and industrial model. The adaptation of the river's course, which in some sectors implies the significant alteration of the natural shape of the small meanders, with the purpose of giving more speed to the water so that it reaches its mouth in the Bay of Samborombón faster. This could have disastrous socio-environmental consequences (Cabaleiro 2023),<sup>7</sup> since it ignores the ecosystemic functions that meanders, together with wetlands, have in the pulse of a flat river that serves as the source of many mirrors and lagoons that make up its basin.

On the other hand, the variables and estimates made in the Master Plan, which was designed a quarter of a century ago, are clearly outdated in terms of pesticide use, which has increased from three to four liters per hectare to the current

12-15 liters per hectare. The plan recognizes that these increased quantities of pesticides will be transported by the new drainage works to the main channel of the Salado River or will be retained in natural or artificial reservoirs, but it does not foresee or establish any mitigation measures for their effects, and even less for such an increase in their use.

Many years, many governments, many files, inaccessible documents or without explicit authors, public officials, multinational companies, agreements and works have passed during the execution of this plan. It is unimaginable and very difficult to access the amount of information. However, as time passes, we enter into the transformations of these lands and riverbeds, which gradually mutate, step by step, changing their condition: their shape becomes rigid,

<sup>7</sup> Cabaleiro, F. 2023. "Escenario desolador en la provincia de Buenos Aires." Buenos Aires: Naturaleza de Derechos. <https://naturaleza.ar/contenido/1521/escenario-desolador-del-rio-salado-en-la-provincia-de-buenos-aires>

their zigzag becomes orderly. Such a magnitude leaves us as spectators of an altered landscape, in the perplexity of a consummated fact.

## WITH

Despite the rational politics that formulates a proliferation of extractive lines of action and that co-opts all environmental discourse for its degradation, we have decided to assume—not to ignore—the existence of this ongoing plan and to trace a path from the “Comprehensive Master Plan **of** the Salado River Basin” to the “Comprehensive Master Plan **WITH** the Salado River Basin”—a short linguistic change that intends to present a radical change in the character of the actions and, perhaps, hopefully, to open regenerative ways of walking at this given point.

A plan, any plan, contemplates actions, effects, makes explicit the details necessary to carry out a work, and presupposes a previous agreement. A master

plan is an instrument of territorial organization often used in the field of strategic planning, and its strategies are expected to change as the conditions of the context change. Can our WITH plan have the necessary agility to influence the context and, at the same time, reformulate itself? Or how could it evolve in the course of action? And how does it take into account in its strategies the agreements generated by the environmental assemblies, the social organizations, the precarious lives in danger, the sense of evaporation of different species?

Let's make a frequency jump. Let us appeal to the genetic memory, to the cellular memory. Let us take refuge in our own inertia. The power of regeneration that we (every body) have is much greater than we can imagine. A plan to stop interfering implies changing the notion of productivity for the capacity to observe the abundance that begins right where current human action ends.



Daniel Boh: "Aborígenes bonaerenses" [Native people of Buenos Aires] (2019). Collection of the Museo de Ciencias Naturales de Miramar "Punta Hermengo."

## Go to

We've been going to the Salado River for some time now and, with it, we've been to all the rivers. Each walk gives us the right dose of experience to understand its existence, our being part of it, our being hué. We walk, we observe, we call upon it, and we invite others to join us. The trails, here in the Pampas, were for connecting one river to another, for going from a water spring to a hill, from a wintering place to a

summering place, from an ancestral community to the next generation. The trails, here in the Pampas, followed the movement of water. This sensitive gait, guided by geography, continues to travel in the environment, folding and unfolding in a myriad of entrances, a matrix to continue walking, imagining, and acting beyond the modulation wired for hectares of territory. One project leads us to another, and so we plan our inquiry with a dose of intuition and collective observation. We will

briefly review this meandering path traveled for several years in various parts of the basin, ways of arriving, of doing, of approaching these waters from the body. To this end, we present a series of actions that preceded the current WITH plan, carried out in recent years together with a wide variety of people, as a way of weaving actions between different natures. What is the nature of the actions that call us? Where do we come from? We will share some gestures and images of our approaches to waters, moments that occurred during workshops, residencies, fairs, performances, videos, installations, lectures. A small selection of actions carried out in the projects can be viewed at the end of the article and on the website of CENTRO RURAL DE ARTE.<sup>8</sup> Each of them originates new imaginations: an accumulation of actions



Martín Flugelman: "Indio Muerto Vive."  
Indio Muerto Wetland.

that transform humidity into an environment.

A group of artists, environmentalists and neighbors walk through the Indio Muerto Lagoon until they name it "Laguna Indio Muerto Vive" (literally, "Dead Indian Lagoon Lives") in a ritual of recognition with these waters and its inhabitants (*Indio Muerto Vive*, 2017).<sup>9</sup> To reach pastures where someone assures that these lands have never been sown, to get close to the banks of the Saladillo stream and to camp (*Prácticas de Periferia*, 2019).<sup>10</sup> To make an extensive concert

<sup>8</sup> [www.centroruraldearte.org.ar](http://www.centroruraldearte.org.ar)

<sup>9</sup> CRA. 2017. *Indio Muerto Vive*, performance, in *Trans acciones utópicas Ecosistema Tropical*. Cazón, Argentina.

<sup>10</sup> CRA & Pedalúdic. 2019. *Prácticas de Periferia*, collective drift. Matanza Riachuelo and Salado Basin, Argentina. Guayas River Basin, Ecuador.



of frogs burst into an artistic residency, occupying the entire sound environment and bringing the river into the encounter (*Interacciones Urbano-Rural*, 2013).<sup>11</sup> Collecting signatures to declare the Indio Muerto Lagoon a protected wetland (*Trans acciones utópicas*, 2016).<sup>12</sup> Walking many kilometers between marshes, leaning back in each one and being swayed by the horizontal vertigo caused by the plains (*Territorio mutado*, 2019).<sup>13</sup> Harvesting water in different riverbeds of the basin, entering a microscopic frequency and observing living creatures that lodge in its drops (*Territorio de reserva*, 2019).<sup>14</sup>

Immersing the body in a very shallow water mirror, the Lobos Lagoon, which extends over 800 hectares, to swim towards its center and place a sign that says "there is water" (*Las re-vueltas*, 2019).<sup>15</sup> Walking among the convulsions of earth and mud generated by the excavator, 25.5 million cubic meters. Striving to put this on a recognizable scale through a body, a drawing, a sound, a poster, a mass, an exchange of words, silence, and to create a glossary of all the terms churned out by the dredger (*Arrebato topográfico*, 2021).<sup>16</sup> Imagine going from the Salado River to the Biobío River—1,400 km between the mouth of

<sup>11</sup> CRA. 2013. *Urbano-Rural*, residency, in *Interacciones Urbano Rural en red*. Achupallas, Argentina.

<sup>12</sup> CRA. 2016. *Trans acciones utópicas*, workshops, residency, fair. Cazón, Argentina.

<sup>13</sup> Elina Rodríguez & Angeles Piqué. 2019. *Territorio mutado* in *Prácticas de Periferia*, collective drift, Matanza Riachuelo and Salado Basin.

<sup>14</sup> María José Trucco. 2019. *Territorio de reserva* in *Prácticas de Periferia*, collective drift, Matanza Riachuelo and Salado Basin.

<sup>15</sup> Patricio Gil Flood & Sara MacLaren. 2019. *Las re-vueltas* in *Prácticas de Periferia*, collective drift, Matanza Riachuelo and Salado Basin.

<sup>16</sup> CRA. 2021. *Arrebato topográfico*, video glossary, in *Río Salado, artistic research*.

one river and the other; 1,400 km to imagine the meeting of their waters; 1,400 km to imagine the meeting of their inhabitants. The waters of the rivers that flow into the different oceans are also related, integrated somewhere. Let's go to the river, the Salado, the Biobío, all the rivers (Formas del tiempo, 2022).<sup>17</sup> Crossing languages to reach listeners who expand the tuning with the river. The river of Quenguipen, Tubichaminí, Salado River, Salado-Fluss. To create a confluence of salty rivers. All the salty and continental waters of the planet.



María José Trucco: Clay mass. Visit to the middle basin dredge (2021).



Elina Rodríguez: "Territorio Mutado" in *Prácticas de Periferia*, Centro Rural de Arte (2019).



Patricio-Gil Flood: "Territorio de Reserva" in *Prácticas de Periferia*, Centro Rural de Arte (2019).

<sup>17</sup> CRA. 2022. *Formas del tiempo I*, performatic conference, in II Encuentro Arte y Desindustrialización, Concepción, Chile. In *Río Salado*, artistic research.



Patricio-Gil Flood: "Las Re-vueltas" in *Prácticas de Periferia*, Centro Rural de Arte (2019).

We want to continue to imagine these practices, to practice ways of creating them, of being in them. We want to flood everything, humidify everything, rehydrate everything, and continue to collectivize the approach to these waters.

### The Following Exercise

For this article, we made a new exercise: an invitation to listen to

contacts with the river, to listen to what appears at different scales of proximity to this riverbed. To do this, we invited a group of 10 people we already knew to carry out an exercise, which we sent them via a WhatsApp audio message, to be resolved in the same format, and which we now collect as a transcript. In this way, we are looking for ways to expand the conversations with people with specific knowledge,

who share with us the territory of urban planning, aquatic biology, pottery, paleontology, anthropology, archaeology, fishing, and to foster a dialogue that includes reflections of different scales and scopes.

*Audio of the invitation*

Hello, we're sending you this audio from CENTRO RURAL DE ARTE.

We're currently working on an artistic research about the Salado River. In this framework, we're collecting moving stories with the river, to make them converge in a polyphonic writing plot.

This is an audio invitation to an exercise:  
**to imagine, to recognize, to discover, to generate a moment or a meeting place or a misunderstanding between you and the Salado River,**  
and to comment freely on this experience in a voice message of two to three minutes.

This experience that you can discover is independent of how much you know about the river materially, but we're also interested in appealing to subtle, remote connections that you can begin to explore where you are. It can be a small or immense experience, material or spiritual, an unnoticed daily sensation where this river might converge, a doubt about the possibility of this connection, or a very close contact that you had or can create. Everything that this prompt unleashes in your listening is of great value for this plot.

Rivers are circular,  
of varying diameters and unknown extents  
their soils integrate aeolian materials  
coming from other regions  
their evaporations moisten other bodies  
they have no destination, they trace endless cycles.

A river of intimate flows and common waters.

So, could you imagine, recognize, detect, or generate a moment/place of encounter or mishap between you and the Salado River, and freely comment on this experience in a two- or three-minute audio?

The reception deadline is June 23rd [2023].  
In this flow, we await the account of your experience in this same WhatsApp.

*Audio messages of the encounters*

«I think of all the nearby rivers that for some reason we don't know. I think of all those veins that connect our territory. And in the capacity that those rivers can have to create imaginaries and how those imaginaries are sometimes built from stories and not because of having been in them.

I've never immersed myself in the Salado River, I don't know it. It gives me a thrill to imagine the Salado River as a river. I'm in love with salt water. To feel the tension of the salt all over my skin until I swallow it. To enter

the water as a ritual, in an act of cleansing, surrender, and transformation that these waters can do in me.»

**Chivi Amoy.** We met at the 3rd Experimental Riverside Congress.

«I hadn't put it into words, but the Salado River has given me a sense of belonging. My contact is with the mud. Each extraction of clay in its gorges has allowed me to recognize myself and to question the official history of the river as the border of the malones.»

**Silvana Nicolini.** We've met at different moments of the Salado River Artistic Research.

«Salado River, Tubichá Miní River, the river of the Quenguipen.

Quenguipen, great Querandí leader, one of the first to be reduced by Juan de Garay, the genocidal one who founded Buenos Aires, accompanied by Guaraní from Asunción and his young Spaniards, who baptized Quenguipen as Tubichaminí, and therefore the river. A river that touches me deeply, coming as I do from such a prestigious family, so ancient, so ancient in these pampas.

I crossed it, I smelled it, I felt it, I stopped, I looked at it, I touched it. I saw it full, overflowing, and I saw it dry, empty, where those shards, remains of ancestral Querandí pottery, are emerging.

This river was once a frontier, the first frontier between the civilized world of the new European invaders and the indigenous world that was disappearing into the desert. It was not a desert, but the Salado was a border. Here and there, before and after, the modern world and

the primitive world. A frontier that was maintained for three centuries, unbreakable by the querandías of all times, the pampas.

The people of Quenguipen live today, continue today, fight and resist. The river is heritage, history, a permanent message from its source to the sea.»

**Sergio Smith.** We were told that he could give us a lot of information about the Querandí culture and we interviewed him.

«I had only one misadventure with the river, and it lasted a few seconds that felt like centuries.

We were fishing and my husband reeled in a carp, removed the hook, and prepared the line to cast it again. He crouched down on the bank and washed his hands. Just as he's about to stand up, the ravine behind him cuts through, he falls into the water and sinks. He never got to his feet, I don't know how he managed to get out, he tried to hold on to the ravine but he couldn't. Without thinking, I put my hand in the water. Without thinking, I stuck the knife into the ground, holding on with one hand and reaching out with the other until I could grab it. From there, neither of us knows how, he came out of the water.

This happened because I was standing on a sinkhole created by the dredgers, and because it was a rough part of the river, it looked like solid ground. Now that this part of the river is practically dry, we went back to look and the depth is between four and five meters.»

**María Angélica Fernández.** Together with Miguel Ángel Villar, she is part of a family of potters in

Ranchos and we invited them to the Cátedra Ambiente y Sociedad 2022.

«I crossed it when I was still in my mother's womb to be born, and I crossed it again to be welcomed in my town with the nickname of Guayama, that mythical Huarpe who fought so hard for his lagoons, who led the lagoon rebellion when the gringos from the north dried them up. The river is linked to my first adventures, going to see where the streets were born, where they ended, getting to the lagoon, looking for the source, where did the water go? Crossing the railroad bridge, following the ravine. All the rivers in that magical river that flows towards the sky.

Once we crossed it, we got muddy and turned white. What a scare, how the water pushed us! But we crossed it and walked back. What a way to walk!»

**Sergio Patiño.** He attended a meeting on water organized in the town of Cazón and we met him there. He researches, draws, films, and builds around the Salado River.

«I miss that river  
that has always been alive  
crossing plains very slowly towards the sea.  
Its wild mind  
its indomitable soul  
its reeds, the mud, and the wetland.  
There is nothing freer than a river,  
that's why progress wants to kill it.»

Translation of the song by the band Pescado para



today, interpreted by **Ignacio Borón**, who is a member of Cosensores, where they elaborate free tools for community socio-environmental surveys and we have been in communication for some time.

«My first contact with the Salado River was through Laguna Indio Muerto Vive, a collective ritual around the great kidney of the river, celebrating its purifying, filtering role. From there I began to articulate my interest in the different forms that water takes when it rests on the territory, its mists, and how light reflects its particles. The river is present in the air between us. Water makes the sky appear on the earth.»

**Martín Flugelman.** We met him at Trans Acciones Utópicas Ecosistema Tropical and we keep in touch, mainly through his photos.

«I observe the state of distortion of the water and organize this observation into a method of regeneration. When the river flows, it incorporates information into its memory zones, sounds, waves, images, smells, colors, and frequencies. If this information is synthetic, its structure is transformed and loses its vitality.»

**Florencia Chiarichietti.** She shared with us her ETCAS method for studying the vitality and regeneration of water, soil and food.

«When I was a child, I went to the mouth of the river to drink mate. When I grew up, I went digging as part of an archaeological team. At the end of the day we

would bathe and there I discovered the power of the river and saw the mullets jump.»

**Virginia Salerno.** She put us in touch with the Villar-Fernández family and other potters in the basin, because she studies the public dimension of archaeology in the Salado micro-region of Buenos Aires.

«To think what it means to hold something that was buried thousands of years ago! I walked along the banks of the Salado River, from the Gómez Lagoon to the Carpincho Lagoon, rescuing fossil remains. A moment in the life of a living creature. Stegomastodon, Smilodon, in this river they developed their activity and now here is my city. The river teaches me.»

**José María Marcheto.** We met him when a friend found bones during a fishing day in the area and contacted him to find out what they were. He is an amateur paleontologist from Junín.

## The Sound of These Waters

Then we ask ourselves what quality of listening is required for this exercise, in which we propose a communication with the river.

To respond to the prompt: “Imagine, recognise, discover, generate, a moment or a place of encounter or mishap between you and the Salado River,” aims to begin to discover ways of undoing the implicit hierarchisation that exists in our culture of the speaker over the

listener (Lenkrsdof 2008).<sup>18</sup> The challenge is to transcend the act of domination over the other, explicit in the management plan of these waters, which has led to the subjugation of identities, the exposure of misunderstandings and the construction of false histories.

We would like to invite you to a practice of rapprochement that makes us peers, where we can recognize ourselves in the river and the river in us, a ritual of communication. For this instance of the exercise, we have turned to a first group of people we already know, who come from different fields of activity and who have different degrees of proximity to the river. It is a small scale of an action that we imagine to expand in future stages, but which here allows us to begin to observe different frequencies of listening, some more audible and others barely perceptible, ancestral listening and

imaginative listening, survival, playful and leisure relationships.

“It gives me a thrill to imagine the Salado as a riversea.” “I hadn't put it into words.” “The river is an inheritance. I've only had one mishap with the river and it lasted a few seconds.” “I crossed it when I was still in my mother's womb to be born.” “I miss the river.” “The water makes the sky appear on the earth.” “When the river flows, it carries information in its memory zones.” “I went to drink mate at the mouth of the river.”

In these excerpts of responses, we observe a richness of experiences that undo the inertia of desertification, open up personal meanings, and outline the power of building new scaffolds.

We want to install a state of expanded listening, guided by the cycle of these waters that evaporate, precipitate, infiltrate,

<sup>18</sup> Lenkersdorf, Carlos. 2008. *Aprender a escuchar. Enseñanzas maya-tojolabales*. México DF: Plaza y Valdés Editores.



Elina Rodríguez: Salt condensations on the soil. Visit to the middle basin dredge (2021).

and reappear (Patiño 2021).<sup>19</sup> We want to bring these and more intimate contacts between the body of the river and human bodies into the air and turn these experiences into common waters.

Oralities associate information, select, and say, including the speed of feeling; different modes of affectivity emerge

through voice inflections, gestures, pauses, silences. Pauses that are necessary for the speaker, moments to catch one's breath, pauses that must be taken into account by the receiver of the sound. We want to focus on these metrics in order to detect and extract units of information that move in listening and that we believe can be valuable to amplify.

<sup>19</sup> Patiño, Sergio. 2019. *Territorio en transformación*. Video. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gCmabvz7BAI>.

We want to return to the oral tradition that exists in these lands. The people who lived here before the invasion had not developed a written language, but the practice of communicating with other species was part of their daily life. This oral language and information have disappeared, as with so many languages that have not become established in any way. A language that remains in the air of time, in the sound traces of words we use today and senses that come from other contexts. It is in the air that sensitive gait has evolved while taking on the movement of the waters.

We need a communication that refines its sensitivity and specializes its listening, capable of perceiving the manifestations of other living beings, including the orality of these waters:

“It is said that the rivers,  
all rivers  
even this river

when they come running  
when they come sounding  
in a moment  
they change their sound.  
With the first ray of sunlight that  
its waters receive  
a quality of sound changes  
that melts into another  
transformation until the first ray  
of light of the following day.  
And so on through all the  
revolutions,  
neutrinos licking the matter that  
slides at every turn.”<sup>20</sup>

### To Retrace Our Steps

This case allows us to continue thinking about a proposal that fosters sensitivity towards this common land, these common waters, this common air. An invitation that makes room for a multitude of singularities in a vast territory, to continue deepening a methodology of contact, intimate, hand-to-hand, that gives priority to the oral transmission of experiences and invents

<sup>20</sup> Fragment translated from the dramatic text of the performance *Formas del tiempo I*, CENTRO RURAL DE ARTE, 2022.

ways for these frequencies to reappear. A campaign to install the river as a theme, as a necessary participant in our lives, throughout the 16,711,084 acres of the basin and beyond, that it will be everywhere, as a confluence of strategies to humidify relationships, to weave an experiential field of transference and make of these stories and listening to a process of collective learning that is integrated into the culture of the region. A re-sensitization that contributes to vital narratives of survival that become new social consensuses from which to act, that can put the hydrocommon into action, taking it as an emerging field of practice (Blackmore 2022, 24).<sup>21</sup> Some

gestures to put the river in the air, to combine the momentary with the moving, the intimate with the massive, a fleeting but transformative place. In the words of Eduardo Kohn (Kohn 2021, XVI own brackets),<sup>22</sup> "learning to think with other living beings [such as rivers] is the beginning of the 'greening' of our ethical behavior, the true spirit of Sumak Kawsay."<sup>23</sup>

It is necessary to reinhabit the earth. For this reason, Plan WITH integrates a series of actions that propose slogans, collect stories, and circulate listening situations with the waters of this basin. It creates means to immerse ourselves and to recognize the hydrocommons,

<sup>21</sup> Blackmore, Lisa. 2022. "Imaginando culturas hidrocomunes: investigaciones interdisciplinarias y prácticas curatoriales entre ríos." *Revista Heterotopías*, UNC Córdoba. Accessed June 15, 2023. <https://revistas.unc.edu.ar/index.php/heterotopias/article/view/39748>

<sup>22</sup> Kohn, Eduardo. 2021. *Cómo piensan los bosques: hacia una antropología más allá de lo humano*. Abya Yala. Quito: Heckt.

<sup>23</sup> "Sumak kawsay, then, is not simply the search for a 'good way of life,' despite how this phrase is often translated—and domesticated—in state discourses. Rather, it is a way of paying attention to the special properties and qualities of life itself—the *kawsay*—in order to find in it a way of living well; that is, it is an ethical orientation that comes from the living world" (Kohn 2021, XV).

to reconnect with the action and to foster public affection for these waters. In this way, the Plan WITH allies itself with and seeks out people and organizations that are working to reassemble the circles of life, for an action that begins by inviting us to speak. And where the words themselves are the ones that lead us to what each one of us already knows, to what the earth teaches, to the infinity of secrets that the plain shelters.

This is the pedagogical tool we are fine-tuning: an artistic maneuver that sets in motion and catalyzes a series of learnings and unlearns inertias, behaviors and habits that are harmful. In this way, throughout its extension, Plan WITH culturally reconnects the river and its inhabitants, generating knowledge that contributes to influencing the conditions of existence.

**María José Trucco** (Buenos Aires, Argentina, 1978) Researcher in the field of living arts, devoted to the creation of spaces that allow for the presence and meeting of living beings. She carries out writing, artistic creation, curatorial and teaching tasks, in works that have taken place in Argentina, Chile, Brazil, Ecuador, Mexico, Spain, Switzerland, Germany, and Australia. She holds a degree in Combined Arts (FFyL, UBA, 2004). She has studied with masters in different fields of the performing arts and completed the specialization program in Epistemologies of the South, CLACSO, 2015. In 2008, she invented CENTRO RURAL DE ARTE and, from there, she works nomadically in creative processes from specific territories, carrying out residencies, plays, talks, workshops and more. She shares the overall project co-direction of the project. She lives in Cazón, Salado Basin, Province of Buenos Aires.

**Elina Rodríguez** (La Plata, Argentina, 1978) Artist, researcher and educator. Her work integrates research, performance, teaching, and curatorial processes. She has participated in different artistic projects in Argentina, Spain, Chile, Canada, Colombia, Brazil, Australia, Uruguay, and Norway. Elina studied Choreographic Composition at the National University of the Arts, Argentina. She has received grants, scholarships, and residencies both national and international. In 2022, she received a grant from Iberescena to carry out a research residency for the 3rd stage of the project "Territorio Mutado," in the basin of the Ter River, in Spain. She works in the field of the expanded scene, carrying out projects that combine art, the environment, and politics. She is interested in the languages of movements because they are ungraspable. Mobility as a possibility of de-hierarchization of links and an alteration of positions. She develops her practice from this focus as a collaborative and contextual force. Thus, each creative project arises from a research platform and emerges into the public sphere in various formats such as performances, installations, drifts, lectures, festivals, fairs, talks, and publications. She co-directs CENTRO RURAL DE ARTE and Jardines Subterráneos.

**CRA - Centro Rural de Arte.** Artistic collective based in Argentina, working nomadically since 2008. They promote artistic research that stresses the scope of languages and specific knowledge to test forms of relationship between different natures. Co-directed by María José Trucco and Elina Rodríguez, they create interdisciplinary operative platforms where people with diverse knowledge and backgrounds contribute through activities that propose different forms of exchange with communities: workshops, lectures, residencies, and various creative practices. They have developed projects together with public and private, national and international entities, and have been invited to participate in cultural management and development conferences in Argentina and abroad. Since 2021, they have been developing the



Salado River Artistic Research together with scientists, neighboring populations, journalists, historians, artists, and environmental organizations. This research has been presented at Bienal Sur (Buenos Aires, 2021), Segundas Intenciones (Plataforma Lodo, 2021), Encuentro Arte y Desindustrialización (Concepción Chile, 2022), 8th Muestra de Arte en Territorio (Centro Cultural de la Memoria Haroldo Conti, 2022), 3rd Congreso Ribereño (Rosario, 2023), Arte y Activismo: University of Leeds and Gino Germani Institute (Buenos Aires, 2023), *Bodies of Water*, NGBK (Berlin, 2023).

Translated from Spanish by Diego del Valle Ríos.

## Bogged

Camila Marambio &  
Carla Macchiavello Cornejo

### Abstract

In this “essay-game,” the reader is encouraged to choose their own adventure. This hyperfiction presents different paths through some of the space-time layers of *Ensayos*, a research practice that since 2011 reflects and exercises decision-making about issues related to the political ecology of Tierra del Fuego and other archipelagos. With a focus on waters, the protection of peatlands, and the creation of a coastal curriculum, this essay-game invites readers to feel-think about how to “de/compose” in times of crisis.

Fixing your gaze is almost impossible.

In the bog, everything sinks. Your boots sink and the smell is acidic. The colors of the materials below don't seem to correspond to the familiar; shimmering petrol, burnt caramel, and streaked grayish greens don't provide the usual clues about what is soil, water, air, amphibian, Earth's crust, or the intermediary substances of decomposition. Layers upon layers of waterlogged leaves, organic matter crushed by its own weight and the dense air around drown out your sensemaking ability.

Your heart races uncontrollably, it's about to explode, and in your desperation, you no longer recognize yourself; you want to return to dreaming, to conspire with rest. That expansive and lucid space, full of possibilities, now fragmented. Your breathing has begun to shorten; there's less and less oxygen, more methane and carbon dioxide. The water no

longer covers your entire body, and the heat starts to dry you out. The deposits are melting.

Cracks rip open, oozing gasses through the shattered layers. The immolated sanctity begins to pave the way for collapse and fire. Ancestral information burns without meaning, fossil fuels vanish; you are witness, victim, and cause. Beneath the hum of mosquitoes, a throaty gasp echoes, the groan of the dying deep within the waters. They are your undulating insides, the other bog.

Seeing yourself naked, you feel alone, as if you were a resource, a categorical object, channeled by the linearity of thought. You no longer perceive your interiority. Energy no longer finds ways to replenish, and you can no longer cry. The only and inevitable path of progress fences you in, as if it were a sentence. You remember in fragments, yet your fibers long to continue drawing from the past. Your impulse is to swim, to give it your all, to leave no one

behind. You wonder: How to rehearse death?

In what follows: you choose your own non-linear reading adventure. Every decision you make branches off into two or more directions, winding like a spiral through paths of spacetime that delve into the history of the collective practice called *Ensayos*, which, facing its imminent endings, engages in reflective feeling-thinking.

As in every adventure, your decisions matter. Each one will lead you to a different section of this experimental hyperfiction, and more than one will lead to a dead end; there are multiple endings, and you can always go back to the beginning or take a step backwards.

Let's start by revisiting the question: How to rehearse death? There are least two ways of doing so: **decomposition**

and **composition**. Which do you choose first?

## Composition

You ford and emerge from the bog, eagerly searching for lights to guide you in the darkness. As you approach the voices of the group, you ponder the journey, contemplating what it means to try. Embracing the unfinished and precarious nature of the attempt, opening up to uncertainty, diverging from preconceived routes. It's dark now, intensely humid, and you're lost, yet you find solace in Helen's words: "As I see it, an *Ensayos* methodology is one that thrives on detours—on being guided, moved, directed, reoriented, decentred—rather than traveling cock-sure, like an arrow, from a to b (to paraphrase Ursula K. LeGuin in her 'Carrier Bag Theory of Fiction,' 1986), with all the violence that this metaphor entails."<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Hughes, Helen. 2019. "Ensayos Methodologies," *Más allá del fin 3/ Discipline 5*: 121.



Christy Gast: Meal prep at Caleta María (2011).  
Courtesy: Christy Gast.

Is it possible to sustain the precision of an arrow, a joint movement, to transform without imposing? To try is to compose.

Bruno used to say that modernity made us get used to the criticism of the avant-gardes, of manifestos that destroy to supposedly reveal a truth beyond appearances. The logic of the single path, of unidirectional

and inevitable progress. Instead, composing entails feeling-thinking about alternatives, bringing together parts that preserve their heterogeneity, and acknowledging that any composition breaks down, fails, even composts.<sup>2</sup> Denise adds that ecological and social art is associated with both an aesthetic and ethical intervention linked to regeneration,

<sup>2</sup> Latour, Bruno. 2010. "An Attempt at a Compositionist Manifesto," *New Literary History* 41: 471-490.

challenging the principle of accumulation and seeking restoration, even when it might seem insufficient.<sup>3</sup>

You think about what you've collectively rehearsed, composing inwardly to recompose outwardly. Crossing oceans and glossaries because you know that water exists in different forms.<sup>4</sup>

If we retire Ensayos, if we stop rehearsing, how will we recompose?

Let us remember what we've rehearsed: you can choose to follow a scent trail to the **Beaver's Skin**, immerse yourself in murky waters with **Cucú and Her Fishes**, or go straight to Raíz Común (**Common Root**).

## Decomposition

With an entangled mound of fishing nets at your feet, you have work for the entire rainy afternoon. As if you were kneading chopped cabbage to extract its juices and make sauerkraut, you soften the strains, pains, doubts, and jealousies with your unknotting. This becomes the only thing you can do to change the narrative; time and again, you'll have to ferment wounds, misunderstandings, and plastic egos. The littoral zone teaches you to blur yourself, just as it does every night, sand and surf boundaries eroded. The tide and the love for the moon teach you to trust in the possibility of other worlds within this world. You sink deeper into the mess, aware that

<sup>3</sup> Ferreira da Silva, Denise. 2023. "How is the Aesthetic Imaged by Social and Ecological Art?", en *And if I devoted my life to one of its feathers? Aesthetic Responses to Extraction, Accumulation, and Dispossession*, ed. Miguel A. López, 134. Viena: Kunsthalle Wien/ Sternberg Press.

<sup>4</sup> See Nygård, Randi y Karolin Tampere, eds. 2017. *The Wild Living Marine Resources Belong to Society as a Whole*. Norway: OCA.



Christy Gast: Razor on the beach at Bahía Jackson (2016). Courtesy: Christy Gast.

in your backpack, you carry a cosmic tool, an oracular mallet that can guide you.

You lay out a simple three card spread of the fortune-telling deck from the Karawatha Forest<sup>5</sup>: past, present and future. But looking down at the cards you know the fourth dimension is missing.

A sacrifice must be made.

In the humble yet rich library at the end of the world, you find a book on ethnobotany that details the history of the origin of menstruation.<sup>6</sup> You read it aloud, slowly and various times, seeking its truth. You have to dig deep because it's been held captive by the folds of the patriarchy,

<sup>5</sup> "The key to interpreting the messages offered by the cards lies in the stories of the plants [in Karawatha Forest, Brisbane, Australia] and the relationships they establish with other beings (including humans)." Franzmann, Caitlin. 2020. "Plunging into Oracle Politics," *Más allá del fin* 3.5: 33.

<sup>6</sup> Among the stories of the Yahgan people translated through anthropological lenses, one speaks of two brothers and a woman, of the anger of one of them culminating in sexual violence towards her, and of menstrual blood embodied in a red flower: Maku Kipa. To move beyond calling out these violences, as María Galindo says, it is necessary to propose feminist forms of subversion that help us weave new non-

Catholicism, and academia, but when you find it, it releases the shame you've been needlessly carrying. Liberated tongues, bleeding hearts, mothers, and grandmothers appear before you, and you enter the trance of intergenerational turmoil. Careful not to disturb the living sponge, you pull peatland reeds to weave (us) again, to mend yourself. Each fiber bears a woman's name. Patricia taught you how pedagogy flows from hands, to mouths, to memory.<sup>7</sup> Sarita, Karolin, Vanessa, Caitlin, and Camila.<sup>8</sup> For a moment, you breathe in sisterhood, then came the wrath of fire.

It came with the wind that incessantly beats the roof of Ivette's house, a rattling that forces you to move, to seek meaning in the nomadic gaze. For seven years, you had been searching for the origin of the name of the island, which from the start you described as the center of the world, emphasizing that Karokynká was the guiding compass of your magnetic being (and your vice).

Karukinka is what you used to call the Isla Grande de Tierra del Fuego (Big Island of the Land of Fire) before meeting Hema'ny, before being flipped upside

patriarchal narratives. Here's one: <https://ensayostierradelfuego.net/programs/when-documents-travel-and-bodies-remain/>. Galindo, María. 2021. "Manifiesto de sedición feminista o manifiesto feminista de sedición," in *Feminismo bastardo*, 102. La Paz: Mujeres Creando.

<sup>7</sup> Patricia Messier Loncuante is an educator who hosts a radio program dedicated to showcasing the traditions of the Kawésqar people. She practices "the ancestral technique of basketry made with 'junquillo,' a raw material that is not found close to where I currently live; the *jemmá*, that is, white people, have destroyed our spaces where the raw material has existed for many generations." Messier, Patricia. 2020. "ÆS JÁLA-KAWÉSQAR KUTEKÉ CE = 'My Ancestor and Me,'" *Más allá del fin* 3.5: 44.

<sup>8</sup> Caitlin Franzmann is an Australian artist; Karolin Tampere is a curator and artist from Estonia based in Norway; Sarita Gálvez is an educator based in Australia; Vanessa Grimaldi is an artist and educator; Camila Marambio is a curator. <https://ensayostierradelfuego.net/programs/ensayo-4-coastal-curriculum-residency-in-tierra-del-fuego-and-isla-navarino/>.



down and getting your head stuck in the peat.<sup>10</sup> Geir Tore was the one who urged you to invoke the voices of the past: in his Sámi culture, that ancestral call and response is known as *joik*.<sup>11</sup> Without that greeting, without seeking permission, without conversing with the departed, you wouldn't be able to decompose the myopia of the present, or the cage of the future. That's how you got started, singing odes to the river, *'onde va la lancha*, copepod choruses, praises to the life of the fish and all its relationships. A makeshift start, fishing in



Christy Gast: Picnic on the Beach at Camerón (2011). Courtesy: Christy Gast.

the stream that feeds Lago Escondido (Hidden Lake), in a corner of Karukinka Park.<sup>12</sup>

To retrace the food chain, to unravel the Big History, you used *our* hands, we used song. We walked along the beach,

<sup>9</sup> Alvette Martínez is an activist and educator. Her memories intertwine political activism within the Movimiento de Izquierda Revolucionaria (Revolutionary Left Movement) alongside the doctor Julio Gastón Contreras, the refuge they found in Tierra del Fuego, and her staunch opposition to the construction of a road in Caleta María, Seno del Almirantazgo. These experiences are captured in the web series *Distancia*, a nomadic ethnofiction essay co-directed by Camila Marambio and Carolina Saquel. They also echo in "Oda a Ivette/Ode to Ivette" by Camila Marambio (2019), featured in *Más allá del fin. 3/Discipline 5*: 110-116.

<sup>10</sup> Hema'ny Molina is a writer, poet, artisan, grandmother, and president of the Selk'nam Corporation of Chile, an organization dedicated to advocating for the rights of the Selk'nam people. Their recognition as an indigenous community was recently ratified in the Chilean Congress.

<sup>11</sup> To learn more about the sámi artist Geir Tore Holm, see *Actos Performativos*.

<sup>12</sup> *Ensayos* was born in 2010 in Karukinka Natural Park, on Isla Grande de Tierra del Fuego, in the Magallanes and Chilean Antarctic Region: <https://ensayostierradelfuego.net/programs/ensayo-1-the-first-residency/>.

against the tide, picking up plastic, always plastic: bags that suffocate, nets that trap, bottles that encapsulate.<sup>13</sup>

Your time is running out and we will split once again, no detours: you decide if you will join us **Beyond the End, Cross the Great Ocean**, or cultivate intimacy with **Distance**. Which path will you take?

### The Beaver's Skin

The marks were visible from the air, amidst the green and orange blankets, but they first arrived by land and water. Once in the forests, they recognized their footprint on shining silver



Christy Gast: Abandoned beaver dams at Estancia Vicuña (2016).  
Courtesy: Christy Gast.

trunks, the trees with truncated tops, dead. Further on, the stagnant water accumulated in large pools, at various degrees and with various basins, hiding lairs in their wooden nooks, true mansions, Fernanda would say ironically a few years later.<sup>14</sup> Bárbara, Christy, Camila, Laura, and Melissa had been part of the mission that would attempt to create a hole in one of their

<sup>13</sup> Even as the waters unite us in transnational solidarity—from the Admiralty Sound, Coney Island, Magnetic Isle, to the Arctic—we always speak from some Place. "Not only does history, but also meaning, emerge from a Place, regardless of whether it is located geographically or is an event in time." Graham, Mary. 2020. "LUGAR- un marco conceptual aborígen: Introducción a un discurso sobre una propuesta de metodología de investigación aborígen," *Más allá del fin* 3.5: 25.

<sup>14</sup> Fernanda Olivares Molina is the director of the Hach Saye Foundation. "Hach Saye literally means 'the space between one heartbeat and another'," she said in an interview with María Jesús Gutiérrez de Val, "Experiencias iniciales: un diálogo sobre retornos territoriales," <https://ensayostierradelfuego.net/featured/experiencias-iniciales-un-dialogo-sobre-retornos-territoriales>.

dams to let the water flow.<sup>15</sup> They walked along their edges, traced those barriers of sticks and moss to feel their weight, tried to find their architects with questions and cameras, but they cleverly evaded them. Invasive, they were called; exotic, they were labeled; threats to biodiversity that must be exterminated, was argued on one side of the archipelago. The reward, perhaps: a beaver barbecue.

They felt chills thinking about the resonances of colonization in this archipelago. Analogies and parallels can't encapsulate the complexity of the changing relationships that have shaped the body of Karokynká. History was a tangled web: just before the introduction of beavers to the archipelago, the Selk'nam were being stalked by the greed of new settlers, cornered and

killed, displaced to missions, stripped of their languages, usurping their territories and replacing their worlds with gold extraction and sheep farming. Trees, mosses, beavers, sheep, deprived of any rights, manipulated like inert things, taught them about adaptation and resilience.

Now you place your nose close to the ground to follow another trace. You've been wanting to communicate better, changing the questions and how to pose them. Who resides in these lands? What does it mean to be native? Can we care for and love the enemy? Smelling the earth, you remember that beaver-skin suits have been worn on different continents to remember their presence and to form a new multi-species family in an anatomy auditorium.<sup>16</sup> You follow the traces of their diaspora,

<sup>15</sup> Christy Gast is an American artist extensively involved in research and creation with *Ensayos in Tierra del Fuego*. Laura A. Ogden is an anthropologist, and Melissa Memory is an archaeologist.

<sup>16</sup> See <https://ensayostierradelfuego.net/field-notes/caring-curiosity-and-curating-beyond-the-end/>.

through scent trails explored with Derek and Giorgia.<sup>17</sup> You went to Estancia Miguelito, where Julián and Denise helped you execute a scent experiment.<sup>18</sup>

Dear enemy, that's what they use for behavior that shows less aggression towards neighbors who maintain clear and porous boundaries. Dear enemy, I call myself, I call you, you call me. Even scent has been treated as an enemy to eradicate in Western modernity; breathing today can be a danger; our breath, a threat. Instead of invasions, (neo) colonial movements, and forced migrations, what would sniffing

our own tail teach us about ways to live together?

To dig deeper with your nose, go to **Gift of Scent**; if you want to travel like migratory whales, head to **Podcast**; if you wish to experiment, go to **SphagnumLAB**.

### Beyond the End

In a small plane with no more than seven people, we fly over the Beagle Channel and Navarino Island comes into view. This time, the mission is to deliver documentation of the collection of artifacts, currently housed in the Melbourne Museum, to the Yagán indigenous community at

<sup>17</sup> When *Paula Magazine* published an article in 2012 about the Chilean biologists Derek Corcoran and Giorgia Graells' beaver hunts in Tierra del Fuego, they said, "To hunt well, we play at being a beaver." That same year, *Ensayos* invited them to spend part of their everyday lives wearing beaver suits crafted by Christy Gast.

<sup>18</sup> Denise Milstein, a Uruguayan sociologist, and her son, Julián Donas Milstein, have been involved in *Ensayos* since 2015. For the outcomes of the multispecies communication experiment which they partook in, see Graels, Corcoran, Marambio, and Gast. 2017. "Dear Enemy: Interspecies Communication through Artisanal Scents," *Pioneer Works Journal*: 94-109.

Bahía Mejillones. These artifacts were taken by William Baldwin Spencer in 1929.<sup>19</sup> We stay at Villa Ukika in the house of Martín Calderón's daughter.<sup>20</sup> She isn't on the island, but Martín and his grandson warmly host us. Before the meeting can happen we have to wait. Waiting is important, making time. Losing track of time we slowly ascend the wrongly named "La Bandera" hill to meet Lana, the giant carpenter who guards the Navarino's teeth.

It was Teko who alerted Camila that, in the depths of a warehouse at the Melbourne Museum, there

might be a series of baskets, and most notably a canoe, from the Yahgan people; she followed the trail.<sup>21</sup> The process took years, until a change in the institution altered its colonial access practices. Thanks to Lisa Hilli,



Christy Gast: Reviewing Furlong Images at Villa Ukika (2016). Courtesy of Christy Gast.

<sup>19</sup> "In February 1929, the famous Australian anthropologist Sir Walter Baldwin Spencer and his fieldwork assistant, Jean Hamilton, traveled to Tierra del Fuego, at the southernmost tip of Chile. Having only recently retired as director of the National Museum of Victoria (modern-day Melbourne Museum), he and Hamilton were following in the footsteps of Darwin and their goal was to study the Yaghan people, whom they dismissed as a 'dying race.'" Carland, Rebecca. 2020. "Reconnecting the Yaghan community to cultural belongings 90 years on," ART Link, <https://www.artlink.com.au/articles/4845/reconnecting-the-yaghan-community-to-cultural-belo/>.

<sup>20</sup> *Tánana. Estar listo para zarpar* (2016), directed by Cristóbal Azócar and Alberto Serrano, "is the return of Martín González Calderón to the heart of the Cape Horn archipelago. Don Martín is a Yaghan artisan, a people that for over 6,000 years have inhabited the southernmost territory on the planet." <https://ensayostierradelfuego.net/field-notes/tanana>.

<sup>21</sup> "The archaeologist, with their long-term view of the past, can contribute significantly to the understanding of coastal dynamics [...] merely proposing that the coastline we see has not always been

Camila and Bec saw, touched, and cried over the piece overnight.<sup>22</sup> Thanks to Léuli Eshrāghi, Camila felt accompanied.<sup>23</sup>

It's not the first time we've gone to the Island prepared to mediate the return of something that was stolen. Years before, we went to inform the community that the wax cylinders Charles Wellington Furlong had used to capture sounds and voices from the island were at Dartmouth

University in the United States.<sup>24</sup> We were able to access them, along with dozens of photos and notebooks from the explorer, thanks to Laura's new position. That was just the beginning.

Visitor protocols are something we've been refining for a while now; without knowing how to proceed at first, we followed an ethics and compliance reporting system created by a university.<sup>25</sup> It was funny because there, beyond

the coast, offers a new perspective to the notion of conservation and management plans." Prieto, Alfredo. 2009. "Arqueología de la costa patagónica: Perspectivas para la conservación," *Intersecciones antropol* 10, no. 2: 22-24.

<sup>22</sup> Lisa Hilli is a Melanesian artist and curator dedicated to studying cultural traditions and history among the Tolai people, as well as exploring the narratives surrounding collecting practices within the Pacific region's cultures. Rebecca Carland works as a curator within the collections at Museums Victoria, where a series of belongings of Yaghan origin are housed.

<sup>23</sup> "The visible and invisible borders of European-derived hegemony do not represent our indigenous geographies, tied as they are into genealogical matter and deep listening to all living beings." Eshrāghi, Léuli. 2018. "Considering the Service of Displays for our Futures," in *Sovereign Words. Indigenous Art, Curation and Criticism*, ed. Katya García-Antón: 246. Amsterdam: OCA/Valiz.

<sup>24</sup> "Furlong [...] was first an explorer, who considered himself an anthropologist, spending over a decade in North Africa, South America, and the American West. Later, he was a US military diplomat during the First and Second World Wars [...] as the archive's finder guide describes, he was 'the first white man to explore the interior of Tierra del Fuego.'" Ogden, Laura A. 2015. "Inscriptions of Territory," *Más allá del fin* 2.

<sup>25</sup> <https://publicpolicydms.monash.edu/Monash/documents/1935812>.

the end, that academic ideology not only sounded out of place but also didn't fit with reality. This experience led us to composting, and soon we wrote our own *cuasimanifesto* for visitor ethics. Here's a snippet:

Go silent to hear what is silenced.  
Learn to feel what is hidden.  
Ask about our well-being. Practice being without prowling.  
Acknowledge the Selk'nam, Kawéskar, Yámana, Haush.  
Tend to the erosion, to the scars colonization left and still leaves.  
Notice the traces we leave behind, what form do they take? What color? What tone? What scent?  
Experience enfolding, unfolding, veering from the norm, to pour horizontals into verticals and to lay verticals horizontally.  
Sing odes to the wind.  
Inhabit the space between the conscious and the unconscious, to uproot reason from its core...  
Wrap around each other, with tenderness and curiosity, with courage, ready to lose ourselves.  
Dream.  
Gaze at the stars.  
Imagine another form of becoming. Rehearse another mode of being.  
Intend to heal. Rehearse healing.  
Daydream to trigger external and internal relational geographies. Attempt to stitch together external and internal geography.



Laura Ogden: Performance still from *Dans la peau du castor*, Paris (2014). Courtesy: Ensayos.

When we try to change the hierarchical order of empire, we always fail, but that's just how it is; if we don't attempt it, the norm will never change. *Poquito a poquito, ensayando*.

There are collections of artifacts, bones, and raw materials from Tierra del Fuego and Cabo de Hornos distributed without

consent all over the world.<sup>26</sup> After our first visit, Francisco and Alberto traveled north to see the archives and discuss how they should be labeled and who could have access to them in the future.<sup>27</sup> Carla, Christy, and Laura were awaiting them and aided the process. The welcome. Is it worthwhile to go and look for what was taken so

<sup>26</sup> Olivares, Fernanda et al. 2023. "Re-telling the story of Selk'nam ancestors: From Karokynká/Tierra del Fuego to Austria," *Human Remains and Violence* 9, no. 1: 49-69.

<sup>27</sup> Francisco Filgueira is part of the indigenous community Bahía Mejillones, <https://www.facebook.com/comunidadyagan/>. Alberto Serrano is the director of the Martín Gusinde Anthropological Museum on Navarino Island. In 2016, they traveled to Dartmouth University to see Furlong's archives. It was the first opportunity a member of the Yaghan community had to access and consult on it.



that they may return to their place of origin?

If you believe so, **Cross the Great Ocean** now; if you believe otherwise, maintain **Distance**. And if you're unsure what to choose or believe the solution is a hybrid one, delve into **SphagnumLAB**.

### Cucú and Her Fishes

You find yourself in a strange community. Coo-coo. They dream during synchronous twilights and sunsets of a theatrical eco-fiction that helps them care for the waters. Coo-coo. They plot with virtual hands the multivocal body of a new coastal curriculum. Coo-coo. They adapt narratives without arcs and use darts dipped in spores as guides. Fe-foo. With María Irene at the spiritual helm and using theater as a pedagogical tool, they get ready writing postcards to the ocean, examining their scars to create

bodily maps leading to shared waters, listening to internal paths to journey to the hot, liquefied center of the earth. Coo-coo! A fascination for repulsion guides them. Fe-foo-fe-foo-fe-foo. While the mouth speaks with the stomach, news from other wetlands come through, and rattle their minds. Coo-coo. They make water together, and the act becomes life as they recognize their own death. coocoocoocoocoocoocoocoocooco.

Who is Cucú?

I am you/me, the peat, the one who dissents and disturbs. The one who sees poetry in the earth, the one who conducts like metal, the one who plants doubt, the one who creates new ways of thinking by plunging her hands into the forest, the one who takes in the details with her body in the mud, the one who thinks with her skin, the one with the untamed tongue, the visionary of the vulnerable body, the guanaco woman.

Cucú asks: Who wants to have lunch?<sup>28</sup>

If you want to fix waterways, follow the **Beaver's Skin**. To inhale spores, go to **Gift of Scent**.

### Cross the Great Ocean

Auntie Margie greets you. At the edge of Brown Lake on Minjerribah Island in a Clam's Kiss. Sonja, Freja, and Leece are also there, extending their welcome to you too. They are all ancestors of the emerging present, their hospitality is golden. They teach you how to separate the fibers of the ungaire that Sonja and Leece will use in their next art piece, a manual labor to reclaim oral memory, knot after knot.<sup>29</sup> Barefoot on their terrace, conversing with



Christy Gast: Ephemera from participatory performance *An Animal Response*, Melbourne, Australia (2016). Courtesy: Ensayos.



Christy Gast: Scent Mound and Beaver Lodge in Peatland at Estancia Vicuña (2016). Courtesy: Christy Gast.

your toes, puts you in a state of relaxation akin to the fiber slowly releasing its greenery. You notice the intermingling

<sup>28</sup> Cucú and Her Fishes, an adaptation of María Irene Fornés' "Fefu and Her Friends," is available to watch here: <https://ensayostierradelfuego.net/featured/save-the-date-cucu-and-her-fishes-new-museum-september-1/>. See Una Chaudhuri, "Ecospheric Experimentality: On Ensayos's Cucú and her Fishes," and Olivia Michiko Gagnon Gagnon, "The Work of Being Together," [https://medium.com/@new\\_museum/reflections-on-cucu-and-her-fishes-d02c8aa80ed7](https://medium.com/@new_museum/reflections-on-cucu-and-her-fishes-d02c8aa80ed7).

<sup>29</sup> On Sonja Carmichael's research on knots and her Ngugi ancestors,

is also a word game, like with posters advocating *Hol-Hol Tol, Bog is Good, Agua, Carbono y Leseras. ¡Vivan las Turberas!* Different tongues merge disintegrating singularity. Rosi travels to the gathering through images, joining the network by giving graphic form to invitation appears: Smell My Bog.<sup>30</sup>

Are you willing to smell the mud, the wolf, the owl, the mold, and the ash? If you say yes, head to the **Gift of Scent**; if not, tether yourself to the **Common Root**.

### Common Root

When you inhale, you initiate the journey of sound, of speech. A trip to the common root, to the intimate feeling where tongues diverge and reunite. You've been traveling for two years to

Karokynká with the Selk'nam vocabulary, to accompany a parallel process of revitalization and conservation—of a language and a people declared extinct so many times, of endangered ecosystems—without bending or attempting to justify it.<sup>31</sup>

You say out loud: my tongue is not innocent. In recognition that you don't speak the same language even if you share one, that linguistic justice requires hard work, and that translating creates a third language.

Hema'ny shares with you that the word for peat and bog is the same, and their inseparability is apparent in the density of repetition, *hol-hol*, like layers of peat. Trying to separate them forces a perspective that fragments and drains the

see "Knots that Bind. Sonja Carmichael's journey to reclaim Quandamooka weaving," <https://stories.uq.edu.au/news/2022/knots-that-bind/index.html>, and the conversation with Sarita Gálvez in *Más allá del fin* 3.5 (2020): 29-32.

<sup>30</sup> See [ensayostierradelfuego.net/programs/smell-my-bog](https://ensayostierradelfuego.net/programs/smell-my-bog) and <https://www.revistamateria.com/entrevista/la-imagen-grafica-de-turba-tol-y-su-busqueda-por-representar-el-ecosistema-de-las-turberas/>.

<sup>31</sup> <https://ensayostierradelfuego.net/programs/raiz-comun/>.



Christy Gast: Herding sheep, Isla Grande, Tierra del Fuego (2016).  
Courtesy: Christy Gast.

tongue of its true richness, overlooking that words are sediments of stories and moving cartographies. Perhaps that's why Ensayistas use language as resistance, speaking of what is useless, uncommon, the "mamaestras."<sup>32</sup>

Being multilingual entails making way for deep listening to bodies. Translating their vital energies with the tongue, the mind, and the skin.

If you want to fine-tune your listening abilities, hop over

to **Podcasts**; if you want to continue unlearning, look into **Undisciplined Pedagogies**; if you're lost and don't understand anything that's been said, go for a swim with **Cucú and Her Fishes**.

## Distance

The revolution will be televised, or at least tele-viewed. I interview you then, and from afar I ask if you see me: why don't you call me by my name, the name I've chosen? There's an episode of the web series *Distancia*, that cuts through the bullshit, undoes what was done, what was said, revises and recomposes, not to clarify a story, but to blur it, to add nuances.<sup>33</sup> Ping-pong, glued with gum, chupi productions, Caro, Ariel, and Camila. If none of these words ring a bell, it doesn't matter. Imagine your own series or think of it as a riddle that no one will ever solve for you.<sup>34</sup>

<sup>32</sup> Macchiavello Cornejo, Carla & Camila Marambio, eds. 2023. *Introducción a Turba Tol Hol-Hol*, 19. Accessed November 28, 2023. [turbatol.org/libro-turba.html](http://turbatol.org/libro-turba.html).

<sup>33</sup> [Episodio 2: errar / err](#)

<sup>34</sup> "A collaboration between humans and more than human is the first

**SphagnumLAB**

They were walked over so many times, without too much attention paid to them. Because they were planning: an experiment, a coastal curriculum, and much more.<sup>35</sup> Meanwhile, the peats were sucking their feet, pulling at their legs, threatening to sink them while embracing them with their spongy mounds. Silently,

they tried to draw attention to what was fermenting, half alive and half dead, in their peat archives. Cucú made them turn their heads to open their hearts and listen to the dangers these ecosystems face. *Hol-hol, tol tol, hol-hol tol.*<sup>36</sup> Barbara, Nicole, and Antonieta untangled the trappings of geopolitics and devised an initial binational initiative for the joint care of the Patagonian peatlands.<sup>37</sup> Tongues

of many generative multiplicities produced by the videos that constitute *Distancia*. The works engage multiple formal modalities of experimental film, video art, and documentary, and they always include multiple voices and viewpoints." Benfield, Dalida María. 2023. "Decolonial Cinematic Flows: Histories, Movements, Confluences," in *The Routledge Companion to Decolonizing Art History*. Tatiana Flores, Florencia San Martín & Charlene Villaseñor Black, eds.: 246-247. New York & London: Routledge.

<sup>35</sup> "Embarking on the journey of surrendering to the littoral zone we believe will result in a curricula: a process that will swell every time we meet on the coast, existing in a state of flux and precarious emergence. We dare to enunciate today that tomorrow the curricula will look different, feel different, taste different..." Gálvez, Sarita & Camila Marambio. 2017. "Coastal Curriculum." Accessed November 24, 2023. <https://ensayostierradelfuego.net/field-notes/coastal-curriculum/>.

<sup>36</sup> In the Selk'nam language, *tol* means heart, *hol* is peat, and *hol-hol* can be understood as peatland. *Hol-Hol Tol*, peatland heart, is a poetic creation by Hema'ny Molina.

<sup>37</sup> To discover the Patagonian Peatlands Initiative organized in 2021 by Nicole Püschel Hoeneisen, responsible for Climate Change and Diversity at WCS-Chile, along with Bárbara Saavedra, director of WCS-Chile, and Antonieta Eguren Ibacache, a specialist in conservation strategy facilitation at WCS-Chile, in collaboration with the Ministry of Environment. See *Memorias del Seminario binacional de turberas de Patagonia*, [https://programs.wcs.org/Portals/134/Memoria%20Seminario%20Turberas%20WCS%20-%20marzo\\_2022.pdf](https://programs.wcs.org/Portals/134/Memoria%20Seminario%20Turberas%20WCS%20-%20marzo_2022.pdf).

and emotions lowered their guard as they resonated with Hema'ny's words: peatlands are ancestors. They ventured across the ocean together to write odes to the peatland, and with the blast of voices, they turned into a peatmob.<sup>38</sup> How to broaden the call?

To escape the storm, they rode the wildest wave, became grounded to the bog, and dropped anchor with a peat-body extended to that other swamp, Venice. They readied themselves with rumors, carried essences, incense, and peatguards, studied their waters, customs, and emissions, wrapped their resonances in living matter and built a vessel to journey to the



Christy Gast: Harvesting Sphagnum at Hankhauser Moor, Germany (2022).  
Courtesy: Christy Gast.

heart of the peatland, *Turba Tol Hol-Hol Tol*.<sup>39</sup> That's where *SphagnumLAB* dwelled, another network of alliances, trust, and protocols that connected a peatland research center in Germany and its paludiculture fields with a conservation park in Tierra del Fuego.<sup>40</sup> They conducted another significant

<sup>38</sup> <https://ensayostierradelfuego.net/field-notes/odas-a-la-turbera-odes-to-the-peat-bog/>.

<sup>39</sup> *Turba Tol Hol-Hol Tol*, curated by Camila Marambio and created by Ariel Bustamante, Carla Macchiavello, Dominga Sotomayor, and Alfredo Thiermann, along with a multidisciplinary team of creatives collaborating with various institutions (Hach Saye, Wildlife Conservation Society-Chile, Ensayos, Greifswald Mire Centre), was the project showcased at the Chilean Pavilion during the 59th Venice Biennale of Art. The rumors served as written and auditory previews, <https://turbatol.org/rumores.html>.

<sup>40</sup> *SphagnumLAB* a sixty-square-meter cultivation of sphagnum moss, served as a functional scientific experiment in *Turba Tol Hol-Hol Tol*: <https://turbatol.org/sphagnumlab-es.html>.

experiment through that platform: how to come to an agreement, how to listen to their stories, and how to acknowledge the existing asymmetries to make decisions without prioritizing one world above another. Only when co-sensing the pain of war were they able to start dispelling fears and set the Venice Agreement in motion.<sup>41</sup>

Even with all this preparation, we find ourselves bogged again whenever we let ourselves get sucked into the toxins



Christy Gast: Coral, Magnetic Island, Australia (2019). Courtesy: Christy Gast.

of the ego that suffocate art spaces. Now we're back in the swamp, in Borikén, thanks to Para la Naturaleza.<sup>42</sup> The peat-producing swamps in the tropics are different from the boreal or subantarctic peatlands. Where do they lead you?

### Podcasts

Even though it's summer, the night is chilly on this small, uninhabited island in the middle of the Strait of Magellan, and as good as your sleeping bag might be, you appreciate the warmth of the fire. The wooden stove is lit inside the dome tent.

Outside, whales sing. The song you hear is not the sonar-like song of echolocation, but the rhythmic breathing of their unihemispheric sleep: Pffff, pffff, pffff... Throughout the night, more than three dozen

<sup>41</sup> Download the Venice Agreement: <https://turbatol.org/acuerdo-de-venecia.html>.

<sup>42</sup> Para la Naturaleza is a non-profit organization aiming to engage civil society in the conservation of natural ecosystems: <https://www.paralanaturaleza.org/>.

humpback whales rest from their long migration, from Colombia to the Francisco Coloane Marine Park. During the day, you learn how to distinguish them by the patterns on their tails or flukes, each design as unique as a fingerprint. Juanita, María, Teresa are some of the names that cetologists use for them. What a mistake to name them with biblical nicknames, you think, but you say nothing. Instead, you ask the group about their pack-like behavior and listen carefully to the explanation on how each year they return to this protected place. Scientists have noted a pattern in their songs because of this. "It's one of the best examples of cultural evolution within the animal kingdom," says Melinda Rekdahl, author of a study published in the *Royal Society Open Science*. Some individuals repeat sounds more than others, some sing "aberrant melodies," and the younger ones hum different tunes from the adults' favorites. Humpbacks don't always sing the same song. They change the

melody, the beats, and, if one likes another's song, they copy it.

In a study published in the journal *Proceedings of the Royal Society B: Biological Sciences*, Jenny Allen discovered an unexpected pattern among humpback whales. Once their songs reach a certain level of complexity, they quit and choose a simpler new one. "A completely new melody is sexier than the complexity of the old song," Allen speculates. Humpback whales use sounds to communicate, orient themselves, and hunt.

Could it be that this is also why Ensayos forms pods and sings songs?

The Ensayos pods are scattered: in the far north of Scandinavia, in Minjerribah/ Meanjin in northwestern Australia, in the Fueguino archipelago, and along the waters that feed the New York aquapolis. To share oral knowledge, they developed a series of podcasts they named



*Hydrofeminist METitations.*<sup>43</sup>

This series lives on a website that, in a way, archives the history of the evolution of their "songs." Songs that are poems, interviews, stories, sonorous compositions, recordings made during their fieldwork, jokes, and more more more. Ariel, Karolin, and Caitlin have the keenest ears, most of all Ariel.<sup>44</sup>

Ear, smell and soma. Soma, the body. Again and again, Camila introduces soma to the exercises from her pilgrimages, and thus everyone benefits from her altered interoception. The multilingual, multi-species, multi-headed, multi-incorporated collectivity mutates.



Christy Gast: Elephant Seals at Bahía Jackson (2016). Courtesy: Christy Gast

If you want to immerse yourself in our pod-like existence, listen to one of the podcasts; if you prefer to be guided by one of the somatic exercises, head to **Undisciplined Pedagogies**; or if you want to see what happens when listening meets pedagogies, read and watch **Cucú and Her Fishes**.

<sup>43</sup> "MET is an acronym for Mechanical Electrical Transduction, a sensory mechanism through which cells convert mechanical stimuli into electro-chemical activity. MET accounts for senses of hearing, balance, and touch; hair cells in the inner ear convert the stimuli of drum vibrations, water dropping in the sink, a crashing wave, and voice into electro-chemical signals received by the brain. <https://ensayostierradelfuego.net/programs/hydrofeminist-meditations-listening-series/>.

<sup>44</sup> Ariel Bustamante is a sound artist based in La Paz, Bolivia. From there, he travels across the highlands, listening to the wind. He joined Essay #3 in 2017. To learn about how he approached the precarious symmetry between northern and extreme southern winds, creating a sound field that spans the distance, listen: <https://www.youtube.com/channel/UC5qmuX8UniXsSvsTOCWw04w>.



Christy Gast: Søsja Jørgensen Performance, Trømsø, Norway (2016).  
Courtesy: Christy Gast.

## Undisciplined Pedagogies

Rug exercise:

Go back to this morning. Early, before you got up. Imagine that you're sleeping and have just woken up. Imagine the daylight, where it's coming from. How the sheets feel. How the mattress feels. How the surface of the bed feels. Imagine that there's someone sleeping next to you, it's your character. Enter their thinking and picture their state

of mind. Then imagine the room they're in. Imagine the tone of their thoughts, whether it's through color or substance.

Imagine how they look when they wake up and what it is they see. Draw this person sleeping and then what they see when they wake up. Describe what they are seeing in detail.

If you feel like it, stop reading this text and do this exercise, or move on to **Performative Acts**.

## Performative Acts

A phone rings...

—Yes?

—Hi, it's Mr. Creek. I was wondering if you already have my test results?

—Ooh, yes, let me see, Mr. Creek. The presence of coliform bacteria is too high. Around 15,000 per 100 milliliters. There's also too much carbon, nitrogen, and phosphorus. There's a high amount of cadmium, chromium, as well as copper, mercury, nickel, and zinc in your sediments, and your pH is at 6.4 at room temperature.

Silence...

—Hello. Helloooo. Mr. Creek, are you still there? Hello? Are you OK, Mr. Creek? How are you feeling, Mr. Creek?

—That's a question I can't answer. I am you, I flow, but I cannot make use of feelings.

Note: Approximately an hour by train south of Oslo, Søssa and Geir are custodians of a farm called Øvre Ringstad, where art and life become one. The gray waters of the estate feed the Holsbekken stream, a narrow and protected canal coming from the Stormåsan swamps. These wetlands receive rainwater from the sky, but also terrestrial waters from other farms, forests, and residential areas near the municipality of Skiptvet.

Walking the waters is one of the practices Søsna and Geir have been engaging in for decades. Through their walks along the Holsbekken stream, they have been led to a canyon of controversies they aim to unravel in a binaural sound piece in which they talk with the stream, interview communities affected, and speculate on how to navigate these intricacies. *A Walk Along Holsbekken Creek, leading to a canyon of controversies* is the continuation of their project *Holsbekken (RGB)* (2018)—created for the exhibition *Let the River Flow. The Sovereign Will and the Making of a New Worldliness*. You think about the network, about incessant flows from the south to the north to the south again. We are swamped.

In 2003, Søsna and Geir began the art project *Sørfinnset skole/the nordland*, a hyper-local, socially committed piece that explores how contemporary art can engage an extended dialogue with a local community. They were inspired by the work of Thais Rirkrit Tiravanija and Kamin Lertchaiprasert in their land, The Land, now a foundation. From south to north to south to north, waters flow sometimes asymmetrically, like monsoons. Understanding how ecology and natural habitats interact, in the broadest sense, with the sustenance of a community leads to orchestrating encounters and activities related to the seasons, to the construction of small-scale experimental architecture, lectures, concerts, courses, workshops, exhibitions, excursions, walks, and parties, in celebration of this intricacy. *Sørfinnset skole/the nord land* will last forever. This statement—a long-term commitment to a remote place and all its relationships—inspired the methodology of

Ensayos, which we have decided to conclude today.

If you've read about the beginnings of Ensayos, go back to **Composition** (if you haven't, go to **Decomposition**). And if you want to lay in the invisibility of the solidarity that runs through the veins of Ensayos, finish with the **Gift of Scent**.

### Gift of Scent

At the core of a scent lie the notes of the heart. Breathe in, inhale, open your mouth. Your throat itches, swallow. Little by little, volatile oils seep through your skin and other openings: castoreum, ambergris, seaweed. Putrid odors that evoke fascination, disgust, and pain in you. Inhale and naturally, more deeply, the high notes penetrate.



Saskia Wilson-Brown: Blackboard at IAO (2015). Courtesy: Ensayos.

Ephemeral, transient, subtly provocative, the gift of scent doesn't overcome the visual realm. It infiltrates the interstices of that hegemonic space that is the truth of what is seen. It colludes with dreams and plots with attraction. It appeals to a chemical, molecular level, to that which escapes power and law. You sweat from the heat; the world ends and all you have to offer (yourself) is a tangled story of substantial hybridity. Scent, color, and sound merge in healing synesthesia.

Camila Marambio ((Phoenix, Arizona, USA, 1979) Transdisciplinary curator, researcher and writer. Her projects focus on decolonizing environmental conservation spanning the fields of environmental

humanities, rights of nature, contemporary art, and performance studies. In 2010 she initiated *Ensayos*, a long-term collective and nomadic ecocultural practice born in Karokynká, the big island of Tierra del Fuego, in alliance with the Wildlife Conservation Society of Chile. Camila holds a PhD in Curatorial Practice from Monash University (2019) and two master's degrees: one in Experiments in Art and Politics from Sciences Po (2012) and another in Modern and Contemporary Art: Critical and Curatorial Studies from Columbia University (2004). She was a postdoctoral fellow at the Royal Art Institute in Stockholm as part of *The Seedbox: An Environmental Humanities Collaboratory* (2021). As a guest curator at the Patricia Phelps de Cisneros Research Institute for the Study of Latin American Art at the Museum of Modern Art (MoMA), she conceived and moderated the *Aconcagua Summit* (2020) and edited the booklet *The Water is the Law* (2021). She currently promotes peatlands protection through the implementation of a global agreement and acting as curator of new perspectives at *Para la Naturaleza* in Borikén, Puerto Rico.

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matters related to the political ecology of Tierra del Fuego. As CM2 she co-edited *Turba Tol Hol-Hol* (2023), which accompanied the Chilean pavilion at the 59th International Venice Art Biennale 2022. Carla is also co-editor of *Dismantling the Nation. Contemporary Art in Chile* (2023), with Florencia San Martín and Paula Solimano.

Translated from Spanish by Cecilia Pérez-Muskus.

# *Ilhas*: Choreographic Crossings in Landscapes of Exclusion

Marina Guzzo & Kidauane Regina Alves

## Abstract

This article seeks to share the experience of production, research and knowledge from the *Ilhas* [Islands] project, carried out in the context of the Corpo e Arte Laboratory, in Baixada Santista, Brazil. In this writing exercise, we set out to think about ways of dancing the landscapes and the bodies that inhabit them, focusing on the infrastructures of exclusion created in the Brazilian colonial context. The project's cartography emerges as a possible method of research and production of a present-day history, based on the documentation of the participating artists' processes, their relationships with places, times, memories, and waters. These are contributions to thinking about water not only as a "natural resource," but as a common good that unites stories, crossings, and breaths of life and memories. The text also contributes ways of producing expanded knowledge in art and shelter in the face of the climate crisis, which is a social, political, and aesthetic crisis.



## Exclusion Landscape

In this text, we intend to share details of the creation of the video-performance work entitled *Ilhas*—conceived in the Corpo e Arte Laboratory, in Baixada Santista, Brazil—during the Covid-19 pandemic. The work was created with women who live in this region, during 2021. Let us tell you a little about this landscape: Santos is considered one of the 10 best cities to live in Brazil, according to a ranking by the United Nations Development Program (PNUD).<sup>1</sup> It is the largest municipality on the coast of São Paulo state and has the largest port in Latin America, which accounts for more than half of the country's GDP.

Inequality, however, marks this classification. The city has the largest stilt slum in the country,<sup>2</sup> in addition to a degraded port area, an abandoned historical downtown and a Municipal Market inaugurated in 1902,<sup>3</sup> which functions as the promise of the future that once housed the port city during the coffee cycle.

Around Santos-SP, a territory located on an island (the Island of Santos and São Vicente), a complex cluster of other municipalities grew up, called Baixada Santista. This municipalities cluster became considered a Metropolitan Region in 1996, following the disintegration of the city of São Vicente into other municipalities:

<sup>1</sup> Estadão. "Conheça as 10 Melhores Cidades Brasileiras Para Morar." *Estadão Imóveis*, June 20, 2020. <https://imoveis.estadao.com.br/noticias/conheca-as-10-melhores-cidades-brasileiras-para-morar/>.

<sup>2</sup> Garcia, Diego and Klaus Richmond. 2020. "Maior favela de palafitas do Brasil enfrenta pandemia, incêndio e enchentes." *Caderno Cotidiano, Folha de S. Paulo*, June 20, 2020. Accessed September 21, 2023. <https://www1.folha.uol.com.br/cotidiano/2020/06/maior-favela-de-palafitas-do-brasil-enfrenta-pandemia-incendio-e-enchentes.shtml>.

<sup>3</sup> "Mercado Municipal de Santos." Turismo Santos. Accessed September 21, 2023. <https://www.turismosantos.com.br/?q=pt-br/content/mercado-municipal#:~:text=Inaugurado%20em%201902%2C%20reunindo%20os,atendem%20no%20atacado%20e%20varejo.>

Bertioga, Cubatão, Guarujá, Itanhaém, Mongaguá, Peruíbe, Praia Grande, Santos and São Vicente (Comitre 2013).<sup>4</sup> The Metropolitan Region of Baixada Santista is marked by a commercial and financial process centered in the municipality of Santos/SP, due to the port and the industrial complex of the island and in the nearby city, Cubatão/SP. Furthermore, the municipalities are connected to Santos and the Port for work, educational and cultural activities, through a series of human infrastructures built to cross the waters that surround the island: bridges, boats, ferries... Everyone needs to go to "the city" and local contexts become poverty areas, without any cultural activity or decent public services in the famous "bedroom communities."

The consolidation of Baixada Santista as a strategic industrial hub for Brazil generated a series of bedroom communities surrounded by fresh water and seawater. The city of Cubatão, as well as the Port of Santos, promoted the development of territories in the region, which coincided with the consolidation of the business-military coup that began in 1964. The entire Baixada Santista area was considered a national security area, that is, "a free territory for the exercise of brutal repression and unlimited discretion against the population and the working class" (ACPO 1995).<sup>5</sup>

In this territory of geographic and social exclusion, women end up making large displacements, many of them to work as housemaids and cleaners, others

<sup>4</sup> Comitre, Felipe. 2013. "A Evolução Urbana na Baixada Santista: Hierarquização e Fragmentação na Região Metropolitana da Baixada Santista (RMBS)." In *Anales del XIV Encuentro de Geógrafos de América Latina v. 1*. Lima: Unión Geográfica Internacional - Comité Nacional Perú (UGI - PERÚ), 1-13.

<sup>5</sup> Associação Cultural de Pesquisa Operária (ACPO). 1995. "Dossiê Caso Rhodia II: Contaminação Populacional." ACPO. Accessed September 21, 2023. <http://acpo.org.br/biblioteca/bb/Dossie2.htm>.

to access healthcare and to educate their children. To be acknowledged, they need to cross the waters, moving from the outskirts towards downtown. According to data produced by CEERT (Center for the Study of Labor Relations and Inequalities), when analyzing the workforce and its condition in Brazil in 2022, the following percentages of underemployed people in the labor market (in unemployment, underemployment or potential workforce): In black women: 30.8% are underemployed; in black men: 19.7% are underemployed; in white women: 20.0% are underemployed; in white men: 12.8% are underemployed (CEERT 2021).<sup>6</sup> The material reality of poor black women in Brazil is marked by domestic violence, femicide, underemployment, and accumulated working hours.

Forced displacement, often daily, for hours of degrading physical labor, alienates most people from their own territory, the land, and the waters that surround them. This separation between nature and culture also happens with water, quite emphatically. Many people move where others stroll and rest, creating a split between body and nature. The modern ideal, concerning the exotic world as a place that presents itself only as a dream—as if the forest were a separate world or as if whiteness were separate from the living world. Or, as Donna Haraway and Thyrza Goodeve question (2015),<sup>7</sup> there is a maintenance game regarding what is nature and what is culture in our society. How can we invert these values?

Coloniality encouraged the idea of nature as something

<sup>6</sup> Centro de Estudos das Relações de Trabalho e Desigualdades (CEERT). 2022. "Página Principal do CEERT." Accessed September 21, 2023. <https://ceert.org.br/esg>.

<sup>7</sup> Haraway, Donna J. and Thyrza Goodeve. 2015. "Fragmentos: Quanto Como Uma Folha. Entrevista com Donna Haraway." *Mediações - Revista de Ciências Sociais* 20, no. 1: 48-68. DOI: 10.5433/2176-6665.2015v20n1p48. Accessed September 22, 2023. <https://ojs.uel.br/revistas/uel/index.php/mediacoes/article/view/23252>.

detached from us, which can be taken and destroyed by human action. The capitalist system has always functioned in opposition to nature, understanding that nature serves as a resource and must, therefore, be exploited and transformed into a commodity. Including the waters and their ecosystems.

In contrast to integration with nature, we have seen monoculture deserts grow in Brazil. The *plantation*<sup>8</sup> system installed by the colonial process, generating wounds and territorial and subjective inequalities, needs to be studied, recognized, and healed by processes that take time and different agencies. A *plantation* brings with it the management of its racialized bodies, spreading the desert, pain, and suffering. From sugarcane, coffee, soybeans, pasture, cattle. From the destruction of biodiversity, it

is a space where punishment is exerted, as well as the management of certain bodies within it: Who deserves to live and who can we let die?

bell hooks (2022)<sup>9</sup> points out that by "remaining oblivious to our natural environment" the "geographical hierarchies" between the city and the outskirts born out of occupation movements are maintained. Unbridled and unplanned urbanization creates a disconnection between coexistence and the substrates of nature.

As we produced the performances with the participating women artists, we realized, through their speeches and journeys, that the waters and all the vegetation surrounding them began to inspire, albeit precariously, a place, an inspiration, an

<sup>8</sup> Kilomba, Grada. 2019. *Memórias da Plantação: Episódios de Racismo Contemporâneo*. Rio de Janeiro: Cobogó.

<sup>9</sup> hooks, bell. 2022. *Pertencimento: Uma Cultura Do Lugar*. Trad. Renata Balbino. São Paulo: Elefante, 284.

encouragement, a relief. The memories and experiences brought back and permeated by the waters point to the maintenance of perpetual gender exploitation.

### Choreographic Crossings

In this scenario arises the creation of the *Ilhas* project. It is a crossing-performance carried out by five women who live in the area of Baixada Santista. *Ilhas* is a video-performance project that portrays five crossings between the Island of Santos and São Vicente, based on the body/memory/history of these five women. Nalva, Marília, Maria, Eleonora, and Kidauane board ferries, boats, and cross bridges to reach the center. On foot, by boat, or by bike these are daily crossings that take place on an island, across many continents, where dreams and reality mix up with the social choreographies imposed by water and men. In the proposition of crossing the connective points between the Island of Santos and São Vicente

and the outskirts territories, each woman can look at the water that surrounds the landscape, and in a poetic dialogue, they can trace a route to escape and dream.

The cities of São Vicente, Guarujá, and Praia Grande are connected to the Island of Santos and São Vicente through bridges and ferries, building the flows that people cross in search of income, work, studies, leisure, and some dignity. The five women-artists-participants in the project, who crossed these points of geographic connection with three other cities, hold a blank sign as a silent demonstration, portraying their experience in this territory. This poster is based on the work



Maria Lisboa in *Ilhas*, dir. Marina Guzzo. Santos/São Paulo, 2022. Photo: Luiz Marques.



Maria Lisboa in *Ilhas*, dir. Marina Guzzo. Santos/São Paulo, 2022.  
Photo: Luiz Marques.

*Blank Placard Dance*<sup>10</sup>, by Anna Halprin, a referential piece in American postmodern dance, where demonstrators protested with blank signs in reaction and response to the Vietnam War and social turmoil in the USA. This is an emblematic performance of the work cycle that Anna Halprin developed from 1965 onwards. She explores the political dimension of performance and its inscription in urban space, at the crossroads of the

event, seeking to test social and institutional restrictions, to disturb the border between artists and audiences, and to encourage a direct experience, as both an artistic and a political commitment.

This reference is important to create not only a performative structure but also to understand the diversity of "protests" that fit into each crossing, into each unique story of the participating

<sup>10</sup> Halprin, Anna. "Blank Placard Dance, 1967." Tamalpa Institute. Accessed September 25, 2023. <https://www.tamalpa.org/calendar/blank-placard-dance>.

women, and also into the common element that crossed us: the access to an island of exclusions.

In dialogue with Anna Halprin, we recreate another ongoing war: that of displacement in the face of precarious and exclusionary infrastructures. Precariousness is the result of the polarization that modernity produced (Maiolino and Mancebo 2005)<sup>11</sup>: Access to social rights, as opposed to their exclusion, is determined through historical processes of colonial-capitalist exploitation. In the city, this polarization is expressed in the physical geography of space and social relations, that pursue a way of living in a place:

«The strong image of privileged islands in cities, standing out from vast and impoverished regions, both economically and intellectually, ends up establishing as a truth a radical

duality situation in the urban fabric, where shades seem to no longer have a place. People talk about exclusion and there is a consensual authorization for cultural, spatial, social, and economic exclusions to be inserted in an amalgamated way. In this sense, the poor population from the outskirts are marked beforehand by these exclusions, subjectifying themselves as outsiders». (Maiolino and Mancebo 2015, 14)

In this social binomial that debates social exclusion and inclusion, center-periphery, multiple generalizations simplify the discussion on the social violence reproduced by city infrastructures. What we need to do here is to understand, based on the performative work, how the participating women artists act as interlocutors of the social and urban issues of their territory, in the local reality of the

<sup>11</sup> Maiolino, Ana Lucia and Deise Mancebo. 2005. Análise Histórica da Desigualdade: Marginalidade, Segregação e Exclusão." *Psicologia & Sociedade* 17, no. 2 (May/August 2005): 14-20. <https://doi.org/10.1590/S0102-71822005000200003>.

Metropolitan Region of Baixada Santista.

Among the crossings, we can notice the precariousness of common goods in outskirt regions through irregular sewage disposal, with consequences on people's health; difficult access to work and income; the erasure of the memory of black, Indigenous, and migrant populations who built the central and suburban territories of the Metropolitan Region of Baixada Santista. Each woman goes through multiple necessary and silent protests on her own.

As a practice committed to finitude, mortality, and carnality, it is a practice that considers reality as encompassing all living beings and water as a center. As a situated practice and knowledge (Haraway and Goodeve 2015), *Ilhas* also took place as a subjective mapping of landscapes, through water

and women's bodies. For ecologists, the landscape is a unit of internal difference (Tsing 2019).<sup>12</sup> The central issue in studying landscapes is appreciating their diversity. A landscape is a mosaic of forest fragments; that is, life forms that live around each other. It is in the different dynamics of each fragment that the heterogeneity of the landscape takes place (Tsing 2019). On the other hand, for cultural geographers, the landscape is a cultural and political system.

What matters is to understand the set of structural principles that hold it together. Aesthetic principles can be important and political histories also play a role. The key element about a landscape, however, is being a unit—or several units, as in the case of *Ilhas*—which can be contrasted with other landscapes, shaped under different principles. It

<sup>12</sup> Tsing, Anna. 2019. *Viver nas Ruínas: Paisagens Multiespécies no Antropoceno*. Brasília: Mil Folhas del IEB.





Anna Halprin: *Blank Placard Dance*, San Francisco Dancer's Workshop, California, 1967. Anonymous photograph of the performance.



Anna Halprin: *Blank Placard Dance*, San Francisco Dancer's Workshop, California, 1967. Anonymous photograph of the performance.

is the fragmented structure of the landscape, the internal differences, that is fascinating.

The landscape considers fixed physical structures and their socio-cultural and economic human flows. The structural principles that hold a landscape together are its social and ecological determinations, materialized in the way of life and physical-geographical consequences where a landscape can suffer modifications. The capitalist economic system produces generalizations, however, it also needs to produce differences within universality to remain alive, competitive, and oppressive. The relationship between universal and particular materializes in the social and ecological landscapes that we share and build (Lacerda 2017).<sup>13</sup>

In *Ilhas*, despite the heterogeneity—that is, the singularities that each territory conveys within an extensive area (Baixada Santista)—a common element connects the five crossings: the waters reveal exclusion processes and memory accesses that reveal social and subjective issues, such as the sense of belonging experienced by the artists, which makes them capable of creating stories about the living territories:

«Everything we see, what our vision reaches, is the landscape [...]. It is not only made up of volumes but also colors, movements, odors, sounds, etc». (Santos 1998)<sup>14</sup>

### Heterogeneous Landscapes

Each woman chose her path, and faced with it, she chose how

<sup>13</sup> Lacerda, Rosane Freire. 2017. "Eurocentrismo, Modernidade e Colonialidade na Construção do Estado e das Relações Étnico-Raciais na América Latina." *Revista SURES*, núm. 7 (febrero de 2017): 39-55. <https://ojs.unila.edu.br/ojs/index.php/sures>.

<sup>14</sup> Santos, Milton. 1998. *Metamorfoses do Espaço Habitado*. São Paulo: Hucitec, 61.



Nalva Andrade dos Anjos in *Ilhas*, dir. Marina Guzzo, Santos/São Paulo, 2022. Photo: Luiz Marques.

to cross it. Also, each woman wrote about the journey, to be part of the video performance. The entire creative process took place remotely, through a working group that met weekly and individual conversations with the artistic direction, since we were in the pandemic. The journeys were also carried out wearing masks and recorded from a distance. We shared every detail of the process in weekly meetings, which lasted four months. The exchanges were intense, and the water that bathed us braided a common thread: being a woman and living crossing paths.

Nalva crossed the Pouca-Farinha neighborhood, in Guarujá,



Marília Fernandes in *Ilhas*, dir. Marina Guzzo, Santos/São Paulo, 2022. Photo: Luiz Marques.

towards Santos. She crosses the Atlantic waters, an ocean that carries many stories and so many crossings. Nalva crosses this path almost daily, looking for access to health treatment for a chronic illness. She crosses the Santos bay, right at the entrance to the port channel, in a small motor boat. Her journey competes with the large ships that enter the port daily for loading and unloading. It is also subject to fog and the sea, which changes according to the tides and the climate. Nalva reports on her crossing the difference between living on a suburban beach, where trash, mud, and neglect are very different from the "other" side of the coast, where she arrives. Santos'

beachfront, an award-winning project of urban planning and landscaping, outlines a beautiful and calm scenery, quite different from the other edges of the island, which have their "backs" to the Atlantic. In Nalva's words:

«My crossing... I would like, in my dreams, that this beach was very clean, that everything was tidy, that the tide would not flood our houses, that the wind wouldn't swipe away the houses' roofs... that the tide wouldn't invade. This is our reality. The beach is not dirtier just because we have people who clean it. Just mud. Just mud. But the sewage goes to the beach.»<sup>15</sup>

Marília crossed the waters of the canal port, which blend with the present and past of the landscape. She brings back

memories of having lived in Guarujá and crossing a boat that no longer exists, telling how her mother saw "the city." Marília connects us to the sea, like this nostalgic image to where we always want to return, almost an uterine longing. Her poetry and music come together in the rocking of a boat that carries many names, and just like water: it carries memory. "That nameless water"<sup>16</sup>—and this is how Marília builds her crossing.

Eleonora crosses the sea by bicycle, across a bridge. The Suspension Bridge. She balances, the wind cutting her face. The fear she reports when crossing it is undermined by the need to access the city that guarantees her livelihood, study, and social inclusion. The bicycle is one of the most common forms of

<sup>15</sup> Text written by Nalva Andrade for her crossing-performance Ilhas, video. Cultura Santos. "Video performance - 'Ilhas' #PrêmioCelioNori." Video. YouTube, March 17, 2022, 14:43. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sFwhlScB6o8>.

<sup>16</sup> Text written by Marília Fernandes for her crossing-performance Ilhas, video. Cultura Santos. "Video performance - 'Ilhas' #PrêmioCelioNori." YouTube, March 17, 2022, video, 14:43. Accessed September 25, 2023. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sFwhlScB6o8>.

transportation for the beach population. In the images of Eleonora's journey, we see the great flow over the bridge. We also see the sea. She also crosses the Atlantic Ocean, at the other end of the island. "It seems that crossing has always been a family mission"<sup>17</sup>—she reports. The sea comes as a consolation. She leaves Praia Grande and arrives at São Vicente, but there's still a long way to Santos, along the beach. Eleonora's body over this bridge shows how infrastructure has a direct impact on our lives and our interaction with the landscape, with nature. The bridge is narrow, cutting off space from the sea, but also from the body that needs to arrive to the other side. "The fear of sharing the bridge with cars and motorcycles disappears when one needs to cross it to gain access."<sup>18</sup>



Eleonora Atysenk in *Ilhas*, dir. Marina Guzzo, Santos/São Paulo, 2022.  
Photo: Luiz Marques



Maria Souza in *Ilhas*, dir. Marina Guzzo, Santos/São Paulo, 2022.  
Photo: Luiz Marques.

Maria now crosses a river. The Rio dos Bugres, as she says, "we cross by boat, over the sewage exposed by the low tide."<sup>19</sup> Dirty water, full of fragments from the

<sup>17</sup> Eleonora Artysenk in *Ilhas* performance cf video. Cultura Santos. "Video performance - 'Ilhas' #PrêmioCelioNori." Video. YouTube, March 17, 2022, 14:43. Accessed September 25, 2023. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sFwhIScB6o8>.

<sup>18</sup> Eleonora Artysenk in *Ilhas* performance cf video. Cultura Santos. "Video performance - 'Ilhas' #PrêmioCelioNori." Video. YouTube, March 17, 2022, 14:43. Accessed September 25, 2023. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sFwhIScB6o8>.

<sup>19</sup> Text written by Maria Lisboa for her crossing-performance *Ilhas*, cf video. Ibid.

port. On a small boat, far from the big city, she tries to enter a path that takes much longer if done walking or by bus. Her crossing highlights the State's lack of care for the Brazilian outskirts, and the violence imposed on bodies that are far from the sea, from the center, from the port. The load is the priority. The waters, people, trees, and animals do not matter as much in the Capitalocene picture (Moore et al. 2016).<sup>20</sup>

Kidauane represented the connection between the Continental Area of São Vicente and the island area of the city. In her text-crossing, she tells us about a deep Brazil, born and raised from violence and exclusion:

«Brazil starts here. We were the first village in Brazil. The beginning of colonization is marked by a tsunami that destroyed this village, and the reconstruction was built further away from the sea, with the same colonial pattern of exploitation: first the sugar mills, then the coffee export, today it is oil. This land is marked by crime and violence. I live in the Continental Area of São Vicente. A territory built by people from the northeast who migrated looking for work and pressured for the construction of this bridge. They protested with fire on roads to demand human dignity in this place. They fought for sanitation, schools, and health, against soil poisoning, and for people who were poisoned by the flow of toxic waste that a French company used to send over here. Ponte dos

<sup>20</sup> Jason Moore, Elmar Altver, Eileen C. Crist, Donna J. Haraway, Daniel Hartley, Christian Parent e Justin McBrien. 2016. *Anthropocene or Capitalocene? Nature, History, and the Crisis of Capitalism*. New York: PM Press.

Barreiros and I turned 26 years together. I have its image engraved in my memory as the bridge that connects me to dreams and despair. Years of forced crossings to the other side of the city within a geography of humiliation. Our history is a portrait of the tragedy that was the Portuguese colonization, perpetuated by a political mafia that oversees its own people. Here, the scales of justice never revealed the accumulation of inequalities we inherited, which is why justice is untrue. I wonder, when will a tidal wave come and destroy everything, so we can build a fair and true future? Another life that is worthy of being called new. The deep fracture of these lands sometimes appears to be irreversible. And I cry for this nation because I cry for myself, and vice versa. While I wait for the teardrops and the sea waters to bring forth a wave of popular upheaval as our only salvation.»<sup>21</sup>



Maria Souza in *Ilhas*, dir. Marina Guzzo, Santos/São Paulo, 2022. Photo: Luiz Marques.

<sup>21</sup> Text written by Kidauane Regina Alves, for her crossing-performance *Ilhas*, cf video. Cultura Santos. "Video performance - 'Ilhas' #PrêmioCelioNori." Video. YouTube, March 17, 2022,

## Social Choreographies

This work highlights the many necessary speeches and protests about the reality imposed on bodies in the cities. There is a clear proposition: holding a blank sign and raising it suggests the political manifestation of something that needs to be said. A pose. A protest. A pose is capable of synthesizing the appropriation of a critique and demonstrating that this performing body carries past histories of its territory. Manuel Segade (2020, 327)<sup>22</sup> states that:

«Any critical appropriation of gestures, any recognition of what came before, is a body that carries other inherited stories, but also stories that are to come.»

The body force exerted to maintain a pose, at the same

time, supports a position within the geographic space. In his text "*Gestos Radicais e Coreografias Sociais*," Spanish professor, curator and director Manuel Segade (2020, 327) retrieves a phrase by American cultural theorist Craig Owens (1950-1990): "To strike a pose is to make a threat." This phrase summarizes the political force that a gesture brings by being capable of producing signs, meanings, and understandings about a given reality.

In *Ilhas*, the bodies of women who live on the waterfront, around the island, highlight the ecological and social crisis we are experiencing. These bodies are capable of producing critical gestures within their territories, where the main effects of capitalist degradation materialize. Greiner (2020)<sup>23</sup> states that artistic, cultural, and,

14:43. Accessed September 25, 2023. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sFwhIScB6o8>.

<sup>22</sup> Segade, Manuel. 2020. "Gestos Radicais e Coreografias Sociais." In *Histórias da Dança: vol. 2*, ed. Julia Bryan-Wilson and Olivia Ardui. São Paulo: Museu de Arte de São Paulo Assis Chateaubriand (MASP), 325-331.

<sup>23</sup> Greiner, Christine. 2020. "A Vulnerabilidade como Ativadora da



in this case, community manifestations carry the power to build new perceptive fields:

«Dance, like any other artistic manifestations, does not resolve social conflicts or political or economic problems. However, it can give visibility and voice to issues and states of precariousness, and in this sense, it imagines and activates policies for life. It can also establish movements that subvert the standards established by power devices, opening paths for micropolitics, or what I have called microactivism. These do not confront the official statutes of macropolitics (government, institutions, market, among others), but act to open new fields of perception» (301).

Greiner (2020) reminds us of the need to bring visibility to states of precariousness, affirming cultural, artistic, and community practices as a possibility of questioning the elements that are part of a precarious life. *Ilhas* shows that the social choreographies imposed on women are also related to all of us. Each woman who performs in her choreographic crossing makes visible the precariousness in which her body is structured, also from flows, transits and difficulties narrated by the journey with their bodies and narratives.

For Segade, the bodies that make up the political “minority” and that experience processes of marginalization are capable of “imploding a certain

*Criação.* In *Histórias da Dança: vol. 2*, ed. Julia Bryan-Wilson and Olivia Ardui, 300-307. São Paulo: Museu de Arte de São Paulo Assis Chateaubriand (MASP).



Eleonora Artysenk in *Ilhas*, dir. Marina Guzzo, Santos/São Paulo, 2022.  
Photo: Luiz Marques.



Scene showing Marília Fernandes in *Ilhas*, dir. Marina Guzzo, Santos/  
São Paulo, 2022. Screenshot by the authors.

normative paradigm of social personality” (Segade 2020, 328), and the implosion means an escape from the subjection of controlled conventional behaviors by power mechanisms:

«The term social choreography is useful as a promise of coordination of the discursive forces that gesture in dissident bodies. [...] Social choreography, writes Hewitt, ‘serves as a warehouse of cultural exchange, in which aesthetic norms (in the narrowest sense) are experienced in search of the social formations that these norms can produce, and in which new types of social interaction are forged into new artistic forms» (Segade 2020, 328).

The waters that surround us highlight a common element, which supposes practices of collaboration and coexistence in the creation of sustainable bonds guided by democratic, community values and shared power—including the power of the artist. In the Ilhas proposal, we understand water as a common good, that also intertwines common life stories—not only from women, but mainly from women, who narrate, from their memories, dreams, and sensibilities, the presence of this materiality in the landscape, in the body and the infrastructure that surrounds them. It is so much more than a “natural resource.”

Water is the memory of life and the body. The common element that intertwines the five video-crossings, and also holds stories that were silenced by several forms of violence and domestication.

## Theoretical Approaches

It is important to define the concept of "commons," established through collective management of resources that can be found in different historical and cultural contexts. Commonality is established through relationships, encounters, sharing, and also through rules, games, conviviality, practices of support and presence. It requires constant co-production and is unseizable: it has to stop being common to become available for exclusive appropriation. It is a relational domain not only of human relationships, but also of objects, institutions, spaces, and climate. Therefore, it depends "on a community that sustains and permanently updates it" (Moraes and Parra 2020).<sup>24</sup>

A form of art that comes close to this concept, idea, as an exercise in contour and definition, means that creating (in its different forms and ways) does not separate the world between us (artists, teachers, producers who investigate, think and make art) and others (students, the public, curators or spectators). Or, as Cohen-Cruz (2020) suggests,<sup>25</sup> given the current context of demanding sociopolitical challenges, we need to think about how artists and their propositions can reveal what we have in common, looking for more people to bring ideas on how to express the wide diversity of experiences occurring in the world.

A common art establishes a relationship of co-belonging and interdependence. A community

<sup>24</sup> Moraes, Alana and Henrique Z. M. Parra. 2020. "Laboratórios do Comum: Experimentações Políticas de uma Ciência Implicada." *Revista do Centro de Pesquisa e Formação 1*, no. 10: 113-139.

<sup>25</sup> Cohen-Cruz, Jan. 2020. "Beyond the 'Other': Seeking Commonality in a Divided World." In *A Busca do Comum: Práticas Artísticas Para Outros Futuros Possíveis*. Org. Carla Cruz, Hugo Cruz, Isabel Bezelga, Miguel Falcão e Ramon Aguiar. Porto: Instituto de Investigação em Arte, Design e Sociedade – i2ADS.

that makes and is made for the common as we move or choose to stop. The common, then, starts from the recognition that we exist through the things that sustain us, just as we sustain the things that exist through us, in a building or in a mutual establishment (Moraes and Parra 2020).

This establishment or fabrication of the common as a driving concept for the insurgency of new collectivities, can be defined “as an expression of action, of the will to generate collectiveness” (Savazoni and Silveira 2018).<sup>26</sup> It is an activation, an idea of building together possibilities and meanings for life, which are not only given by public authorities or large institutions, but can be studied through organizations, meetings, artists, and activists. The works carried out in this project had this type of

activation, the five women-artists-participants were able to seek common, singular meanings for something that is common to all: the waters they cross and surround them.

Common art doesn't have one choreographer or director, it has many. It results from a collective production and, at the same time, belongs to no one. Common art dances with the wind, with the tides, with the rain.

During this artistic experience, in the *Ilhas* project, we sought the theoretical basis of art thinking through the categories of author Erin Manning (2019)<sup>27</sup> about the “minor gesture,” an aesthetic and political field guided by the notion of process as a strategy for new ways of thought and production in art, as well as a call for collective insurgencies in the current context. “It is to

<sup>26</sup> Savazoni, Rodrigo T. and Sergio Amadeu Silveira. 2018. "O Conceito do Comum: Apontamentos Introdutórios." *Liinc em Revista* 14, no. 1 (May 2018): 5-18. Accessed July 18, 2020. <https://doi.org/10.18617/liinc.v14i1.4150>.

<sup>27</sup> Manning, Erin. 2019. "Proposições para um Movimento Menor." Trad. André Arias. *Revista Moringa* 10, no. 2 (June-December 2019): 11-24.

emphasize that art is before all else a quality, a difference in kind, a technique, that maps the way toward a certain attunement of world and expression” (Manning 2019).

Care and attention are also necessary to think about what is common, what is common to us. Cities and territories—and especially the waters that surround them—built under colonial logic, did not leave enough space or time for these gatherings. And even when they happen, like with an artistic action that involves a community, they bear the risk of becoming merchandise, products, and propaganda. These systems work together in the violence they enforce over humans and non-humans, turning all of them into objects, gadgets, commodities, as well as devices and shows to be sold as social action.

A social choreography implicated in the common is always a reconfiguration, a displacement within the common to place

there something that wasn't common. It is difference and singularity. A difference that becomes visible through a “community figure,” which is undone through encounters and new configurations produced by a creative process. Commonality appears between the cracks and fractures, in what is agreed upon from an apparently “inconceivable,” “difficult,” or “unexpected” proposal.

A new configuration of bodies, time, and places that come closer through art. And this art is not created by equals. There is no perfection or virtuosity. It is an art that deals with singular encounters, producing differences, opposition, joy,



Crossing scene in *Ilhas*, dir. Marina Guzzo, Santos/São Paulo, 2022.  
Screenshot by the authors.

and a lot of (poetic) struggle. Common art and its experiments provide agency between body, affection, aesthetics, and politics. We also place ourselves in front of a territory, a public space, and expand into the field of inventive practices, people who didn't belong or didn't know this complex universe of knowledge/movements, and, upon entering this field, gain visibility and power of speech:

«The World trembles, it creolizes, that is, it multiplies, mixing its forests, its seas, its deserts, and its ice floes, all threatened, changing and exchanging its ways and culture and what yesterday we knew as identities, largely massacred» (Glissant 2014).<sup>28</sup>

By carrying out a theoretical reflection on Ilhas' artistic work, and its possibilities for enunciating issues related to

climate crisis and ecology, we were able to think about how the preservationist and "ecological" debate often excludes a large number of people from information, health and modern technologies. Preservation does not prevent transformation—or deconstruction. And deconstruction has to do with reviewing the privileges of those who may or may not have access to a comfortable urban life, or to a preservation area, with its distances and exclusions. It is, among other things, a persistent critique of what a person doesn't want (Spivak et al. 1996).<sup>29</sup> How can we continue to desire preservation, but including the people who live and transform themselves in preserved areas? How to inhabit ruins and transform them into living landscapes? It is important to maintain the production of life for different species and subjectivities that share this

<sup>28</sup> Glissant, Édouard. 2014. *O Pensamento do Tremor*. Juiz de Fora: Editora UFJF, 81. [Free translation.]

<sup>29</sup> Spivak, Gayatri, Donna Landry e Gerald MacLean. 1996. *The Spivak Reader: Selected Works of Gayatri Chakravorty*. New York: Routledge.

living world with us—not as an essence, but as a relationship (Glissant 2014).

Activating other ways of existing and carrying out actions/creations, including human and non-human agents, in a network of materialities and sensibilities that promote plural inter-species choreographies—not always consensual. It is the production of landscapes, which not only catalog diversities but manage to narrate the stories in which they emerge, understanding that diversity is always created with collaborative synergies, always in the future (Tsing 2015).<sup>30</sup> Invent, mix, dance. Blowing with different breaths (Glissant 2014).

«Innovating in the history of humanities, the world is no longer just a dream for us, a distant thing to be satisfied, it is no longer a project, an achievement to be completed, but from now on, and for as long as necessary, a suffering, a common suffering. Our job is to strive everywhere, here and there, inside, to sublimate this suffering. It becomes suffocating, or on the other side, a free breath. It can become, in absolute diversity, a liberated breath, that is, art and just measure, freedom—the words and also the very things of the interdict, which we ironize so as not to infringe on ourselves—it is, here-there, our work around the world» (Glissant 2014, 41).

In a world where encounters are possible, islands then turn into archipelagos. We're all neighbors (Krenak and

<sup>30</sup> Tsing, Anna. 2015. "Margens Indomáveis: Cogumelos como Espécies Companheiras." *ILHA: Revista de Antropologia* 17, no. 1 (January/July 2015): 177-201.





Scene showing Nalva Andrade Anjos in *Ilhas*, dir. Marina Guzzo, Santos/São Paulo, 2022. Screenshot by the authors.

Cesarino 2016).<sup>31</sup> And some crossings produce meaning and connections. Choreographing, in etymological terms, is drawing, recording space with a moving body. To choreograph means putting yourself in relation: to time, space, writing, movement. Choreographing is organizing possibilities for transformation gestures—in space and time. Choreographing here, in this text and from this work,

is understood as the verb that allows us to (re)position ourselves, from our own bodies, to think about mobility, the water that surrounds us, the trajectories of exclusion.

The artistic experience happens in the sensitive encounter where we can invent new ways of existing, feeling, dreaming, and plotting. It is important to clarify that this doesn't happen

<sup>31</sup> Krenak, Ailton and Pedro N. Cesarino. 2016. "As Alianças Afetivas." In *Incerteza Viva: Dias de Estudo*. org. Jochen Volz and Isabella Rjeille, São Paulo: Fundação Bienal de São Paulo, 169-184.

with any given art. I like to think from Dénètém Touam Bona's proposition (2020, 34)<sup>32</sup>:

«An art that is like a celebration of earth, a celebration of the sky, a celebration of the cosmos. An art that is a big Yes to life. And so, an art that forces us to say No. To attest to the intolerable, the filthy, the destruction of the world: whether it is the sixth mass extinction of living species or the sinister agony of the right to asylum.»

The proposition of an art that is truly engaged in social transformation, and that doesn't reproduce what the art market places as urgent—due to its agenda in calendars and spaces drawn and accessed by only a few. Let's think about art-life, water-life, water-art connections. And so many other infinite combinations and crossings... In this sense, we can think of an art (or many arts) as power(s) in

establishing alliances between different ontologies: placing forms of life and knowledge face to face, and being able to share in a sensitive (and not just rational) way. An ability to establish a dialogue between worlds and forms of life. Understanding the sea, the rivers, the waters as forces that transform and inhabit this world—just like us. The river could be our grandfather—as Ailton Krenak (2022)<sup>33</sup> says—and not just a garbage dump or a place where water is "taken" from. The *Ilhas* project connects with this by naming the "unnamed" waters that surround us in this territory.

These different worlds and cosmologies show some transit between Indigenous and *quilombola* communities, but also between scientists and their scientific data, concrete numbers and measurements that only make sense to experts

<sup>32</sup> Bona, Dénètém Touam. 2020. *Cosmopoéticas do Refúgio*. Desterro, Santa Catarina: Cultura e Barbárie, 34. [Free translation.]

<sup>33</sup> Krenak, Ailton. 2022. *Futuro Ancestral*. São Paulo: Cia. das Letras.

and scholars on the subject. The movement and crossings of protagonists can be studied as a transit of knowledge. Diasporic choreographies that consider the body and differences as a possibility of (re)existence and building futures (Silva 2018).<sup>34</sup>

Art as an exercise in otherness (beyond what the art market

defines as "other"). Human and more-than-human otherness. An art that can impact the way we choose to live and care for our commons. A way to face fear and emerge from paralysis in the face of the dreadful future that approaches, with courage (acting from the heart) and joy, which is, according to Spinoza (2008),<sup>35</sup> the greatest shelter.

**Marina Guzzo** (Campinas, SP, Brasil, 1978) Artist, researcher and professor. She is an associate professor at the Federal University of São Paulo (Unifesp) at Baixada Santista Campus and a researcher at the Body and Art Laboratory of the Institute of Health and Society. As an artist and researcher, Marina focuses on the interface of body and landscape, mixing dance, performance and circus by tensioning the limits of subjectivity between cities and nature. Since 2011, her research revolves around the climate crisis and the role of the artist in producing imagery for a decaying world in the Anthropocene. She works in partnerships with health, cultural, and social assistance facilities, thinking of art as a political action that weaves a complex interspecies network of people, institutions, objects, plants, animals, fungi, and landscapes. She holds a post-doctorate degree from the Department of Performing Arts at ECA-USP and a master's and doctorate in Social Psychology from PUC-SP.

<sup>34</sup> Silva, Luciane Ramos. 2018. *Corpo em Diáspora: Colonialidade, Pedagogia de Dança e Técnica Germaine Acogny*. Doctoral thesis, Universidade de Campinas (UNICAMP).

<sup>35</sup> Spinoza, Baruc. 2008. *Ética*. 2. ed. Trad. T. Tadeu. Belo Horizonte: Autêntica.

**Kidauane Regina Alves** (São Vicente, SP, Brasil, 1995) Artist and researcher. She has a degree in Social Service from the Federal University of São Paulo (Unifesp) and a master's in Health Sciences from PPGICS at Unifesp. Kidauane's artistic and research practices focus on health, with the body and territory as her main research themes, with an emphasis on socio-environmental vulnerability and women's health. She worked as a dance artist with the Meander International Platform (Norway), an international network of artists dedicated to discussing art and the climate crisis. She worked as a social educator in socio-educational actions on social participation with children, teenagers, and adult women at the Instituto Camará Calunga de São Vicente-SP. She also serves as a social worker to guarantee the rights of vulnerable populations and in socio-educational actions on public policies on violence against women in the community of Paraisópolis-SP, through the Einstein Program in Paraisópolis Community. She is a performer linked to the Interdisciplinary Dance Center of the Body and Art Laboratory (Unifesp). Kidauane participates as an activist in Mbyareko, an Indigenous collective from Baixada Santista, where she produces community actions along with the Guarani Mbya people toward territorial recovery in the cities of São Vicente, Praia Grande, and Itanhaém.

Translated from Portuguese by Sylvia Monasterios.

*Primitiva Afluencia*. Giving Birth to  
Hydrofeminist Relations: Practices of Care  
for the Cali, Cauca and Magdalena Rivers  
Luisa Fernanda Giraldo Murillo

**Abstract**

*Primitiva Afluencia* [Primitive Affluence] (2020 - 2023) is a triptych of the living arts crossed by the autoethnography of labor and birth. It is a three-act hydrofiction composed of hydrofeminist textualities. The story manufactures a bio-woman with marigold skin, whose power is to alleviate river channels with gestures and poetics of care. It is an offering to the hydric genealogy of the territories of Cundinamarca and Valle del Cauca in Colombia.

These gestures are a cross between the foundational myth of native Amazonian peoples—such as the Tukano and the Shipibo—about the serpent-canoe, and the concept of hydrofiction. The myth's serpent is a canoe and a womb that populates the banks of large rivers and also carries the bodies of dead humans back to the cosmos. A union between hydrofiction and the image study methodology of the German historian Aby Warburg establishes a relationship between the river and the anaconda as mothers.

The triptych intends to reinstate the myth through expanded dramaturgies about the origin of the river-Anaconda and to promote bonding with and a vital imaginary about the waters, to counteract the current necropolitics with a hydrocommons life.

## Births

In my second month of pregnancy, during COVID-19 confinement, I searched with my partner for the nearest body of water: the Cacique Lagoon. We took my pregnant body as an offering, along with all our hopes for the future. I entered the lagoon tied on my waist to a line/cloth/cord that held and protected my body. It allowed me to float, to see from the lagoon, to be a womb, and, at the same time, an embryo in formation.

To understand the root of *Primitiva Afluencia*, it is important to understand the gesture in Figure 1. In this aerial image, I found an echography of identity as a species for the first time, from the singularity of the birth to come but finding myself/ourselves as being the environment. We were the embryo in the maternal body of the lagoon and this was the first visual connection between the



Figure 1. Luisa Fernanda Giraldo: *Gesture En la laguna el agua hace de cuna* [In the Lagoon the Water Acts as a Cradle] (2020). Cacique Lagoon. Cácuta, North of Santander. Photo: Keishmer Enrique Pérez Torres.



Figure 2. Google Maps satellite images of the monthly journeys to Valle del Cauca.

umbilical cord and the shape of the Anaconda. From then on, I flew once a month from Pamplona (North of Santander) to Valle del Cauca, to meet the Cali River.

The images in Figure 2 display my journeys. In these traveling

<sup>1</sup> Global health emergency caused by Covid-19.

paths, I find a connection between the zigzagging movement of the Anaconda in regard to the umbilical cord, which seems as an elongation into the Colombian territory. This provided a kind of anchorage with the mythological figure, considering I traveled as the Anaconda would, while pregnant, by air and land to reach a harmonious space.

In December 2020, I could not submerge my belly in the waters of the highly polluted Cali River. The Cali River is born in Los Farallones Natural Park and flows into the Cauca River, which in turn flows into the Magdalena River. There is mining activity at its source, accompanied by a strong military presence.<sup>2</sup> This collective body descends from south to north, which I interpret as an inversion of the colonial north-to-south power relation, thus inverting the capitalist compass.



Figure 3. Luisa Fernanda Giraldo: *Gesture ¿Cómo arrullar a un cuerpo de agua?* [How to Cradle a Body of Water?] (2020). Cali River, Valle del Cauca. Photo: Keishmer Enrique Pérez Torres.

Cultural critic Suely Rolnik (2019)<sup>3</sup> refers to this compass concept as a guiding device for a politics of desire within the body, the possibilities and needs of singularity for good living. Tracing that desire, the following immersive gesture was born from the question: How to cradle a body of water in a crying state of alert and contamination?

Nowadays, these gestures of walking, immersing, gestating, and cradling inside a river are

<sup>2</sup> Movimiento Ser Montaña, an environmental group for the liberation of the Cali River.

<sup>3</sup> Rolnik, Suely. 2019. *Esferas de la insurrección. Apuntes para descolonizar el inconsciente*. Ciudad Autónoma de Buenos Aires: Tinta Limón, 59-62.



rare for a pregnant woman; they are “primitive gestures” (Zuleta 2010),<sup>4</sup> almost extinguished due to water pollution levels. However, despite these indicators, the ordinary life of the Cali River still retains vestiges of these actions.

Back home—three months later—I closed my eyes on the night of March 27, 2021, to push one last time and watch my daughter Manantial go through a golden tunnel as her legs pushed hard. I saw quite a few women give birth in many different ways: screaming, moaning, crying for help, thrashing, holding their breath, holding back the flow of contractions so as not to overflow at the wrong time, sedated, anguished; all

finally released from the pain of birth. Even though we were exhausted, I felt the force of all births with me, I felt us anchoring ourselves to the biological web of our species.

Giving birth was an experience that founded worlds (Bardet 2019)<sup>5</sup> out of the division between the maternal body and the body of the newborn. During gestation, childbirth, and later, in the multiple social articulations, as a constant question about care, I established dialogues with/from/alongside thinkers such as Marie Bardet, Suely Rolnik, María Puig de la Bellacasa, Claire Mercier, Lisa Blackmore, Mapa Teatro, and Astrida Neimanis. They are part of the hydrofeminist thinking that accompanied the transformation

<sup>4</sup> Zuleta, Stanislao. 2010. “El arte en las sociedades primitivas,” *Arte y filosofía*, Hombre nuevo editores. Medellín: Fundación hombre nuevo editores, 51-71. He proposes a temporal and technological inversion of the term “primitive” in the history of art, comparing social time and spiritual needs during cultural changes. In other words, he prioritizes the primitive temporal relationship with matter, the urgency and necessity of gesture over scientific evolution.

<sup>5</sup> Bardet, Marie. 2019. *Hacer mundos con gestos*. Ciudad Autónoma de Buenos Aires: Cactus, 103-111.

of metaphor into material substance and action. The crying, the hunger, and the fluids as primitive gestures went from being thought to being a body.

Three months after I gave birth, in June 2021, as part of a research developed at the Interdisciplinary Masters in Theater and Living Arts, we walked with Luz Ángela Monroy, Carolina Castaño, and Francisco Viveros (fellow students), to where the Cali River is born. When I arrived at the Peñas Blancas area, I expected to find a single place, a space of containment and emergence of this flow. I associated the birth of the river with the maternal birth.

Gilbert, a mountain interpreter, accompanied and guided us through this territory. He told us about the existence of 2,834 river springs in the whole area, going down the mountain to the Pichindé and Aguacatal rivers, which make up the Cali River basin. This seemed to me a duration of multiple forces and multiple exits. By associating this

with human birth, I interpreted these sources as an event of the cyclical process of our species. In view of the number of springs, or births, of this body of water, I had the urge to reinstate the idea of childbirth as a unique and singular event that invigorates the formation of bodies. Everything shapes the body: all that we say, do, think, and transform, resembles the pot of food on the river bank: a set of matters and materials



Figure 4. Satellite and frontal image of the water springs of the Cali River (2021), Los Farallones Natural Park. Photos: Google Maps and Luisa Fernanda Giraldo.

(Abderhalden 2013)<sup>6</sup> that sustain us, so we can continue to exist. Gestation, caresses, nourishment, childbirth, companionship, and all the networks of care sustain the birthing throughout the riverbed.

With the daily action of caring, I understood that each birth and its network must situate the tones, borders, and affective assemblages (Bardet, 91-97) of experience. Caring is a gesture/ thought and, as María Puig de la Bellacasa says, “ways of caring can be identified, investigated and understood. Concretely and empirically, caring remains ambivalent in meaning and ontology” (2017).<sup>7</sup> That is to say that until caring is not embodied, it is difficult to explain the feeling of death and life that those of us who mother find ourselves in, faced with the urgency of the biological aspect of the primitive gesture. In every daily

life, bodies refine those ways of articulating and caring.

To build these poetical and political practices in my work in the living arts, the gestures of *Primitiva Afluencia* integrate the hydrofeminist positions on the care of bodies of water. When living next to rivers, eating and washing are part of those daily practices that can illustrate our ancestral relations with bodies of water.

### On the Riverbanks: Eating and Washing

The many water sources, as they descend the Colombian mountains, form large rivers such as the Magdalena, the Cauca, or the Cali rivers. To coexist with their large bodies, we inhabit their shores. The walks along the rivers or lagoons may be considered social devices for inhabiting the shores. These

<sup>6</sup> Abderhalden, Rolf. 2013. “Actos/actas: el archivo es la obra/la obra es el archivo.” *Becas de investigación teatral: indagando la escena*, 19-22.

<sup>7</sup> Puig de la Bellacasa, María. 2017. *Matters of Care: Speculative Ethics in More Than Human Worlds*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1-3.

walks are Sunday rites in Colombia. These days, time sheds its capitalist dimension as we prepare to share the food and the family ceremonies. An object that is always near the river is the cooking pot. It is a mobile sculpture laboratory that becomes a spiritual compass: a place to center vital forces and social encounters.

On these familiar occasions for sharing food and collective well-being, going into the water together is a poetic healing experience. To be in the water is to stop resisting the passing of time; it is to unload the temporal gravity of the body at work; it is not checking the clock before a meeting. Sharing nudity, washing our bodies, having a family meal, sleeping near the river, living together in an intimate space of leisure through our public actions, are microscopic ritual events that understand duration through the insistence, urgency,

and necessity of daily actions. In his text “María Teresa Hincapié (2000-2008) Restitución,”<sup>8</sup> David Gutiérrez Castañeda traces the artist’s thinking, describing the daily operations or microscopic rituals she considers sacred. Eating and washing are two such sacred rituals, daily performed for the sustenance of life. All human settlements arise near bodies of water. From a hydrofeminist stance, washing and eating are gestures in which care is understood as the articulating axis of our vital relations with water.



Figure 5. Gustavo Gómez: *Lavanderas en el río Cali* [Washerwomen in the Cali River] (1982). Universidad ICESI digital library. Source: <https://audiovisuales.icesi.edu.co/audiovisuales/handle/123456789/63153>.

<sup>8</sup> Gutiérrez Castañeda, David. 2013. “María Teresa Hincapié (2000-2008) Restitución”. *El Ornitorrinco Tachado: Revista de Artes Visuales*, Vol. 1, 20



Figure 6. Luisa Fernanda Giraldo: *Gesture Lavandera en el río Cali* [Washerwoman in the Cali River] (2022). Cali River, Valle del Cauca. Photos: Mónica Restrepo.

As a poetic strategy, I entered the now polluted waters of the Cali River, near the Cali Departamental Fine Arts Institute [*Instituto Departamental de Bellas Artes de Cali*] to perform the gesture of washing. As a gesture of care, I chose to wash the same line/cloth/cord with which I had entered the Cacique Lagoon during my pregnancy. To wash in the river was to wash away time; to enter its waters was to enter a temporal flow without gravity, which reminds us that bodies can pause their material production in order to build affective and spiritual relationships with their environment. This gesture gave me another clue to find the root of *Primitiva Afluencia*.

As I fastened the line/cloth/cord to my body, I perceived

the force of the river and all the solid and mineral materials it carries. Catching the debris with the fabric meant a kind of microscopical and spiritual discharge for the river. Intending to extend the gesture, and, as an act of hydrofiction, to wash and approach a body as large as the river-Anaconda, I moved along the entire riverbed guided by Google Maps, passing the Cauca and the Magdalena rivers, until I came to Puerto Berrío, a municipality in the department of Antioquia with a particular geomorphology. As Figure 7 shows, the flow's circular shape suggests the river may be expelling what has been thrown into it in the past.

The Cauca and the Magdalena rivers have had a violent history for several decades, due to

the country's armed conflict. Everything that has been thrown into the river surfaces in this area: materials, plastics, minerals, and also human bodies—especially of people who disappeared during the 1990s in Colombia. Because of the number of bodies found, the inhabitants of this area collect and care for these bodies, asking them for miracles and favors while burying them in La Dolorosa cemetery (Calle and Martínez 2021).<sup>9</sup> In these material and symbolic relations, within the hydrofiction, I associate the rivers with anacondas: settlers and gravediggers, messengers



Figure 7. Image taken from Google Maps of the area called Remolino Grande [Big Swirl] in the municipality of Puerto Berrío, Antioquia.

between the earth and the cosmos.

By geolocating Puerto Berrío in satellite images, articulating and repositioning the images and shapes of the large rivers as records of an idea, I allude to the methodology developed by the Jewish German historian Aby Warburg in his *Atlas Mnemosyne*. This method established new visual relationships in an open poetic process that created a personal cartography of symbolic connections or, in this case, possible fictions. This was done by updating the boards to workspace tables using Illustrator. All of the images were positioned and distributed intuitively.

I associated these visual relationships of various Colombian rivers with the serpent named Anaconda in Indigenous cosmogonies. In the Afro-Cuban

<sup>9</sup> Calle, Margarita and Felipe Martínez. 2021. "Los rostros, los ríos y las ruinas. Trazas de un archivo sensible en el contexto de la violencia política en Colombia," *Co-herencia* Vol. 18 No 34, 449-450, <https://doi.org/10.17230/10.17230/co-herencia.18.34.16>

thought of the Huaros-Canta, it is believed that the river is born from the sea. This turns the tributaries into the veins of the earth, thus inverting a whole gravitational and colonial relationship (Farfán Lobatón 2002).<sup>10</sup>

The Atlas in Figure 8 shows ceramic supports from the pre-colonial *palafitos* of Maranhão, Brazil, which are marked with icons representing the skin of the anaconda. They are a reference to the myth of the snake-canoe (Navarro 2021).<sup>11</sup> The myth tells how the white Anaconda of the cosmos descends to Earth in the form of a belly-canoe, stopping on the shores to drop humans to populate the land. On its return trip, the Anaconda delivers the bodies of the dead to the stars. So, both the Anaconda and the River are mothers. With them, I establish a link through



Figure 8. Luisa Fernanda Giraldo Murillo: Board generated in Illustrator using/ updating the methodology of Aby Warburg's *Atlas Mnemosyne*.

hydrofiction for the union of bodies and rivers in their shared condition of mothering. The Tukano shamans speak of the Amazon River as the terrestrial Anaconda and of the meandering rivers as the movement of the reptile. In *The Cosmic Zygote* (1982), Peter Roe's book about the Shipibo—a Pano-speaking people of the Peruvian Amazon—we read about the part played by anacondas in the creation of the world, and their association

<sup>10</sup> Farfán Lobatón, Carlos. 2002. "El simbolismo en torno al agua en la comunidad de Huaros-Canta," *Bulletin de l'Institut français d'études andines*, Vol. 31, 8, <https://doi.org/10.4000/bifea.6967>.

<sup>11</sup> Navarro, Alexandre Guida. 2021. "La anaconda como serpiente-canoe: mito y chamanismo en la Amazonía Oriental, Brasil," *Boletín de Antropología* vol.36, núm. 61, 164-186, <https://doi.org/10.17533//udea.boan.v36n61a10>

with healing rituals, divination, ceremonial dances, and building musical instruments (Navarro 2021, 176-179).

A reinsertion of the origin myth of the river-Anaconda would empower our vital connection with rivers as an important element of a hydrocommons life, in “the urgency of (re)thinking the extractive dynamics that structure life, and the eco-ethical implications of the very categories of what is considered life” (Blackmore, Lisa).<sup>12</sup> Myth through ritual as a theatrical event—anchored to ancestral cosmogony—evokes/proposes/actualizes/revitalizes our ways of being alongside bodies of water.

Within the Indigenous cosmogonies across the Americas and the contemporary discussions, rivers are not resources to be exploited,

controlled, and domesticated at our whim; they are subjects with rights and duties,<sup>13</sup> as well as victims of the Colombian armed conflict. Rivers are beings capable of reacting to that which affects their vital environment. The hydrofeminist gestures proposed in this triptych confront our current necropolitics towards rivers with life in gestation.

I wondered then, how to assemble the myth as an agent of change through theatricality? The following gestures emerged as possible answers to that question.

### **First Gesture: *Partituras de caléndula para el río Magdalena* [Pot Marigold Music Sheets for the Magdalena River]**

In the old railroad station in the city of Girardot, from the

<sup>12</sup> Blackmore, Lisa. 2022. “Imaginando culturas hidrocomúnes: investigaciones interdisciplinarias y prácticas curatoriales entre ríos,” *Revista Heterotopías* v. 5, n. 10,15.

<sup>13</sup> Ruling T-622 of 2016 recognizes the Atrato River as the first river-subject endowed with rights in Colombia.



11th to the 31st of July 2022, we built a collective workshop that combined the efforts of fishermen, poets, filmmakers, visual artists, and craftsmen and craftswomen from Girardot and nearby rural areas.<sup>14</sup> We made five purgatorial mantles woven from poly-shade, orange satin and 8,000 live marigold flowers. We chose pot marigolds because of their antibiotic and anti-inflammatory power: they are supporters of life. We inhabited tributaries of the Magdalena River as well as the channel that leads to the Bogotá River. At that point, there are no more solid contaminants thanks to wastewater treatment, but the blackish and yellowish colors of the waters at the meeting point of the two rivers seemed painful and violent to us. In this relationship between bodies of water, color functions as a poetic instrument

that becomes an indicator of discomfort.

We composed the mantles as a kind of visual music sheet by performing corpographies of the healing marigold along with Indigenous Panche symbols. We investigated form, color, smell, antibiotic power, and the possibility of assembling an image that can heal. Corpography intends to place knowledge in the body through an image. These images we achieved came from the school and university idea—for those of us who aren't musicians—of the pentagram: five spaces where musical notes are constantly regrouped. Thanks to John Cage's graphic work on sound, we understand vibration differently. Where does it come from? How does it take shape? How does it look? In the musical sheet, we can visualize the wavy shape of sound.

<sup>14</sup> Nancy Sánchez, Sandra Obando, Rubén García, Rubén Bonilla, Ricardo Infante, Ricardo Gonzales, Pilar Martínez, Omar Casilimas, Nubia Jiménez, Mirian Murillo, Laura Martínez, Irinarco Pedromo, Liliana Cuervo, Edilma Villaraga, Diana Guarín, Clara Fonseca, Camilo Trujillo, Camila Gutiérrez, Armando García, Adonay Murillo, and Keishmer Pérez.

The composition placed the symbol of a maelstrom-headed woman kneeling in worship of the sun<sup>15</sup> on the five mantles. The music sheet mantles then became a pedagogical strategy within the group to think about the shape of sound and the movements of these river garments. This transformation of matter within the social fabric created a community moved by the desire to produce a cultural space and recover a dignified identity for the municipality of Girardot, which has usually been a place for the waste of Colombia's capital.

Alluding to the Colombian theater group Mapa Teatro, Suely Rolnik (2018)<sup>16</sup> describes their stagings as spaces that build ephemeral communities of affection. Each staging is singular and focuses the theatrical energy in the present



Figure 9. Collective construction of the *Music Sheets* (2022). Casa de la Cultura, old railroad bridge station. Girardot, Cundinamarca. Photos: Keishmer Enrique Pérez.

moment from “another sphere of subjective experimentation [...] an outside-of-the-subject” (13). Thus, the attendees are active witnesses as well as actors in the story, they become part of the myth of creation. In this exercise of the living arts, the audience takes on the role of witnesses, active spectators who build and complete the story. Figure 9 features different micro and macro moments of the composition process of the music sheet mantles. Translating

<sup>15</sup> A reference and connection with the meeting of the Remolino Grande area in Puerto Berrío, Antioquia.

<sup>16</sup> Rolnik, Suely. 2018. “En el principio era el afecto,” in *Mapa Teatro*, coord. by Colección de Arte Contemporáneo Seguros Bolívar. Bogotá, 13-19.

the paper-scale into river-scale was very important, as it turned the laboratory into a corporal process.

These mantles were hung from the old railroad bridge, 32 meters above the Magdalena River level. This bridge connects the municipalities of Girardot and Flandes. The five music sheet mantles were installed in the air to be played like piano keys by the force and wind of the river. As part of this musical performance, the wind releases the woven marigold flowers, which fall into the water as a symbolic healing and purging.

This action took place on July 31st, 2022, a touristy Sunday. As the closing act of our workshop/lab within the public program of the 46th National Artists Salon “Inaudito Magdalena,” we planned handicraft sales, made *sancocho* on the riverbank, and presented the performance. The gesture consisted of transporting a canoe adorned as a pot marigold petal down



Figure 10. *Partituras de caléndula para el río Magdalena assembled (2022). Railroad bridge. Girardot, Cundinamarca. Below, in the riverbed, is the tourist pier. Photo: Luisa Fernanda Giraldo.*

the riverbed, carrying relief to the river—just as the antibiotic properties of the marigold travel through human veins—while the shore was filled with handicrafts, food and culture.

In this experience, I was accompanied by José Irinarco, who has been a fishing engineer on the Magdalena River for over 50 years. He transported and steered the canoe into the riverbed. As the pot marigolds were blown onto the water’s surface, some were immediately sucked up by the force of the eddies. The canoe/belly was the



Figure 11. River day and performance. *Partituras de Caléndula para el río Magdalena* (2022). Girardot, Cundinamarca. Photos: Keishmer Enrique Pérez.



Figure 12. Luisa Fernanda Giraldo Murillo: Performative appearance at the closing of the workshop/laboratory *Partituras de caléndula para el río Magdalena* (2022). Magdalena River. Girardot, Cundinamarca. Photo: Girardot Mayor's Office.

vehicle to transport us safely throughout the river-Anaconda.

Upon receiving the aerial image (Figure 12) captured by the Mayor's Office of Girardot, a possible visual update of the myth of the snake-canoe was suggested through theater and the living arts. It was a collective experience that allowed us to lend a body to the myth from the hydrofeminist perspective.

### Second Gesture: *Primitiva Afluencia*

To join the Cali River at its source, to embody where this primitive force comes from, we met on September 2, 2022, at the entrance of the Departmental Institute of Fine Arts to travel with the attendees of the 9th International Encounter of Living Arts: *Hacer lo común* [Creating the Common]. We would go to Los Farallones National Park, where the river is born. There were 30 of us. Guided by a family of mountain interpreters, we

traveled by jeep, had breakfast, and walked carrying an offering of pot marigolds to La Colonia Fall. We had to purchase an insurance policy that marked us as tourists to enter the area, because there is a strong military presence due to the mining activity in the zone. Ecotourism has been the only way the park's inhabitants have found to make a living. This made me think about problems of State protection and access to rural public spaces.

The first performance took place upon arriving at the waterfall. A woman in costume transformed herself into Anaconda and delivered the pot marigolds to the riverbed as an offering of forgiveness. After this, each attendee decided to approach the waters and establish a personal connection with the waterfall: some sang to it, some immersed in it, others raised their heads inside it, or shared their food.

We went back to the park's entrance for lunch and then returned to the city. On the way

back, the second performance took place at the exact meeting point of the Pichinde and Aguacatal rivers. In this rite, the serpent descends in the form of a marigold flower to the riverbed until she finds this meeting point. Due to heavy mining activity in the zone, the pollution of the Aguacatal River transforms the waters of the Pichinde River and stains those of the Cali River. We had with us one of the music sheet mantles made in Girardot. Thanks to three helpful river guards,<sup>17</sup> we were able to submerge the mantle from one end of the river to the other, simulating the anaconda's movement.



Figure 14. Luisa Fernanda Giraldo: "Anacondas de caléndula" [Pot Marigold Anacondas] and "Abrazo al río Cali" [Embracing the Cali River] in *Primitiva Afluencia* (2022). Charco del Burro. Cali, Valle del Cauca. Photos: Julián Álvarez.

At the end of the rite, Anaconda sheds her skin to show her human body. Without her reptilian powers, she resorts to the embrace (Figure 14) as a



Figure 13. Collective offerings, immersions, and performance in *Primitiva Afluencia* (2022). Los Farallones National Park, La Colonia Fall. Cali, Valle del Cauca. Photos: Julián Álvarez.

<sup>17</sup> Mar Núñez, Lucia Amaya and Laura.

poetics of care for our species. Within these poetics of care (Puig de la Bellacasa 2017, 17) as hydrofeminist acts, there is greater urgency for rites of mourning, of forgiveness. We must understand the ecological dimension not only, for example, as recycling, but as a human dimension regarding the transformation of materials and affections. Springs, lagoons, upper course, streams, confluences, tributaries, middle course, alluvial plains, meanders, oxbow lakes, deltas, estuaries, and mouths: like the stages of human growth, each part of a river's body is in a different timeframe, each one realizes a universe and an affective assemblage. To be born, to grow in strength, and to die with dignity are the demands of these hydrofiction practices. In this sense, we must not only protect and care for springs and births; we must care for each stage of the river, as we do for each stage

of a living being, until it reaches death or further births.

Performatic immersions express this care through microscopic ritual acts such as cooing, humming (Deleuze and Guattari 2002),<sup>18</sup> washing, eating, asking for forgiveness, and caressing. These are actions that, when repeated daily, can help and revitalize our relationships with bodies of water.

### Closures and Openings Third Gesture: *Armadura cyborg, nacimiento de una biomujer* [Cyborg Armor, the Birth of a Bio-woman]

Ritual as theatrical hydrofiction composes a space for collective imagination and allows for speculative ethics on the care of waters. Embrace the waters, adore them, take care of them, talk to them, accompany them, visit them, eat on their shores, flow with them, light them, sing

<sup>18</sup> Deleuze, Gilles & Félix Guattari. 2002. "1837- Del Ritornello," in *Mil mesetas. Capitalismo y esquizofrenia*. Valencia: Pre-textos, 317.

to them, lull them to sleep. In my case, after navigating the Cécota Lagoon in North of Santander, I went down to the Magdalena River to metamorphose, within a hydrofiction, into a bio-woman made of pot marigold skin who heals the rivers.

I come from the mountains of Caldas and North of Santander. Navigating the lagoons, for me, was to move in the spiritual realm of the serpent. Lagoons are bodies of water different from the anaconda rivers. In Colombia, lagoons are generally found in mountains and moors. For the Guane people of the Department of Santander, ritual is linked to good living (*buen vivir*). In the *Hujupacha* cosmogony,<sup>19</sup> the womb, the lagoon, and the serpent are associated with the underworld; death is a passage to return to life; the jaguar represents

the intermediate world; and the eagle represents the world above. In their view, lagoons in the eagle's world become mirrors, eyes, and bellies on a human biological scale.

For Lévi-Strauss (1970),<sup>20</sup> the interaction between culture and the environment is vital, as symbolic phenomena become marks for memory. Here, the symbolic phenomenon of the pot marigold bio-woman purges the river with caresses to help its healing. The canoe's ability to float, in such a phenomenon, is associated with the anaconda's ability to move on land and water. Beings and matter that can move on water sustain human life and populate the Earth. By fabricating/visualizing/presenting this myth, it took on a new meaning for us. Theater and performance, as laboratories of social imagination (Rolnik 2018,

<sup>19</sup> References to the inaugural lecture of the exhibition "Otras Realidades," given by the Indigenous artist Edgar Pico Ruiz at the Custodio Garcia House for Culture, in the city of Bucaramanga, on June 9, 2022.

<sup>20</sup> Lévi-Strauss, Claude. 1970. "A estrutura dos mitos," in *Antropologia estrutural*. Rio de Janeiro: Tempo Brasileiro.



15-16), allow us to revitalize and update those symbolic phenomena in contemporary memory. Affective relationships mediated through imagination allow for the construction and embodiment of allegories.

As part of this eco-ethical commitment to creation, costumes, which have been one of the theatrical elements with which we collectively created the hydrofiction, goes from being a textile prop to the center of a material and emotional encounter with the environment. Pot marigold flowers, when adequately pressed and dried,<sup>21</sup> can last between 50 and 200 years. This means that there can be a durability for some of these gestures beyond the moment of the performances. There is a recycling of the bio-woman's skin. By pasting the dried flowers on my body with egg whites,<sup>22</sup> they



Figure 15. Luisa Fernanda Giraldo: *Biomujer con piel de caléndula* [Bio-woman with Pot Marigold Skin] (2023). *Virgilio Barco Library, Festival Pliegues y Despliegues, Ecologías en Acción Bogotá*. Photos: Natalia Giraldo.

became part of the skin. Inspired by Donna Haraway's cyborg imagery, in which she finds “a metaphor for the inhabitants of the postmodern world and a promise of emancipation” (Haraway 1991),<sup>23</sup> in this hydrofiction, a world appears in which humans can heal the environment with our skin.

Guided by hydrofeminist principles, my artistic practice was immersed in the birthing and

<sup>21</sup> Hurtado, Camila. “Virtual botanical pressing and drying workshop,” Instagram, @Happygreenfamily.

<sup>22</sup> Thanks to the meeting with the artist Margarita Ariza at La Dicha Artlab, an immersion residency in Salento. Quindío, Colombia.

<sup>23</sup> Haraway, Donna J. 1991. *Ciencia, Cyborgs y mujeres. La reinención de la naturaleza*. Valencia: Ediciones Cátedra, 6.

gestation of life. It was essential to understand birth, the river bed and river mouth, inside and outside. My daughter was named after the source of all anaconda-rivers: Manantial (Spring). There is in me and others, a vital force and desire to build memories where myth becomes part of life.

To think of a myth's journey, not only a narration, but a visual journey—a contemporary transfer onto bodies and landscape—becomes an act of symbolic representation, full of information and documentation, historical to the extent that it accumulates layers of time, layers of past/present/future spaces and thoughts. Donna Haraway writes about:

«a feminist writing about the body that, metaphorically, stressed vision again, for we need to stress that sense to find our way through all the visualizing tricks and powers of the sciences and modern technologies [...] to name where we are and where we are not, in dimensions of mental and physical space that we hardly know how to name [...] If we name it, we can answer for what we learn and how we look» (Haraway 1991, 326-327).

In the case of our gestures, by allowing the group of spectators-witnesses to randomly gather, regardless of their occupation and condition, we managed to find a collective imaginative force that is not rooted in history or struggles—however important or necessary as they are—but in the conviviality to which the living arts appeal. Each gathering, each union of forces, desires, and knowledge produced situated relations with the

landscape that are worth listening to, composing, and sharing. In *Esferas de la insurrección. Apuntes para descolonizar el inconsciente*, Suely Rolnik writes about the micropolitics of desire and its capacity to weaken the capitalist framework of our current times. Here, these small groups, these social movements and everyday gestures, produce a cellular transformation of the ways of being in the world (Rolnik 2019, 9-18).

Conviviality, embrace, rites, and, broadly, all the hydro-poetics of care mentioned in this reflection are daily actions that underpin a common life for humans and rivers. Hydrofictions are ways of operating on primitive gestures, theatrical in this case, which allow us to speculate, create, and present possible worlds for the healing of our relationship with the waters.

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Bogotá; *Primitiva afluencia* [Primitive Affluence], presented at the IX Encuentro Internacional de las Artes Vivas in Cali. She also participated as a lab/workshop organizer in the 46th Salón Nacional de Artistas (Girardot) with *Partituras de caléndula para el río Magdalena* [Pot Marigold Music Sheets for the Magdalena River]; and was awarded in the 17th SRA (V) Eastern Region with the gesture *En la laguna el agua hace de cuna* [In the Lagoon, Water Is a Cradle].

Translated from Spanish by Luis Mancipe León and Saúl Figueredo.

ECOCRITICAL  
PANORAMAS  
IN  
AMPHIBIOUS  
WORLDS

# The We Within: Oceanic Imaginaries of Caribbean Art

Tatiana Flores

## Abstract

The essay considers the representation of the ocean in the work of Caribbean artists and writers, including María Magdalena Campos-Pons, Dionne Brand, Édouard Glissant, Juana Valdés, Nadia Huggins, and Suchitra Mattai. It takes as a point of departure the critique of Western humanism and its purported universal subject in the art of Campos-Pons and examines how the artist calls forth a specific “we”: the victims of colonialism and the Transatlantic slave trade. Moving from the figural to the abstract sea, the essay turns to representational strategies for rendering the ocean’s vast immensity and the silenced histories contained therein. The author concludes that considering the sea as hydrocommons requires acknowledging difference and particularity.

## The Sea Within

María Magdalena Campos-Pons' 1990 mixed-media installation *Everything Is Separated by Water, Including My Brain, My Heart, My Sex, My House* prefigures a lifelong engagement with the ocean as a key site of artistic investigation.<sup>1</sup> In this early work, whose primary pictorial element is painted enamel on board, the artist depicts herself in a frontal upright pose, nude, and bilaterally split (Figure 1). A Black woman with a short Afro, her body is without skin. Its two halves, described in shades of red and yellow suggesting flesh, are positioned

against a white wall, each atop a small colorful structure that curator and scholar Lisa Freiman has identified as an Aztec temple (Freiman 2007, 35).<sup>2</sup> Seven rows of barbed wire encircle each body half. Between them is a vertically oriented stream of water. Its source lies below, between two adjacent text boxes: the left one reads "BRAIN" and the one on the right "HEART." The water gushes downwards from a form akin to a sideways figure eight. Punctuated by spirals, the central watery element resembles a waterfall.

Water as separator, as the title implies, counters the observation

<sup>1</sup> María Magdalena Campos-Pons' first retrospective took the name of this piece as its title. See Freiman, Lisa D., ed. 2007. *María Magdalena Campos-Pons: Everything Is Separated by Water* (Indianapolis: Indianapolis Museum of Art, in association with Yale University Press). In 2019, I curated a solo exhibition of the artist focused on the theme of the sea in her work for the Dana Women Artists Series Galleries at Mabel Smith Douglass Library, Rutgers, The State University of New Jersey. The exhibition later traveled to the Haggerty Museum of Art at Marquette University. See *María Magdalena Campos-Pons: Sea and Self* [exhibition catalog] (Milwaukee: Haggerty Museum of Art, 2021).

<sup>2</sup> Freiman, Lisa D. 2007. "María Magdalena Campos-Pons: Everything Is Separated by Water," in *María Magdalena Campos-Pons...*, ed. Lisa D. Freiman, 12-62. Indianapolis: Indianapolis Museum of Art, in association with Yale University Press.



Figure 1. María Magdalena Campos-Pons: *Everything Is Separated by Water, Including My Brain, My Heart, My Sex, My House* (1990). Mixed-media installation, water-based enamel on board, wire, wool threads. Approximately 84 × 72 × 4 in. Courtesy: Newfields Art Museum, Indianapolis.



made by ecofeminist Astrida Neimanis: “Water connects the human scale to other scales of life, both unfathomable and imperceptible. We are all bodies of water in the constitutional, the genealogical, and the geographical sense” (Neimanis 2012, 287).<sup>3</sup> The work of art belies its name, however, not only because the upright thrust of the water parallels the position of the artist’s bifurcated body, but also because the boxed-in words naming key organs function as a capital to the liquid column that cascades beneath (Freiman 2007, 35). Indeed, the structures holding up the figure’s legs find resonance in the architectural referents of the waterfall, bridging the separate(d) elements. The water is anthropomorphized: the spirals forming beneath them recall an eye and a hand, or a combination thereof, like the hamsa amulet, a Middle Eastern symbol of protection

consisting of an open palm with a pupil at its center. The sinuous curves describing the outer edges of the water resemble snakes, establishing a relation with the animal realm while also deepening the association to ancient mythological and religious traditions.

Water indeed connects, and it would not appear that Campos-Pons is refuting that. In *Soy Una Fuente/I Am a Fountain* (1990), she acknowledges her watery state of being, depicting the myriad liquids that ooze from her, among them tears, blood, and milk (Figure 2). This work also contains a body that is divided, but in this case, the organs are fragmented to the extent that the whole cannot be reconstituted. Campos-Pons’ emphasis on separation in both art works, rather than denying the interconnectedness of lifeforms and world cultures, counters the universal subject

<sup>3</sup> Neimanis, Astrida. 2012. “Hydrofeminism: Or, On Becoming a Body of Water,” in *Dutiful Daughters: New Directions in Feminist Thought and Practice*, eds. Henriette Gunkel, Chrysanthi Nigianni, and Fanny Söderbäck, 85-99. New York: Palgrave Macmillan.

of Western art and humanist discourse.<sup>4</sup> The specificity of her female organs and the broken-up body oppose the male ideal epitomized by Leonardo's *Vitruvian Man* (ca. 1490), which pictures a nude man, perfectly proportioned according to a classical canon, positioned within a square and circle, arms and legs extended to reach the edges of both. Her state of captivity, severance, and mutilation in *Everything Is Separated by Water* refuse the pictorial conventions of the nude woman as an object of visual consumption. While Neimanis, and ecofeminists more broadly, assert a common "we," Campos-Pons eschews generalization and stays with the "I" and "my."

Literary scholar Dixa Ramírez D'Oleo has critiqued the "we"



Figure 2. María Magdalena Campos-Pons: *Soy Una Fuente/I Am a Fountain* (1990). Mixed media installation: oil on board, clay tablets, 108 × 153 5/8 in. Detroit Institute of Arts, Museum Purchase, W. Hawkins Ferry Fund.

of ecocriticism for its "forced or coerced relationality" (Ramírez D'Oleo 2023, 8).<sup>5</sup> As she argues in a book combatively titled *This*

<sup>4</sup> Liliana Gómez discusses *Everything Is Separated by Water* as an intervention into "narratives of the anthropocene" and also makes the point that it "critique[s] universalism." See Gómez, Liliana. 2020. "Acts of Remaining: Liquid Ecologies and Memory Works in Contemporary Art Interventions," in *Liquid Ecologies in Latin American and Caribbean Art*, eds. Lisa Blackmore and Liliana Gómez, 35-53. New York and London: Routledge.

<sup>5</sup> Ramírez D'Oleo, Dixa. 2023. *This Will Not Be Generative*. Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press.

*Will Not Be Generative*, “The basic problem of this ‘we’ and its expected relationality when we consider racialization, and specifically (anti-)blackness, is that all ‘humans’ have not existed, lived, or died on a flat horizontal plane” (Ramírez D’Oleo 2023, 13). Neimanis’ “we,” like those of the authors critiqued by Ramírez D’Oleo, insists that “humans and nonhumans alike, are ‘all’ interwoven in processes of becoming and unbecoming, without attention to how these differences reify these inequities” (Ramírez D’Oleo 2023, 13). Campos-Pons’ stress on embodied subjectivity establishes a connection with Black women in the diaspora while simultaneously enacting an interpretive and affective refusal towards non-Black audiences. The artwork’s spatial configuration might lead a casual spectator to become unmoored, while the skinless body could induce

recoil. Whereas the Old Masters offered cohesiveness through the use of linear perspective and the idea of a painting as a window into a world, Campos-Pons puts forth a vision of the earth asunder that she and her ancestors have known for centuries. Denying wholeness or resolution, she counters what African-American philosopher George Yancy refers to as the white embodied gaze: “when white bodies look out upon the world, they not only see what has been put there for them to see, and see it in a specific way, but they cooperate, consciously or unconsciously, with broader processes of normative and epistemic accretion, in assisting to bring certain objects into view in particular configured ways” (Yancy 2016, 244).<sup>6</sup> Campos-Pons’ perspective corresponds instead to what Ramírez D’Oleo, following Zakiyyah Iman Jackson, refers to as the “black(ened) position”: “Perhaps to be in a

<sup>6</sup> Yancy, George. 2016. “White Embodied Gazing, the Black Body as Disgust, and the Aesthetics of Un-Suturing,” in *Body Aesthetics*, ed. Sherry Irvin. Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press.

black(ened) position is to always face a vision of the world that violently seeks to exterminate our specific 'we.'"<sup>7</sup>

Emphasizing partition, captivity, torture, and death (Aztec temples were sites of human sacrifice, after all), *Everything is Separated by Water* offers not merely "a vision of the world," but the world itself, for it operates, I argue, as a conceptual map.<sup>8</sup> The two halves of the body stand in for the continents of Africa and America, the water is the Atlantic Ocean, and the seven rows of barbed wire represent the major latitude lines: equator, Tropic of Cancer, Tropic of Capricorn, Arctic Circle, Antarctic Circle, North Pole, and South Pole. The work has typically been interpreted

in terms of the isolation of the artist's native Cuba to the rest of the hemisphere, and it could also be read as an allegory of contemporary migration, beyond the forced dislocation of Africans to the Americas.<sup>9</sup> When she created it, Campos-Pons was in the process of emigrating to the United States, and the piece previews the separation from her family and homeland, which would become a common theme in her art from then on. Reading beyond the biographical opens the work up to the significance of her intervention to the broader history of art.

In *Everything Is Separated by Water*, Campos-Pons stages a stringent critique of Western pictorial and cartographic traditions that betrays a

<sup>7</sup> Ramírez D'Oleo, *This Will Not Be Generative*, 61. See as well: Jackson, Zakiyyah Iman. 2020. *Becoming Human: Matter and Meaning in an Antiracist World*. New York: New York University Press.

<sup>8</sup> On the significance of mapping in Caribbean art, see Flores, Tatiana. 2017. "Inscribing into Consciousness: The Work of Caribbean Art," in *Relational Undercurrents: Contemporary Art of the Caribbean Archipelago*, eds. Tatiana Flores and Michelle A. Stephens. Long Beach, CA: Museum of Latin American Art, distributed by Duke University Press: 29-89.

<sup>9</sup> See Freiman 2007, 35-36, and Gómez 2020, 38.

decolonial posture. Philosopher Nelson Maldonado-Torres identified a “decolonial turn” in the late twentieth century in political mobilization and humanistic discourse, positing this as a “response to modern Western colonialism and its radical, longstanding forms of systematic dehumanization” (Maldonado-Torres 2017, 247).<sup>10</sup> The years leading up to 1992, the quincentennial of Columbus’ arrival in the Americas, propelled much reflection on the legacy of what some referred to as a discovery and others decried as an invasion. As Jamaican theorist Sylvia Wynter noted in her important essay “1492: A New World View,” defenders and detractors of the anniversary tended to approach it from a dyadic perspective: a confrontation of Europeans and

Indigenous Americans. What both Wynter and Campos-Pons called attention to is that this schema should not have been understood as a dyad, but, rather, a triad. The crucial third element missing from the critical debates around this charged anniversary was the enslaved African (Wynter 1994).<sup>11</sup> Indeed, Campos-Pons anticipated Wynter’s important argument, for *Everything Is Separated by Water*, created in 1990, forges a connection between Indigenous Americans and enslaved Africans. The Aztec temples act as the base for each half of the woman’s body. The figure is missing her feet, and the legs are held up by the temples which become akin to surrogate roots. Significantly, in 1992, Campos-Pons created a woodcut of a slave ship on

<sup>10</sup> Maldonado-Torres, Nelson. 2017. “On Metaphysical Catastrophe, Post-Continental Thought, and the Decolonial Turn,” in *Relational Undercurrents: Contemporary Art of the Caribbean Archipelago*, eds. Tatiana Flores and Michelle A. Stephens. Long Beach, CA: Museum of Latin American Art, distributed by Duke University Press: 247-259.

<sup>11</sup> Wynter, Sylvia. 1994. “1492: A New World View,” in *Race, Discourse, and the Origin of the Americas: A New World View*, eds. Vera Lawrence Hyatt and Rex Nettleford, 5-57. Washington and London: Smithsonian Institution Press.

amate bark paper, which was used by Indigenous Mexicans to paint their sacred codices before the Spanish invasion (Figure 3).<sup>12</sup>

Counterposing a stripped and severed Black body to audiences accustomed to envisioning the world as a coherent whole, the critique that Campos-Pons put forward in *Everything Is Separated by Water* signaled an inaugural moment in her own practice

and set a powerful example for artists who followed.<sup>13</sup> Not only did she deconstruct Western cartography, she brought its victims to the fore, refusing a universalizing abstraction that became a strategy of erasure and a means to evade blame or responsibility. Indeed, a map offers, in the language of decolonial studies scholars Catherine E. Walsh and Walter D. Mignolo, “dislocated, disembodied, and disengaged abstraction” (Walsh and Mignolo



Figure 3. María Magdalena Campos-Pons: *Untitled* (1992). Woodcut printed in black on six sheets of brown amate bark paper, stitched together with black thread. 206.37 × 55.56 cm. Museum of Fine Arts, Boston.

<sup>12</sup> Amate paper was banned during the Spanish Conquest. See López Binnqüis, Rosaura Citlalli t. 2003. “The Endurance of Mexican Amate Paper: Exploring Additional Dimensions to the Sustainable Development Concept.” Ph.D. dissertation. University of Twente, 6.

<sup>13</sup> See, for example, Carlos Martiel’s *Punto di Fuga* (2013) and *Encomienda* (2020), and Susana Pilar Delahante Matienzo’s *Dibujo Intercontinental* (2017) and *Abriendo Paso* (2023).

2018, 3).<sup>14</sup> Architect and scholar Fernando Luiz Lara has linked the development of spatial abstraction—as manifested through mapmaking, architecture, and urban planning—to the conquest of the Americas. Defining abstraction as “the quality of dealing with ideas rather than events, or something that exists only as ideas,” he argues that “[m]odernity was created when we abandoned any relational knowledge and adopted a superficial (what occurs on the surface) understanding of space in which the controlling white man is removed from it, and every non-man and non-white being is reduced to an object to be plotted and thereby controlled” (Lara 2020).<sup>15</sup> By making the body and space around it into a map in *Everything Is Separated by Water*, Campos-Pons exposes

cartographic abstraction as a “tool of coloniality” and commemorates its victims (Lara 2020).

In foregrounding the body, Campos-Pons forces us to see the ocean, not as an abstraction—an oceanscape of indescribable magnitude that in visual art tends to be rendered as both silent and empty—but as an active site of history. In the words of poet Derek Walcott, “The sea is history.”<sup>16</sup> Rather than letting “the ocean ke[ep] turning blank pages,” however, Campos-Pons underscores the connection between the oceanic and the human, time and time again (Walcott 1978). In the photographic composition *Nesting IV* (2000), she employs some of the same visual strategies as in

<sup>14</sup> Walsh, Catherine E. and Walter D. Mignolo, eds. 2018. Introduction to *On Decoloniality: Concepts, Analytics, Praxis*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.

<sup>15</sup> Lara, Fernando Luiz. 2020. “Abstraction Is a Privilege,” *Platform*. Accessed September 18, 2023. <https://www.platformspace.net/home/abstraction-is-a-privilege>.

<sup>16</sup> Walcott, Derek. 1978. “The Sea Is History.” Accessed September 18, 2023. <https://poets.org/poem/sea-history>.

*Everything is Separated by Water*: her own divided body, an ocean conceived on a vertical axis, and lines that divide and encircle, except that these are constructed with hair, less systematically (Figure 4). *De Las Dos Aguas* (2007) returns to the earlier work's pictorial structure but emphasizing physical wholeness—doubling as opposed to splitting the body (Figure 5). These and other works connect Blackness and the ocean and propose an archipelagic view of the world and its people that is premised on relationality.

Archipelagos are island chains, and they were conceptualized by Martinican philosopher Édouard Glissant and other Caribbean thinkers as sites of relational thinking that were foundational to generating epistemologies that were not beholden and, indeed, countered the Western

(continental) tradition. In Glissant's words, "What is the Caribbean in fact? A multiple series of relationships. We all feel it, we express it in all kinds of hidden or twisted ways, or we fiercely deny it. But we sense that this sea exists within us with its weight of now revealed islands" (Glissant 1989, 139).<sup>17</sup>

The sea within is an integral facet of Campos-Pons' body of work, and it is an important trope not only to her own experience but to the "us": "the sea within us" that Glissant describes. He conceived the Caribbean as a rhizome with islands as nodes in a network, but rather than an abstract grid or web, he called for specificity, writing, "Identity as a system of relation [...] challenges the generalizing universal and necessitates even more stringent demands for specificity" (Glissant 1997, 142).<sup>18</sup>

Foregrounding the Black body

<sup>17</sup> Glissant, Édouard. 1989. *Caribbean Discourse: Selected Essays*, trans. Michael Dash. Charlottesville, VA: University Press of Virginia.

<sup>18</sup> Glissant, Édouard. 1997. *Poetics of Relation*, trans. Betsy Wing. Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press.





Figure 4. Maria Magdalena Campos-Pons: *Nesting IV* (2000).  
Composition of 4 Polaroid Polacolor photographs, 29 × 25 in. each.  
Haggerty Museum of Art at Marquette University, Milwaukee.  
Courtesy of the artist and Gallery Wendi Norris.



Figure 5. María Magdalena Campos-Pons: *De Las Dos Aguas* (2007).  
Composition of 12 Polaroid Polacolor Pro Photographs. Approximately  
20 × 24 in. each, framed 80 × 90 in. overall. Courtesy of the artist and  
Gallery Wendi Norris.

in her oceanic imaginary, Campos-Pons calls forth a specific “we.”

## Peopled Waters

Seascapes across pictorial traditions have often focused on the view from the shore. Whether featuring calm or turbulent waters, bathers, or boats, these kinds of images underscore the present moment and envision the sea superficially, that is, on surface level. In this section, I focus on representational strategies employed by Caribbean writers and artists to foreground their history within the ocean’s abstract immensity.

Dionne Brand, a Trinidad-born poet and author living in Canada, captures the ocean as both familiar and overwhelming, recognizing its unparalleled power and agency:

«The sea behind the house where I was born was a rough country sea, with a long wide shining white beach. I recall waking up each day to discover what it had brought us, and what it had carried away. The word *gaze* only applies to water. To look into this water was to look into the world, or what I thought was the world, because the sea gave an immediate sense of how large the world was, how magnificent and how terrifying. The sea was its own country, its own sovereignty» (Brand 2011, 7).<sup>19</sup>

<sup>19</sup> Brand, Dionne. 2011. *A Map to the Door of No Return: Notes to Belonging*. Toronto: Vintage Canada.

The passage begins with the familiar image of the seascape before the author turns to consider the relation of the ocean to sight. The ocean quickly becomes an abstraction, first an analogy for the world itself, then a sovereign state. As the text progresses, what becomes increasingly clear is that the ocean eludes straightforward characterization. Over several pages, the reader learns that it is at once generous and relentless, that it is the author's first memory and a constant in her lived experience, "indistinguishable to me from air" (Brand 2011, 8). In her small town of Guayaguayare on the southeastern edge of Trinidad, "the sea sighed as at the end of a long journey" (Brand 2011, 8). Brand goes on to tell the reader what "you would not know": "that in that place there were fierce quarrels and illicit romances," "that old age did

not limit your sexual encounters or seductions," "that runaway madmen lived there" (Brand 2011, 8). In other words, the sea is silent to the daily dramas of human life, as it has been to the epic of forced displacement that brought Brand's African ancestors to that place over the course of centuries.

In his 1992 essay "The Antilles: Fragments of Epic Memory," delivered in Stockholm when he accepted the Nobel Prize for Literature, Derek Walcott wrote:

«The sea sighs with the drowned from the Middle Passage, the butchery of its aborigines, Carib and Aruac and Taino, bleeds in the scarlet of the immortelle, and even the actions of surf on sand cannot erase the African memory, or the lances of cane as a green prison where indentured Asians [...] are still serving time» (Walcott 2005, 72).<sup>20</sup>

<sup>20</sup> Walcott, Derek. 2005. "The Antilles: Fragments of Epic Memory," in *Nobel Laureates in Search of Identity and Integrity: Voices of Different Cultures*, ed. Anders Hallengren. World Scientific Publishing Company, ProQuest Ebook Central, <https://ebookcentral-proquest-com.proxy1.library.virginia.edu/lib/uva/detail.action?docID=244250>.

This evocative passage brings to life vivid images that connect Caribbean nature with its bloodstained, harrowing past. But perhaps it is too optimistic to say that the waves breaking on the shore “cannot erase the African memory,” for Walcott’s remembrance of the Indigenous, African, and Asian victims of colonialism exists because his words call them forth. Nature itself is silent, and plenty of tourists happily sit on Caribbean shores and gaze upon the water none the wiser. Indeed, Brand’s enigmatic comment that “the word *gaze* only applies to water” to me recalls the calming effect of water, as a place to rest the gaze and to be transported elsewhere with one’s thoughts. “Gaze,” according to the *Cambridge Dictionary*, means “to look at something or someone for a long time, especially in surprise or admiration, or because you are thinking about

something else.”<sup>21</sup> In her written meditations on the ocean, Brand often veers away from the water to recount anecdotes about the people of her village and their travails, and in many of these the ocean is the backdrop, not the protagonist. And, yet, “It’s difficult to live near the sea. It overwhelms. Well, not true. It owns. Your small life is nothing to it. The sea uses everything” (Brand 2011, 9).

The *Oxford English Dictionary* adds additional context to the term “gaze” by quoting Jacques Lacan’s famous definition from *The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis*: “In our relation to things, in so far as this relation is constituted by the way of vision, and ordered in the figures of representation, something slips, passes, is transmitted, from stage to stage, and is always to some degree eluded in it—that is what we

<sup>21</sup> *Cambridge Dictionary*, s.v. “gaze,” accessed September 20, 2023, <https://dictionary.cambridge.org/us/dictionary/english/gaze>.

<sup>22</sup> *Oxford English Dictionary*, s.v. “gaze, n., additional sense,” accessed September 20, 2023, <https://doi.org/10.1093/OED/5562607493>. For

call the gaze.”<sup>22</sup> The idea of an inherently elusive object of representation meshes well with Brand’s relating the gaze to water. The ocean as subject, whether visual or verbal, is evasive, and oceanic imaginaries seeking to account for history must find strategies keeping the gaze fixed and attentive. Brand models the challenge throughout the section of *The Map to the Door of No Return* entitled “Water,” as her narrator keeps drifting away from the ocean to memories and family anecdotes.

Eventually, Brand acknowledges that the sea is unseeable: “The sea would forever be larger than me. My eyes hit only its waist. I saw a wave’s belly looking backwards, I saw froth rolling toward my feet as the sea moved into my spot on the beach. It always came in a jagged circle, frothing and steaming” (Brand 2011, 12). What was earlier

described as a sovereign nation is now anthropomorphized as body parts: a waist and a belly. In a powerful image, the mighty sea is reduced to the evanescent circle forming on the sand around the feet of the narrator as the wave retreats from the shore. Her body is evoked here as is her psyche, though the ocean remains uncaring, its immensity never in question. The passage continues,

«It reduced all life to its unimportant random meaning. Only we were changing and struggling, living as if everything was urgent, feeling—the ocean was bigger than feeling. It lay at the back of us, on the borders of quarrels and disagreements. It took our happiness as minor and transitory [...] Our origins seemed to be in the sea» (Brand 2011, 8).

Here, Brand grapples with the ocean as an indifferent progenitor. When she evokes “our

discussion of the gaze in Lacan, see Maria Scott, “Deciphering the Gaze in Lacan’s ‘Of the Gaze as Objet Petit A,’” *The DS Project: Image, Text, Space/Place, 1830-2015*, accessed September 20, 2023, <https://thedsproject.com/portfolio/deciphering-the-gaze-in-lacans-of-the-gaze-as-objet-petit-a/>.

origins [...] in the sea," it is clear she is referring to her specific community. Her statement is not akin to declaring a universal "we," as in "we are all bodies of water" (Neimanis 2012, 287). Glissant observes that, in Caribbean aesthetics, "poetic thought safeguards the particular, since only the totality of truly secure particulars guarantees the energy of Diversity" (Glissant 1997, 32). Though it may appear similar from any given shore, the ocean for Caribbean people is a specific entity. The difficulty is to capture not only its immensity and elusive nature, but its particularity.

Aligning with Brand's locating origins in the sea, Glissant describes the ship that transported the ancestors as a "womb abyss" (Glissant 1997, 6). In his writings, the abyss becomes a central trope that evokes the terror of the Middle Passage, and he identifies three

different manifestations of it: "the belly of the boat," "the depths of the sea," and the immensity of the ocean's surface (Glissant 1997, 6-7). His writings on the abyss demonstrate the near impossibility of oceanic representation: "In actual fact the abyss is a tautology: the entire ocean, the entire sea gently collapsing in the end into the pleasures of sand, make on vast beginning, but a beginning whose time is marked by these ball and chains gone green" (Glissant 1997, 6-7). In this ungraspable, abstract space, how to render the specific?

Nadia Huggins has spent nearly a decade photographing swimmers in the waters of her local beach in St. Vincent. The series *Circa No Future* (2014-present) follows a group of male teenagers swimming and diving in Indian Bay.<sup>23</sup> The images capture joy and spontaneity, as the water

<sup>23</sup> This series is discussed in greater depth in DeLoughrey, Elizabeth and Tatiana Flores. 2020. "Submerged Bodies: The Tidalectics of Representability and the Sea in Caribbean Art," in *Liquid Ecologies in Latin American and Caribbean Art*, eds. Lisa Blackmore and Liliana Gómez, 163-186. New York and London: Routledge.

becomes a space to let go of social constraints. Recognizing the trauma the ocean holds for people of the African diaspora, the artist shows how empowering it is to know how to swim and to penetrate the deep (Figure 6). A photograph of an adolescent exploring the corals forming on the rock suggests both curiosity and agency. The light diffracting on the surface creates gentle patterns on his back, contrasting the craggy texture of the rock before him. Noting that most people who go to the beach experience the ocean from the vantage point of the shore, Huggins brings the viewer on an underwater journey to offer a space of potential and liberation.<sup>24</sup>

In the series *Disappearing People* (2018-present, Figure 7), the body is absent and what remains are bubbles that suggest a ghostly presence. The arresting compositions hold the gaze through the delicate interplay of



Figure 6. Nadia Huggins: *No. 4. Circa No Future*. Courtesy of the artist.



Figure 7. Nadia Huggins: *Disappearing People*. Courtesy of the artist.

<sup>24</sup> My remarks in this paragraph are informed by an interview I conducted with the artist on January 12, 2019.

light and color. The chromatic range travels from indigo in the depths to teal below the surface to a combination of both at the top level, where the light breaks through—a gleaming white. The bubbles leave a dynamic trace, marking a vertical path that culminates in a frothy explosion. Though one imagines that the bubbles index the presence of a diver, the photographs are composed in such a way to orient the movement upwards. What is suggested is not submersion into the depths, but, rather, ascension. Literary

scholar Valérie Loichot writes that “religions and rites prevalent in the diasporic New World privilege water as a sacred site, a shared place between the unborn and the departed, a necessary vessel for the dead to travel safely to another shore” (Loichot 2020, 4).<sup>25</sup> This series pictures the ocean with reverence, not as indifferent or uncaring, but as home.

Artist Juana Valdés, who was born in Cuba and emigrated to the United States as a child, has been engaging with the



Figure 8. Juana Valdés: *Rest Ashore* (2020). Still from single channel 4K video, sound, 13:35 min. Director and producer: Juana Valdés. Cinematographer and DP: Lee Burghard. Editor: Setty McIntosh. Sound design: Onel Mulet.

<sup>25</sup> Loichot, Valérie. 2020. *Water Graves: The Art of the Unritual in the Greater Caribbean*. Charlottesville, VA: University of Virginia Press.





Figure 9. Juana Valdés: *The Deepest Blue* (2023). 36 ceramic panels. 50 × 175 × 3 in. Location: Cruise Terminal F, PortMiami, 1103 N Cruise Blvd, Miami, FL, USA. Collection: Miami-Dade County Art in Public Places Trust. Photo: Zachary Balber.

oceanic for much of her career. Growing up in South Florida, she experienced the ocean as a site of natural disasters, migratory crises, and rising sea levels, perhaps more immediately than for its role in her ancestors' forced migration. Past and present converge in *Rest Ashore* (2020), a film that evokes the aftermath of a boat that has capsized. It was projected onto a large sail in its inaugural installation at Locust

Projects gallery in Miami. The space was dark, and wooden pallets were scattered about and also arranged to form a seating area. The film begins with a view from the shore, the waves loudly crashing. The viewer is then transported above the water, from the coastline to the middle of the ocean. Suddenly, the camera is underwater, within a space that is dark and disorienting before the water's surface becomes visible from

below. The scenes shift back to the shoreline from the coast, then from the air. The mood becomes dark and ominous. A motorboat speeds through the water as the clouds gather. The sun comes out, and the sea is calm. Objects begin appearing on its surface: a backpack, two suitcases, then many pieces of luggage and empty lifejackets. The camera alternates between below and above the surface, viewing the objects from different vantage points. A teddy bear floats on the water, and clothes begin sinking: jeans, shirts, and a white tutu dress (Figure 8). The final scenes show the clothing strewn across the shoreline with jumbled voices evoking memories of happier times. Through underwater film technologies and drone footage, Valdés succeeds in representing the ocean through its many facets, allowing the spectator to soar above it and also to become completely submerged.

Although there are no people, the audience is well-aware that this sea is a vessel for history.

In *The Deepest Blue*, a large-scale mosaic of ceramic tiles that reads “*un solo mar*,” Valdés depicts a topographical rendering of the ocean floor from the Azores to the Caribbean, a feat of visualization made possible by lidar technology.<sup>26</sup> The textured relief, with its irregular grooves in blues and greens, appears completely unfamiliar. The predictable swells of the ocean’s surface are replaced with a landscape that in parts looks like icy crags and in others like pockmarked skin. The texture of the earth below the sea appears old and rugged, unlike the ageless blue waves that provide the dominant image of the sea. By showing the spectators what lies beneath, Valdés signals to the sea’s geological history and foregrounds how water connects humans across time

<sup>26</sup> For more information on this technology, see “What Is Lidar,” National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration. Accessed September 20, 2023, <https://oceanservice.noaa.gov/facts/lidar.html>.



Figure 10. Suchitra Mattai: *The Atlantic Deep* (2020). Vintage saris and fabric. 15 × 30 ft. (4.57 × 9.14 m). Courtesy of the artist.

and space. Envisioning the ocean as a totality, she counters the reductive view of the sea that dominates in the popular imaginary. In considering the ocean's depths and the mysteries they hold, one cannot help but be reminded of the millions taken by the water whose stories will never be known. Loichot posits that "art and poetry cannot, en masse, offer a remedy, a reparation, a cure, a rite" for "the irremediable damage inflicted on the victims and the survivors" of the Transatlantic slave trade and contemporary tragedies

involving the sea, such as forced migrations or ecological disaster (Loichot 2020, 6). Operating as a site of commemoration and remembrance for the victims



Figure 11. Suchitra Mattai: *An Ocean's Cradle* (2022). Vintage saris, fabric, and ghungroo bells, 10 × 15 in. Courtesy of the artist.

of the Middle Passage, *The Deepest Blue* renders the ocean's topography as their final resting place.

Guyanese-American artist Suchitra Mattai stages commemorations of her own through her textile-based practice that engages with histories of indentureship in the Caribbean. After the emancipation of enslaved Africans in its colonies in 1834, the British sought a new labor force through the indenture of people from Asia. As described by sociologist Kamala Kempadoo,

«The indentured were shipped to the Caribbean and confined to a plantation or estate where they lived and worked under conditions comparable to those for Africans under slavery. They had no choice in employer, could not change employers or buy themselves out of, or negotiate their contract, nor could they move freely without the consent of their employers. Planters in collusion with colonial governments often managed to maintain them in states of indenture or dependency through creating economic conditions that demanded or required re-indenture after the initial contract» (Kempadoo 2017).<sup>27</sup>

Mattai is descended from Indian indentured laborers. Because, in her words, "colonized people don't have a space in history," she began a process of historical revisionism through colorful tapestries made of

<sup>27</sup> Kempadoo, Kamala. 2017. "'Bound Coolies' and Other Indentured Workers in the Caribbean: Implications for Debates About Human Trafficking and Modern Slavery," *Anti-Trafficking Review*, No. 9 (2017): 48-63, DOI: 10.14197/atr.20121794.

repurposed vintage saris (K Contemporary 2023).<sup>23</sup> Weaving them together was akin to “weaving people together” and bringing their “shared past[s]” into conversation (K Contemporary 2023). In *Atlantic Deep* (2020), she pictures the ocean through an enormous tapestry whose chromatic palette surprises because blues do not predominate (Figure 10). The dominant color is brown, perhaps relating to the designation “Brown Atlantic” that has been attached to the period of indentureship.<sup>29</sup> The browns frame a path of blue and white that extends horizontally across. While the blues that describe the ocean are more clearly delineated, the browns occupy areas verging on formlessness. Parts of them extend to the

floor, effectively evoking the depths of the work’s title. In its presentation, the tapestry is both perplexing and disorienting. While it does not look like any seascape, it effectively captures both movement and displacement. Indeed, a “sense of disorientation” is what the artist sought to convey so as to conjure the “experience of being an immigrant” (K Contemporary 2023).

In *An Ocean’s Cradle* (2022), Mattai again confounds expectation, presenting a multi-hued ocean with gold tassels, braided hanging white cords, and embedded ghungroo ankle bells (Figure 11). More than evoking the ocean, the tapestry recalls a map that traces multiple possible paths. Like Campos-Pons, Mattai

<sup>28</sup> “K Contemporary Presents Artist Suchitra Mattai,” YouTube, February 22, 2023, video, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8sJAGAHfHMI>, accessed September 20, 2023.

<sup>29</sup> See Hardeen, Devi. 2012. “The Brown Atlantic: Re-thinking Post Slavery,” Black Atlantic Resource Database. <https://www.liverpool.ac.uk/media/livacuk/csis/blackatlantic/BARD-Essay-1-1.pdf>. The concept of the Brown Atlantic is in dialogue with the more widely known and accepted notion of the Black Atlantic, a term introduced by British sociologist Paul Gilroy in *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness*. (London: Verso, 1993).



Suchitra Mattai: *An Ocean's Cradle* [detail] (2022). Vintage saris, fabric, and ghungroo bells, 10 × 15 in. Courtesy of the artist.

counters colonial and modern cartography, proposing, in her case, community and connection. The astounding chromatic variety in this piece pays homage to the rich visual culture of India, while the tightly woven ropes speak to togetherness and mutual support across generations, national boundaries, and oceans. The

title evokes the ocean, not the country of origin, as nurturing mother, celebrating diasporic culture and shared experiences among multiple Caribbean communities.

The sea has multiple contradictory associations in Caribbean aesthetics, ranging

from sorrow to salvation, from terror to nourishment. It is a place where past and present converge and worlds meet, but also where inequities are most visible. To think of the ocean as hydrocommons requires never losing sight of difference. As Neimanis acknowledges, “Bodies of water as a feminist figuration is [...] about relationship and care. It is about sustaining and holding other kinds of bodies, and bathing new kinds of bodies into being. In this sense, bodies of water as figuration is necessarily about difference, too. Even as waters hold us together in a kind of deep-time hydrocommons, aqueous connection is not about assimilation, or even a universal confluence” (Lemos 2020).<sup>30</sup>

The contemporary artists and authors discussed here have offered inventive visions of how the sea may be represented. Drawing on their histories and experiences as colonized subjects, they rely on figuration and abstraction to counter Western pictorial conventions and the white gaze. The specific “we” invoked by Campos-Pons, Huggins, Valdes, and Mattai, along with Brand, Glissant, Walcott, and other Caribbean thinkers, binds them together through common ties. Though others may be invited to engage, audiences should not mistake this gesture for an acceptance of overarching universal frameworks that risk diluting the power of the particular.

<sup>30</sup> Lemos, Sofia. 2020. “We Are All at Sea: Practice, Ethics, and Poetics of ‘Hydrocommons.’” *Mousse Magazine*, November 17. Accessed February 26, 2024. <https://www.moussomagazine.it/magazine/astrida-neimanis-sofia-lemos-2020/>.

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# Ariel Guzik and His Laboratory for Research in Resonance and Expression of Nature. Tools for a New Education around Marine Species

## María Paz Amaro Cavada

### Abstract

This article aims to disseminate the work that Ariel Guzik and his team have done around communication with marine animals by means of the instrument-machines they develop. In an attempt to raise awareness of certain ecological issues among different audiences, the hope is that a gradual articulation of these issues will emerge to promote changes at the environmental, social, and legal levels. Thus, marine life can be preserved in the future under a series of regional and international actions. The description herein contained of various art pieces supposes the possibility that art can achieve connections to strengthen life in different spheres. As a result of more than twenty years of relationship with the artist, this article presents information of his recent projects gathered from conversations with him during 2023.



Ariel Guzik: *Holoturian*, first immersion in the Sea of Cortés (2018).  
Photo: Raúl González.

## Introduction

The work of Ariel Guzik and the team that makes up his Laboratory is known in certain artistic enclaves. His creations intend to foster an awareness in individuals and communities beyond institutions, in local and global groups susceptible to artistic-pedagogical strategies. My objectives prefigure the

knowledge of the pieces that *perform* in the sea, as well as the intentions established in this interspecies encounter. It is hoped that this knowledge will lead to the valuation and protection of the natural environment by groups that will grow in size to achieve important changes at a social level. The importance of making the Laboratory's recent production known is to contribute to its dissemination. It is desired that actions are taken to ensure the continuity of explorations that allow the manufacture of parts for these environments. The ultimate goal of these instruments-machines is to create a space for the encouragement of lasting changes for environmental preservation in the legal and political spheres. In this global world, the consequences of natural detriment will sooner or later permeate the daily environment in which we are accustomed to live.

In some regions, various events and insurrection movements have



Ariel Guzik: *Holoturian*, expedition in San Juan de la Costa, Baja California Sur (2018). Photo: Raúl González.

taken place, such as the claim to the right to water in Bolivia at the start of the millennium. A series of legal strategies in some geographies have successfully tried to grant legal personality

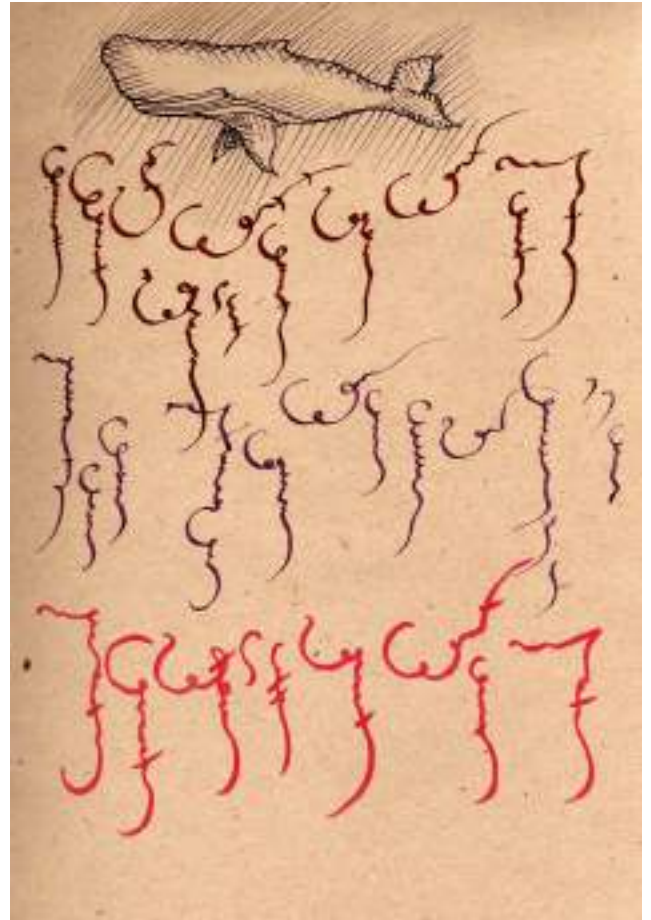
to natural entities (Viaene 2017).<sup>1</sup> Others have failed, such as the project to rewrite the Chilean Constitution in 2022, which would have eliminated the one imposed by the regime of Augusto Pinochet.<sup>2</sup> Even when it seems that art cannot significantly interfere with other fields, I observe the awakening of an awareness of a multifactorial situation in which art can be an agent of change, such as in the cases above. The following examples are such multifactorial processes that successfully achieved reforms in favor of the protection of waters and the

<sup>1</sup> Viaene, Lieselotte. 2017. "Yo soy el río, el río soy yo." Viaene stresses that the jurisprudence of the Inter-American Court of Human Rights has recognized that the relationship with the land and others is not limited to possession and production but is special, collective, and multidimensional, integrating their worldview and cultural and spiritual identity. <https://dplfblog.com/2017/06/08/rios-seres-vivientes-y-personalidad-juridica/>.

<sup>2</sup> In its genesis, this constitutional proposal wished to recognize natural rights. The State and society would have had the duty to protect them. It would have recognized that individuals and peoples are interdependent with nature, forming an inseparable whole. The State would have promoted good living as a relationship of harmonious balance between people, nature and social organization. Nature would have been respected and protected, as well as its regeneration, maintenance and restoration of functions and dynamic equilibrium of natural cycles, ecosystems and biodiversity. Glaciers would have been excluded from all mining activities. Water would also have been recognized as essential for life and the exercise of human and natural rights; the State would have been obliged to protect water in its hydrological cycle.

beings that live in them, as well as in favor of the strengthening of the communities urged to remedy this deterioration.

Lieselotte Viaene records that, in 2017, New Zealand granted legal person status to the Whanganui River. The Te Awa Tupua law of the Iwi Maori people recognizes this river as an ancestor, a living entity, as well as the existence of a spiritual relationship of the community with it. This event had an impact on the Indian state of Uttarakhand, where, in order to curb high levels of water pollution, it was decided that the Ganges and its tributary Yamuna have rights as would a human being. Colombia's constitutional court considered the Atrato River in Chocó as a subject of law when it ordered the State to develop a plan against overflow mining. In 2008, Ecuador constitutionally recognized nature or Pacha Mama as a subject of law. In addition, there has been progress in the recognition of the collective rights of indigenous peoples who claim their particular



Ariel Guzik: *Cetacean Writing*, drawing on paper (2008). Artist's collection.

relationship with water, and have been systematically excluded and silenced by predatory practices (Viaene, 2017).

The generalized detriment of the environment has provoked humanist groups to create spaces for discussion. Such spaces will lead to the formation of structures necessary for a different perspective on

animal species. A recent discussion concerns the development of speciesist consciousness, a central focal point for theorists, activists and artists:

«In the era of the Athropocene the question of the animal has emerged with urgency, and towards it much thought has been turned to its theory, and to develop policies and economies that create the space for that otherness which we are (not). [...] The current importance of the animal in discourse has also provoked an alteration in the practices in which it is inscribed. From the political to the economic, it is dislocated, because the space of its (dis)appearance is also dislocated. Legislation considers—it begins to do so—a separate treatment for a certain way of being of the animal, for a certain type which includes, however, only what from the new scale of values is considered as such, as for example what has or aspires to dignity, from degrees of consciousness or of feeling pain. Anthropocentrism shamelessly erects its measuring sticks» (González Valerio 2021).<sup>3</sup>

From this perspective, the animal is not simply *other*: it is *our other*. The quotation ignores the fact that this has not been the only sphere of life in which the anthropogenic machine has functioned. Ma. Antonia González Valerio also mentions the plant world. It is clear that natural environments—ecosystems, biomes, habitats—are equally compromised, species and their environments are altered, domesticated, exploited, and

<sup>3</sup> González Valerio, Ma. Antonia. 2021. (Comp.): *Encuentros de animales* (e-Book). Mexico: UNAM/Akal 2021), 1-3.

objectified as merchandise, or as a series of steps in a capitalist extractive process.

All this is part of the problem of how to live on “a vulnerable planet that has not yet been killed” (Haraway 2013).<sup>4</sup>

Haraway envisions a possible “technological flexibility” in a world that can change course thanks to our awareness and re-education of desire: “We need to be committed to radically reducing this obscene burden of reproduction, consumption and production, while helping to create the will, the imagination and the devices for the good of people and of other creatures, both as a means and as an end in itself” (Haraway and Kenney 2013).<sup>5</sup> Silvia Rivera Cusicanqui

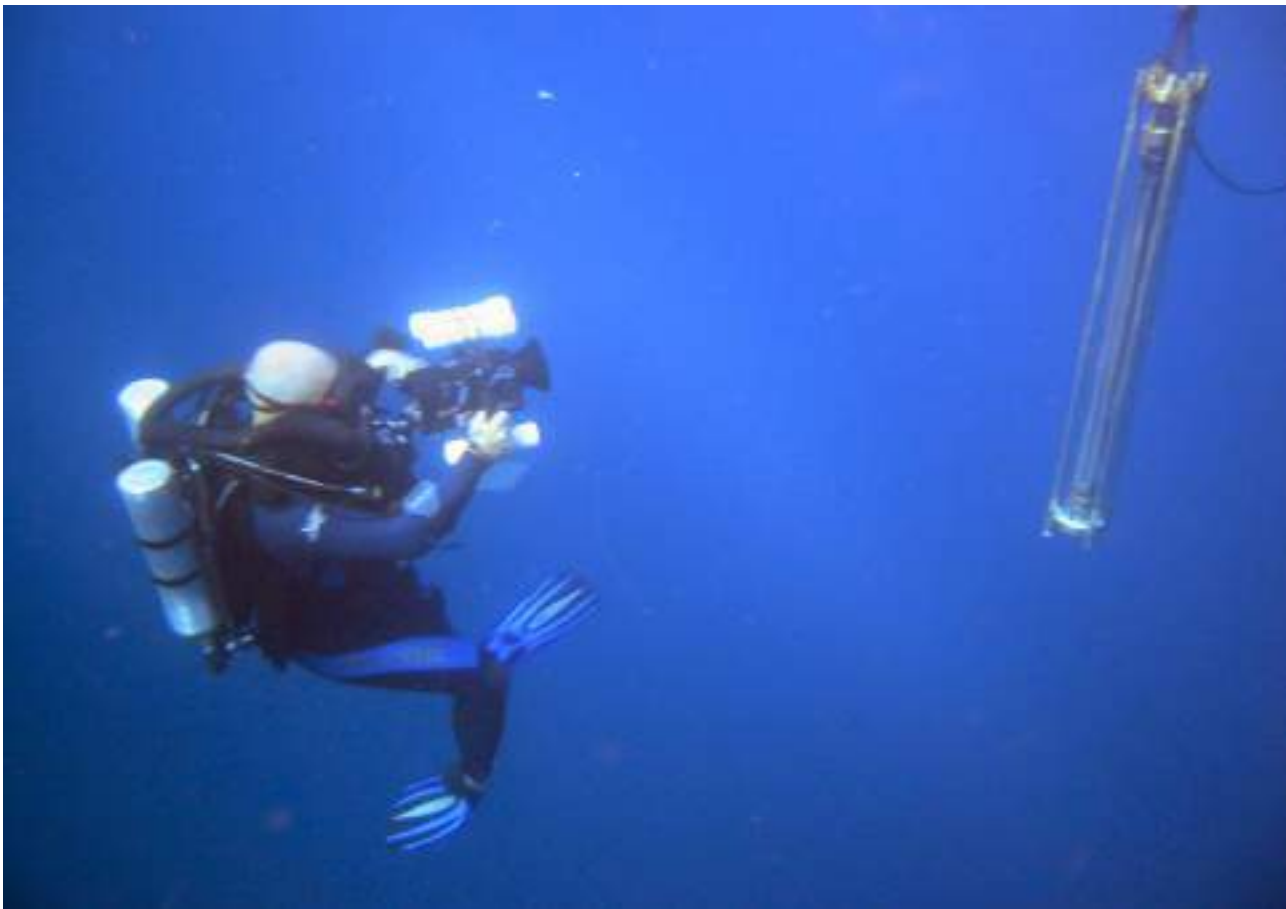
calls for decolonizing social-historical facts by paying attention to “the emergence of communities of life that draw on Indian, ecologist, and feminist epistememes” (Rivera Cusicanqui 2018). If it is possible to decolonize and *decommodify* modernity, one would have to be inclined to enunciate a “natural society,” since it is not possible to think of the capacity for exchange as a product of nature, but rather as the epitome of the social (Rivera Cusicanqui 2018).<sup>6</sup>

What has been stated so far reflects a world divided by multiple realities, in which the defense of the natural environment and the right to build a system in accordance with each territorial community's

<sup>4</sup> Haraway, Donna. 2013. “Sowing Worlds: a Seedbag for Terraforming with Earth Others,” in *Beyond the Cyborg: Adventures with Donna Haraway*, edited by Margaret Grebowicz and Helen Merrick. New York: Columbia University Press, 137.

<sup>5</sup> Haraway, Donna & Marha Kenney. 2015. “Anthropocene, Capitalocene, Chthulhocene,” in *Art in the Anthropocene. Encounters Among Aesthetics, Politics, Environments and Epistemologies*, edited by Heather Davies and Etienne Turpin. London: Open Humanities Press, 255-256.

<sup>6</sup> See Rivera Cusicanqui, Silvia. 2018. *Un mundo ch'ixi es posible. Ensayos desde un presente en crisis*. Buenos Aires: Tinta Limón, 39-43.



Ariel Guzik: *Cápsula Nereida*, first immersion in the Sea of Cortés (2007). Photo: Raúl González.

specificity are hindered by practices and modalities of an economically and legally stagnant regime. The description of the project presented here, although it does not contemplate a pedagogical objective as its ultimate goal, does express this double concern in the face of a technologized world whose natural rhythms have been plundered.

### **An Enclave of Instruments and Resonances**

Founded in 1990 in Mexico and directed by Ariel Guzik, the Laboratory for Research in Resonance and Expression of Nature is a space that develops sound machines-instruments that establish an encounter between living beings: animals, plants, and their interrelation



Ariel Guzik: *Holoturian*, string instrument (2015). Photo: Laboratory for Research in Resonance and Expression of Nature.

with human beings. Throughout its history and for each project, musicians, artists, researchers, designers and technicians have joined in the development of the corpus of artifacts. Some pieces have deployed their sound in deserts as well as in urban environments and bodies of water. The exploration of diverse signals on Earth has presented questions about the natural world. If the goal is the attainment of technological flexibility, the Laboratory's machine-instruments are flexible enough to not alter or invade the environments in which they operate.

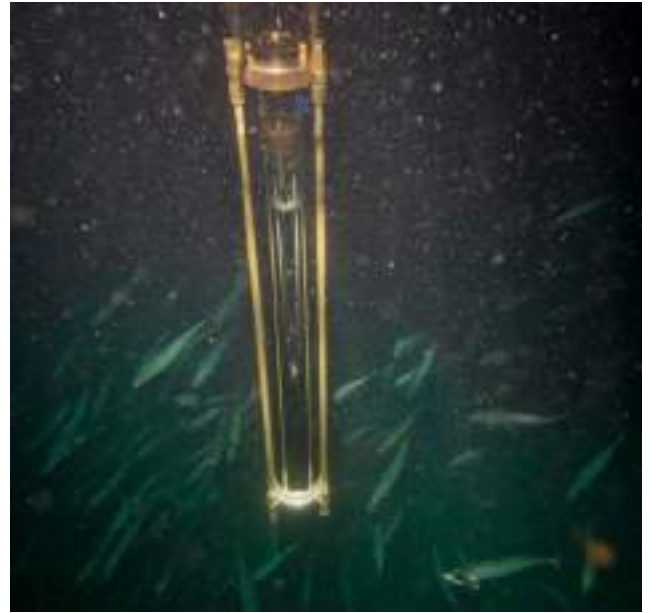
Guzik shies away from framing his work and that of his collaborators as art. Through the invention of instruments and languages, tested in research trips, concerts, music CDs, and exhibitions, he encourages encounters with the beings that inhabit the world, without implications of intrusion, domestication, exploitation or domination. This is vital insofar as this space distances itself from a scientific-positivist approach that seeks to explain such phenomena from pre-established hierarchies. The Laboratory privileges imagination, fantasy, and astonishment, without being casuistic or immediate: the work is the result of decades of introspection and research of certain natural phenomena, thus establishing distance and non-negotiable positions against certain kinds of technologies that shape our main modes of coexistence and consumption.

The Laboratory seeks to preserve what is immanent and original to the Earth by contemplating its

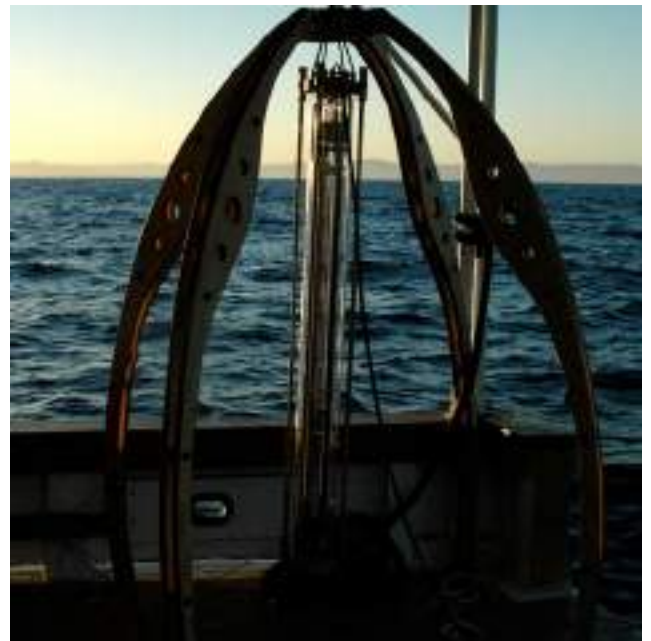


manifestations, without deciphering them or endowing them with attributes. As stated in its foundational documents—which have not been published in ordinary editorial forms but make up an administrative archive that allows for the construction of the pieces—the Laboratory’s vision comes from an intimate and pressing need to re-enchant a world that is alien to human beings, through resonance mechanisms that lead to reverie and encourage a sense of care towards the Earth and its creatures. Its mission is centered on the search for languages and forms of expression that transcend the barriers between species to inspire and promote the bond that unifies living beings.<sup>7</sup>

«This team’s work values signals over information and prefers subtle expressions to strident manifestations. With the study of resonance, the Laboratory exposes the internal



Ariel Guzik: *Cápsula Nereida*, expedition in the Sea of Cortés (2013).  
Photo: Raúl González.



Ariel Guzik: *Cápsula Nereida*, first immersion in the Sea of Cortés (2007).  
Photo: Raúl González.

<sup>7</sup> I would like to thank Ariel Guzik and his team for their generosity in allowing me to consult their foundational documents for this research.

logics of the nature of sound, electricity, magnetism, chaos and time, the signals of the sea, the wind, the clouds and the sun. In a special way, it explores the manifestations and expressions of the planet's living and seeks to meet them. *Music for marine life*» (Laboratory for Research in Resonance and Expression of Nature).

The Laboratory develops three lines of research: The Atmosphere and the Cosmos, The Earth and its Signals, and The Sea. A family of instruments-machines has been created for each line of research, to give voice to different natural phenomena. The latter focuses on the expressions of marine life and the encounter with its beings, with a special interest in cetaceans. I will limit myself to describing a few of these machines: the still under construction *Nave Narcisa* [Narcissa Ship], the *Cápsula Nereida* [Nereid Capsule], and the *Holoturian* [Holothurian].

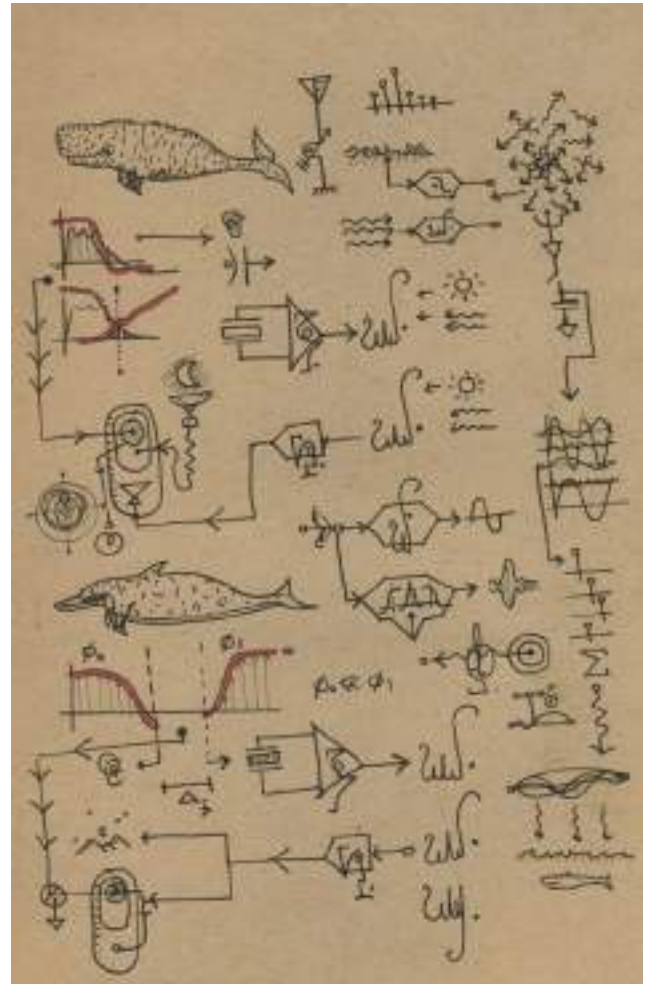
The first instrument is the fruit of a long term project that will connect with other related machines in a future marine research station. The second instrument is a tubular underwater capsule of molten quartz glass and bronze, in whose core rests a string musical instrument. Its nature is in itself a material language, a manifesto of echo for the beings that express themselves and may be said to see with sound. The third instrument is an underwater capsule of solid iron with inscriptions in cetacean writing. It is a heavy vessel, capable of submerging to great depths. In contrast to its external structure, its interior is a warm chamber of oak wood that houses a living plant and a string musical instrument made of maple and silver fir wood. The capsule has light and ventilation, and its temperature is also controlled, all of which allows it to keep the plant alive for a long period of time. Conceived as a chrysalis, the capsule has no windows. The

plant represents the soul, the protected fragility, the beauty of the Earth and its survival.

If one tries to understand Ariel Guzik's body of work in a traditional artistic sense, he clarifies that it is not about pieces but about machines that, by their organic nature and simplicity, allow contact with phenomena. The machines that descend to the depths operate as a great tympanum coupled to the environment (Guzik 2023).<sup>8</sup> The desire for contact with cetaceans arose from a dream that Guzik mentions in his text "Caligrafía cetácea" (Guzik 2019).<sup>9</sup> He considers the invention of new languages to communicate with other terrestrial beings more feasible than trying to decipher or emulate their own expressions. Guzik avoids hierarchical disposition in which animals are objectified for useful notions to describe human interaction,

but doesn't necessarily have a curious unexpected approach far from a premeditated hypothesis.

The first ancestor of cetaceans lived approximately fifty million



Ariel Guzik: *Communication with Cetaceans*, drawing on paper (2006). Artist's collection.

<sup>8</sup> Guzik, Ariel. 2023. Series of interviews with Ariel Guzik in his studio. Mexico City.

<sup>9</sup> Guzik, Ariel. 2019. "Caligrafía cetácea." In: *Revista de la Universidad de México*. 850-851. <https://www.revistadelauniversidad.mx/articles/d74218cc-b88b-4afa-96e2-d6073687cc8c/caligrafia-cetacea>.

years ago. The size of some cetaceans, such as the blue whale, can go from twenty to thirty meters. They have highly sensitive brains and a primary acoustic area. Hearing is the most developed of their senses. Their large brains arose as an evolutionary response to complex social environments. In basic science books and documentaries, one can usually find information about the low-frequency sounds with which they can communicate from considerable distances. Humpback whales emit sounds of varying frequency that form songs that can last for hours, as toothless cetaceans possess the virtue of song. The infrasonic prayers of blue whales, the hymns and choruses of humpback whales, the ancestral roars of gray whales—these are also languages. Their songs and echoes span oceanic expanses. Cetaceans can see through sound by means of an auditory receiving apparatus that works like a radar. This is the manifestation of a

particular form of intelligence in which observation and expression arrange a circular and indissoluble process.

The messages of the cetaceans can travel great distances. They see the world through the echoes of the sounds they themselves emit. The vibratory expressions with which they describe the world are also sonorous. What some cetaceans see, others do as well. They also meet to exchange echo languages and project spaces built with sounds.

Guzik says that this relationship began more than fifteen years ago while he was sleeping. In a dream that appealed to his family background—Eastern Europe during the Second War—he got out of a train and went into a tunnel at the end of the platform. In the darkness, he glimpsed a blue-green glow from a glass skylight. Through it, he beheld an underwater landscape where a pair of whales appeared. “I understood that those distant

songs came from the sea” (Guzik 2019). Shortly thereafter, Guzik and a few collaborators organized the first expedition in Baja California Sur, seeking to have an encounter with gray whales and dolphins. As he explains in the aforementioned text, it is all a collective endeavor, although much of the process occurs in the Laboratory, as well as in his imagination and dreams:

«In those scenarios of encounter, a language is decanted at the same time that a desire is sublimated. It is clear to me that much of what happens to me there lives in my imagination and is based only on my own desires. That is a freedom that comes from investigating outside the constraints of science. In the end, all forms of language imply, at some point, a disagreement. Its incompleteness and exhaustion motivates the invention of new voices» (Guzik 2019).

The musical project *Ballena gris*, recorded in Magdalena Bay (2002 and 2003), highlights the primary interests of these first approaches. The idea was to find an ideal place to install an amphibious station that would track signals from the sea and combine them with others from the natural world by means of an itinerant lab called *Laboratorio Plasmath*. Machines recorded the sonic rendezvous of voices of the crew, whales and dolphins, coral crackles, and murmurs of unknown origin. The resonance machinery worked and was recorded on an audio CD, a CD Rom, and an expedition log. The machine-instruments and the site of their *performance* depend on the adaptation strategies within the sociocultural imaginary and/or their replication in



Ariel Guzik: *Cetacean Writing*, drawing on paper (2019). Artist's collection.

new forms. There is something random about this process, which is partly alien to Guzik's discourse, as he attempts to recover an intention for the first modern machines. Therefore, the materials involved in this technology appeal to one of analogous character, in which the elements maintain their nobility. In many of his pieces, Guzik bets on the recycling or recovery of technology considered archaic.



Ariel Guzik: *Holoturian*, first immersion in the Sea of Cortés (2018). Photo: Gabriela Galván.

In 2017, the *Cápsula Nereida* managed to produce an echo in the sea of Costa Rica that caused a cohort of dolphins and other sea creatures to approach. In a context as limpid as the sea, the strings at the heart of this instrument reverberate in space. The cetaceans notice the vibration in the distance as if it were a shiny object. It may seem like a mandala<sup>10</sup> of sounds or the changing possibilities of shapes through a kaleidoscope. In Guzik's words: "...it is not a matter of baiting

<sup>10</sup> The construction of a mandala pursues a spiritual intention. In Buddhism, the concentric forms suggest an idea of perfection and the circle evokes the eternal return of the cycles of nature. See Jung, Carl Gustav. 2002. *Los arquetipos y el inconsciente colectivo. Sobre el simbolismo del mandala*. Madrid: Trotta.

them, it is simply an offering of beauty, a reflection of their own sonic gaze” (Guzik 2023). These are instruments with a double function: they are the message and the vehicle in which it is transmitted. The way the Laboratory has approached marine beings through its instruments is gestural in nature: a sustained intention, a passive observational activity, and a discreet participation.

### **The Nave Narcisa and Its Future Implications**

Is there any kind of pedagogy behind these instruments that neither seek to emulate nor to explain? Insight derived from this artistic project should not be downplayed for being close to an awakening of sensibility

or imagination, for coming from an emotional response to these performances. Having inherited a library from his uncle, Guzik moved away from traditional education at a young age to become self-taught in the principles of classical physics and other phenomena of his interest, such as electromagnetism. Each machine is the result of meticulous research, but the intention of this creator does not presuppose an intention of scientific dissemination. The machine-instruments become tools for a meeting of minds of a different nature. The repertoire of the white noise on Earth and its different spaces, such as the sea, is infinite. The captured resonances are familiar to us, they respond to our atavistic memory.<sup>11</sup> Guzik explains that the

<sup>11</sup> In the text “La música de las esferas,” I mention that since Aristotelian thought it was believed that the stars emitted a sound of a harmonic nature due to their circular motion. The Pythagoreans thought that such a sound was extensive and inaudible, perennially embodied and pulsating incessantly within humans: an incessant aural capacity became generalized deafness. It was Pythagoras, whose discovery of this phenomenon—“the music of the spheres”—was the only one capable of hearing it through his solitary contemplative activity. See: Amaro, María Paz. 2013. *CordioX*. Catalog of the 55th International Art Exhibition/Venice Biennale, edited by Itala Schmelz. Mexico: INBA/PAC/RM Verlag, 45-54.

aquatic vibration is projected on the bodies following a harmonic channel that produces a cymatic effect.<sup>12</sup>

The *Nave Narcisca* owes its name to the cetacean gaze that provokes its own beauty, a sonic and graphic echo, although invisible in terms of reciprocity between those who operate these instruments-machines and the beings to whom they are directed. If one were to follow the conventional process in which works are inserted in the art circuit—introduction, exhibition, collection and speculation that provides them with a mercantile value—these works would be neither productive nor utilitarian according to the above clauses. They do not lead to a predetermined object; if so, their transcendence would



Ariel Guzik: *Nave Narcisca*, drawing on paper (2015). Artist's collection.

become vulgar. We can approach them as “cultural products” susceptible to being *measurable* from another perspective: as emissaries of the sea in our culture. Eduardo Viveiros de Castro and Déborah Danowski say that in certain Amerindian and Amazonian peoples, it is

<sup>12</sup> Coined by the Swiss physicist Hans Jenny, cymatics corresponds to a subset of the vibrational modal phenomena displaced in space forming different geometric patterns according to the frequency of the vibration. These patterns can be appreciated with a cymascope, a device capable of providing an analog image of sound and its vibration, displayed in geometric patterns. With the development of this tool, the unexplored fields of sound and vibration are visible for both scientific studies and artistic appreciation.



Nature that *was born* from Culture or separated from it and not the other way around, as in our anthropological-philosophical system. Its emphasis lies in the stabilization of the transformations that differentiated animals from humans, and not in the acceleration of the transformation of the animals we were into the machines we will be. What we might call the natural world, or “world” for short, is for Amazonian peoples a multiplicity of intricately connected multiplicities.

Animals and other species are conceived as many types of people or peoples, as political entities (Danowski and Viveiros de Castro 2021).<sup>13</sup> “It is not ‘the jaguar’ that is human, it is individual jaguars that take on a subjective dimension as they

are perceived as possessing a society behind them, a collective political otherness.” In these attempts, the aim is to exercise a decolonization of the gaze, a rapprochement in proportions different from the conventional ones. This translates into moving away from a hierarchical, unilateral and utilitarian vision, no matter from which sphere it is appreciated, be it from the use of science as an axis aimed at strengthening a structure whose ultimate goal is the entity as a resource.

Initiated in 2002 from an ecocentric,<sup>14</sup> critical, and transdisciplinary vision, the Nave Narcisa will be open to the participation of artists, researchers and children of the world. It is hoped that it will help to raise awareness about oceanic

<sup>13</sup> Danowski, Déborah and Eduardo Viveiros de Castro. 2021. “¿Hay algún mundo por venir? Ensayo sobre los medios y los fines,” in *Prácticas artísticas en un planeta de emergencia*, published by Centro Cultural Kirchner. Buenos Aires. <https://www.cck.gob.ar/hay-algun-mundo-por-venir-por-deborah-danowski-y-eduardo-viveiros-de-castro/4964/>.

<sup>14</sup> Contrary to biocentrism, which focuses exclusively on the moral consideration of living beings, the ecocentric vision encompasses a set of ethics that upholds the inherent value of all nature and considers ecosystems, the biosphere and the Earth as a whole or *holon*.

conditions on the threshold of collapse for cetaceans and other aquatic lifeforms. The current phase of the project aims to connect the instruments thus far built—the *Cápsula Nereida*, the *Holoturian*, the *Ventana Armónica* [Harmonic Window], and the *Tímpano Marino* [Marine Eardrum]<sup>15</sup>— within an underwater lab of interspecies communication, together with other instruments that condense the experience of brightness, space, beauty, time, intention, life, fragility, music, voice, and imagination. The culmination of the project is the heart of a future crewed station—the *Narcisa*— that will have periods of work and exploration under the sea. This coexistence arranged in a new mutuality will provide time and space for creating experiences through a musical language, in which the ship will be a container



Ariel Guzik: *Nave Narcisa*, drawing on paper (2017). Artist's collection.

where the axis will be the sound, the messages-objects will be an invitation for contact, and the experiments will be samples of musical interaction.

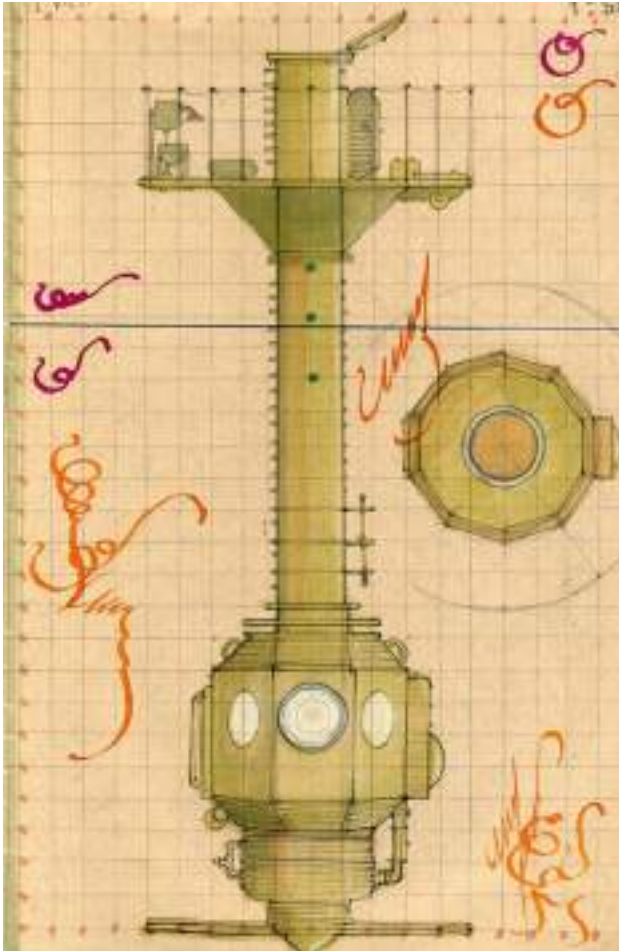
The *Nave Narcissa* will contain a cabin that can accommodate

<sup>15</sup> The *Tímpano Marino* conditions airborne sounds to be heard in the marine environment. It is the messenger of the voice produced by humans to the sea. Its sonority is subtle, yet extremely clear. It is an invitation to build an intuitive relationship with the unified set of instruments. It is operated from land or from the sea surface aboard a ship. It will be the sound language console of the *Narcissa* Underwater Station.

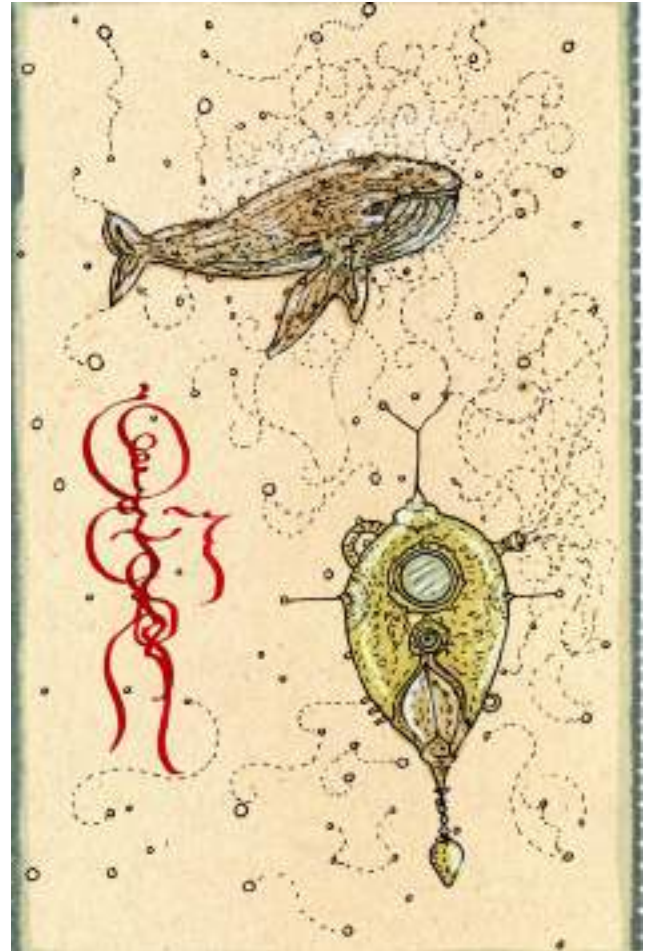
up to four crew members for long periods of time. It will be a chapel and a crewed sound instrument in which it will be possible to travel and maintain sustained encounters with cetaceans. It will be a laboratory with sound instruments of organic architecture and a metalanguage embodied in its own materiality and in the subtle sonorities that it will emit under certain circumstances. The crew will be able to contemplate the depths when accessing the lower chamber through windows that will look outside. The instruments will be able to reflect subtle sonic enunciations that some marine animals will be able to recognize. It will be equipped with the necessary instruments that ships use to communicate with surrounding vessels and shore stations, and it will have components that ensure hybrid power for storage, distribution, and use. The output of the sound and visual records will be by means of an audio system with the necessary equipment for the transmission,

reception, listening, and recording of underwater and surface audio, as well as an audiovisual recording system, which will include the equipment necessary for the visual and sound documentation of experiences inside and outside the ship: materials for future research, experiments, and their subsequent dissemination.

These initiatives represent a change in the perspective of cetaceans and other entities as sentient beings. They are expected to establish a new integral meaning, different from the project of modernity and progress imposed in most of Latin America. If the sound machines have this meaning, they will open the path for other sensitive experiences as evidence of a sentient world that coexists and connects with different realities. It is vital that the different spheres of life, separated under a notion of enlightened categories, are articulated not only to solve problems, but also to open



Ariel Guzik: *Nave Narcisa*, drawing on paper (2020). Artist's collection.



Ariel Guzik: *Cetacean Writing*, drawing on paper (2020). Artist's collection.

initiatives, especially legal ones, that guarantee the rights of other beings for posterity.

## Conclusions

This paper describes a project more than two decades in development, in which a multi-speciesist conscience is present with particular emphasis on

cetaceans and their environment, for which machines have been built that seek a harmonious encounter based on curiosity for otherness. The kind of technology used constitutes an irrevocable stance in the face of a world transformed by technique in service of maintaining the production-consumption pairing. Given the circumstances,

postcolonial studies have called for the need to renounce this model that seems to have been erected in perpetuity. The latest descriptions of marine artifacts expound a kind of pedagogy that will touch the agents scattered around them: institutions, collectivities, and individuals willing to engage in a form of desire ready to be reeducated.

This kind of project is vital nowadays. Within the hybrid framework of art, but refusing its own origin and name, it pretends to point out what escapes traditional supports and conventions. The more it moves away from these, the more distant it will be from commissioned works, ideological proselytism and propaganda. Its radical and urgent character is strengthened the more it leans towards the decentralized, which is understood here as a project that goes beyond the

species within what we usually understand as “living.” It is comparable to what Alejandro Castillejo Cuellar and Daniel Ruiz-Serna say about the Truth Commission in Colombia, insofar as it is linked to space as sentient, giving rise to a multi-species ethnography that relates the pain of other forms of life and resignifies another kind of witness and/or testimony of nature. Animals, trees, the wind itself, have a voice that must be recovered through the acceptance of different modes of expression (Castillejo Cuéllar and Ruiz-Serna 2023).<sup>16</sup>

From the designation of the “anthropocenic” as a historical phase beyond the geological, it is possible to find a way out of this rigid framework. As Manuel DeLanda proposes: “Beyond the strato-graphical discussion, the Anthropocene can be felt as a call to reimagine the human

<sup>16</sup> Castillejo Cuéllar, Alejandro and Daniel Ruiz-Serna. 2023. “37. Árboles testimoniales,” interview with Alejandro Castillejo Cuéllar and Daniel Ruiz-Serna, on *Humanidades Ambientales*. <https://www.humanidadesambientales.com/pensar/37-castillejo-ruiz>.

through biology and geology...”<sup>17</sup> Projects such as Ariel Guzik's call for the urgency to reorder our scheme of priorities based on shared experience. Even if it is indirect, through the consultation of an archive or library, it has the potential to form a collective agency to pursue the necessary reforms of a global legal system. As a communicator of particular moments in the work of the Laboratory, I trust that the range of possibilities it expresses can make us more aware of what we stand to lose.

Haraway replaces the notion of the Anthropocene with that of the Capitalocene, a voracious economic-political system that knows no boundaries, in which the life of creatures, the beauty and richness of the earth are figured as mere resources and externalities (Haraway 2015). The work of the Laboratory for Research in Resonance and Expression of Nature opposes

such compartmentalization. It is closer to what Mariela Yeregui points out concerning the non-modern—non-Western—as it implies the modernity/ coloniality pairing that paves the way for “civilizing” work. One of the elements of the global system of structural inequalities that Yeregui points out is the universal scientific-technological boom. The projects of Guzik and his team are homologous to some of the practices described by Yeregui, which put dominant ideas around the relation between art and technology in crisis. The notion of laboratory forged here coincides with the precepts she describes: the laboratory-space as a workshop-space, provider and self-generator of techniques, inventiveness and novel strategies, which promotes an activist interference in core ecological issues, with a protest vocation, claiming a playful relationship with scientific

<sup>17</sup> DeLanda, Manuel. 1997. *A Thousand Years of Nonlinear History*. New York: Zone.

knowledge (Yeregui 2017).<sup>18</sup> Can the sea, unlike the museum, be a place where art happens? One of the intentions that this Laboratory pursues is to constitute an archive for memory, reverie and conservation. Even when the instrument-machines rebel against confinement, incapable of generating



Ariel Guzik: *Cetacean Writing*, drawing on paper (2018). Artist's collection.

stridency, their struggle must also be the result of critical and countercultural thought in our times, an examination of our own ecological imagination, so that addressing the environmental crisis results in a turn to relationships in terms of reciprocity. The artistic fields of action of these groups lead us to think beyond the limits of our temporal structures. They are crucial practices today, for they are related to the survival of living species in direct coexistence.

Following what the Copenhagen-Tartu school of biosemiotics states, it is necessary to unite artistic appreciation with critical reflection towards a new culture and a re-education of desire around the ecological roles of each species, for the sake of preserving our vital systems. If we don't want to become a memorial of a vanishing world, we must act in order to preserve and regenerate what is immediate to

<sup>18</sup> Yeregui, Mariela. 2017. "Prácticas co-creativas. Decolonizar la naturaleza." PDF available in *Open Edition Journals*. <https://journals.openedition.org/artelogie/1601>.

us. Our mission is to conjure up other possible futures through imagination or art, to rethink the possibilities of a future so far portrayed as apocalyptic and stormy, which we may yet change with our most furtive dreams. The described marine projects of Guzik and his team support

this mission, they stand as evidence of such a recalibration and can be understood as an artistic-pedagogical practice, an experience that can be emulated in local contexts, and as an articulation of a new social and legal dimension for these aquatic creatures and their environment.

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Translated from Spanish by Luis Mancipe León and Saúl Figueredo.



# A Series of Returns: Indigenous Land, Water and Food Sovereignty in Contemporary Art

Katie Lawson

## Abstract

This text draws connections between contemporary art projects realized in Mexico City, Mexico, and Toronto, Canada, over the last ten years as a means of studying patterns of colonial settlement (and its remnants) through hemispheric encounters. The resulting transnational dialogue reveals common strategies of watershed “management” implemented by colonizers, which has led to environmental degradation and threatened Indigenous food sovereignty across the Americas. Maria Thereza Alves, Cocina CoLaboratorio, and Ogimaa Mikana have created projects that harness public intervention and community-based practices to draw attention to the lesser-known stories of watersheds with the hope that this will lead to social mobilization in defense of overexploited natural resources. Ultimately, I argue that contemporary art plays a significant role in fostering a series of returns—the return of local histories threatened by disappearance, the return of a watershed itself, or the return of Indigenous knowledge with attendant sustainable agricultural practices. This text also considers the role of the artist as an amplifier

of existing community organizers, situating this research within the ongoing discourse on visual culture, community-based art, public space, and decolonial and environmental action.

Maria Thereza Alves realizes projects that are research-based, emerging from the specificities of local context. This work often involves connecting with community organizations to amplify the lesser-known histories of a given region. She frames her role as a witness to silenced histories—often in relation to critical issues of decolonization through land, water, plants, borders, and birds. She has realized temporary public artworks in an impressive array of international locations, but the scope of this paper includes two related projects in Mexico City, Mexico, and Toronto, Canada. Both *The Return of a Lake* (2012/2014) and *Phantom Pain* (2019) respond to the desecration of bodies of water as a consequence of settler colonialism—revealing interlocking hemispheric patterns of environmental degradation. That is to say, working across disparate localities has enabled the artist to point to global patterns concerning colonial practices of water “management” and I intend to follow suit with transnational research in this regard. Alongside consideration of Maria Thereza Alves’ work, I propose a parallel examination of site-responsive projects by Cocina CoLaboratorio and Ogimaa Mikana (in Mexico and Canada respectively) that use complementary strategies to reassert the significance of Indigenous sovereignty with crucial links to traditional foodways.

This constellation of contemporary artists draw attention to the environmental realities and social circumstances of a place, with the hope that this will lead to social mobilization in defense of overexploited natural resources. Water runs through these works as a major current, taking up the stories of Lake Chalco, Lake Xochimilco, the Don River, and Pigeon Lake.

The artists considered here take their cue from the colonial transformation of a landscape that often obscures or makes invisible the past and present presence of Indigenous peoples. In the introduction of an issue of *Decolonization: Indigeneity, Education & Society*, Melanie K. Yazzie and Cutcha Risling Baldy argue that,

«...radical relationality requires *interconnecting* these variously scaled decolonial practices to build the kind of mass movements that are necessary for staging a serious counterhegemonic challenge to the status quo of death that currently structures our existence. This requires commitment and trust in the work we have already done. The paradigm has already been created; we just need to *enforce it*» (Yazzie and Risling Baldy 2018).<sup>1</sup>

I do not seek to flatten the complex differences between the contexts of Mexico City and Toronto, or Latin and North America, but I am interested in what might be revealed through this line of inquiry into the ongoing expropriation and destruction of Indigenous land, water,

<sup>1</sup> Yazzie, Melanie K. and Cutcha Risling Baldy. 2018. "Introduction: Indigenous peoples and the politics of water," *Decolonization: Indigeneity, Education & Society* 27.1, 1-18.

and livelihoods across the Americas. Through consideration of the projects brought together in this text, I explore the role of contemporary art in fostering and depicting a series of returns—whether that be the return of local histories threatened by disappearance, the return of a watershed itself, or the return of Indigenous knowledge with attendant sustainable agricultural practices.

### Lake Chalco: Maria Thereza Alves

I was first introduced to Maria Thereza Alves through her work in DOCUMENTA (13), where she presented *The Return of a Lake* (2012), a project that focused on the desecration of a lake in the region of Chalco, near Mexico City, in the early twentieth century. At the time I was seeking examples of aesthetic strategies that revive local histories where bodies of water were radically altered to serve settler colonial desires for a mastery over nature and capital gains. Alves lived in

Mexico for just shy of a decade, and in 2009 she began working collaboratively with regional Museo Comunitario del Valle Xico (Community Museum of Xico Valley), who wanted the history of Lake Chalco to be made visible.

Before the arrival of Mexicas (Aztecs) in the Mexico Valley Basin, the Chalca people established control over the region's five interconnected lakes: Chalco, Texcoco, Zumpango, Xaltocan, and Xochimilco, which functioned as one hydraulic system. The equilibrium was disturbed with the Spanish invasion of the sixteenth century, as settlers demolished existing infrastructure like the Nezahualcōyotl dike, before implementing a series of drainage projects in the seventeenth century known as *desagüe*—all in the interests of expanding Mexico City into the lakebed of Texcoco but with negative implications for the broader valley area. The Chalcas and Aztecs understood the interdependence of the valley's many bodies of water,

and embraced the abundance of water and seasonal flooding in their way of life. Alves' focus would settle on a historical moment closer to present day, with the man-made disaster initiated by Spanish settler Íñigo Noriega Laso (1853-1923), who set in motion a series of "modernizing" projects in 1885 that caused the collapse of the region's commerce, ecological equilibrium, and adversely affected twenty-four Indigenous villages and towns. A close friend of the then president Porfirio Díaz, Noriega carried out a large-scale geoengineering project to drain the lake around his opulent hacienda to pursue agro-industrial ventures that would quickly make him one of the country's richest men (Alves 2012).<sup>2</sup> But as the title of Alves' work suggests, more than a century has passed since Noriega's actions, and a lake is returning. Despite the draining of most of its waters, excessive pumping of the underground

aquifer has continued, resulting in the depression of the lakebed where pluvial waters now collect—the emergent body of water has a new name to reflect the two communities that make up the area where the lake is returning, Lake Tláhuax-Xico. Although there are troubling aspects of this development, it also signals the possibility of return—not just of water, but for previous ways of life and more sustainable agricultural, social, and environmental engagement.

For the initial presentation in Kassel, Germany, for dOCUMENTA, the artist produced a multi-faceted installation and publication that investigated the history of the region of Xico and Tláhuac through pre-Hispanic, colonial, and present-day relations to a body of water that has been subject to radical transformation (Figure 1). In an aesthetic that embraces the DIY materiality of the community museum,

<sup>2</sup> Alves, Maria Thereza. 2012. *El regreso de un lago | The Return of a Lake*. Köln: Verlag der Buchhandlung Walther König.

papier-mache dioramas of the region are scattered throughout the gallery space. In his review, Richard Hill (2013)<sup>3</sup> suggests an aesthetic resonance between the display strategy and the venue for the work, the Ottoneum Natural History Museum. The scale models depict a parched landscape with fledgling crops, sparsely populated areas and handwritten labels with details about the founding of the community museum and a timeline of changes in land ownership and use (Figure 2).

Two years after the work was exhibited in Kassel, Alves would revisit this project through the Museo Universitario Arte Contemporáneo (MUAC) at the Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México (UNAM) in Mexico City (Figure 3). Interconnected bodies of water, similarly to Canada's Great Lakes region, shaped the worldview of the Indigenous communities who



Figure 1. Maria Thereza Alves: *The Return of a Lake* (2012). Installation view, dOCUMENTA (13), Kassel, Germany. Courtesy: Maria Thereza Alves.

settled in the Mexica (Aztec) capital of Tenochtitlan. This included *chinampas*, a pre-hispanic feat of engineering in hydro-agriculture—artificial islands in shallow lake beds that integrated organic materials and waste recycling while producing high yielding crops. *Chinampas* were a part of an economically diverse and prosperous aquatic society that worked with, rather than against, the lake environment. The manufacture and use of canoes were a central pillar of Nahua enterprises, used by farmers to cultivate their crops and deliver them to a

<sup>3</sup> Hill, Richard William. 2013. "Exhibition Review: *The Return of a Lake*, Maria Thereza Alves at dOCUMENTA 13." *PUBLIC Journal*, 244-247.

network of regional markets, but also by artisans and merchants to reach customers and deliver building materials; certain crafts were made possible by the resources of the lake itself, as in the case of woven mats made with reeds (Conway 2012).<sup>4</sup> Alves had set out to recreate a *chinampa* as a part of the 2012 iteration, reactivating a plot that had been destroyed by Noriega’s drainage of the lake, but plans were brought to a halt by diminished water levels. The eponymous publication for *The Return of a Lake* includes writing by the artist that lays bare her intentions with the project as a whole, lest this desire for a pre-modern Indigenous technology be misconstrued:

«This work is not against change; ample documentation demonstrates that by the time of the Spanish conquest, Lake Chalco/Tláhuac-Xico had been completely transformed



Figure 2. Maria Thereza Alves: *The Return of a Lake* (2012). Detail view, dOCUMENTA (13), Kassel, Germany. Courtesy: Maria Thereza Alves.



Figure 3. Maria Thereza Alves: *El retorno de un lago—The Return of a Lake* (2014). Installation view, Museo Universitario Arte Contemporáneo (MUAC-UNAM). Courtesy: Maria Thereza Alves.

<sup>4</sup> Conway, Richard. 2012. “Lakes, Canoes, and the Aquatic Communities of Xochimilco and Chalco, New Spain.” *Ethnohistory* 59.3, 541-568.

by human action. It is rather a discussion of how colonial practices implemented by Spain continue in place as a quotidian reality for Indigenous communities and obstruct the possibility of a viable and ecologically sustainable future for all members of Mexican society» (Alves 2012, 8).

The intervening two years between presentations also allowed for previously unrealized aspects of the project to come to fruition, and by the time *The Return of a Lake* was shown at MUAC-UNAM in 2014, Alves was able to reactivate a former *chinampa*. This was achieved working with the *ejido* of Tláhuac, and resulted in the cultivation of vegetables sold at the local market.<sup>5</sup> Alongside

a series of workshops with local community members, the revival of *chinampas* contributed to conversations about the sustainable and flourishing futures that were buried by dominant settler culture (Amaro Altamirano 2018).<sup>6</sup> In a reflection written by curator Paloma Checa-Gismero, who worked closely on the MUAC-UNAM presentation, she describes these off-site programs as extensions of the project's presence in the gallery, to expand the scope of the collaborative endeavour by rethinking how neighboring institutions in disproportionate power positions can relate to one another; recognizing the relatively precarity of the community museum to a major contemporary art institution (Checa-Gismero 2014).<sup>7</sup> Since the

<sup>5</sup> Alves, Maria Thereza. 2014. "From the Core of the Earth" in *Maria Thereza Alves: El Retorno de un Lago | The Return of a Lake*, 12. Mexico City: Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México.

<sup>6</sup> Amaro Altamirano, Genaro. 2018. "Dissipating Darkness" in *Natura: Environmental Aesthetics After Landscape*. Eds. Jens Andermann, Lisa Blackmore, and Dayron Carrillo Morell, 61-67. Zürich: Diaphanes. Genaro Amaro Altamirano provides an account of the working sessions held at MUAC.

<sup>7</sup> Checa-Gismero, Paloma. 2014. "On *The Return of a Lake*. MUAC,



rise of community-based practices in the art world in the 1990s, there have been enduring debates around how to measure the impact of such projects. While Checa-Gismero's intentions are clear, as are Maria Thereza Alves', one question that a project such as this raises is what happens after the temporary exhibition or public intervention is over? As Claire Bishop notes,

«The tasks facing us today are to analyze how contemporary art addresses the viewer and to assess the *quality* of the audience relations it produces: the subject position that any work presupposes and the democratic notions it upholds, and how these are manifested in our experience of the work» (Bishop 2014).<sup>8</sup>

For these institutionally initiated processes to have long-term impact, it is ultimately up to the community to continue working towards their goals—whether that be continued awareness and recognition of a common concern, or seeking the funds and infrastructure to keep Museo Comunitario del Valle Xico open.

One way that temporary projects can live on and gain a wider audience is through the creation and dissemination of publications. The gatherings that took place through the development of both iterations of this work, the 2012 and 2014, proved to be fruitful—the Community Museum published a booklet which called

Mexico City, August – November 2014," *FIELD: a journal of socially engaged art criticism*: <http://field-journal.com/issue-1/checa-gismero>.

<sup>8</sup> Bishop, Claire. 2004. "Antagonism and Relational Aesthetics," 78. *October* 110.

on the thirteen municipalities of the region to create communal land committees, to reforest the hills as a form of resistance against continued urban sprawl, to educate local farmers on sustainable agricultural practices, cultivate water management organizations, counter real-estate industry privatization and more. The artist's publication for documenta, a "Manifesto for Water" was signed by representatives of different boroughs, including Chalco, Xochimilco and Milpa Alta. It "demands a reorientation of water policies" for the valley as a whole, asserting the importance of protecting aquifers and restoring former river and canal systems that supported flood prevention before colonial settlement (Demos 2014)<sup>9</sup>. In other words, the collaboration between the Community Museum and Maria Thereza Alves unified community action, demanding the return of

the lake, the return of access to drinking water (which remains inconsistent), and the return of the *chinampas*. Together, the "Manifesto for Water" and the artist's publication serve as reminders that a hyperlocal issue is intertwined with a broader region, proposing that the insights gained from the case of Lake Chalco are applicable to other bodies of water—this brings me to form a relationship with the second project considered in the scope of this text, which focuses on Xochimilco.

### Lake Xochimilco: Cocina CoLaboratorio

In February of 2022, I had the opportunity to spend time in Mexico City as a participant in the Visualizing Foodways Field School, organized by Zoë Heyn Jones through the Hemispheric Encounters Network in partnership with the

<sup>9</sup> Demos, T.J. 2014. "Return of a Lake: Contemporary Art and Political Ecology in Mexico." *Maria Thereza Alves: El Retorno de un Lago | The Return of a Lake*, 41. Mexico City: Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México.

Centre for Sustainable Curating (University of Western Ontario) and the Centro de Investigaciones sobre América del Norte (UNAM). As a part of this intensive gathering of scholars, artists, and activists, Cocina CoLaboratorio hosted our group in Xochimilco for a day on the *chinampa* of Humedalia A.C., an organization that works in environmental education and conservation tourism. Cocina CoLaboratorio is an initiative that brings together farming communities, scientists, cooks, and creatives to exchange knowledge, design and take action across disciplinary boundaries in order to create sustainable food futures. Emerging out of a partnership in 2016 between post-secondary institutions and professional networks in Mexico and the Netherlands (Cascoland, the Forefront Project, the aforementioned UNAM, and Wageningen University), the initiative had grown exponentially to include collaborators from a range of disciplines, organizations and geographies. If Maria Thereza Alves taps into the work of existing communities, Cocina CoLaboratorio is a mechanism for the creation of new networks and relationships. They identify their core questions as follows:

«How do we bridge scientific and local knowledge? What kind of interdisciplinary projects can we create towards a better livelihood and ecological resilience of farmer communities? How can we conserve the environment and its biodiversity in balance with sustainable food production and pair local consumption to global demand?» (Cocina CoLaboratorio).<sup>10</sup>

<sup>10</sup> Cocina CoLaboratorio, "Info" <https://colaboratorykitchen.com/es/>.

In 2020, Xochimilco became a site of interest for consideration of a local food system in relation to the social, political and environmental context, and Cocina CoLaboratorio embedded themselves within the *chinampas*. Their aim was to celebrate and encourage a return to the biocultural heritage of the Xochimilcas, developing a series of pilot projects that would unfold on site. The major public output of this time is an audio work, *Vox Populi* (Radio Cocina CoLaboratorio 2020),<sup>11</sup> a mobile radio that creates a collective portrait of the community through the inclusion of quotes from participants of different ages, genders and socioeconomic backgrounds that have been or are involved in local food systems and traditions. These fragments are enveloped by a soundscape based on field recordings—the rippling

of water and rustling of plant matter; songs sung by birds and boat engines alike. Zabadiel is one of several participants, a *chinampero* from the younger generation concerned about loss of biodiversity and native seeds, who is committed to cultivating crops without agrochemicals and working collectively with dignity and respect.<sup>12</sup>

At the Visualizing Foodways Field School, we travelled through the extensive canal system as we listened to a related series of audio recordings featuring accounts from the region (Figure 4). Upon arrival to the *chinampa*, our group gathered to contribute to Cocina CoLaboratorio's *Living Biocultural Archive* (2022). The archive is positioned as a temporary, rhizomatic and changing platform that promotes exchange and dialogue—we had each been asked to bring a

<sup>11</sup> <https://soundcloud.com/colabkitchenradio>

<sup>12</sup> A *chinampero* or *chinampera* is the name for individuals who cultivate and care for *chinampas*. Cocina CoLaboratorio. 2020. "Exchanges in the Chinampas of Xochimilco." <https://colaboratorykitchen.com/stories/?story-532>.



Figure 4. Documentation of program organized by Cocina CoLaboratorio for Visualizing Foodways Field School in Xochimilco (2023). Courtesy: Katie Lawson.



Figure 5. Documentation of program organized by Cocina CoLaboratorio for Visualizing Foodways Field School in Xochimilco (2023). Courtesy: Katie Lawson.

recipe, seed, history, practice, or tool that refers to strategies we carry with us from our home contexts that have been mobilized in the defense of territory and community (Figure 5). The experiences shared by members of our group were far reaching, as we had all traveled from across North, Central and South America to be together. We harvested fresh produce from the chinampa to create collaborative salads, sharing

stories and tactics over plates of abundance, creating a collective vision from different territories.

My offering to the group came from the Canadian lands where I live and work as an uninvited guest, as I described the ongoing work of Indigenous water and land defenders in the context of my home. More specifically, I relayed my experience of joining grandmother Josephine Mandamin on one of her

Water Walks—an elder from Wikwemikong First Nation. Grandmother Josephine brought renewed attention to campaigns for water protection through organized walks around the entire 17,000 kilometres of the Great Lakes Watershed. This example sparked further discussion about the varied strategies of Indigenous environmental activists across hemispheres. It is in this spirit



Figure 6. Documentation of research walks with Maria Thereza Alves, Kari Cwynar and Katie Lawson: *Phantom Pain* (2019). Courtesy: Katie Lawson.

of exchange that this text has been authored, to refer back to Yazzie and Baldy's argument that we must develop interconnected and variously scaled decolonial practices. It also prompted me to draw connections with artist-led projects that were realized in southern Ontario by Maria Thereza Alves and Ogimaa Mikana that reveal patterns that echo through disparate projects of colonial settlement—the mastery of nature, radical reshaping of land and water, and destruction of Indigenous foodways.

### Don River: Maria Thereza Alves

In 2019, I had the privilege of working with Maria Thereza Alves in my capacity as a curator for the Toronto Biennial of Art (TBA). Our curatorial team worked with Kari Cwynar at Evergreen's Don River Valley Public Art Program to co-produce a new site-responsive artwork by Alves in the city. Given the artist's previous work on silenced

histories that illuminate the relationship between environmental degradation and colonial settlement, the Biennial facilitated a dialogue with Helen Mills, a founder of Lost Rivers, a community organization initiated by the Toronto Green Community.<sup>13</sup> Since 1995, this group has led a series of public walks and programs that encourage residents to rediscover the lost and buried rivers that once flowed through the country's largest city, nestled within the Great Lakes watershed. The research for the commission began with a series of walks with Mills, who served as our guide along the former pathways of the Don River, Garrison Creek, Taddle Creek, Lavender Creek, Mud Creek, and the Market Streams—regularly pointing to subtle clues in the natural and built environment that mark the former course of forgotten tributaries and streams

(Figure 6). From the slump of a sinking home built on what was once a creek to the old willows along the basin of a grassy park that indicate the former bank of a buried river. Over the last two hundred years, increasingly rapid urban development has brought varying degrees of intervention for different segments of the watershed—most common being the draining or infill of wetlands and tributaries to provide space for residential, industrial and commercial growth.

Maria Thereza Alves became particularly invested in the Lower Don River, which has been subject to a dizzying array of large-scale transformations, regularly subject to detrimental resource extraction, the radical transformation of the valley through industrial development (including using the river as a sink for waste), and major infrastructure “improvement”

<sup>13</sup> The scope of the organization has expanded as a joint project of the Toronto Green Community, the Toronto Field Naturalists, and community partners Hike Ontario. Their trail system has been designated as official Ontario Legacy Trail. <https://www.lostrivers.ca/>

schemes since the founding of York in 1793. Jennifer Bonnell's landmark book *Reclaiming the Don: an Environmental History of Toronto's Don River Valley* traces the European visions (and re-visions) for the Don River Valley as a means of illustrating changing economic, political and technological realities—namely, the relationship between humans and nature—through nineteenth and twentieth-century capitalist economies. She writes:

«Colonial approaches to the river and its valley differed in important ways from those that would follow. From reconnaissance expeditions to surveys, land surrender treaties, and resettlement efforts, imagined futures in this period consciously strove to establish a permanent European presence in the region through the institutions of agriculture, commerce, and private property. Specific in conception and practice to colonial imperatives of claiming and remodelling the geography of the New World, these imagined futures positioned the Don River and its valley as central to the development of the future capital. The practices that flowed from these ideas had visible and lasting effects upon valley ecosystems. They also displaced, and then replaced entirely, existing Aboriginal land uses» (Bonnell 2014).<sup>14</sup>

It is a site that is ripe for environmental historians, and there are many stories to be told about this watershed. Alves, however, was most interested in

<sup>14</sup> Bonnell, Jennifer. 2014. *Reclaiming the Don: an Environmental History of Toronto's Don River Valley*, 22. Toronto: University of Toronto Press.



the tri-government initiative that emerged in the 1880s. By this time, years of waste and sewage disposal by the municipality and a growing industrial hub had resulted in abhorrent conditions including foul odors and polluted waters that were a threat to public health with common outbreaks of cholera and diphtheria. The heavily contaminated waters of the Don were exacerbated by deforestation and soil erosion that impacted seasonal flood patterns. The so-called Don Improvement Plan of 1886 sought to improve the sanitary conditions of the watershed, make it navigable for large vessels, accommodate rail traffic, create new lands for industry, and offer flood control. City engineer E.H. Keating proposed that these lofty goals could be achieved through the dredging of a wide channel from the harbour to nearby Ashbridge's Bay Marsh and

the radical straightening of the Lower Don River, diverting the mouth of this Lake Ontario tributary. The project ultimately failed and pollution of the watershed would continue unabated through the twentieth-century, with worsened flooding and further development, namely the construction of the Don Valley Parkway.

Riverdale Park West sits in the heart of the Lower Don River, a site where the straightening of the tributary was most severe. This is where Maria Thereza Alves felt compelled to install a temporary public artwork, a subtle intervention in the park that would act as a memorial for the loss of a past landscape (Lawson 2022).<sup>15</sup> The evocative title *Phantom Pain* calls to mind the troubling, treatment-resistance sensations in human patients who have experienced the loss of a limb. The Don River was effectively

<sup>15</sup> Lawson, Katie. 2022. *Water, Kinship, Belief*. Eds. Candice Hopkins, Katie Lawson and Tairone Bastien. Toronto: Toronto Biennial of Art and Art Metropole, 328.

amputated, and Riverdale Park West becomes reinscribed as a site of bodily trauma, one that continues to send signals through the nervous system of the city. The artist installed a series of five steel forms that sat flush with the park's grass, a compressed and fragmented rendering of the river's former winding path (Figure 7). From certain angles, the work almost completely disappears, but when a passerby is within close range, the reflective surface of the work catches the hue of the sky above and for a moment the once shimmering surface of water returns to this radically altered site (Figure 8). While chosen for its perceptual effects, steel appealed to Alves as a material that would be easily recycled once the 2019 Biennial came to a close, moreover working as a modest scale that would not require extensive site remediation once the work was removed.

*Phantom Pain* makes visible the complicated and often buried

histories of one of Toronto's watersheds—in spite of the radical changes to the river, it returns to its original path through the ebb and flow of the hydrological cycle. In the scope of this paper, I have barely skimmed the surface of the long history of environmental degradation localized to this urban watershed. However, Maria Thereza Alves' engagement with the Don River extended beyond the conditions of land and water, as these elements of an ecosystem inherently impact native flora and fauna that once thrived in the region. This entanglement was recognized but only implicitly addressed by the artist. And as a means of deepening my research I situate this artwork in dialogue with projects by contemporary artists that take up the ripple effect that environmental degradation has on the ability of all beings, human and non-human, to thrive. A key example of these interdependencies can be found in the fact that by the 1860s, once abundant



Figure 7. Maria Thereza Alves: *Phantom Pain* (2019). Stainless steel temporary public sculpture at Riverdale Park West, Toronto. Courtesy: The Toronto Biennial of Art.



Figure 8. Maria Thereza Alves: *Phantom Pain* (2019). Detail view of sculpture surface. Courtesy: Katie Lawson.

native salmon had ceased to spawn in the river—a formerly reliable food source for human and non-human inhabitants of the region for thousands of years. Salmon are one of many species of fish and animals that have been impacted by the radical transformation of environments, which leads me to consider a project that focuses on a particular food plant that is native to the Great Lakes region.

### Pigeon Lake: Ogimaa Mikana

In the nearby Kawarthas, Indigenous communities have had the cultural, spiritual and economic practice of harvesting *manoomin* since time immemorial. Oral tradition attributes the migration and settlement of Anishinaabeg peoples around the Great Lakes

watershed to following a shell in the sky thousands of years ago, leading to a “place where food grows on water”—the abundance of wild rice within the region’s freshwater basins thus became central to their cosmology. As the only grain of its kind native to North America, it has served for thousands of years as a traditional food, a medicinal substrate for poultices, a spiritual offering for ceremonies like funerals; a food source for a range of water fowl and shelter for young fish, frogs, and aquatic prey (Stack Whitney 2015).<sup>16</sup> Ogimaa Mikana is an artist collective founded by Susan Blight and Hayden King, working in public art and social practice to assert Anishinaabe self-determination on the land. In 2016, Ogimaa Mikana expanded their *Reclaiming/*

<sup>16</sup> Stack Whitney, Kaitlin. 2015. “Manoomin: The Taming of Wild Rice in the Great Lakes Region,” *Arcadia* no. 2, Rachel Carson Center for Environment and Society: <https://doi.org/10.5282/rcc/6830>.

*Renaming* (2013-) project from interventions in signage and historical plaques to include a billboard near Peterborough, Ontario, that served as a creative intervention in the Mississauga Anishinaabe's fight to harvest wild rice (*minomiin*, *manomin*, or *manoomin*).

A popular "cottage country" destination, Pigeon Lake received international attention when a citizen-organized group of settlers lobbied for the removal of wild rice in the body of water to "make boating easier and to protect their lakefront property values" (Carleton 2016).<sup>17</sup> Despite the fact that Anishinaabeg rights to hunt, fish and gather food on their traditional territories are protected by the nineteenth century Williams Treaties,

non-Indigenous cottagers stake their own claims, which prioritize a particular landscape aesthetic and use of the lake for recreational activities. As Sarah Wylie Krotz notes, these contemporary complaints have historical resonance, as British settler, writer and botanist Catharine Parr Traill wrote of the impediment of rice beds to the "progress" of boats in 1830 (Krotz 2017).<sup>18</sup> Traill's written account coincided with an influx of settlers to the region, and three years later, the British government authorized the construction of locks, dams, and a canal system that would form the Trent-Severn Waterway. This geo-engineering project resulted in the flooding of the territories of Curve Lake First Nation, Hiawatha First Nation, and Scugog First

<sup>17</sup> Carleton, Sean. 2016. "Decolonizing cottage country: Anishinaabe art intervenes in Canada's 'wild rice war.'" *Canadian Dimension*, September 15, 2016: <https://canadiandimension.com/articles/view/decolonizing-cottage-country-anishinaabe-art-intervenues-in-canadas-wild-ric>.

<sup>18</sup> Krotz, S. W. 2017. "The Affective Geography of Wild Rice: A Literary Study," *Studies in Canadian Literature* 42.1: <https://journals.lib.unb.ca/index.php/SCL/article/view/25931>.

Nation; negative impacts on fish and animal habitats; and the dwindling of rice beds. At the centre of contemporary reportage on the conflict is James Whetung, a member of Curve Lake First Nation who is a provincially licensed harvester and founder of the company Black Duck Wild Rice, named for his father's clan (Jackson 2016).<sup>19</sup> The activities of the company are wide-reaching: for forty years, Whetung has worked to rehabilitate local rice beds in consultation with community elders, cultivate and sell wild rice, and to re-educate the public on how to gather and process the plant through experiential workshops as an advocate for Indigenous food sovereignty and security.

The billboard mounted by Ogimaa Mikana reads "*Anishinaabe manoomin inaakonigewin gosha*"—it offers no English translation upfront, but it is flanked by a hashtag #ogimaamikana (which takes curious passerbys to the collective's website) and a simple line drawing of the water bound crop (Figure 9). The presence of the Anishinaabemowin language is itself a disruption within a landscape dominated by the language of British colonizers.<sup>20</sup> The onus is placed on the viewer to seek out further information, and would easily discover that the text translates to "wild rice is Anishinaabe law." Susan Blight describes the philosophical teachings that are central to the harvesting of this nutritious,

<sup>19</sup> Jackson, Lisa. 2016. "Canada's Wild Rice Wars." *Al Jazeera*: <https://www.aljazeera.com/features/2016/2/20/canadas-wild-rice-wars>.

<sup>20</sup> While outside of the scope of this text, it is worth noting that much in the same way that the manipulation of water and land is a strategy of colonial settlement, so too is the imposition of the language of the colonizer and loss of Indigenous languages (which are a part of a given community's intangible cultural heritage). There has been a resurgence of interventions with Indigenous language in public spaces around the world, its own generative line of inquiry that is furthered through the exchange of global strategies for decolonization.



Figure 9. Ogimaa Mikana: *Reclaiming/ Renaming* (Susan Blight & Hayden King), “Anishinaabe manoomin inaakonigewin gosha” (2016). Billboard in Peterborough, Ontario.

sustainable food source—teachings that are threatened by the lack of freedom to continue with land-based practices that are central to Anishinaabeg identity and sovereignty (Carleton 2016). There are resonances here with the assertion by Cocina CoLaboratorio and Maria Thereza Alves that the *chinampa* represents not just a sustainable food system, but is part of an intricate web of human and non-human relations that inform our connection to place and culture. Intertwined with the

harvesting and seeding of wild rice are the expression of that identity through songs, stories, dances and ceremonies that accompany the drying, roasting and winnowing of the grain—all a part of the web of relations that Leanne Betasamosake Simpson describes as her nation’s “ecology of intimacy” (Simpson 2017).<sup>21</sup>

## Conclusions

Each of the projects detailed in this paper look quite different on the surface: a gallery exhibition, an ephemeral series of gatherings with their resulting audio recordings, a steel sculpture, and a billboard. They emerged from distinct geographies and socio-political contexts, yet each of the artists or artist collectives recover an aspect of local cultural and environmental heritage and Indigenous knowledge, working with aesthetic strategies with ties to social practice to translate, develop, and amplify existing

<sup>21</sup> Simpson, Leanne Betasamosake. “Land and Reconciliation: Having the Right Conversations.” *Watershed Sentinel*, November 23, 2017: <https://watershedsentinel.ca/articles/land-reconciliation/>.

research or stories. There is also something fundamentally relational about the process of realizing each work—the artist takes on the role of amplifier, and shares strategies with community-based practices. While Maria Thereza Alves champions the work of the Museo Comunitario del Valle Xico and Lost Rivers, I would argue that Ogimaa Mikana provided a signal boost to Black Duck Wild Rice and James Whetung, and Cocina CoLaboratorio demonstrates the most literal meaning of amplification in their

broadcast of a sprawling network of interdisciplinary researchers and practitioners. At first glance, the resulting contemporary artworks tap into local contexts by way of the forced manipulation and transformation of water and land, but they also expand out to include consideration of equally critical issues of our times: Indigenous sovereignty, food systems, and sustainable agricultural practices. I am encouraged by these artists to look to the past in order to imagine an alternative future—there is always the promise of return.

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# Posthumanist Feminism and Water Crisis in *Kowkülen* by Seba Calfuqueo

## Camila Stipo

### Abstract

This paper is an analysis of the artwork *Kowkülen* by Seba Calfuqueo from a posthumanist-feminist perspective. It proposes that the piece works as a hydrofeminist figuration—in other words, a conceptual and material meditation on the possibility to understand ourselves in more-than-human communities, which allows us to map the intra-actions that enable the constitution of a hydro-community risen from histories of colonization, patriarchy, and extractivism. Accordingly, the work considers the water crisis as events of variable dimensions, which depend on specific dynamics and relations with water.

## Introduction

This paper is an analysis of the artwork *Kowkülen* [Liquid Being] by the artist Seba Calfuqueo.

This work allows us to think of the current water crisis no longer as a “universal” problem but as events of variable dimensions, which depend on local dynamics and specific relations with water, understanding it not as a “resource” or “H<sub>2</sub>O” but as another agent in the specific intra-actions<sup>1</sup> of different communities. Thus, I will argue that *Kowkülen* allows attention to be drawn to specific water relations, marked by histories of colonialism, extractivism, and patriarchy. Likewise, the work opens up gestational possibilities of more-than-human resistances, questioning through them the hierarchical binary divisions

that constitute modern Western epistemology at the basis of the nature/culture divide implied in the “modern water” paradigm.

To this end, we will first consider the problems of facing the water crisis starting from the paradigm of “modern water” (Linton 2006),<sup>2</sup> that is, water understood as a single substance (H<sub>2</sub>O) that belongs to the realm of nature, which can be understood according to scientific methods of abstraction and quantification. Consequently, “modern water” is to be managed globally, according to economic criteria of efficiency. This is an issue that has had particular but paradigmatic expressions in Chile.

Secondly, following the posthumanist proposals of Astrida Neimanis, we present an

<sup>1</sup> Intra-action is a Baradian term used to replace “interaction,” which necessitates pre-established bodies that then participate in action with each other. Intra-action understands agency as not an inherent property of an individual or human to be exercised, but as a dynamism of forces in which all designated “things” are constantly exchanging and diffracting, influencing and working inseparably.

<sup>2</sup> Linton, Jamie. 2006. *What Is Water? The History of a Modern Abstraction*. PhD dissertation. Ottawa: Carleton University. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14649365.2012.757036>. [Free translation.]

alternative to the conventional thought about the water crisis. For Neimanis, it is necessary to pay attention to the materiality of the waters that constitute bodies, in order to, first, follow the traces of the specific local dynamics of colonialism, extractivism, and patriarchy embodied in waters, which direct their flows; and, second, to learn from the gestationality of waters to transform ourselves into “means for others” (Neimanis 2017, 102),<sup>3</sup> that is, to generate relations that enable the flourishing and sustainability of life.

Consequently, I will argue that *Kowkülen* functions as a hydrofeminist cartography, bringing our attention to local and global dimensions of specific waters. At the same time, it questions the individuality of the modern Western subject and the constitution of modern water from a situated perspective, in order to gestate hydrocommon futures.

## The Modern Water Paradigm

Jamie Linton has shown that, since the early 17th century, the radical distinction between nature and culture has excluded the cultural meanings associated with water, which came to be perceived as a single and essential substance (H<sub>2</sub>O) (Linton 2006, 108-144). In other words, there was a shift from grasping the existence of “waters” to that of “water.” This phenomenon has been understood as the “conquest of water” (108), contextualized in the growing demands of capitalist productivity which require a conceptualization of water more adequate to its ends. Linton calls “modern water” the habit of abstracting, fixing, containing, and relating to water through codings such as H<sub>2</sub>O—a very useful habit for industry and the market, but ineffective and detrimental in addressing the current water crisis (4).

<sup>3</sup> Neimanis, Astrida. 2017. *Bodies of Water. Posthuman Feminist Phenomenology*. London & New York: Bloomsbury Academic. [Free translation.]

Linton quotes Derek Gregory to illustrate this dominant way of relating to water, which has operated on a global scale since the end of the twentieth century. According to Gregory, the new discourse of hydrology and hydraulic engineering that translated nature into mathematical formulas does not give rise to any kind of “local knowledge,” since “the hydraulics of irrigation canals and the mechanics of dam construction could be the same all over the world” (41).

This abstract and universalizing relation with water has specific consequences in the approach to the water crisis by those in power. Linton shows how, in the late 1990s, the water problem began to be presented as “global,” insofar as it began to affect the interests of rich countries, even though the diagnosis of water problems as

endemic in poor countries had already been around for quite some time (332). This global approach has implied the search for maximizing the efficiency of water use, extracting it as a “commodity.” Thus, the response to the modern water crisis has been to try to save it, turning water into an economic abstraction based on the principle of natural scarcity.

This is especially relevant when analyzing the Chilean case of water management, as it has been considered “a paradigmatic case of neoliberal environmental governance” (Prieto 2022).<sup>4</sup> After the 1973 civil-military coup d'état, an economic model based on the market as the resource allocator, the privatization of economic activity, the liberalization of the economy through the opening to foreign markets, and, in general, the reduction of the

<sup>4</sup> Prieto, Manuel. 2022. “Indigenous Resurgence, Identity Politics, and the Anticommodification of Nature: The Chilean Water Market and the Atacameño People.” *Annals of the American Association of Geographers* 112, no. 2: 1, <https://doi.org/10.1080/24694452.2021.1937036>.

state apparatus as an economic agent, was implemented in Chile by force.

In this context, the dictatorship imposed the 1981 Water Code, which laid the foundations of a water management model based on private ownership of water rights (as well as the separation of these rights from land ownership), with liberties to buy, sell, mortgage, inherit, and transfer them freely, like any other real estate. This action sought to establish the legal norms and conditions to spontaneously produce a water market that maximizes profit with minimal state action (Bauer 2004).<sup>5</sup>

Thus water, already transformed by the abstraction process that turned it into H<sub>2</sub>O, underwent a second abstraction that turned it into a scarce economic

resource, which for Chile has meant a greater abstraction of its environment, by legally separating it from the ownership of the land.

### Water and Posthumanism

Addressing the issue of the abstraction of water, posthumanist theorist Astrida Neimanis (2014)<sup>6</sup> states:

«treating water as quantifiable and instrumentalized not only risks its exploitation and deterioration; it also belies a management paradigm that is ultimately unworkable and unresponsive to specific water challenges, in specific places at specific times. Abstraction is thus another problem tied to issues of quantification, instrumentalization, anthropocentrism and a nature/culture split.»

<sup>5</sup> Bauer, Carl J. 2004. *Siren Song. Chilean Water Law as a Model for International Reform*, Washington, DC 20036–1400: Resources for the Future.

<sup>6</sup> Neimanis, Astrida, 2014. "Alongside the Right to Water, a Posthumanist Feminist Imaginary." *Journal of Human Rights and the Environment* 5, no. 1 (2014);: 5–24, 12.

Neimanis argues that the water crisis is also a social crisis, insofar as it is precipitated by a social imaginary of what water is (Neimanis 2017, 20). Accordingly, the author offers a different perspective to think not only about water but also about the social relations it entails and enables (20), no longer from the perspective of the H<sub>2</sub>O abstraction, but from the local relations materialized by the specific intra-actions that water embodies and by which it is embodied. Neimanis proposes a posthumanist perspective of approaching the problem of the water crisis, seeking to enable forms of community in the face of the climate crisis, without ignoring the dynamics of unequal distribution of burdens and benefits that the latter implies, nor the specific ethical responsibilities involved in the contemporary crisis situation.

It should be noted that, broadly speaking, the posthuman subject is defined

«within an eco-philosophy of multiple belongings, as a relational subject constituted in and by multiplicity, that is to say a subject that works across differences and is also internally differentiated, but still grounded and accountable. Posthuman subjectivity expresses an embodied and embedded and hence partial form of accountability, based on a strong sense of collectivity, relationality and hence community building» (Braidotti 2013).<sup>7</sup>

<sup>7</sup> Braidotti, Rosi. 2013. *The Posthuman*. Cambridge: Polity Press, 58.

In other words, posthumanism aims to overcome the individuality of the subject, focusing its analysis on relationships or intra-actions as the most fundamental analytical units. Likewise, it discards anthropocentric approaches to the observation of these relationships, considering both human and non-human agents. Finally, this perspective does not seek to find universal truths but rather implies a “thinking-from” (Haraway 2019),<sup>8</sup> that is, focusing on what situated, historicized, local, and material experiences can tell us about alternatives for “thinking/making for more livable politics and ecologies in the times of burning and extraction called the Anthropocene and Capitalocene” (141). That is why, even though this perspective sweeps away the priority of the human (and particularly the white, heterosexual, proprietary male) as the meaning-endowing axis and sole agent in the configuration of the facts of the

world, it does not result in an ethical homogenization in which it is impossible to determine accountability. It is precisely the careful mapping of local dynamics, and not universal rules, that allows identifying the participants in the becoming of facts, constituting a situated ethics (Braidotti 53), which includes nature not as a kind mother but as an active agent in the intra-actions that materialize the different states of affairs of the world.

Accordingly, as these approaches confront extremely entrenched perspectives regarding the individual subject and agency as an exclusively human prerogative, they require material-conceptual mediations that open up the possibility of understanding ourselves in broader communities than just the human one, without obscuring the differences that result from extractivist, colonial, racist, and patriarchal

<sup>8</sup> Haraway, Donna. 2019. *Seguir con el problema. Generar parentesco en el Chthuluceno*. Consonni, 20.

hierarchical dynamics. These meditations have been called “figurations” (Neimanis 2017, 5-6).

Neimanis invites us to think of ourselves as “bodies of water,” arguing that “as bodies of water we are *both* different *and* common; water calls on us to give an account of our own (very human) politics of location, even as this situatedness will always swim beyond our masterful grasp, finding confluence with other bodies and times” (4-5). In other words, the invitation does not imply *imagining* ourselves as bodies of water, nor does it have to do with abstractions such as “the liquid” or H<sub>2</sub>O, but rather, it calls us to pay attention to the materiality of the concrete waters that constitute us and with which we coexist, in order to change how we think of the way we inhabit the world (19-22).

At the same time, Neimanis explores the gestational potential of water to think about our capacities of resistances and responsibilities in the face of the moment of crisis, arguing that,

«if we are all watery, then we all harbour the potential of watery gestationality within our corporeal selves. [...] this gestationality need not take the form of a human reprosexual womb: we may be gestational as lover, as neighbour, as accidental stranger. We learn gestationality from water; we repeat its potential in and as watery bodies, too. In the context of our world’s pressing water crises, this lesson can encourage us to be more thoughtful, and more responsive, in terms of what we give back to water in all its forms, but in



particular to those planetary water bodies that we (as always differentiated) currently exploit, pollute, and instrumentalize. How might we, in a partial dissolution of our own sovereign subjectivity, also become gestational for this gestational milieu?» (69).

This is why Neimanis speaks of “hydrofeminisms,” in the sense that objects of feminist thought, such as gestation, extend rhizomatically into new concerns through the watercourses of which we are a part.

«To follow our bodies of water along their rivulets and tributaries is to journey beyond the cleaving and coupling of sexually differentiated human bodies: we find ourselves tangled in intricate choreographies of bodies and flows of all kinds—not only human bodies, but also other animal, vegetable, geophysical, meteorological, and technological ones; not only watery flows, but also flows of power, culture, politics, and economics» (Neimanis 2014, 111-112).

To become a body of water is to let ourselves think about animal ethics, environmental degradation, or neocolonialist capitalist incursions, from feminist perspectives that, in turn, expand the borders of feminism (112).

Thinking of ourselves as bodies of water allows us to generate local cartographies in which water actively interferes, questioning the hierarchical nature/culture split replicated in the “dualisms: self/other, mind/body, [...] man/woman, civilized/primitive, reality/appearance,

all/part, agent/resource, builder/building, active/passive, good/evil, truth/illusion, total/partial, God/man” (Haraway 2019, 14). In the same way, figuration uncovers the potential gestationality of the waters that inhabit us, opening the possibility of more-than-human alliances for the sustainability of life in the Anthropocene.

### *Kowkülen* [Liquid Being]

I would like to suggest that Astrida Neimanis's figuration of “bodies of water” is useful for

thinking about the work *Kowkülen* by Mapuche Champurria and non-binary visual artist and performer Seba Calfuqueo.<sup>9</sup>

*Kowkülen* consists of a three and a half minute video, presented in the exhibition *Ko ñi weychan* [The Struggles of Water], in which we see the artist in different scenes, submerged naked and on her back in the waters of the Cautín River, Araucanía Region, surrounded by the native forest. Seba's body is shown in different positions with



Seba Calfuqueo: *Kowkülen* [Liquid Being]. Register video: Cons Gallardo & Raúl Moncada. Courtesy: Seba Calfuqueo.

<sup>9</sup> Seba Calfuqueo, *Kowkülen*, 2020, <https://vimeo.com/457468658>.

blue shibari ties, letting herself be rocked by the waters that surround her. The sound design is composed of the sound of the river, and the image is accompanied by different texts in Spanish and Mapudungun.

Referring to this work, Seba notes,

«*Kowkülen* came with my approach to the Curacautín, a complex territory besieged by monoculture forestry that destroys the existence of biodiversity and only allows for the growth of a single species. From a very young age, I had a bond with the waters near the Villarrica and Calafquén lakes. Water was always an environment that I was taught to value and respect in its various forms: *trayenko* or slope, *traitraiko* waters that hit the rocks, and *lefü*, that is, rivers where the water runs free» (in Barros Cruz 2022, 33).<sup>10</sup>

Heather Davis asserts that art is a space of experimentation for living in a damaged world, a space in which to think about and narrate the ways we inhabit the world, “narratives that can be disruptive or visionary, that can connect or separate us from the earth” (Davis, 2018).<sup>11</sup> Along these lines, for Calfuqueo, art

«is a space for creating other realities, unfeasible under the colonial system in which we live. Art is another tool

<sup>10</sup> Barros Cruz, María José. 2022. “Seba Calfuqueo” in *Aguas libres. Conversaciones con artistas y activistas por la defensa del agua en Abya Yala*. Santiago de Chile: Ocho libros, 33.

<sup>11</sup> Davis, Heather. 2018. “Art in the Anthropocene.” Ed. Rosi Braidotti and Maria Hlavajova. *Posthuman Glossary*. London & New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 65.

for decolonization, which allows us to become sensitive to the environment and to other beings, thinking of other ways of relating, outside those established by society. Art is a field that allows us to think about the future, a place that has historically been denied to indigenous peoples» (in Barros Cruz 2022, 35).

In this sense, my hypothesis is that this work operates as a hydrofeminist cartography, insofar as maps cannot be understood as transparent representations of a territory. The territory does not precede the map, but rather space becomes territory through practices of delimitation that include cartography. Since places are planned and constructed on the basis of maps, so that space is itself a representation of the map, the differentiation between the real and the representation loses meaning. Maps and territories are co-constructed. Space is constituted through cartographic practices (Corner 2011, 93).<sup>12</sup>

Accordingly, Calfuqueo's work is a map not only because it allows us to follow the particular relations and dynamics of specific body-territories with the problems produced by neoliberal extractivism, the binary gender norm, colonialism, anthropocentrism, and secularism as organizing structures of bodies and the violence that looms over them, but also because, at the same time, it opens possibilities to generate new forms of hydro-community in the face of the water

<sup>12</sup> Corner, James. 2011. "The Agency of Mapping: Speculation, Critique and Invention." In *The Map Reader: Theories of Mapping Practice and Cartographic Representation*, ed. Martin Dodge, Rob Kitchin, and Chris Perkins. John Wiley & Sons, 9. <https://doi.org/10.1002/9780470979587.ch12>.

crisis. The latter is what I will call *Kowkülen's* gestational capacity.

Now, as Neimanis points out, attending to the waters that constitute a hydro-community requires that we account for the diversity of location policies found in it (Neimanis 2017, 4-5), so it is not possible to avoid the dynamics of unequal distribution of burdens and benefits of the crisis. This exercise requires tracing them through watery flows that carry in their materiality the histories of contamination, dispossession, resistance, invisibilization, settlement, spirituality, and multi-species communities of resistance.

This is precisely what *Kowkülen* shows, as it allows us to think locally about the water crisis, articulating it with other types of splits that resonate with the nature/culture hierarchical binary, such as man/woman, science/superstition, civilized/barbarian, religious/secular, etc. This work thus invites us



Seba Calfuqueo: *Kowkülen* [Liquid Being].  
Display documentation.  
Courtesy: Seba Calfuqueo.

to reflect on the problems of extractivism linked to modern Western epistemology, anchored in the individuality of the subject. Likewise, it proposes more-than-human alliances that resist the taxonomies of modernity, thus generating a body of water as speculative fabulation, which proves both the possibility of local multispecies intra-actions, as well as the histories of particular waters placed in relation to each moment and place, that is, historically situated.

The Cautín River, where the video takes place, is the most important tributary of the Imperial River, one of the three main basins of the region.<sup>13</sup> These basins have been lowering their flow due to the decrease in precipitations and the elevation

of the 0°C isotherm. These phenomena are a byproduct of climate change (Rojas 2012, 48)<sup>14</sup> and have contributed to the mega-drought affecting the entire country. This situation takes on an even more critical expression in a region that, in the national collective imagination, is a territory characterized by abundant water (Neira Barría, 2020).<sup>15</sup>

The decrease in water flows is added to the overexploitation of surface and subterranean aquifers, and the high use for agroforestry activities and electricity generation. These causes are, in turn, related to the aforementioned legal and judicial status of water in Chile, as well as the concentration of use rights linked to the Water Code of the dictatorship.

<sup>13</sup> The region has three main river basins: the Imperial River basin, the Toltén River basin, and the upper Biobío River basin.

<sup>14</sup> Rojas Corradi, Maisa. 2012. "Cambio climático global." In *Cambio climático global: vulnerabilidad, adaptación y sustentabilidad. Experiencias internacionales comparadas*, ed. Jorge Rojas Hernández. Editorial Universidad de Concepción, 48.

<sup>15</sup> Neira Barría, Paz. 2020. "Situación del agua en la Araucanía." <https://observatorio.cl/situacion-del-agua-en-la-araucania/>.



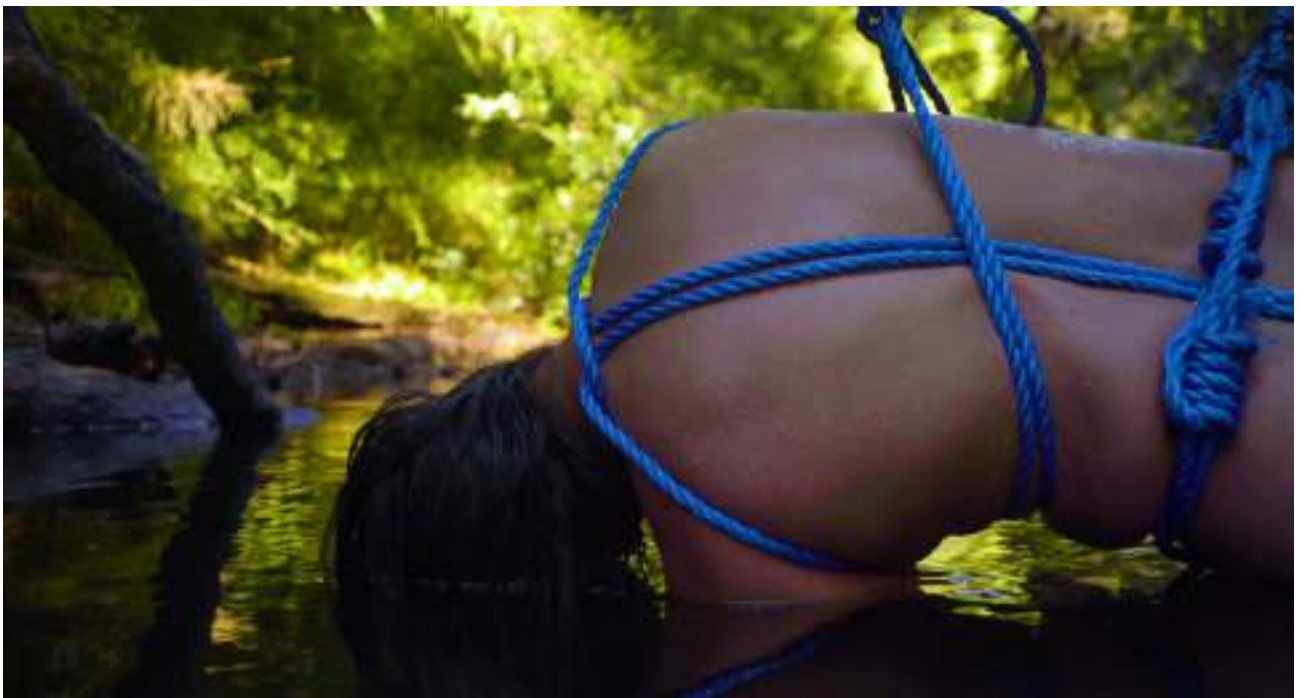
Seba Calfuqueo: *Kowkülen* [Liquid Being]. Register video: Cons Gallardo & Raúl Moncada. Courtesy: Seba Calfuqueo.

That is why *Kowkülen* begins with a black background and blue letters, in which we read “In Chile, the 1981 Water Code written during Pinochet's dictatorship is still ruling. This document defines water in Chile as a marketable good.” Thus, the work begins by directing our attention towards an extractivist and anthropocentric economic structure at the planetary scale, which has particular expressions

in Chile due to the history of violence linked to the military dictatorship that consolidated the prioritization of water as an asset at the service of the industrial sectors (Budds 2020, 17),<sup>16</sup> leaving the reproduction of human and non-human life in the background.

However, both the setting of the work in the Araucanía region and the Mapuche body of the artist,

<sup>16</sup> Budds, Jessica. 2020. “Gobernanza del agua y desarrollo bajo el mercado: Las relaciones sociales de control del agua en el marco del Código de Aguas de Chile.” *Investigaciones Geográficas*, no. 59 (2020): 17. <https://doi.org/10.5354/0719-5370.2020.57717>.



Seba Calfuqueo: *Kowkülen* [Liquid Being]. Register video: Cons Gallardo & Raúl Moncada. Courtesy: Seba Calfuqueo



transport us to more specific dimensions of the extractivist model and its ties to colonialism. I am referring to the “Pacification of Araucanía” process, a series of military campaigns through which Mapuche lands were occupied and colonized by the Chilean State in the second half of the nineteenth century (Mallon 2009, 156).<sup>17</sup> As is well known, this occupation resulted in the usurpation of land from Indigenous communities through processes of accumulation by dispossession (Harvey 2005),<sup>18</sup> which in relation to water has meant the accumulation of use rights.

«Altogether, the sanitary [water] companies, drinking water committees, and Indigenous communities, are entitled to 7,152 liters per second out of a total of 192,729, corresponding to 3.7% of the regional total. OC [...] The

situation is especially critical in rural areas, which concentrates the regional population without access to a public water network (22% of the regional population)» (Neira Barría 2020).

It is precisely this usurpation that Calfuqueo refers to in the first scene of *Kowkülen*. In it, we see her body almost completely submerged in the river, blending in with the stones on which the water hits—*traitraiko*. Here, we read: “The history of the peoples settled historically *inaltu lafken mew* next to the water. I have been there, in a liquid state, running through different basins.” Thus, the work is not talking about abstract waters but about the materiality of this water-body, specifically configured by the water that constitutes the Mapuche blood of Seba (Neimanis 2017, 29), in material and historical relation with the

<sup>17</sup> Mallon, Florencia. 2009. “El siglo XX mapuche: esferas públicas, sueños de autodeterminación y articulaciones internacionales.” In *Las disputas por la etnicidad en América Latina*, ed. Christian Martínez and Marco Estrada. Santiago, Catalonia, 156.

<sup>18</sup> Harvey, David. 2005. “El ‘nuevo’ imperialismo: acumulación por desposesión.” CLACSO.

waters of the Cautín River, placing the viewers within the historical conflicts of the State of Chile and the Mapuche people.

These conflicts are reflected in dispossessions of water and land from the communities, which today have their main expression in forestry companies protected by the State through militarization in defense of private property, destroying the native forest and water courses we see from beginning to end composing the scene composed by the artist in this video (Martínez 2018, 65).<sup>19</sup>

Calfuqueo adds that they are “Liquid, historical ties. Knowing that I am part of the territory” (*Köwkulen*), highlighting both the inescapability of her bodily ties to the territorial and ecosystemic collectivity formed by the specific histories embodied in this body of water, as well as the questioning of the artificial

separation between water and territory established during the dictatorship (Barros Cruz, 32). Therefore, while the text on the video denounces the market's ruling over life, we see Seba's body separating from the land and leaving the scene.

However, the native forest, the Cautín River, and Seba's body, cannot be understood as three separate entities that make up the work, as they are already hydrically linked by specific dependencies threatened by a history of violence. These connections evidence the porous limits of these bodies, which open the way to the water communities mentioned by Neimanis. This is precisely what the following scene shows through the ties that knot the artist to the trunk of a tree, submerging part of her body in the water. The partial concealing of her face throughout the

<sup>19</sup> Martínez, María José. 2018. “Reflexiones y propuestas desde la defensa del territorio y la refundación del pueblo Mapuche. Mujeres del Parlamento Koz Koz, Panguipulli, Chile.” In *Mujeres en defensa de territorios. Reflexiones feministas frente al extractivismo*, ed. Angela Erpel Jara. Santiago de Chile: Fundación Heinrich Böll, 65.

video makes it difficult to identify her individually. We also see the gradual intensification of the pressure on Seba's body due to the ties as the video progresses. This points to the pressure of modern colonial and extractivist dynamics on the entire hydro-community.

Thus, the work not only emphasizes the tensions between the Chilean State and the Mapuche people, but also gives an account of how this particular history has had detrimental consequences for all the vital multi-species ecologies that are sustained through hydrological cycles.

«Many Indigenous peoples defend life. Defending life also means preserving native forests and what lives in them. Without forests, there is no possibility of life, and that is the struggle that many peoples around the world have led. The defense of the territory includes the act of accepting that nature is inherently intelligent and ceasing to understand it as an external environment that we merely observe without feeling part of it» (Barros Cruz 35).

Thus, the water crisis and the dispossession of the entire hydro-community by the advance of extractivism contextualizes not only *Kowkülen* but also much of Calfuqueo's work. For example, in *Mapu Kufüll*,<sup>20</sup> Calfuqueo denounces how the lack of water availability and agroforestry extractivism have also destroyed other forms of life. In this work, she addresses the mushroom

<sup>20</sup> Calfuqueo, Seba. 2020. *Mapu Kufüll*. <https://sebacalfuqueo.com/2020/10/09/mapu-kufull/>.

foraging practices of Mapuche communities during the period of colonization, as a response to the hunger produced by the genocide committed by the Chilean State. As the artist explains, “The knowledge of fungi is implicitly related to the knowledge of the forest; *fungi are fundamental to the relationships between life, water, and plants, as they are their connective networks*” (34-35).<sup>21</sup>

This knowledge of the forest and its networks of sustainability is also addressed in *Kowkülen*, giving rise to another aspect of the colonial dimension that has not only dispossessed land, but has also concentrated knowledge and science in the hands of a few male experts who have been allowed to experiment with human and non-human bodies. To this end, the artist retrieves localized

notions of “healing” discarded by the West as worthless forms of knowledge. Hence we see the *lawen*<sup>22</sup> growing on the riverbank, which is reinforced by the phrase “cleaning (themselves) with the rocks. Healing sediments. *Kurake Lawen*” (*Kowkülen*).

At the same time, this crosses the references to different spiritual figures in the work—Nguen ko, Arüm ko, Ngürü filu, Shumpall, Kai Kai—which are linked to specific objects that make up the territories inhabited by the Mapuche, pointing to the importance of spirituality as an essential element of a good living (*buen vivir*) and questioning the distrust of some forms of feminism in this spiritual dimension (Mohanty 2011, 117-173).<sup>23</sup> In other words, it allows reflecting on how some forms of feminism might

<sup>21</sup> The italics are my own intervention.

<sup>22</sup> *Lawen* are medicinal herbs that grow near watercourses.

<sup>23</sup> Mohanty, Chandra T. 2011. “Bajo los ojos de Occidente; academia feminista y discursos coloniales.” In *Descolonizando el feminismo: teorías y prácticas desde los márgenes*, ed. Liliana Suarez y Aída Hernández. Cátedra.

enclose colonialist perspectives, making it difficult to denounce the unequal distribution of environmental suffering from a spiritual perspective, due to the fact that water is understood as a single substance—H<sub>2</sub>O. Regarding this, the artist states:

«From the Mapuche cosmovision, waters are no object or material, nor an element either, but life itself. The blue color used in the performances alludes to the sacred condition of waters. For the Mapuche culture, blue is a sacred color and it represents the connection with the transcendental Calfu» (in Barros Cruz 31-32).

The destruction of sacred places adds a specific surface to the devastation produced by the climate crisis and capitalist dispossession denounced in *Kowkülen*, showing that “while the lack of water availability impacts on the daily ways of life of the most vulnerable population, it also generates an impact on the spirituality of the Mapuche people” (Bravo and Fragkou 2019, 51).<sup>24</sup>

In addition, the flow produced by the suspension of the artist's body to a trunk by means of the blue ties, leaving her partially submerged in the water, also suggests other types of flows that open up through this spiritual dimension—namely, the flows of gender that question binarism in this work.

<sup>24</sup> Bravo, Leslie and Maria Christina Fragkou. 2019. “Escasez hídrica, género, y cultura mapuche. Un análisis desde la ecología política feminista.” *Polis* 18, no. 54. <https://doi.org/10.32735/s0718-6568/2019-n54-1401>.

«minimal parts of a whole and, even so, still present. Ecosystems, species. Itrofill mongen. I want to be a fish, without a sex to be reckoned with. A shumpall, interstice of man, of woman. Non-binary waters going through basins [...] My body is water. I merge myself into it. That is my policy» (*Köwkulen*).

This ties in with various themes in Calfuqueo's oeuvre regarding the colonial dimensions of gender construction, which have had specific expressions in both the distribution of water and its scarcity (Bravo and Fragkou 49). In previous works such as *You Will Never Be a Weye* (2015) or *Bodies in Resistance* (2020), the artist speaks of the suppression of Indigenous culture by Spanish colonization, “a denial that also is extended—by the patriarchy’s command—to the control of our own identities and bodies.”<sup>25</sup> Calfuqueo rescues the history of subjects that do not comply with gender binarism, focusing on fluctuating identities between the feminine and the masculine that were exterminated by Catholic colonizers under the accusation of sodomy.<sup>26</sup> This also adds to the reasons why in *Kowkülen* we never see the artist from the front, thus concealing the body parts used to assign gender in Western modernity.

However, in *Kowkülen*, the insistence in these gender flows, which are still present despite centuries of

<sup>25</sup> Calfuqueo, Seba. 2015. *You Will Never Be a Weye*. <https://sebacalfuqueo.com/2016/09/10/291/>.

<sup>26</sup> Calfuqueo, Seba. 2020. *Cuerpos en resistencia*. <https://sebacalfuqueo.com/2020/01/27/bodies-in-resistance-inche-ta-kangechi-2020/>.

suppression, goes beyond human corporeality. Centrality is placed on the ecosystemic connections that sustain the entire hydro-community—symbolized by the artist's body held by the ropes—and which cannot be categorized within the Western structure of male/female.

«At school, in Santiago, we were taught that nature corresponded to the idea of reproduction from a male and a female, but nature is not only that way but several. Some species are transient, others self-reproduce without the need of a male or female, and others are even hermaphrodites. Waters are not binary, they do not respond to the feminine or the masculine, and it is with this power of non-identification with binarism that I was able to embrace my identity, which did not fit into these categories. Gender is something that runs fluidly in my life, it does not stop at rigid categories, just like the waters when no one is stopping them» (Calfuqueo in Barros Cruz, 33).

Thus, the porosity of the limits posed by the artist between the human body and the river, between the human and the divine, between man and woman, is made possible precisely by a particular politics: that of being bodies of water.

As Astrida Neimanis asserts:

«Currents of water are also currents of toxicity, queerness, coloniality, sexual difference, global capitalism, imagination, desire, and multispecies

community. Water's transits are neither necessarily benevolent, nor are they necessarily dangerous. They are rather material maps of our multivalent forms of marginality and belonging» (Neimanis 2017, 15).

In this sense, the work is a cartography of a body of water composed of multiple waters that are embodied in this link of the blue ties around the artist, the river and the territory. All this questions the exceptionalism and the priority given to human subjectivity in terms of the relationships of dependence and intra-action shared by all the bodies of water that configure the balance necessary for the hydro-community. The subject in the work is constructed “from the materiality of the body and its various porosities, flows, points of stagnation and scalar complexities” (15), paying attention to the bodily materialities that allow us to connect “questions of feminism with environmental concerns, not only as something we deal with, but also as something we embody, intimately and diffusely” (30).

Since this mapping allows us to question modern water as an abstraction at the service of the market, which opens spaces to understand waters as plural and collective (36), the work also operates as a gestational device, that is, a mediation that gives rise to the generation of resistance in the face of crisis.

As I have stated, cartographies not only represent territories but also allow their co-constitution. Thus, by bringing our attention to concrete waters that have been stripped by extractivism in Araucanía—colonized





Seba Calfuqueo: *Kowkülen* [Liquid Being]. Display documentation.  
Courtesy: Seba Calfuqueo.

waters that run through the rivers and veins of the artist, secularized and normalized waters, understood as H<sub>2</sub>O, taking away their ambiguity between the human and the divine, between the masculine and the feminine—*Kowkülen* allows us to understand the waters from outside the paradigm of modern water.

The specific stories embodied in this body of water constructed

in the video allow gestating approaches to waters with the potential to offer alternative solutions to the crisis, ones that do not respond to the logic of capital or the principle of scarcity. By immersing herself in the Cautín River, partially renouncing her individual subjectivity, the artist becomes a very specific medium for the care and flourishing of local and global ecosystems, which are embodied in this body of water (102).

## Conclusions

The posthumanist conceptualizations of Astrida Neimanis regarding the water crisis are useful to analyze the work *Kowkülen* by Seba Calfuqueo, insofar as the latter maps a specific hydro-community that questions the universalizing abstractions at the base of the nature/culture split. In this sense, the work questions the “modern water” paradigm denounced by Jamie Linton, as it makes room for local histories and problematics, and the specific relations and intra-actions that affect equally

specific communities, enabling more-than-human alliances for the sustainability of life in the context of the depredation of the Anthropocene—which hovers its violences differentially over subordinated, i.e., feminized and colonized, bodies.

By paying attention to the concrete waters brought into relation in the work, instead of to an abstract idea of H<sub>2</sub>O, the result is a mapping of difference that uncovers the ways in which environmental suffering is unjustly distributed in Chile, and not a homogenization of bodies as “bodies of water.”

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Translated from Spanish by Luis Mancipe León and Saúl Figueredo.

ACTIONS  
TOWARD

HYDRO  
COMMONS  
ECOLOGIES  
AND  
ECONOMIES

# The River Flows, the Stone Remains: Mutual Understandings between Water and Humanity in Mayan Territory

## Diego Ventura Puac-Coyoy

### Abstract

Water and its deep interrelationship with other living beings has been widely addressed by various communities throughout history. The location of large bodies of water has determined human settlements and has allowed their development. It was not until the Industrial Revolution that water exploitation became excessive. This text explains the dynamics and relationships between the Maya K'iche community of Chichicastenango and water, as well as access to it through self-management and its care under ancestral logic and the Mayan worldview.

## Introduction

*The stone trail is a witness  
of our past,  
perhaps painting is a record  
of our present.*

With these words I would like to begin this text, which is partly testimonial and partly descriptive of my experience with my work as a curator and an ancestral authority of my community. My intention is to propose a journey where these worlds meet—art and community service—both with a common interest: water.

In the sacred *Cholq'ij* Mayan calendar, Imox is the *nahual*<sup>1</sup> and day when the waters are remembered. Seas, rivers, lakes, groundwater, rainwater<sup>2</sup>, and cenotes. It is also the *nahual* of madness, of imbalance related to everything that we cannot understand. Within the

knowledge of my community and its way of seeing and understanding the world, one must ask for permission from everything that exists before touching it. Before the day of *kajib'* Imox, I have asked for permission to talk about him/her, to talk about water and our interaction with her/him. Water, mountains, trees, fire... they all have their own spirit and personality, their understanding and science. That is why we understand and approach them from a place of respect and coexistence, unlike the current understanding, where everything is an exploitable, defilable, and disposable resource. Even people. At this point, it is important for me to point out that awareness and interaction with water, from the essential to the ritual, is something that we experience and embody, not from folklore but from daily life.

<sup>1</sup> *Nahual* is each of the days of the sacred Mayan calendar, which determines the actions related to work, economics, rituality, community, family, and other aspects of worldly and human life

<sup>2</sup> The rain has a different personality and *nahual*, which is *Kawoq'*.

Life in the Mayan nations in Guatemala is a constant act of resistance facing the world and its current system: the way it functions, the way of understanding how things are done and who is allowed to exist. Large urban centers and their problems underestimate community life and erase people's identities. As there is no cohesion or sense of community and shared responsibility in the cities, it is difficult to solve daily problems that are becoming more accentuated every day, such as crime, waste management, traffic, and the care of green areas. Water supply is one of those urban problems. Dismantling the community has been a practice that the current economic/political systems have successfully achieved, one that has evolved for each specific case and context across Latin America. Due to the lack of identity, collectivities don't have a significant cohesive element and, therefore, are doomed to fail.

In the vast majority of Indigenous peoples across the Americas, there is a calling, even before birth, to follow community responsibility. Belonging to native nations, from the European invasions to this day, implies a constant act of resistance against everything: a language that is not yours, an economic system that relegates you to being servitude, social dynamics that give you a place according to your skin color or surname. Despite all this, there is our resistance and we honor our existence, because we honor our ancestors and those who will come after us, even if we don't know them yet and we probably won't know their names, and perhaps they won't know ours either. But we already prayed for them.

We carry the weight of history over us everyday. Not only because of our cultural heritage, but because in countries like Guatemala, we are the ones

carrying the country on our backs. Migration to the United States and remittance economy underpin this colonial ranch assumed as a country to this day; and the migrants—mostly Mayan—are undervalued here and there.

In all historical processes, there are nuances and phenomena that vary with each region, and also by factors that tend to change the course. In colonial times, land ownership was (and still is) a determining factor for Indigenous peoples. Later, in the republican era, it was access to education as a civilizing process to occupy other spaces. More recently (1980s and 1990s), university education and the internal armed conflict<sup>3</sup> changed the variables. Based on these changes, we have revisited and criticized our past and recent history as Mayan descendants—

racialized bodies and diverse agents in all the contexts of our lives. Ultimately, we are always political, economic and cultural subjects, even though there are strong movements from within that recognize themselves merely as cultural bodies or economic agents—in both cases, exploitable through exoticization.

History has recorded that events tend to be cyclical, that is, they repeat themselves from time to time. We can probably realize this in our individual experiences: it is vital to understand the way in which the tests, errors, and decisions in our lives return from time to time. It is thanks to the accumulation of acquired experiences that we change, and thanks to the lack of memory that we repeat mistakes and make each situation worse. It was already said with the allegory of the snails and their

<sup>3</sup> The internal armed conflict lasted 36 years. In this period, more than 600 massacres were perpetrated against indigenous communities, in addition to forced disappearances, torture, and other practices against human rights. More than 80% of the victims were descendants of Indigenous peoples, with the Ixil nation being the most affected.

spiral: everything returns and everything remains.

So this is where the knowledge, rituality, and practices around bodies of water are placed in context. It is based on how knowledge is shared in the different Mayan nations in Guatemala, and how those processes have preserved our science. It is important to emphasize that due to colonial logics, rituality has carried (often secretly) the entire weight of Mayan wisdom.

At this point, I would like to pose the following questions and think about their answers throughout the text: Are there any ways to reverse the impact that humankind has had over the earth and nature? Are 30 years too long to understand, recover and practice new ideas? Is there a chance to leave the hegemonic power on the sidelines or is there an opportunity to negotiate? Would it be germane to negotiate?

## Water and Its Understanding in Chuwila'

In 2015, I was called to be one of the Mayan ancestral authorities of Chichicastenango: the *Quiché*. During the last century, this duty was known as *auxiliatura indígena* (Indigenous aid). It is one of the forms of local power in charge of issues of customary law, Indigenous law, and private law. It works through an assembly model encompassing the 90 Mayan K'iche communities that are part of the municipality.

This ancestral governance, its forms and continuity, are recorded since the late classic and postclassic periods; it represents the ancestral structure of the elders, who also have ritual functions within their civil functions. As we mentioned earlier, the foundation of life is the sacred Mayan calendar, and therefore, the role of the Indigenous Mayoralty is key in the daily



life of Chichicastenango. It is understood that the entire operation of the Indigenous municipality or Indigenous city hall is based on this calendar, which due to the Spanish invasion and colonization, overlaps in syncretism with some Christian holidays.

It is important to mention that the political power of the Guatemalan State in our territory is embodied by the civil municipality or town hall, which is in charge of providing *services* to the population—namely roads, water, drainage, and waste disposal. It is bound to hegemonic thinking, which assumes that the (white) human being is at the top of the world and that nothing and no one else matters as long as

their needs are fulfilled.<sup>4</sup> That said, we return to the work of the Indigenous Mayorality, which operates on a logic contrary to the Guatemalan State. It is in charge of some communal lands, as well as altars or sacred Mayan sites, forests, ravines and water sources, rivers and creeks. At the beginning of our journey, this was part of my main work in the Indigenous Mayorality, the care of the sacred sites that were in the mountains, caves, and rivers; since caring for water is an important part of this job. The municipality has an important area of apple, peach, plum, anona, and corn cultivation under the *milpa* system,<sup>5</sup> which has been passed on and developed for generations in town. It is

<sup>4</sup> This implies that, as racialized bodies, we don't matter either to the Guatemalan State and its hegemonic logic.

<sup>5</sup> In the *milpa* system we find the basis of the Mesoamerican diet: corn and beans. In the same plot we find the fabulous trio: corn-beans-pumpkin. However, describing it only in this way would reduce it. The *milpa* is a wise ancient agricultural system and also from wildlife that, in these dark times of climate chaos, is part of the solution. In the *milpa* agroecosystem everything is a circle, everything has a function, each element contributes something. Beans (Fabaceae family) provide nitrogen to the soil, while the plants rely on the corn stalk to grow. One helps the other. "Nitrogen is the most important nutrient in crop production and in both plants and humans, nitrogen is used to produce amino acids that make up proteins." Additionally, in this system, the soil

up to us, the public figures of the Mayoralty, to preserve, socialize, and publicly activate this system in town, according to the calendar. A large part of food security depends on us, since much of the family economy supported by women is based on the fruits harvested in domestic gardens, which are themselves part of an inherited knowledge. Thus, women play an active role in water care and its use for gardens, homes, and transmission of knowledge and ideas to their children, since they are generally in charge of parenting. It is relevant to mention that, in communities where there are no piped water projects, women and small children go to the rivers to get supplies.

In pre-Hispanic fashion, each community is governed by an authority, who in turn is one of the sacred days of

the calendar. In the case of Chuwila (Chichicastenango), it is governed by the *nahual* Q'anil and Tzikin, which are the days of earth's abundance, seeds, crops, and trade. It is no coincidence that the Chichi market is so famous and that it has remained in the same place since the late classical period. The calendrical-ritual work of the Mayoralty is based on a community and *ad honorem* system. The town's main festival is on December 21st: the winter solstice and the ancient festival of Saint Thomas. The important dates of water and earth contemplated by this work begin 20 days (a score) after the winter solstice, which coincides with the Saint Sebastian festival (one of the three patron saints). This is when the blessing of the seeds begins.

The blessing of the seeds is a system that guarantees

itself is protected, storing moisture ("cover crop": protection and then fertilizer) thanks to the wide leaves of the pumpkins (Cucurbitaceae family). Hauri Fuentes, Eliane. 2023. "¿Qué es el sistema milpa?" Guatemala: Plaza Pública. Accessed August 20, 2023. <https://www.plazapublica.com.gt/content/que-es-el-sistema-milpa>.

the protection of native and *criollo* seeds<sup>6</sup> in many of the 90 communities. During this ritual part, the *nahual* Tzikin, represented in the image of the Ascension or the Ascended Christ, is taken to each of the cantons or communities for three days. Mayan ceremonies and mass are performed. People bring their preserved seeds from the previous harvest that were intended for sowing. Usually, in these activities, one sees diverse and very old seed specimens that are difficult to find in markets, such as dark red corn, yellow *güicoyes*, pinto beans, *piloyes*, among others. Carrying this image and protecting it is also the job of the Indigenous Mayoralty, since the security of the assets of the confraternity of Saint Thomas and Ascension Day often falls on the figure of the *Aj Sargentos*, which is the group I currently belong to.

This time spans from January to Easter. During this period, water is the ruling deity and, depending on the charge of the year, it can be feminine or masculine. This determines how the harvest will be favored or affected. This, in terms of modern science, is described as the El Niño or La Niña phenomenon, but it exists in the rituality of our community long before the invasion. In fact, the association of the buried Lord or Dead Christ with a water deity has to do with the process of water reaching the bosom of the earth to give life again. For the Ascension festival, 40 days after Maundy Thursday, the prayer for water is made with the same Christ (completely outside the Catholic liturgy) to ask for rain, since the sowing stage has already begun.

Then, the sowing and harvest cycles are controlled by the

<sup>6</sup> For seeds and animals, the adjective *criollo* implies that they are local, natural, native, from the backyard, with no genetic modifications, agrochemical fertilizers, or industrial food concentrates in the case of animals. In general, these fruits, seeds, and animals tend to be more expensive in the local market. *Criollo* corn or *criollo* chickens are common terms to hear.

calendar and its scores, until reaching the winter solstice. In the previous chapter, I mentioned the snail metaphor. It could be assumed that these short earth-related cycles are always in our mind and are part of the popular domain, as they are something that interests us permanently, but actually, when we are faced with the constant harassment of all evangelizing and civilizational processes, these cycles have been established as “traditions.” As members of the Mayoralty, it is our duty to preserve and, to the right extent, to *de-traditionalize* these things, to explain them as the science and knowledge of our ancestors. Right now, in this generational leap where several members have had access to higher university education, the debate has been put on the table: what is the right extent to socialize this knowledge?

## Relationships with Water: Ours and Those of the West

One of the biggest concerns in the Western/Eurocentric world is the debate on climate change, bodies of water, and nature understood as a “resource.” In the last decades, nature has been deprecated and destroyed more rapidly than in the last century,<sup>7</sup> due to the excessive consumption that contemporary neoliberal societies in “first-world” countries promote and encourage. The idea of expanding territories for consumption is colonialist and is not new: the exploitation of the land and its entities has existed for at least 2,500 years, if we count the ancient Greek colonies. Resources are a synonym of capacity and power; hence, it is since that time that humankind has made the same mistakes regarding

<sup>7</sup> Considering the processes of massification or mass production for the entire world (not just for developed countries) 50 years ago.

colonized territories: exploitation, imbalance, and collapse. This concern and the consequences are not foreign to our environment or our work, nor to other Indigenous Mayoralities—such as the 48 cantons and Sololá's Indigenous Mayorality—as well as resistance movements that have emerged from the care practices from Mayorality, such as *Milpamérica*<sup>8</sup> which comes from the care of the communal forest of Totonicapán, a territory of 48 cantons.

The colonial idea is not foreign to our realities<sup>9</sup> nor to our

dynamics. There is an apparatus in all Latin American and African nations<sup>10</sup> that promotes oblivion and punishes dissemination and preservation of historical memory, as well as critical thinking.<sup>11</sup> This system is based on a devastating model of the current economic system and contemplates the depredation of territories designated as Global South or peripheries. Religion has played a substantial role in this idea, as one of the major institutions that promote anthropocentrism through the overpowering statement that man is above all living entities.<sup>12</sup> In our narrative,

<sup>8</sup> Futuros Indígenas. “Milpamérica resiste, soluciones vivas a la crisis climática.” Prensa Comunitaria, October 10, 2022. Accessed November 21, 2023. <https://prensacomunitaria.org/2022/10/milpamerica-resiste-soluciones-vivas-a-la-tesis-climatica/>.

<sup>9</sup> In the Guatemalan context, there are more than 25 cultural groups with their own languages, worldviews, and economies. We are talking about 25 different “realities” in a territory the size of Guatemala.

<sup>10</sup> I do not know or do not have accurate information about Asia and the Middle East.

<sup>11</sup> In the Guatemalan national basic curriculum, Social Studies is relegated below more innovative subjects such as Entrepreneurship, Business or Mathematics. The current public educational model promotes entrepreneurship over other subjects such as Language or Natural Sciences. Even in the Social Studies curriculum, the tensions of the internal armed conflict, peace agreements, or the 1944 revolution are mentioned merely as facts.

<sup>12</sup> The fundamental book of the Christian religion is the Bible. In

it is at this point that the role of the nation/State and the behavior of Power regarding water—understood as a manageable resource—comes in.

As stated at the beginning of the text, the water crisis is most severe in the cities. Also in urban centers, due to the poor administration and lack of awareness about water in municipal entities. Just Google “water Montevideo,” “water Guatemala City,” “water Monterrey,” or “water” and the name of any Latin American city, and you will find recent news about this crisis. In Chichicastenango, starting in the 1990s, the community organized itself through self-management committees to solve the problem through

community work. Currently, in the urban area there are four self-management committees that manage water through rules agreed upon in assemblies. Here, the civil municipality is limited to providing economic and logistical support, but has no authority over decisions, administration, or water care.

Under these models, community work is absolutely necessary and mandatory. Especially because the ritual is linked to this work, like almost everything in our context. It is mandatory to carry out Mayan ceremonies linked to bodies of water, but also masses and evangelical services—for the people who also live in these projects—and all members of the assembly must attend. Then, we proceed to take care of the

Genesis 1: 26-28 it reads: “6 Then God said: ‘Let us make humankind in our image, according to our likeness; and let them have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the air, and over the cattle, and over all the wild animals of the earth, and over every creeping thing that creeps upon the earth.’ 27 So God created humankind in his image, in the image of God he created them; male and female he created them. 28 God blessed them, and God said to them, ‘Be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth and subdue it; and have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the air and over every living thing that moves upon the earth.’”

springs and the pipes that carry the water.

The board that represents the committee assembly is renewed every two years, and it is elected among the members. Tours are organized to learn about the routes that the water travels between the hills and cliffs. In this way, everyone that is part of the project becomes aware of the hard work it takes to get water access. But it also means taking responsibility with water. That is why its use is forbidden for irrigation, swimming pools, car wash, or commercial use.

In this dynamic, the responsibility is on the neighbors, since there is the possibility of filing complaints for improper use of water. In general, all community work is appreciated, and even though there is punishment for breaking the rules, on the project's statement it is intended to return to the ancestral idea of water, the existence of its spirit and its personality as an entity that generates life.

Gradually, we have stopped calling it a “resource” and begun to call it “sacred” or “holy water,” acknowledging access to it as a fundamental human right. Consequently, if a neighbor damages the water, it will be denied to them—it is a two-way relationship.

This evidently challenges the thought that has been replicated throughout republican life in Guatemala, specifically about quantifiable and exploitable resources, while speaking of “inert elements.” In contrast, here they are given a place and a personality that allows us to be able to coexist with them without thinking about human dominion. At this point, it is important to highlight this contrast of ideas between the community and state power, and how these ideas become a reality. We are talking about a 30-year path to reach these changes. We have seen at least two generations interact in search of a common good that does not only involve the humans who inhabit this geography.

## On the Relevance of Curatorship

My duty in the Indigenous Mayoralty is one and my professional job is another, but on this path I decided that they would go hand in hand, and that I had a commitment and relevance to generate dialogues, meetings, tensions, and disagreements in my community and my region, departing from curatorial practices. Curatorship begins as a professional job with the university studies I chose, according to today's society ideology: being able to choose a career. To thread discourses and do research through the work of artists, the work of other curators, and to mediate these practices with the population, us curators—in an ideal world—get paid. The work in the Mayoralty is for the common good in specific situations—which I already described—and it is *ad honorem*. There is also a genealogical component: my

great-grandfather already did this work and that is why I was called, because someone in my family had already done it before.

At this point, in my curatorial practice, I always seek to be relevant. I'm not talking about the relevance of the artists' practice but about the curatorial practice and the mediation regarding the situation and the context. As Annalee Davis (2019) has stated,<sup>13</sup> it is critical at this moment to rethink, question, and propose dynamics that change and hack the system based on preconceived ideas of art in our post-colonial and post-independence territory, as well as its role in the collective imaginary on specific topics such as economy, landscape, race, gender, identity, tourism, and territory. Even with forms of organization regarding water, our territories are not immune to the problems of bodies of water. Pollution is probably the biggest challenge we face, and

<sup>13</sup> Davis, Annalee. 2019. *Sobre el estar comprometida con un lugar pequeño*. Costa Rica: Teor/ética escrituras locales, 252.



sometimes art as an awareness agent can have an impact. This is where I work.

Lately, the contemporary art circuit has turned to the expressions and forms of Indigenous peoples and their understandings of art, language, and the world. But curatorial practices remain white, through white curators or institutions embedded in whiteness.<sup>14</sup> Then they talk about our knowledge and science and attribute magical formulas to it that *could* solve the problems of today's world, which come from colonialist and neoliberal systems of extraction and exploitation. Do we really have these solutions or are they just a light at the end of the tunnel? Is our resistance a burden that we were born with and which we must carry as we advance in this material world?

It is what we know how to do. How we do it and, within this context, where we do it, is what gives us a sense of responsibility. What we know and how we apply this for the benefit of our community and, in turn, for our well-being, is what defines our path. This destiny is part of the social fabric and is understood as a trade, rather than as a job. The prefix *aj-* in the Mayan K'iche language denotes a trade or occupation. The different occupations arise from and aim at the well-being and service to the population. In this understanding, we must name what calls us on this occasion: art.

In Mayan languages, there is no word for art. Perhaps for this reason, in contemporary understandings<sup>15</sup> from Indigenous peoples, it is

<sup>14</sup> Many of the current biennials across the Americas have presented Indigenous art, but from the mediation and discursive dosage of white curators.

<sup>15</sup> The first time we publicly observed these understandings of art was thanks to the Ru'k'ux festival that has been held in Tzolojya (Sololá) for more than 10 years.

approached or named according to the craft: word, image, sound, movement. The closest words we have are related to crafts and trades, mainly regarding visual practices. We have the *ajtzib* or scribe, and from contemporary transversality we have the *ajtzij* or the one who speaks. Community commitment endows those who engage in these practices with certain responsibilities. Mainly, to transfer ideas to material form to be shared with others. In some way, as a metaphor, it is like the *ajq'ij*,<sup>16</sup> who has the commitment to transform prayer into matter, or the grandparents who already knelt before the earth and prayed for us, even before our parents were born. This responsibility binds us and creates a sense of stewardship towards the group and vice versa; and that is why crafts related to art are fully recognized by the community as essential in the ecosystem. What we know as

art in the contemporary context has opened deep discussions around the narratives that we live and witness. In the case of Guatemala, modernism brought aesthetics that developed in unequal contexts, and where the influence of European avant-gardes flooded the environment.

During the internal armed conflict and post-conflict, several artists used visual art as a vehicle to report serious human rights violations, genocide, and crimes against humanity in the country. In the same way, modernism opened the door to an art market and an artistic scene—as in other latitudes of Latin America—though in Guatemala it was on a different scale. I mention inequality because, as part of the national scene, art was not exempt from it. The official art history granted classifications and designated spaces in its exercise of theory and documentation, as it was strongly influenced by the

<sup>16</sup> Spiritual guide and leader. *Ajq'ij* in its literal translation is “the one who speaks to the sun.”

academic world (essentially, the ways of dictating history)—however, these ways were excluding. It was a handful of avant-garde artists who would be established as the masters of modern Guatemalan art, leaving aside the art of the native peoples.

This latter current was branded as *popular*, *primitivist*, *traditional*, and *naive*. Artists that come from Indigenous peoples have been considered painters<sup>17</sup> or artisans. Categorizing artists in this way uncovers the academic thinking of that time (which still prevails) and how some aesthetics and themes are considered inferior. Many people have pointed out that, in the Carlos Mérida Museum of Modern Art in Guatemala City, Indigenous or Mayan painting is placed in the back of the Museum, in a hallway

on the way to the restrooms. This placing contrasts with the rest of the chronological museographic proposal.

Why is it so important to bring this up? Because in the construction of memory from art history—which has proven to be a primary source of information for research—it is important that all evidence or testimonies (in this case, artworks) are approached with the same commitment and interest, otherwise, history that is taken as official will be biased and incomplete. The fact is that many Mayan artists, since the last century, have addressed water and its forms, its preponderance and influence on the life of their communities. My intention from curatorship and from my work in the Indigenous Mayoralty is to be a communication channel

<sup>17</sup> There are artistic movements and schools fully identified in Mayan communities such as Chixot (Comalapa), Totonicapán, San Juan and San Pedro la Laguna. These schools have unique characteristics and themes that make up the memory and fabric of these communities. Some of the most prominent examples of these movements are: Rosa Elena Curruchich, Andrés Curruchich, Paula Nicho, Oscar Perén, Diego Isaías Hernández, Mariano González Chavajay, Juan Sisay, Fidel Caté Tuc Tuc, and the Ajpacajá brothers.

between artists and their communities, to reach common understandings about water based on image and form.

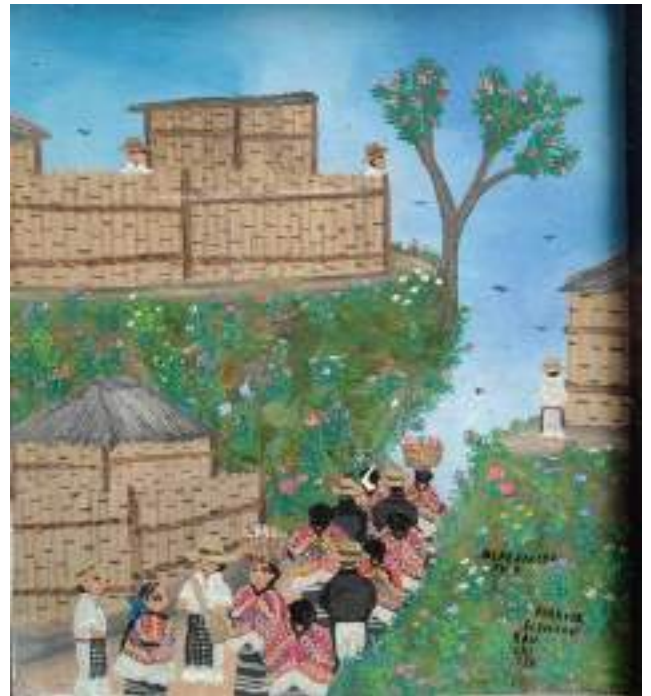
In other words, art history proves to be biased and suffers from the same weaknesses as other historical disciplines. Although it is understood that history is in charge of facts and not interpretations, it is also known how certain facts are accepted and documented and other facts are ignored in the hegemonic and systematic framework. Giving prominence to large bodies of water as independent from human beings is extremely dangerous for this framework. What would become of naval painting and its military discursive load? What happens if the sea or lakes and rivers stop being landscapes?

In this context in which we operate is where this proposal arises. It is necessary that within our close collectivities and in our own communities we collect and tell our stories. The construction

of historical memory implies knowledge of the testimonies that we can offer in our different jobs. A big part of an artist's duty is to record our time and the events that occur in our contexts.

### Image, Word, and Territories

Along these lines, I would like to thread in chronological order artists who belong to Mayan nations in Guatemala and their approaches, who discuss



Rosa Elena Curruchich: *Aldea Pachtur van al río* [Pachtur Village Goes to the River]. Oil on wooden panel. Collection of the Fondo para la Imagen, Palabra y Pensamiento Ventura Puac-Coyoy.

water in our context from their communities.

**Rosa Elena Curruchich** (San Juan Comalapa 1958 – 2005) portrayed Chixot ceremonies celebrated around the rivers that surround this community, and their use for human survival. Although we could approach it as a painting of “customs and traditions” (*usos y costumbres*), Rosa Elena documents life experiences as testimonies to make a correlation throughout her work. Thus, she portrays events such as *Bendición del agua por los principales* [Water Blessing by the Leaders] or *Lavando ropa en el río* [Washing the Clothes In the River], two works that show respect and water use. She also painted works such as *El sacerdote hace ceremonia en la montaña* [The Priest Performs a Ceremony On the Mountain], *El niño siempre le sale sangre en su nariz* [The Child Always Has His Nose Bleeding], *Para curar se quema la hoja de higo* [A Fig Leaf Is Burned to Heal], and *Un señor*

*explicando el significado de las cosas antiguas* [A Man Explaining the Meaning of Ancient Things].

Through this artist's painting we can affirm that community knowledge is being preserved and that there is a community systematization in this regard. From water handling, through health and rituality. In this context, it is worth asking: What is the degree of disregard of the Western world towards nature? We can probably calculate it from the approach and questioning that Sandra Monterroso, Marilyn Boror, and Seba Calfuqueo bring forth with their works.

These artists expose the exploitation of water, the plundering of communities and the serious consequences of these practices. **Sandra Monterroso** (Guatemala), shows this through the reality of the Q'echi people, her native nation. The Cahabón River was rerouted in 2012 to give way to a hydroelectric project that has left several Indigenous

communities adrift. Since then, river defenders have been criminalized, persecuted, and murdered. In her performance *El agua se volvió oro-el río se volvió oro-el oro se volvió azul* [The Water Turned into Gold-The River Turned into Gold-The Gold Turned Blue], Monterroso invokes the spirit of water. Through a textile piece made up of several *güipiles*<sup>18</sup> woven on backstrap loom by Q'eqchi Mayan weavers from Alta Verapaz, Guatemala, dyed with indigo (a Mesoamerican pigment that is the base of Mayan blue), the artist performs an invocation to call the “*muhel*/spirit” and return it to where it belongs.<sup>19</sup>

In the same path, **Marilyn Boror** (San Juan Sacatepéquez, Guatemala) exposes how her community of San Juan Sacatepéquez suffers from the plundering of mountains and

water by the cement factory that settled there. The theft of community water and poisoning of underground streams for cement production are always



Marilyn Boror: *Monumento vivo* [Living Monument]. Performance at the Bienal en Resistencia, Guatemala. 2021. Courtesy: Jimena Pons Gandinni.

<sup>18</sup> Translator's note: A *güipil* or *huipil* is a traditional garment worn by indigenous Mesoamerican women; it is a loose-fitting woven tunic, usually decorated with woven or embroidered colorful designs.

<sup>19</sup> Monterroso, Sandra. 2019. “El agua se volvió oro-el río se volvió oro-el oro se volvió azul.” Accessed November 21, 2023. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8sX0Vc8EE2g>.



Seba Calfuqueo: *Mercado de aguas* [Water Market]. Ceramic/installation, Chile, 2021. Courtesy of Seba Calfuqueo & Diego Argote's studio and website.

present in her work, but my particular interest is in a work that shows the body/territory as a political subject and as a denunciation that speaks for an entire population.

*Monumento Vivo* [Living Monument] (2021) is a monument of Marilyn Boror Bor's body—an artist, a woman, Indigenous Mayan-Kaqchiquel. Dressed in the traditional Mayan clothing of San Juan Sacatepéquez, in the main

square of Guatemala City, the *Monument* stands on a pedestal-like cement base, merging with liquid cement. The cement covers her ankles and dries during the day, turning the artist into a living monument. Like every monument, the plaque alludes to the commemoration it represents, and it reads: **“In memory of the land defenders, In memory of the spiritual guides, In gratitude to the political prisoners, In gratitude to the community leaders. Freedom for the rivers, the hills, the mountains, the flowers, the lakes!”**<sup>20</sup> We are the living monument that is fighting for the territory, we walk on the fresh cement that the oligarchy and power put on our feet, we leave the footprints and we do not let it harden in its wake.<sup>21</sup>

This work foregrounds and questions one of the most

<sup>20</sup> “Cementería violenta a mujeres de San Juan Sacatepéquez.” Prensa FGER, December 10, 2019. Accessed November 21, 2023. <https://www.fger.org/cementeria-violenta-a-mujeres-de-san-juan-sacatepequez/>.

<sup>21</sup> Bienal Sur. 2021. “Monumento Vivo.” Accessed November 21, 2023. [https://bienalsur.org/es/single\\_agenda/367](https://bienalsur.org/es/single_agenda/367).

serious issues we are experiencing in the K'iche territory, which is the excessive concrete construction that threatens the balance of other Mayan nations and our own, by deforesting areas for housing—a phenomenon boosted by remittances.

Threading these tensions, the work of **Seba Calfuqueo** (Chile) in his installation *Mercado de aguas* [Water Market] (2021) shows the commercial exploitation of water, along the line of anthropocentric thinking, which regarding construction implies a greater load of use of this element that will remain inert in concrete. This work speaks of its use in monoculture and private business:

«The installation is composed of ceramic pieces made out of a 20l plastic bottle. 20l is also the amount of water each monoculture industry tree needs to grow, specifically species like eucalyptus, avocado, and pine radiata. Each bright blue enameled ceramic has carved on its surface a phrase from the Water Code of Chile, created during Pinochet's dictatorship, which also consecrates Chilean water as a marketable good and states that it can be sold in its Water Market, inherited from the dictatorship. The work proposes thinking about the language we use, the water code still prevailing within the Chilean constitution, the ways of distributing water using plastic bottles, and the present neoliberal system of Chile which will trade anything to please the market, even the waters.»<sup>22</sup>

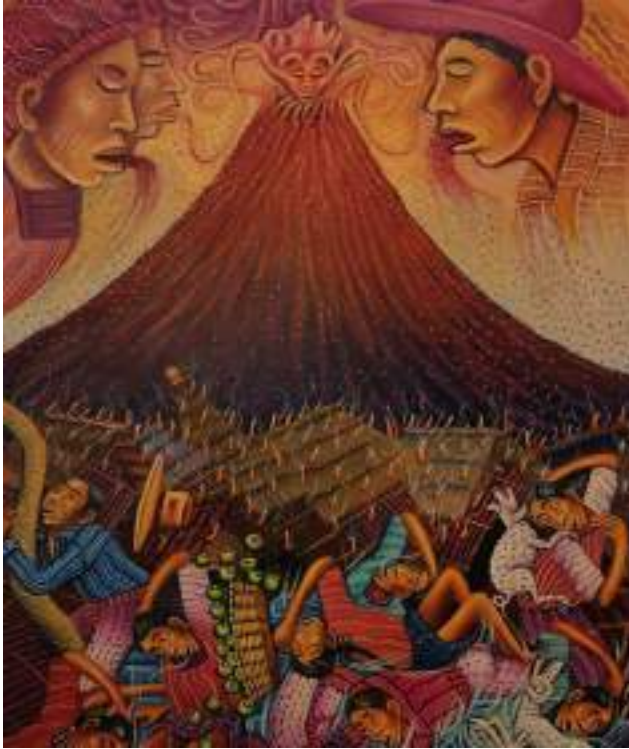
<sup>22</sup> Calfuqueo, Seba. 2021. "Mercado de aguas." Accessed November 21, 2023. <https://sebacalfuqueo.com/2022/04/09/mercado-de-aguas/>.



This *Journal* revolves around hydrocommons, and at this point, it has been evidenced that in both K'iche and Mapuche territories there are similar increasingly disturbing water issues and phenomena. While in the first line of ancestral knowledge, the artist Rosa Elena expresses the need to continue caring for and thinking about living beings, Monterroso and Calfuqueo (who are also part of Indigenous nations) problematize and report abuse, constant harassment, and persecution of those who follow the line suggested by Curruchiche. In other words, in all three narratives, the resistance of Native nations is bluntly evidenced.

The proximity to large bodies of water gives identity and sustenance to the communities that surround them. That is the case of the extensive work this Tzutujil artist who lives in Lake Atitlán: **Diego Isaiah Hernandez** (San Juan La Laguna, Guatemala), who has a

particular style within the lake school of painting. Along with Juan Sisay and the González Chavajay brothers, they are precursors of this movement, which has earned worldwide recognition for its characteristic style. Diego has dedicated himself to documenting the deep relationship between the lake and the life of his community (San Juan la Laguna), especially the permanence of the lake in the memory of his community. He painted scenes of hurricane Mitch (1998) and the eruption of the Atitlán volcano (1853)—events that remain in the collective imagination but weren't covered by the news of those times because they were in indigenous towns. The presence of the lake after these tragedies brought hope for survival and recovery to these communities. It is worth remembering that state aid mechanisms are practically non-existent for these communities after natural disasters; hence the importance of the lake for the Kaqchikeles and T'zutujiles,



Diego Isaías Hernández: *Erupción del Volcán (Atitlán)* [(Atitlán) Volcano Eruption] (2023). Courtesy: Fondo Ventura Puac-Coyoy Collection.



Diego Isaías Hernández: *Riqueza de Guatemala y su lago de Atitlán* [The Richness of Guatemala and its Lake Atitlán] (2019). Courtesy: Fondo Ventura Puac-Coyoy Collection.



Alfredo Ceibal: from the series *jardines de otros mundos* [gardens from other worlds] (2022). Mixed media on wood. Courtesy: Studio Alfredo Ceibal and META.



Alfredo Ceibal: from the series *jardines de otros mundos* [gardens from other worlds] (2022). Mixed media on wood. Courtesy: Studio Alfredo Ceibal and META.

and how since ancient times the lake has been a geographical reference for the K'iches of the kingdoms that live there.

Finally, it is relevant to raise questions with the work of an artist who, from the urban context of Latin American cities, proposes a somewhat dystopian future, but that is also hopeful at times. **Alfredo Ceibal** (Guatemala) traces a prophetic journey of its own. His work speaks of the cycles of water that replicate the cycles of living beings and their eternal dance between heaven and earth, their flow, their mobility. Water is not static, and neither are human beings. Birds and butterflies migrate, and rivers traverse geographies.

### Conclusions (and Further Questions)

What is the relationship between all of these artists, my curatorial practice, and my community work? Where do we all meet? In the sustained commitment to our

places and the eternal resistance of Indigenous peoples, not only in Guatemala but in all Latin America. Even with the differences that exist between Mayan kingdoms and nations in a territory as small as Guatemala, there is a shared vision regarding bodies of water and our lives. In all Indigenous cultures across the Americas, the work of midwives is strictly guided by water and the lunar cycle. This raises a central question: Where could we all meet in this apparently irreversible reality?

Although we are aware of the multiple realities and issues that each territory experiences, and where humanistic disciplines such as sociology and anthropology have already appeared and theorized, why is art so important in bringing light to these situations?

It is also relevant to talk about the collective nature of artistic work in our communities, which, when understood as trades, are familiar and necessary for our

neighbors and communities; which seems to be less—or not at all—effective from theory.

Finally, this article seeks to highlight the ways in which assembly and community models offer alternative possibilities for building horizontal and respectful relationships with water, and thus, contribute to the mapping of *hydrocommons* cultures or understandings. The selection of works I present in this text seek to walk together with those forms, given that their authors have also experienced these community ways.

Perhaps there is a future for the children of fire and corn, based on what we learned from our ancestors—both from their wisdom and their mistakes. Probably, in our collective work and intergenerational belonging, we will be able to remain like the stone but to flow over time like the river. Our hope is to be the last to leave and witness the volcano and the comet. And then, to turn off the light.

**Author's explanatory note:** As a result of the 2023 general elections and the attempted coup d'état and subsequent establishment of a dictatorship in Guatemala, the movement of organization and Indigenous authorities in Guatemala pronounced themselves and gathered strength from the leadership of the 48 cantons of Totonicapán, the Indigenous Mayoralty of Sololá, the Indigenous Mayoralty of Santa Lucía Utatlán and Palín, as well as the Xinca Parliament. In Chichicastenango, the movement was endorsed by the Allied Indigenous Communities of Chichicastenango, who are now in an assembly process for restructuring the current Indigenous Mayoralty of Chichicastenango; therefore, many of the dynamics described in this text will change for good.

**Diego Ventura Puac-Coyoy** (Quezaltenango, Guatemala, 1991) *Ajq'ij*, curator and artist. He belongs to the Maya K'iche nation. He is a co-founder of Espacio/C arte+memoria, where he coordinates the residency program. He is co-editor and curatorial assistant of the Imago Mundi - Guatemala collection (Benetton Foundation, Italy, 2015), curator/part of the selection committee of the Museu MARTE auction in El Salvador (2016), TEOR/ÉTica's curatorial studies program in Costa Rica (2018), and he has collaborated with texts for the cataloging of the MAC Panama auction (2019 and 2020). He was a jury for the Beca Catalizadora TEOR/ÉTica 2022. He is part of the advisory board of Terremoto magazine and is currently a curator of the Ventura Puac-Coyoy Fund collection. He lives and works between Chichicastenango and Quezaltenango.

Translated from Spanish by Sylvia Monasterios.

# If You Think You Can Grasp Me, Think Again. An Artistic Look at the Waterscape of the Térraba-Sierpe Wetland in Costa Rica

## Diana Barquero

### Abstract

This text stems from an artistic research on the “waterscape” of the Térraba-Sierpe Wetland, located in the Southern Pacific region of Costa Rica. Surrounded by two rivers and the sea, this space forms a liquid, blended network of diverse chemical and organic substances. This article offers a brief historical review of how this aquatic landscape has evolved and a concise analysis of the physical and symbolic qualities of this mangrove. Through field studies, interviews, and theoretical research, I have created a body of visual work using various materials from the area to observe the processes of transformation, erosion, and degradation caused by agrochemicals and other human action. How to delineate a boundary or border in an inherently aquatic space? In what ways is a fluid body, such as the wetland, affected by human spatial divisions? My visual proposal aims to reflect on these questions, with water at the core of the visual work methodology.

## Introduction

Mount Chirripó is the tallest mountain in Costa Rica. Its name comes from the Cabécar language: “mountain of eternal water” is its translation. On a cloudless day, visitors can simultaneously observe the Pacific Ocean and the Caribbean Sea from its peak. In Chirripó lie the headwaters of a river called El General, a large, wide, and cold river that descends from the mountain to join another river, the Coto-Brus. The most voluminous river in the country, the Térraba River, is born from these two rivers. Térraba or Diquís (“big water” in the Boruca language) is the river that runs through the namesake indigenous community.

The Sierpe River, which originates among small mountains in the southern area, is also part of this system. It runs through lowlands, always sinuous, meandering; its course is slow and wandering. It pushes the soil, carrying sediments



Diana Barquero Pérez: Mangrove section in the Térraba-Sierpe National Wetland (2020).

loaded with nutrients. These particles are visible throughout the river, which feels full of floating diversities. The shapes it produces resemble roots, spirals, neurons, or electricity. It has hundreds of channels; its body is a maze. Along its edges and at the river mouth with the Pacific Ocean lies the Térraba-Sierpe Wetland: a wall of thousands of intertwined trees rooted in invisible soil. This soil reveals itself only when the sea retreats in its continuous movement, leaving a soft black mud, impossible to tread for inexperienced people like myself.

This land and its waters have been under constant

transformation for hundreds of years. It was the home of indigenous peoples long before this land became a nation and took the name we now know it by. With the establishment of the United Fruit Company (UFCo), the seed of the modern transnational economic model was sowed, altering the means of production and cultivation in rural areas of Costa Rica. These rivers carry this history in their different materialities, chemicals, and beings that inhabit the wetland down to its last opening: the sea.

The Térraba-Sierpe Wetland is currently a disputed territory where agricultural borders constantly expand at the expense of protected areas. Here, tensions between private and public entities converge, as well as (often opposing) needs from various sectors such as fishers, farmers, and business owners. Today, the Wetland is defined and afflicted by the historical and



Aerial view of the Térraba-Sierpe National Wetland. This view allows visualizing the agricultural border adjacent to the protected area. Images from Google Earth, accessed 2023.

intensive use of pesticides. This article highlights how this territory enables different ways of relating to its water bodies. Just as the waters trailing the wetland are manifold, so is the way beings and communities relate to them.

Being an artist, I set out to create visual devices that would compose a “liquid meshwork”<sup>1</sup> where materials innate to the wetland and neighboring areas, as well as information gathered from this space, come together. I mainly focused on observing the slow erosion and degradation

<sup>1</sup> By “liquid meshwork,” I mean the interrelation of material, chemical, and symbolic elements that blend together within aquatic spaces.





Diana Barquero Pérez: Agricultural frontier: rice and oil palm plantation in the vicinity of the wetland. In the image, Soledad Castro.

processes caused by agrochemicals and sediments, described in various sources and also verified on-site.

In terms of methodology, this text arises from an artistic research carried out between 2019 and 2020. Part of this research was conducted in collaboration with the scientist

María Soledad Castro<sup>2</sup> through a series of field studies. Their objective was to interview some communities closely connected to the water tributaries and explore different sections of the territory.

In the following sections, I will discuss the physical and symbolic qualities of the wetlands

<sup>2</sup> Ph.D. in Environmental Sciences. Castro's practice focuses on the use of agrochemicals in the Delta Diquís area. Learn more at: Maria Soledad Castro-Vargas, "Pesticides, Plantations, and the State: The Making and Unmaking of the Térraba-Sierpe Delta" (Ph.D. thesis, Universitat Autònoma de Barcelona, 2023).

and mangroves, followed by a concise description of the history and production of the aquatic landscape of the Térraba-Sierpe Wetland. I will then share my experience during the field studies and their influence on the production of certain pieces. Subsequently, I will elaborate on the production processes of the visual devices and conclude with some findings.

### Wetlands: Water as the Center

Water is in constant flux, not only physically and geographically, but also as a cultural, social, and symbolic landscape (Karpouzoglou 2017).<sup>3</sup> The term “waterscape,” as defined by Erik

Swygendouw (1999),<sup>4</sup> seeks to elucidate the intertwined relationships between nature and society to challenge the hegemonic stance of Western science, which dichotomizes both of these aspects. Indigenous peoples in various geographies have diverged from this dualistic thought for a long time. The Bröran or Térraba people, a community close to the Térraba-Sierpe Wetland, understand that rivers, water, and the sea possess qualities of kinship and life, of closeness and symbiosis.<sup>5</sup>

If it bears describing, the waterscape of the wetland is a particular ecosystem where water plays a fundamental role.

<sup>3</sup> Karpouzoglou, Timothy y Sumit Vij. 2017. "Waterscape: A Perspective for Understanding the Contested Geography of Water", *WIREs Water*. <https://doi.org/10.1002/wat2.1210>.

<sup>4</sup> Swyngedouw, Erik. "Modernity and Hybridity: Nature, Regeneracionismo, and the Production of the Spanish Waterscape, 1890-1930," *Annals of the Association of American Geographers* 89, no. 3: pp. 443-465 (23 pages). Specifically on the relationship between Terraba-Sierpe wetland and the concept of 'waterscape' see: Castro-Vargas, "Pesticides, Plantations, and the State..." Also see: Castro-Vargas, Soledad. 2024. "The Making of the Terraba-Sierpe Delta Waterscape in Costa Rica: Thinking Within and Beyond the Plantation." *Journal of Peasant Studies* (under review).

<sup>5</sup> Information obtained from an interview with Asdrubal Rivera Villanueva from the Bröran community in 2019.

Wetlands can be saltwater or freshwater, flowing or stagnant. Their surroundings feature aquatic vegetation and are influenced by water or flood conditions. Aesthetically, wetlands are highly diverse: they can be rivers, mangroves, lagoons, marshes, and more. The Térraba-Sierpe Wetland encompasses various types of landscapes, including vast expanses of mangroves (Lobo Cabezas 2014).<sup>6</sup>

As per Ginwala and Zihlerl (2013),<sup>7</sup> mangroves are spaces where the land seems supernatural. They are places of “continuous reconfiguration: neither sea nor land nor river nor sea, no saltwater or freshwater, no daylight or darkness... The mangrove is, therefore, a landscape that demands

extraordinary measures. Its porous body, which bestows upon it a fluctuating life determined by the tides, also grants it the quality of extraterritoriality.”

The mangrove is a space ruled by the tides, where life follows the rhythm of these waters. It is a territory that breathes, that constantly inhales and exhales, revealing and concealing its channels and grounds; a tide that attracts and withdraws beings that appear, disappear, and reappear while its water veins swell and empty. This cycle dictates its constant transformation and its ability to erase any mark. Steady witnesses to these changes are the large and tangled mangrove trees, like an impassable wall, with extraordinary qualities to

<sup>6</sup> Lobo Cabezas, Silvia, coord. 2014. *Diversidad Biológica del Diquís II: Humedal Térraba-Sierpe*. 1st ed. San José, Costa Rica: Museo Nacional de Costa Rica

<sup>7</sup> Ginwala, Natasha & Vivian Zihlerl. 2013. "Sensing Grounds: Mangroves, Unauthentic Belonging, Extra-Territoriality." *E-flux Journal* 45. Accessed August 23, 2024: <https://www.e-flux.com/journal/45/60128/sensing-grounds-mangroves-unauthentic-belonging-extra-territoriality/>.

thrive in inundation and salinity. In the mangrove area of the wetland, there is a community of people that understands the tide cycle and navigates the inaccessible mangrove: the “*piangüeros*.” The *piangua* is a bivalve mollusk (as in, two shells that join and close). This mollusk is artisanally harvested by many families living near the wetland. The *piangüeros* traverse the wetland at the precise moments when the tide reveals the mud where these animals hide. They are expert guides across the hundreds of channels that compose it. They walk on muddy soils, typically challenging to navigate for inexperienced individuals. With great intuition and acquired skill, they bury their hands in the mud, probing and collecting the *pianguas*, to later sell and consume them.<sup>8</sup>

Likewise, mixture is a powerful element in the Wetland: a



Diana Barquero Pérez: José, the *piangüero*, between the mangroves (2020).

combination of river and sea waters, of salinities and compost that enables unique lives of vegetation and fauna. As expressed by Michael Taussig, the mangrove is a powerful assembly, a lush entity that oscillates between the pure and the impure in “an intoxicating mix of life-in-death” (Taussig 2018, 26).<sup>9</sup> Decomposition and recomposition form an endless cycle in wetlands. The extraterritoriality defined by the porous boundary of their bodies demands rethinking how we conceive (the idea of) borders,

<sup>8</sup> An important part of the field trips was conducted under the guidance of two local *piangüeros*, with whom we had several conversations and took two boat trips.

<sup>9</sup> Taussig, Michael. 2018. *Palma Africana*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press.

as well as the multispecies relationships that occur in the fleetingness of tides, rains, and the drifting sediments. The mangrove breaks the line between the inside/outside, imbuing these divisions in vigorous and multiple transitions. In the wetland, “the boundary between land and sea turns into a choreography of crossings. Where the mangroves are, human determinations turn into ghosts. The inability to leave a mark is also noted as a problem of historicity” (Karpouzoglou & Vij 2013, 8).

This ghostly quality responds to its rhythmic transformation. While it's true that it's difficult to discern marks of the passage

of time in the mangrove, these are evidenced in the Térraba-Sierpe Wetland through changes in volume, size, and quantity of species.<sup>10</sup> They also manifest in multiple external pressure factors, such as changes in land use, the use of agrochemicals, and excessive sedimentation caused by soil runoff due to pineapple monoculture.<sup>11</sup> It's also noticeable in the disappearance of buffer zones between the wetland and farms, with plantations being directly adjacent to the protected area.<sup>12</sup> These signs are perceived by nearby communities. In the interviews conducted, several individuals described these changes in the territory. These conversations took place within

<sup>10</sup> Information gathered from field trips conducted in 2019.

<sup>11</sup> Data from: Castro-Vargas, Maria Soledad. 2023. “Pesticides, Plantations, and the State: The Making and Unmaking of the Térraba-Sierpe Delta” (Ph.D. thesis, Universitat Autònoma de Barcelona). Piedra Acuña, Jessica & Adolfo Quesada Roman. 2017. “Land use and cover changes between 1948 and 2012 in the Térraba Sierpe Wetland, Costa Rica.” *Rev. Mar. Cost.* 9, No. 2: 9-28. Cortés, Guillermo & Natalia Montero. 2021. “La frontera agrícola en las áreas aledañas al Humedal Nacional Térraba Sierpe y sus implicaciones en la sostenibilidad de los sistemas productivos.” *Revista e-Agronegocios* 7, no. 1. Accessed September 10, 2023. <https://revistas.tec.ac.cr/index.php/eagronegocios/article/view/5317>.

<sup>12</sup> See: Cortés & Montero. “La frontera agrícola...”

the context of field trips, which I will describe later.

### Brief History of the Térraba-Sierpe Wetland

To better understand this waterscape, it is necessary to comprehend how this territory has evolved historically. Today, the Térraba-Sierpe Wetland is a protected area with different zoning, meaning that a small number of locals live in certain areas and can utilize specific resources under government regulations. This protected area contains the largest mangrove in Central America, with approximately 33,000 hectares, making it a region of significant environmental importance in terms of biodiversity and carbon

sequestration.<sup>13</sup> Indigenous peoples have occupied its delta for more than 3,000 years. Between 2008 and 2016, around 1,300 hectares were drained and transformed for agricultural purposes (Piedra Acuña & Quesada Roman 2017). Inside and outside the wetland, there are rice fields and oil palm plantations. Upstream on the Térraba River, the company Del Monte has been producing pineapple at large scale for 40 years, directly affecting the wetland.<sup>14</sup> Additionally, specifically in the Diquís Delta area, there was a significant alteration in social and environmental dynamics with the arrival of the United Fruit Company (UFCo).<sup>15</sup> There was a before and after in the

<sup>13</sup> Castro-Vargas, "Pesticides, Plantations, and the State..." Piedra Acuña & Quesada Roman, "Land use and cover changes between 1948 and 2012..." Lobo Cabezas, Silvia, coord. *Diversidad Biológica del Diquís II...*

<sup>14</sup> Information gathered during field trips.

<sup>15</sup> Idem. See also Cano Sanchiz, J. M. 2017. "Mamita Yunai, una bananera estadounidense en Centroamérica: el caso de Palmar Sur (Costa Rica)," in *Memorias: Revista Digital de Arqueología e Historia desde el Caribe*: 88-119. Damoisel, Mathilde. 2018. "Sobre las bananas y las repúblicas," video, [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0R8AVcB6Aic&ab\\_channel=LatinoamericaLibre](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0R8AVcB6Aic&ab_channel=LatinoamericaLibre).

country's agribusiness structure with the UFCo, as it was the first company established as a multinational consortium, laying the foundations for transnational corporations in America. It was founded in 1899 in Costa Rica, specifically in the Caribbean. It was the result of the merger of two American companies: Andrew Preston's Boston Fruit Company and Minor C. Keith's Tropical Trading Company (Damoiseil 2018). The UFCo developed an extensive and intensive system of single-specie banana plantations in this basin: the Gros Michel, which brought a high susceptibility to diseases due to its single genetic variation (Castro-Vargas 2023). Consequently, a fungus commonly known as Panama Disease (*Fusarium oxysporum* f. sp. *cubense*) spread, causing significant damage to the plantations. This led to the strategic shift of relocating the plantations to new territories, resulting in the deforestation of different areas (Castro-Vargas 2023). Therefore, in

1932, the UFCo moved from the Atlantic to the southern Pacific coast, where the Wetland is located. There, it caused a profound transformation of the waterscape, creating a complex irrigation, drainage, and water storage system that remains in place today (Castro-Vargas 2023). The Térraba River was diverted to feed an artificial water system. This event, involving the river's canalization and the "cleaning" and parceling of the land, profoundly altered the area's geography.

Additionally, as part of the strategies to curb diseases in these crops, in 1938, they began spraying a pesticide known as "Bordeaux mixture" (made up of copper sulfate and hydrated lime) in the Delta Diquís area. It was used to kill the fungi causing Panama Disease and Black Sigatoka. For 40 years, more than 12,000 workers per year used it in the plantations. They sprayed this mixture at least thirty times a year, sickening many workers due to their

prolonged exposure (Marquart 2003).<sup>16</sup> This chemical product left a colored layer in the soil, traceable as a mark called “copper line,” visible in the soil's stratigraphic layers studied by archaeologists and geologists.<sup>17</sup> During the 1960s and 1970s, another pesticide used was Nemagon, produced by Dow Chemical (Castro-Vargas 2023).

This alteration in the Wetland points directly to the mercantile model of that era, and how it operated on the land and water, a model that is still replicated to this day with different adjacent monocultures.

### Fieldwork: Navigating the Wetland between Water and Land

I developed my artistic practice starting from various moments

of field and theoretical work. Initially, the project arose from my interest to continue studying bodies of water. I had previously worked on the concept of “overflow,” linking water with “materialities” such as mud, earth, and coal.<sup>18</sup>

In speaking to others, I discovered aquatic qualities of transformation in wetlands that greatly intrigued me. This is how I met María Soledad Castro, who introduced me to the social and



Diana Barquero Pérez: Banana architecture built by the UFCo (2020).

<sup>16</sup> Marquart, Steve. 2003. "Pesticidas, pericos y sindicatos en la industria bananera costarricense, 1938-1962," *Revista Historia* 47: 43-95.

<sup>17</sup> Information gathered from an interview with archaeologist Ifigenia Quintanilla. For more information on the effects of this pesticide, see Marquart, "Pesticidas, Pericos y sindicatos..."

<sup>18</sup> See more: <https://dianabarquero.com/Overflowing-Material-Subject-Alterations>.



environmental issues of the Térraba-Sierpe Wetland. Together, we conducted three field trips where we gathered documentary, visual, and aural information. These trips were vital for the project, as they allowed us to witness the qualities of the wetland and its boundaries/borders on-site and eventually, to generate visual devices based on this experience.

**On the first trip**, our main focus was getting to know the people living on the land surrounding the wetland, which once belonged to the now-gone UFCo. There, we spoke with farmers who recounted the era of the UFCo and the struggles they face today. We talked to a group of farmer women known as *Mujeres Semillas* (Seed Women). These women cultivate in Chánguena, one of the neighboring farms to the wetland, which is currently in litigation due to ownership rights arising from the abandonment of these lands by the UFCo. They plant their plots free of agrochemicals. Evelyn Saborío, one of the women in the collective, emphasized the importance of their group in promoting pesticide-free cultivation among their peers:

«Many men continue to sow here using the same chemicals they used in the banana plantations. They kept the habit of farming this way, inherited from the times and methods of the UFCo [...] Instead of stripping nutrients from the soil with agrochemicals, it's better to nourish it with them [...]. Pests come because the soil isn't well-nourished, and if it's not nourished, it has no way to defend itself. It's like my body: if my immune system is low, I'll get sick more often. If we don't feed

the land, it will get sick more often. And we want to change that because the UFCo left that chemical-ridden thinking here.»



Diana Barquero Pérez: Interview with Evelyn, from the Mujeres Semilla collective (2020).

Evelyn told us that the Ministry of Agriculture and Livestock (MAG) encourages this method of farming. They donate agrochemicals as part of government support and training. According to her comments, these agrochemicals are often given to farmers who violate buffer zones or drain parts of the wetland.<sup>19</sup>

**On the second trip**, we ventured to the dock in Ciudad Cortés, a small town that was an important port during the UFCo era. In Ciudad Cortés lies one of the entrances to the wetland. There, the Térraba River flows into the sea and connects with the mountain and the Boruca villages, one of the indigenous communities

<sup>19</sup> Information gathered from interviews during field trips.

still inhabiting the area. When talking with them and the Bröran people (Térraba), they both highlighted the importance of the Térraba River in their communities, the efforts made to grant the river rights as a living being, and the issues brought on by monocultures in the upper parts of the rivers. These communities and the *piangüeros* mentioned how the Térraba River has lost its depth due to erosion and excessive sedimentation caused by pineapple monocultures. In



Diana Barquero Pérez: Stills from the video *A través de la plantación de piña* (2021).

certain sectors of the mangrove, the red mud from the mountain accumulates to such an extent that the piangua mollusks have disappeared. These groups also described how there are sections where the relationship between mud, sea sand, freshwater, and saltwater has been altered, resulting in entire sections of mangrove trees dying or “drying up.”<sup>20</sup>

In order to witness the excessive sedimentation they recounted, we decided to journey upstream **on the third trip**, following the course of the Térraba River up to Longo Mai in Buenos Aires in Puntarenas, where the pineapple plantations are located. Despite the plantation being 70 km from the wetland, pesticide residues manage to reach it. According to the residents, Longo Mai has been heavily affected by the expansion of pineapples produced by Del Monte (PINDECO S.A.).<sup>21</sup>

<sup>20</sup> Information gathered during field trips. See also: Castro-Vargas 2023, “Pesticides, Plantations, and the State...”

<sup>21</sup> Pineapple Development Corporation.

Specifically, residents have reported significant water source contamination.<sup>22</sup> While there, we traveled to a pineapple cultivation farm. We drove through the plantations in a car, passing through planted fields. There, the plants, spanning across multiple kilometers, create a sense of *déjà vu*: a sequence of patches with sharp tips that lend the landscape a sense of chlorophyllic aridity—a vast green desert. This sensation inspired the video *A través de la plantación de piña* [Through the pineapple plantation] (2020),<sup>23</sup>



Diana Barquero Pérez: Beto in his boat (2020).

where I showcase the repetition perceived over time by the eye in these landscapes, unveiling the extensive magnitude of the crops.

**In addition to the overland trips, we took three boat trips through the wetland.** During our visit, we spoke with Pino and Beto, two piangüeros who are part of the Association of Piangüeros, Marine Resources, and Related Activities of Ajuntaderas (APREMAA)<sup>24</sup>—Ajuntaderas is a village adjacent to the mangrove area. As we talked, they shared how their lives were. Both fish, collect piangua mollusks, and transport people in their boats. Pino<sup>25</sup> is older, was born in 1956 and told us about the work related to the mangrove. He knows about certain trades practiced before the wetland became a protected area: extracting tannin from the red

<sup>22</sup> Information gathered from interviews with members of the *Ríos Vivos* group, defenders of the Volcán River in Longo Mai.

<sup>23</sup> Single-channel video without audio, one and a half minute long. Accessible at: <https://vimeo.com/912138087>

<sup>24</sup> Asociación de Piangüeros, Recursos Marinos y Afines de Ajuntaderas.

<sup>25</sup> His name is Adrián Torres, but everybody knows him as Pino.



Diana Barquero Pérez: Plate with fresh pianguas (2020).

mangrove and making charcoal from the mangroves. Both know, by heart, each type of mangrove in the wetland by their common and scientific names.

Pino, as president of APREMAA, embodies a strong sense of community. He engages with various sectors, including the government, universities, and researchers like ourselves. His association was created to bring together and promote improvements for people engaged in piangua extraction in the Ajuntaderas area. When discussing their work, they describe how they traverse

the mangrove during low tide searching for these small shells; some refer to this work as “harvesting.”<sup>26</sup> They describe how, with each tide, the piangua mollusks swim and move around, so with every tide cycle, they must find the small yet visible traces within the mud.

For Beto and Pino, the *piangüero* is a freshwater fisher. Their profession is misunderstood by both sea fishers and farmers. Their work, to me, is like the mangrove: ambiguous, a point in between. The sea becomes their border; they sail, fish, and



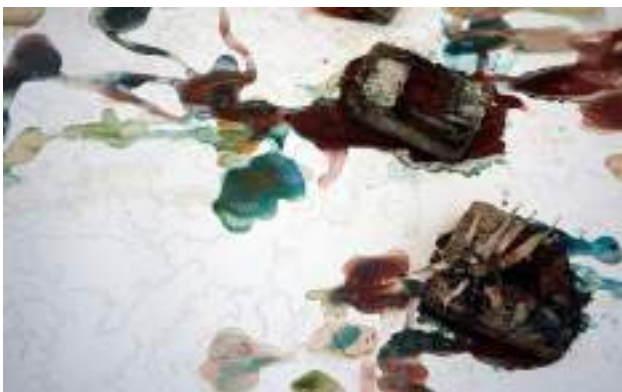
Diana Barquero Pérez: Detail of Conglomerates (2021).

<sup>26</sup> Piangua extraction is currently under strict control by MINAE, who offer training sessions for people to obtain a license for gathering pianguas.

harvest between fresh and saltwater, sensing the tidal changes from the rivers and moving through them.

Visiting this area was essential for delving into the specific knowledge of these fishers, nurtured by their communal relationship with water, and thus understanding how they are part of a communal network they form daily to protect this place symbiotically.

I also noted how different State institutions are present in the wetland in the shape of public policies. The regulations imposed on fishing communities by the Ministry of Environment and Energy (MINAE), as well



Diana Barquero Pérez: View of the conglomerates and liquids (2021).

as the training and donation of agrochemicals by the Ministry of Agriculture and Livestock (MAG), shape this waterscape. The canalization and zoning of private companies, like UFCo, as well as land disputes among cooperatives, private companies, and small farmers today generate direct or tangential consequences that alter and shape the wetland.

### Liquid Meshworks: From Fieldwork to Artistic Work

How can a field study and theoretical research be translated into and embodied by a series of visual devices? In this project, there were three central materialities used as a starting point: mud, the Bordeaux mixture fungicide, and water. With this combination, the organic and the chemical elements mimic what happens in the Wetland: substances blend, creating a network of soils, water, and chemicals interacting with the species inhabiting the Wetland. My intention with the pieces was to replicate this liquid meshwork



Diana Barquero Pérez: View of *Flowing Timeline* and *Conglomerates*. Part of the *Scratching the Surface* exhibition at Hamburger Bahnhof – Nationalgalerie der Gegenwart, Berlin (2021).

to reveal its symbolic qualities and historical significance in shaping this territory.

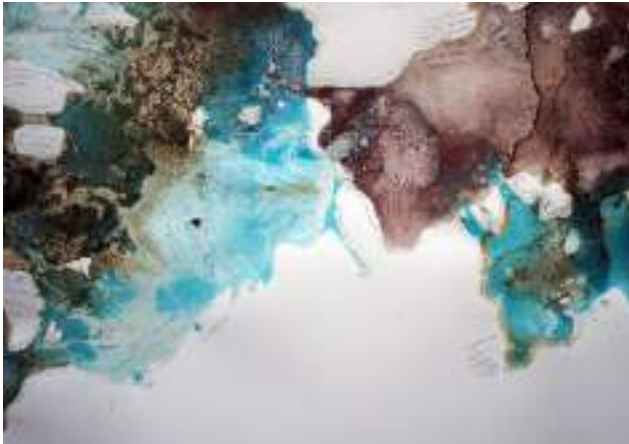
On the other hand, with the artistic project, I aimed to confront the division/parceling of the land with how bodies of water behave. This occurs in *Conglomerados* [Conglomerates] (2021),<sup>27</sup> a piece that emulates

the geological concept of a conglomerate. This is a sedimentary rock formed by other rocks fixed together. For the piece, I created 20 conglomerates, shaped according to the UFCo<sup>28</sup> parcels, using materials from the wetland and nearby areas.<sup>29</sup> These are arranged on a paper with a drawing of the Delta Diquís map,

<sup>27</sup> <https://dianabarquero.com/If-you-think-you-can-grasp-me-think-again>.

<sup>28</sup> For this, I relied on the maps of the UFCo's farms, kindly lent by the archaeologist Ifigenia Quintanilla.

<sup>29</sup> The materials used include: red and brown clay, plaster, cement, banana peels, pineapple, rice, rope, piangua shells, and soil. The



Diana Barquero Pérez: Detail of *Flowing Timeline* (2021).



Diana Barquero Pérez: Installation view of *The collection* (2020). Exhibited at T.O.P Project Space, Berlin. (2020).

and every day are progressively cracked with liquids<sup>30</sup> deposited on them once a day. This way of irrigation simulates the rhythm of the tides that flood the Wetland daily. As the liquids come into contact with the conglomerates, they start to break apart, slowly dispersing their materials across the paper. In the installation, the Bordeaux mixture has a greenish-turquoise color and a faint sulfur smell.

This piece aims to reveal the fiction that is the territory's

segmentation into productive and protected zones. Water and various liquids intermingle, blurring any notion of boundary or border, transporting their elements within and beyond these artificially created limits by human hands. Likewise, the shape of the conglomerates resonate with the stratigraphic reading of the subsoil, allowing us to think about time not in human terms but in geological ones. The copper line present in the wetland and echoed in the conglomerates leads

materials directly reference crops bordering the wetland and other important elements, such as piangua.

<sup>30</sup> The liquids include pineapple juice, freshwater, seawater, Bordeaux mixture, and iron oxide with water. These represent different liquids that coexist symbolically or materially in the Wetland.



us to reflect on how these impacts are inscribed over time, transcending animal/human life. This piece changes over time; the liquids gradually accumulate, creating new stains. This allows seeing the slow and cumulative passage of time behind the use of agrochemicals, which, just like on paper, accumulate in the wetland. The condition of this piece showcases the slow erosion and degradation processes produced by agrochemicals and contaminated sediments.

Next, I created *Línea de tiempo líquida* [Flowing Timeline]



Diana Barquero Pérez: Detail of objects from *The collection* (2021).

(2021).<sup>31</sup> It is a diagram made on watercolor paper with pencil, salt, water, liquefied plants, soil, coffee, gypsum, iron oxide, and Bordeaux mixture. These materials, like the conglomerates, travel across the paper, blending with each other. Using the marks left by these strokes, I wrote a timeline using the gathered data. This information encompasses the socio-political context of the Delta Diquís area, its social struggles, and changes in land use. It also displays some shifts in agricultural models in relation to the country's economic transitions. The diagram works as a fictitious or mental map where the strokes created by pesticides and other liquids organize and distribute the arrangement of information.

Part of the information gathered comes from the article "Accumulation by Conservation" by Robert Flescher and Bram

<sup>31</sup> <https://dianabarquero.com/lf-you-think-you-can-grasp-me-think-again>.

<sup>32</sup> Büscher, Bram y Robert Fletcher. 2015. "Accumulation by Conservation," *New Political Economy* 20, no. 2: 273-298.

Buscher (2015).<sup>32</sup> This article explains how governments, business leaders, and agents of economic elites seek more stable modes of accumulation to overcome the current environmental and financial crisis. The diagram also includes information from interviews with surrounding community members and popular stories. This piece was made from the dry marks that resulted from the liquids poured onto the conglomerates in the previous work. The toxicity of the pesticide produces a decomposition process on the paper, which can be seen in some parts of the diagram. This paper will slowly deteriorate, emulating the slow destruction in the Wetland.

I gathered material, visual, and aural compilations from field studies used for the piece titled *La Colección* [The Collection] (2020). It consists of a series of objects and materials brought from the Wetland, along with images, photographs, and

objects made of clay and sediments. This piece aims to correlate the pressures generated by monocultures to the materialities from the Wetland. In some components of this piece, I started with the gesture of pressing, shrinking, and colliding, producing small shapes with banana, pineapple, and sediment residue.

In this project, the visual devices sought to reproduce a model of operation that symbolized what happens in the Wetland. This is why moving water and transformation become core elements, both in the pieces and in the mangrove.

### Conclusions: If You Think You Can Grasp Me, Think Again

While researching for this project, I sought literature that resonated with this place. When I discovered the poem by Adrienne Rich, "Delta," I realized that this project echoed the gesture of the impossibility of grasping or seizing. She writes:

"If you have taken this rubble for my past / raking though it for fragments you could sell / know that I long ago moved on / deeper into the heart of the matter / If you think you can grasp me, think again: / my story flows in more than one direction / a delta springing from the riverbed / with its five fingers spread."<sup>33</sup> I found myself unable to "grasp," while trying to link different layers of information and experiences that arose from my encounter with the Wetland. In the non-human voice emerging from the poem, which holds multiple stories and flows unsuspectedly, I also encounter an impossibility to grasp. The title suggests human arrogance and the difficulty of apprehending and understanding land, water, and their resources as something other than material for extractive use, considering them as passive elements for human and industrial use. The project's

name questions this excessive simplification of our idea of living and non-living entities that coexist in this environment. Additionally, there's another element slipping through our hands: agrochemicals. These chemicals permeate and travel without us having certainty about their long-term effects. They are presented as a ghostly evil, slowly destroying everything that crosses their path, gradually degrading the complex fabric of this space.

The Wetland today, in its porous body, is a body in resistance. (Contaminated) Water becomes the center of events that happen both inside and outside the protected area. This text is a study of some threads of the history and production of the waterscape of the T erraba-Sierpe Wetland. I limited myself to understanding certain aspects of how global market dynamics and economic

<sup>33</sup> Rich, Adrienne. 2005. "Delta," in *Poemas (1963-2000)*. Spain: Ed. Renacimiento.

models shape this landscape based on monoculture. I wanted to contrast this with perspectives and stories from communities living near the Wetland to understand how both components are closely related: these are part of the physical and social fabric that is the production of the waterscape, linked by its water bodies.

For this project, working with farmer populations and piangua harvesters was essential; however, there are still other aspects to address and other populations to listen to and connect with.

One outcome of this project led to the current inquiry I'm engaged in. It focuses on the concept of "slow violence"<sup>34</sup> generated by monoculture—particularly pineapple cultivation in Costa Rica—and the close relationship between

warlike logics, plantation, and colonization in developing this cultivation system. This new line of research wouldn't have been possible without the contributions from this project.

Finally, I want to emphasize how changes in land use, land struggles, and pesticide residues are inscribed in this waterscape. They're etched into various materials and creatures that adapt and decompose within the aquatic landscape. They're delineated in the movements of water and the stories around its water bodies, both upstream and downstream. Pesticide contamination is a slow, silent, and elusive process. Catastrophes aren't necessarily explosive, nor do they imply immediate disappearance. Degradation can be challenging to grasp and envision. However, traces appear on land and in water, delving into layers and

<sup>33</sup> Term by Robert Nixon. Ver: Nixon, Robert. 2013. *Slow Violence and the Environmentalism of the Poor*. Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press.

embedding themselves in the bodies of those who closely coexist with them. My artistic process understands the tensions of this waterscape as alphabets that can be read

from the resulting materiality in the layers of sediment, water, and chemicals; alphabets that, through their traces, continuously form intricate patterns in this waterscape.

**Diana Barquero Pérez** (Costa Rica, 1986) Artist and researcher. Her work emphasizes processes of friction, transformation, and collapse. She focuses on places that coexist in tension with so-called “productive spaces.” How are sociopolitical interests and tensions inscribed in the landscape? What are the subjects/materials and processes that mediate this production? Through her work, Diana seeks to answer these questions. She holds an MA in Spatial Strategies from KHB, Berlin (2020) and a Bachelor's degree in Fine Arts from the University of Costa Rica (2014). She is currently pursuing a PhD in Arts and Design at UNAM (Mexico). Her professional development includes various artistic residencies, notably at Pivô Pesquisa (2023, São Paulo), Dos Mares (2023, Marseille), and Alter-academia (2016, TEOR/ética, Costa Rica). Diana has held solo exhibitions in Costa Rica and Germany, and participated in group exhibitions in Costa Rica, Germany, Brazil, Guatemala, and the United States. She received the Elsa-Neumann-Stipendium des Landes Berlin research grant (2020) and the Kickstarters Stipendium (2021, Berlin). She was the recipient of the Francisco Amighetti National Arts Award in the “other media” category (2018).

Translated from Spanish by Cecilia Pérez-Muskus.

# Mezcal, Forests, Farming, and Water in Agua del Espino, Oaxaca, Mexico

Elisa Silva

with the collaboration of Ellie Bailey

## Abstract

Since 2017, Elisa Silva of Enlace Foundation, together with Guillermo Chavez and Diana Ponce of ReThink Foundation, have been part of a long-term relationship with the neighbors of Agua del Espino. It started as friendship with the Coronado family, who, in addition to being *ejidatarios* (member of a community that shares ownership of the land) and farmers, produce and sell mezcal. Soon, new relationships were forged with other neighbors. Today, a trusting rapport exists with the entire community, allowing for an organic exchange of knowledge and experiences with local authorities and engaged townspeople, incrementally arriving at a shared revitalization plan for the village.

The story begins with two key university experiences at the Harvard Graduate School of Design in 2018 and the University of Toronto in 2019. Students focused their studies intently on water as a common resource, and ways to both stretch its presence in the territory and take better advantage of it. Strategies include reforestation, enhancing landscape productivity,

implementing water catchment and irrigation systems, as well as fabricating adobe bricks for construction that use a mezcal byproduct instead of water. Thanks to the invaluable support from the Harvard University David Rockefeller Center for Latin American Studies (DRCLAS), the Instituto de la Naturaleza y Sociedad de Oaxaca (INSO), local authorities, and schools, many of these projects are already in progress; the restoration of the landscape, marked by the hopeful trickles of once thriving Prieto River, is now within sight. This ongoing work has been nourished by the previously mentioned group as well the Harvard GSD Department of Landscape, and numerous elders, villagers, teachers and school children. The following pages reflect their collective experiences.

## The Birth of the Community

Within the collective memory of Agua del Espino, only the revered elders can recall a time when the Prieto River flowed with abundance throughout the year. Despite its understated position as a mere tributary to the much more prolific Atoyac River, this stream is a distinct indicator of the community's vitality. After describing the factors that likely generated such a critical loss, this essay will recount the journey of a concerned community and a collective of deeply invested external advisors who over the past six years have woven together a comprehensive array of strategies. These support the village back toward a hopeful path of prosperity, based on their past cultural practices and an obsessive quest to lengthen the presence of each droplet that falls on its territory.

The town's footprint, situated closest to the Prieto River,

is modest in comparison to the surrounding land. It is an *ejido*, which in Mexico is an area of communal land that is collectively owned by members of a community. Individuals enjoy usufruct rights over the land, which they mostly use for agriculture. Agua del Espino was established on July 29, 1936, and encompasses a total of 2,071 hectares, nearly half of which are communal.<sup>1</sup> A picturesque array of undulating peaks and valleys direct rainwater along intricate paths, gracefully cascading down the mountainside. This natural phenomenon once nurtured the growth of dense patches of lush greenery, providing respite in the otherwise arid climate. In a bygone era, agave plants thrived abundantly, harmoniously coexisting with shrubs and fruit trees. The remarkable biodiversity not only preserved the soil's valuable nutrients, but also created ample shade, providing a cool environment for essential bacteria to flourish.

<sup>1</sup> *Acta de Posesión Definitiva y Deslinde del Ejido de Agua del Espino, October 30, 1936 (Municipality of La Compañía, State of Oaxaca).*



Water, concealed deep within the soil and cooled by the welcoming shade, once embarked on a lengthy journey down the mountains, intimately entwining the life of the Prieto River with the landscape that surrounds it.

In these early days, agave grew wild in the communal mountains. Agave is the plant that sources mezcal, and even though production requires the entire plant to be harvested, residents never worried about its depletion. The spirit had humble beginnings, in contrast to the widespread appeal it enjoys today. It was often dismissed as a beverage meant for those of modest means, lacking the prestige and popularity associated with other alcoholic beverages (Paez-Lerma et al. 2022).<sup>2</sup> However, nestled within Agua del Espino, mezcal held a special place of reverence and appreciation.

Within this idyllic *ejido*, distillation techniques were lovingly passed down from one generation to the next, preserving the artistry and craftsmanship of mezcal production. The drink is a living testament to the enduring power of tradition, where the locals embrace mezcal as more than just a drink—a symbol of joyous celebration, deeply intertwined with the fabric of their community. Mezcal has played an integral role in marking momentous occasions and commemorating cherished traditions. The spirit's rich flavor profile became an essential part of various ceremonies, from the celebration of the town's patron saint, exuberant weddings and baptisms, to intimate small-town birthdays and lively cookouts.

The abundance of agave and other natural growth echoed the healthy flow of water along

<sup>2</sup> Paez-Lerma, Jesús, Nicolas Soto-Cruz, Manuel Kirchmayr, Anne Gschaedler. 2022. "Mezcal Production in Mexico: Between Tradition and Commercial Exploitation." *Frontiers in Sustainable Food Systems* 6 March 21.



**Figure 1.** The areas of color traced over maps of the territory delineate the surviving patches of greenery on the rolling hills of Agua del Espino in 2002, 2010, and 2021, respectively. These groups of vegetation correspond with paths of water flow. Over the past 20 years misled land management practices have shrunk their footprint. Today, the climate of Agua del Espino is described as semi-arid, with average temperatures ranging from 16° to 22°C. The region experiences low levels of rainfall, with average annual totals ranging from 600 to 1000mm. Rainfall is mostly concentrated in the rainy season, which is consequently followed by a dry period of excessive heat and drought. (“Monitor de sequía de México,” Conagua Gobierno de México. Accessed August 1, 2023.

<https://smn.conagua.gob.mx/es/climatologia/monitor-de-sequia/monitor-de-sequia-en-mexico>). Courtesy: Enlace Foundation.

the Prieto River and enabled the accumulation of water in aquifers. This water not only sustained the life of the people and animals of Agua del Espino, but was and still is a key part of the agave distillation process. This is how close life, culture, and water are intertwined.

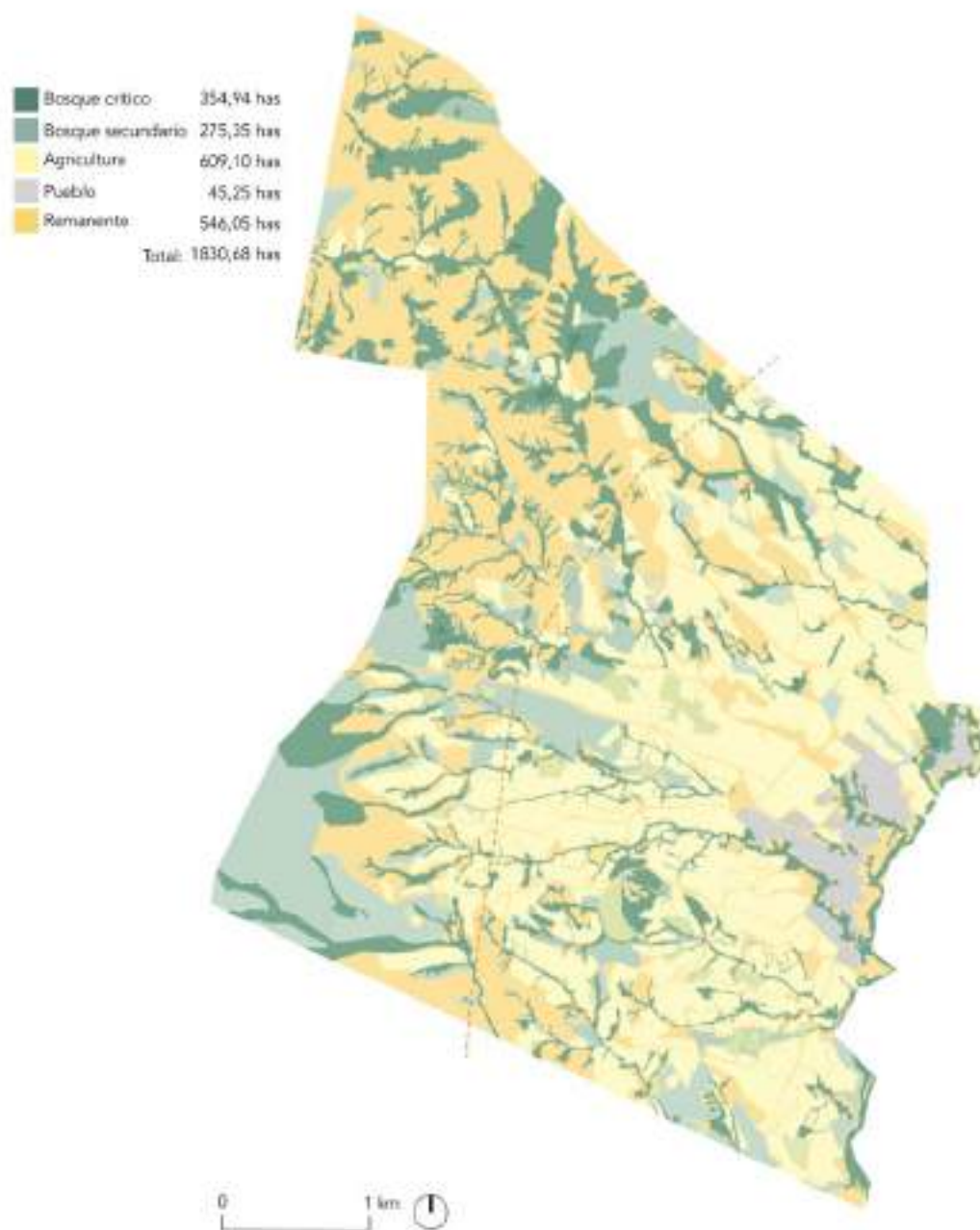
### Downfall

The recent and growing international popularity of mezcal, has introduced shifting patterns in the behavior of this ecological system. Economic opportunities quickly overshadowed tradition, and old agave growth patterns have been disrupted in favor of vast collections of monoculture patches, spiking mezcal production. As exports have risen, more residents have entered the cultivation business and fewer workers are leaving for the city or *el Norte*, another way of calling the United States. Farmlands previously dedicated to squash, beans, and corn—the combination of these crops is known as *milpa*—have been

replaced with monoculture agave. More homes and plantations have sprung up as Agua del Espino became more populated. In other words, the *ejido's* economy has been improving.

While the town has thrived, its life source has suffered; although current farming practices provide economic prosperity to Agua del Espino, they are hardly sustainable. Alongside moderate population growth and increasing economic desires to farm, parts of the once forested communal land have been razed and replaced with parallel, unnatural plantations. Much of what is left of the communal territory is relegated to livestock pasturing.

These unassuming practices of present economic growth have unexpectedly become the biggest obstacle to continued prosperity, and the communal land in particular has suffered for it. After several years of monoculture planting and livestock grazing, much of the soil has become infertile. Lack



**Figure 2.** Grand swaths of once untouched land are greatly threatened by the economic pressures that feed the growth of agricultural. This map displays the remaining vulnerable lands, represented in dark and light green, in conjunction with those areas currently dedicated to agricultural cultivation in light yellow. The orange territories are either idle farms or areas of communal land with no vegetation and high levels of soil erosion, associated with overgrazing. Courtesy: Enlace Foundation.

of shade has contributed to a rise in soil temperatures, not only prohibiting the habitation of essential microorganisms but forcing water to evaporate early in its journey, never reaching the aquifers or the Prieto River. Once thriving land has turned to rusted dirt where few plants are able to take root. The Prieto River, which once flowed year-round, now rarely manages to gather water during the rainy season, while farmers celebrate clouds that never rain.

## Hope

The *ejido's* true power lies in the unbreakable bonds of its community. Living and working together on shared land, the townspeople form a deep-rooted sense of unity. Flowing through generations, the townspeople have cultivated a spirit of cooperation and mutual support, weaving a strong social fabric that has withstood the trials of time. This tight-knit network of individuals not only shares the same land but also a common

purpose, ensuring that the well-being of every member is safeguarded.

The strength of the *ejido's* community manifests in various ways. Communal land is perceived by outsiders as impractical and a deterrent to private ownership, yet it offers unique opportunities for collective action. In Agua del Espino, this sense of shared responsibility enables residents to decisively act on new strategies to maintain the vitality of the landscape. When faced with adversity, they readily pool resources, knowledge, and skills.

On the 14th of January in 2023, the townspeople convened at the *Agencia* building to address the concerning degradation of the landscape. Attentively, the farmers listened to proposals put forth by Enlace Foundation, ReThink Foundation, the Harvard University Department of Landscape Architecture, and the Instituto de la Naturaleza y Sociedad de Oaxaca (INSO),



**Figure 3.** Community members of Agua del Espino coming together to participate in a reforestation activity as part of their *tequio* (voluntary work) tradition. July 2021. Photo: Elisa Silva.

aimed at initiating the crucial process of environmental restoration. With unanimous agreement on the following proposals, the farmers are hopeful that implementing these changes will lead to the recovery of their soil, increased access to water, better crop yields, and the complete restoration of the Prieto and its aquifers, returning the river to its year-round splendor.

### Mapping and Knowing the Land

Commissar Tirmo García highlights a key aspect of this story. Despite his relative youth

at 50-something, García is revered as an elder in Agua del Espino following his extensive knowledge of the land. García's memories of youth are deeply intertwined with his education in land practices. He recalls his teachers meticulously describing the various land markers that delineate the borders of the town, the communal land, and the wider *ejido* boundary. With immense dedication, García spent countless hours traversing the vast expanse of the *ejido*, committing these symbols, boundaries, and familial land claims to memory. Remarkably, even to this day, he can recall the names of valleys and long forgotten family land assignments that have never been officially recorded.

However, the education of today's youth in Agua del Espino paints a different picture. Instead of instilling the intricacies of their land culture, the current educational system prioritizes teaching concepts and trades that hold little relevance to Agua

del Espino's history. This modern approach often encourages the younger generation to seek opportunities in urban centers, pulling them away from their ancestral lands (VanWey, Tucker, and Diaz McConnell 2020).<sup>3</sup> As a consequence, much of the invaluable generational knowledge of the land is fading.

An ambitious endeavor was begun with the hope of reviving the generational knowledge embedded in the landscape of Agua del Espino. In May of 2022, an extensive mapping and land surveying exploration led by Elisa Silva of Enlace and Agua del Espino's Commissar Tirmo García, proved to be an obvious yet unprecedented initiative. Up until this point, the precise demarcations of land assigned to villagers and areas called *agostaderos* or communal land in Agua del Espino existed only in the collective knowledge of the townspeople,

as the area had never been concretely mapped before. This collective knowledge, combined with their status as an ejido, stands as a powerful testament to the strength of community, culture, and generational wisdom. However, as this invaluable knowledge has begun to dissipate with younger generations, there is an increasing need to record it for the future. The experience in "co-mapping" with the community not only sought to preserve the existing knowledge but also extended the community's understanding to previously unknown places.

Armed with a large format, printed, satellite map, Silva and García walked the landscape for several days, recording the uses and implied ownership of every hill and valley. With focus and dedication and an eye for detail, they carefully marked out boundaries by hand, unraveling

<sup>3</sup> VanWey, Leah K., Catherine M. Tucker, and Eileen Diaz McConnell. 2020. "Community Organization, Migration, and Remittances in Oaxaca." *Latin American Research Review* 40, October 5.

the intricate tapestry of land tenure conditions in Agua del Espino.

Mapping not only shed light on the patterns of land ownership, or rather usufruct, in the area but also unveiled the patches of vulnerable greenery that could be lost if its tender decided to cultivate agave there and raze existing trees. Surviving swaths of lush growth were demarcated, their existence intricately linked to the paths of rainwater trickling down the landscape. Notably, these verdant oases thrived predominantly along the north faces of the peaks, where the oblique sun rays hit the sloped ground with less intensity compared to their sun-drenched southern counterparts.

Yet, as Silva and García traversed the landscape, they routinely passed recently razed segments of the communal land. Despite the natural

resilience of these green areas, the expanding mezcal industry has truly taken its toll. Silva recounts how much it pained García to pass by swaths of once-thriving natural landscapes now replaced by unnaturally geometric plantations. Moreover, the few untouched areas have been left to suffer the ravages of overgrazing by livestock. García's puckered forehead revealed his frustration in the face of these increasingly frequent, damaging practices playing to the tune of international economies rather than the tight-knit community life with which he grew up.

Over the years, satellite imagery has documented the gradual depletion of greenery, highlighting the magnitude of the ecological impact.<sup>4</sup> However, the recent mapping walks have offered a more comprehensive view of the landscape, revealing previously unknown vulnerabilities.

<sup>4</sup> Enlace Arquitectura has traced the vegetation coverage of satellite images recorded on Google Earth since 2002. Figure 1 reveals a pattern of shrinkage and disappearance.





**Figure 4.** The areas of remaining lush vegetation in Agua del Espino are highlighted in shades of red. Overlaying these areas of critical forest are patches of land susceptible to claim by townsfolk and farmers. These land claims suggest future use as agricultural farmlands, and thus pose a great threat to existing, healthy vegetation. Courtesy: Enlace Foundation.

There is an alarming overlap of newly-claimed private land and the sparse remnants of once-lush vegetation. Market pressures to cultivate more land are motivating a de-facto “privatization” of the communal lands much like the enclosures of the commons witnessed in England in the 18th century.<sup>5</sup> Such land grabs place these fragile ecosystems at even greater risk; continued unrestricted land use may further threaten the survival of these precious green patches.

As detailed mapping data comes to light, the community now faces a critical decision. Armed with this newfound knowledge, they can address these vulnerabilities and protect the remaining forest. It becomes a collective responsibility to find sustainable solutions, striking a balance between economic growth and environmental conservation.

## Water Catchment

Mapping was not only instrumental in clarifying land uses and their potential conflict with forest preservation, but also revealed opportunities for concrete intervention. Strategic locations for water basins could be easily identified and even quantified using topography maps obtained from processing drone imaging into a three-dimensional model. The digging of new water basins marks the beginning of this process, envisioned to capture and aid the filtration of rainwater into the aquifers. This method of water catchment is effective because the size of the basins can be dug in less than a day, a cost that is accessible to locals and time efficient.<sup>6</sup> It also draws relevance from existing practices in the area, namely a water fed by a drainage path and surrounded

<sup>5</sup> Juergensmeyer, Julian C. and James B. Wadley. 1974. “The Common Lands Concept: A Commons Solution to a Common Environmental Problem.” *Natural Resources* 14, J. 361.

<sup>6</sup> The volume of the water basins is between 230,000 and 300,000 liters, depending on the site, and approximately 200 m<sup>3</sup> of earth movement. This can be done with a simple backhoe for the equivalent

with mature trees, that, although intended for animal hydration, visibly benefits the vegetation growing downhill.

As rainwater permeates the surrounding soil, it triggers a cascade of positive effects. Firstly, this process filters moisture into the soil, which nurtures an environment conducive to greater plant growth. Moreover, it results in decreased temperatures, mitigating the impact of heat during the dry season (Ni et al. 2009).<sup>7</sup>

By creating a constellation of new basins strategically scattered on the hills of the common land, the team aims to extend the retention period of rainwater within the landscape, reducing evaporation and runoff. This approach promises manifold benefits, not just for

the environment but also for the overall well-being of the community.

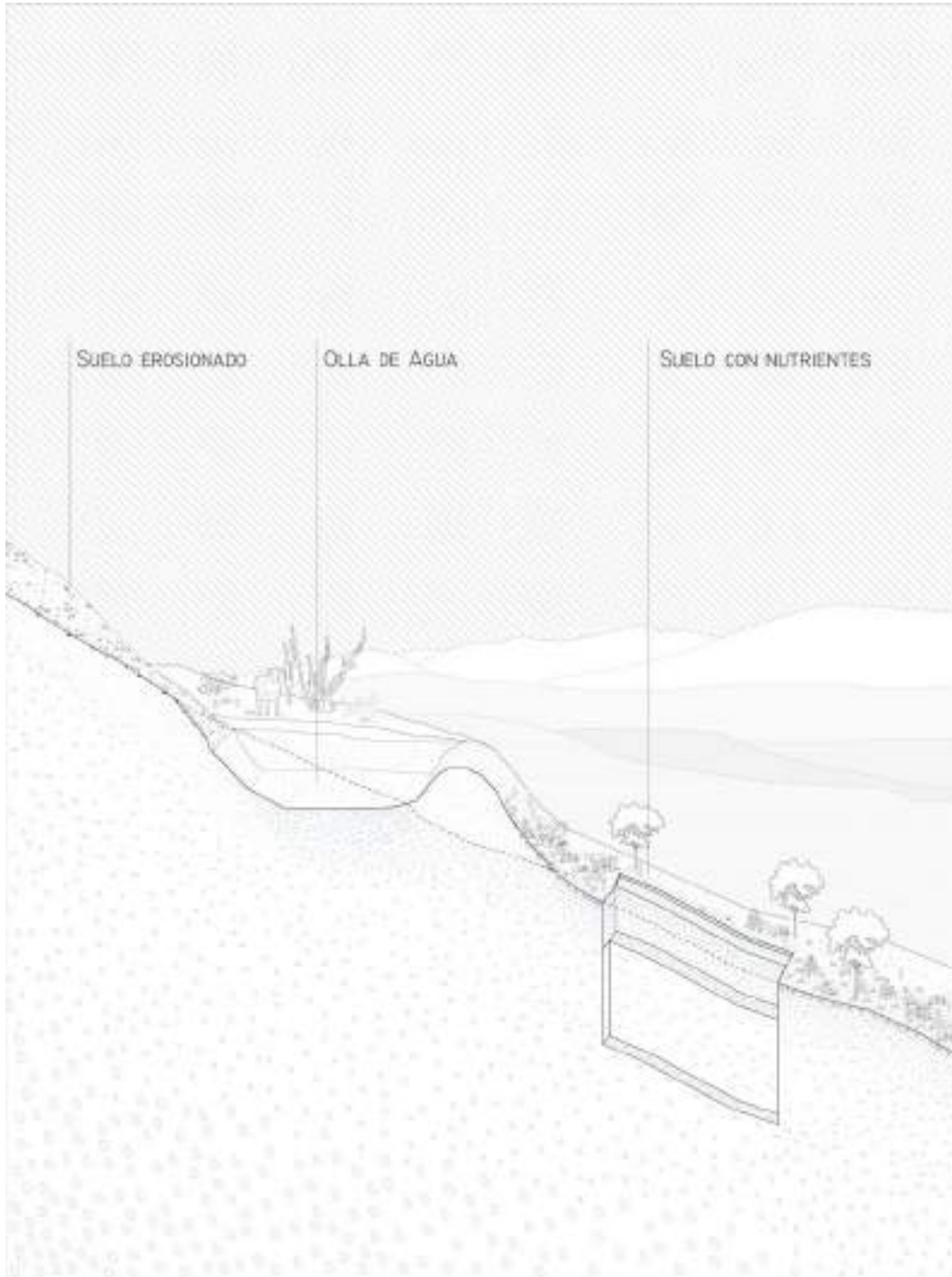
The significance of these basins extends beyond immediate ecological improvements. As water filters down to replenish the large aquifers, the town is assured of a sustainable water source, even during the harshest dry seasons. Access to plentiful water ensures the townspeople's well-being, safeguarding agricultural practices, supporting livestock, and securing the basic needs of everyday life.

## Reforestation

The plant growth stimulated by the future water basins represents but an initial phase of a more ambitious plan for environmental revitalization. The reforestation initiative seeks to breathe new life into

of one work day, which is a cost that is accessible to most farmers in Agua del Espino.

<sup>7</sup> Ni, Junjun, Yifeng Cheng, Qinhua Wang, Charles Wang Wai Ng, Ankit Garg. 2019. "Effects of vegetation on soil temperature and water content: Field monitoring and numerical modeling." *Journal of Hydrology* 571: 494-502.



**Figure 5.** The implementation of dug-out water basins is a simple and economically efficient method of water catchment. As water flows down the mountain, rather than eroding precious topsoil, it is captured in these trenches. Then, it is allowed to seep into the soil, allowing for a buildup of nutrients that encourage plant growth downstream of the basin (Ni et al. 2019, 499). Courtesy: Enlace Foundation.

the landscape by reintroducing a plethora of native plants that have historical significance and ecological importance, such as *guaje*, *guamucho*, *copal*, and *jarilla*; the careful selection of species adapted to the region's climate and soil conditions ensures a higher chance of successful establishment and long-term sustainability.<sup>8</sup>

Once these native trees and shrubs take root, they will play a pivotal role in cooling the soil beneath them. This cooling effect not only fosters increased water retention but also creates a more favorable environment for the growth of essential nutrients and beneficial soil microbes. As the soil improves in health, it becomes better equipped to support a flourishing ecosystem, benefitting both plant and animal life (Ni et

al. 2019, 499). Moreover, the complex root systems developed by the newly planted native species act as a natural defense against rainwater runoff and soil erosion. These intricate root structures anchor the soil firmly in place, reducing the risk of erosion during heavy rainfall and ensuring that valuable topsoil remains (Ni et al. 2019, 499).

The reforestation process has already commenced through a dedicated group of townsfolk under a collaborative effort known as *tequio*, a tradition of voluntary contribution toward works in the community practiced through their legal system of uses and customs—unwritten traditions transmitted through ancestral generations that operate as common law (Maldonado Alvarado 2015).<sup>9</sup> In

<sup>8</sup> New trees will be grown in a community nursery from seeds and through grafting. Seeds of the *guaje* and *guamucho* trees will be collected and sprouted, while *copal* and *jarilla* can be easily grafted from trees already growing in the local landscape.

<sup>9</sup> Maldonado Alvarado, Benjamín. 2015. "Perspectivas de la comunalidad en los pueblos indígenas de Oaxaca," in *Bajo el Volcán* 15, no. 23 September-February: 151-169. Benemérita Universidad Autónoma de Puebla. Puebla.

Agua del Espino, the community engages in small yearly projects organized by either the *Agencia* (the local authority that regulates matters pertinent to the township) or the *Comisariado* (official entity that oversees the communal lands of the *ejido*) in accordance with this tradition. Some recent projects include installing electric lighting along the path toward the cemetery and constructing concrete stadium seating for spectators of the bull riding competitions that are part of the town's annual celebration in March.<sup>10</sup> This shared practice stands as a powerful testament to the unity and strength of the Agua del Espino community.

In July of 2022, following several lackluster attempts at reforestation by the teams of Enlace, ReThink, and the community during the two

previous summers, Elisa Silva and professor Pablo Pérez-Ramos of Harvard University met with Natalia Lazaro, the director of Agua del Espino's school. After listening to their concerns, Lazaro suggested using a sizable piece of land entrusted to the school, west of the town center for an experimental reforestation project. This one-hectare piece of land was being partially used as a soccer field, and represented the perfect canvas to practice alternative cultivation initiatives. With contributions through *tequio* from parents of school children, 300 trees and 1,000 agaves were planted in careful arrangements between existing vegetation and around the fenced perimeter. Furthermore, a tree nursery is being established at the school, echoing the state-sponsored program *Sembrando Vida*,

<sup>10</sup> In honor of its patron saint, St. Joseph, the township of Agua del Espino organizes a three-day celebration in mid-March. It is comprised of band concerts, bull riding competitions, eating, and drinking. The village's mezcals maestros make special distillations for the celebration. Preparation and organization is led by the *Agencia* authorities with *tequio* contributions from the entire town.



**Figure 6.** This map displays the hopes for future reforestation. Those sections highlighted in dark green are areas into which forests can expand. The gray patches, which represent a combination of formerly farmed areas and communal land, would be made available for agricultural development in exchange for currently forested areas susceptible to farming if claimed by local *ejidatarios*.  
Courtesy: Enlace Foundation.

started by several local farmers in 2021.<sup>11</sup>

As the young trees and shrubs take root and grow, the impact of this collective endeavor will ripple throughout the landscape. The reforested areas will become thriving ecosystems, harboring increased biodiversity, cooling the soil, and acting as carbon sinks. In concert with the water basins distributed across the landscape, the intricate root systems of the newly established plants will work together to sequester rainwater deep into the soil. This natural water storage mechanism will have far-reaching benefits: nourishing the plants themselves, replenishing the aquifers, sustaining the

needs of the community, and ensuring a steady flow of water to the Prieto River.

## Livestock

In conjunction with reforestation efforts, INSO is engaging farmers in crucial discussions regarding their livestock management practices. Currently, and historically, farmers have allowed their livestock to graze freely on the large swaths of communal land.<sup>12</sup> However, with the steady growth of the community, remaining communal land is subject to overgrazing. Over 500 hectares of land have become dangerously depleted of their natural green cover.<sup>13</sup> Furthermore, this practice

<sup>11</sup> *Sembrando Vida* is a government-sponsored program to encourage villagers to produce tree nurseries. See more: <https://www.gob.mx/bienestar/acciones-y-programas/programa-sembrando-vida>.

<sup>12</sup> Villagers' right to access communal lands (*agostaderos*) for animal grazing is stated in their constitutional document, cited earlier: *Acta de Posesión Definitiva y Deslinde del Ejido de Agua del Espino*, October 30, 1936 (Municipality of La Compañía, State of Oaxaca).

<sup>13</sup> Mappings produced by Enlace from satellite images, and confirmed visually through walks over the territory between May 2022 and April 2023, reveal areas that are neither being farmed nor covered with forests, and that are characterized by a rocky soil, animal tracks, and scarce vegetation.



of open grazing has directly hampered reforestation efforts. In 2020 and 2021, in the midst of the COVID-19 pandemic, ReThink, with the support of the Harp Helú Foundation, led reforestation efforts by planting over 2,000 trees in fence-protected areas of communal land.<sup>14</sup> However, due to lack of attention and supervision of these areas, locals allowed their animals to freely graze over the land, inevitably leading to the disappearance of nearly all of the newly planted trees. Going forward, it is evident that careful livestock management is essential and must go hand-in-hand with reforestation initiatives. Balancing the needs of the community, the livestock,

and the environment is crucial to ensure the sustainability and health of the ecosystem.

The issue at hand is also aggravated by the presence of goats in particular, which have proven to be the most detrimental animals to the landscape due to their grazing habits. Because they are not selective about their food, goats have the tendency to completely deplete the land of any and all plant cover (Rashid 2008).<sup>15</sup> In response to this concern, INSO has engaged in discussions with the community about the possibility of transitioning from goats to sheep, as sheep are more selective in their diet and do not consume vegetation as voraciously as goats do.<sup>16</sup> This

<sup>14</sup> Harp Helú Foundation in Oaxaca has several tree nurseries in the state in order to support communities with reforestation efforts. Rethink organized the planting efforts with local villagers who volunteered their time. These efforts failed for several reasons: The young trees were not directly from the territory and included less sturdy species such as pine. They were also too small to withstand the harsh weather during the dry season. Furthermore, unsupervised grazing contributed to their disappearance.

<sup>15</sup> A Rashid, Mamoon. 2008. "Goats and their nutrition." *Manitoba Agriculture, Food and Rural Initiatives Manitoba Goat Association*. <https://www.gov.mb.ca/agriculture/livestock/goat/pubs/goats-and-their-nutrition.pdf>.

<sup>16</sup> Goats like to eat the tops of plants. Sheep are grazers, preferring

shift would help mitigate the negative impact of grazing on the environment and promote a more sustainable coexistence between livestock and the delicate ecosystem of Agua del Espino.

By adopting this unobtrusive adjustment, the community can strike an amicable balance between reforestation efforts and the well-being of their livestock. This, in turn, will contribute to the preservation of communal lands and the restoration of the natural green cover, promoting a healthier environment.

### Regenerative Agriculture

In the wild, agave plants naturally grow in close proximity to other native plants, fostering

a balanced ecosystem.<sup>17</sup> However, with the increasing demand for agave cultivation for the production of mezcal, farming practices adopted from tequila producers in the State of Jalisco have disrupted this natural growth process. Farmed patches, widely used for crops like corn, soybeans, and wheat, even if locally produced, are far from ideal in the vulnerable, arid climate of Agua del Espino; once such monoculture crops are harvested, the land is cleared, leaving the soil barren and overheated for the rest of the year (Schonbeck 2009).<sup>18</sup>

The dominance of monoculture cultivation poses several environmental challenges. Farmers are regularly encouraged by non-native

to eat short, tender grasses and clover. Their dietary preference is forbs (broadleaf weeds) and they like to graze close to the soil surface. Goats require and select a more nutritious diet. See more: <https://www.sheep101.info/sheepandgoats.html#:~:text=Goats%20like%20to%20eat%20the,select%20a%20more%20nutritious%20diet>.

<sup>17</sup> Davis, Sarah C. and Hector G. Ortiz-Cano. 2023. "Lessons from the history of Agave: ecological and cultural context for valuation of CAM," *Annals of Botany* XX, June 5: 1–15.

<sup>18</sup> A Schonbeck, Mark. 2009. "An Ecological Understanding of Weeds." *eOrganic*, January. <https://eorganic.org/node/2314>.

engineers to remove any and all weeds that appear amidst rows of agave. This alteration of the agave's natural habitat distances the plant from its usual growth pattern and exposes the soil directly to the hot sun, which encourages water evaporation rather than water sequestration. As a result, the soil tends to dry out quickly, leading to decreased moisture levels and reduced water retention capacity (Romano 1999).<sup>19</sup>

Additionally, the heat generated in these monoculture areas inhibits the productivity of essential bacteria that are crucial for plant growth. Healthy microorganisms are further inhibited by poisonous pesticides similarly proposed by eager entrepreneurs seeking clients. The combination of these factors results in severe nutrient depletion and a decline in the overall health of the soil,

making it less fertile and unable to support thriving vegetation (Schonbeck 2009).

Furthermore, the arrangement of these monoculture patches in rows parallel to the mountain slopes exacerbates the problem. When sparse rains occur, the water is channeled rapidly along these rows, encouraging paths of erosive runoff. This runoff carries away valuable topsoil together with pesticide and fertilizer additives, leading to downstream environmental damage including siltation and reduced water quality (Romano 1999).

Recognizing the importance of preserving the region's delicate ecological balance, Enlace, Rethink, INSO, and Harvard professor Pérez-Ramos, in collaboration with farmers like Don Herminio Coronado and Don Elías García, have proposed a shift towards regenerative

<sup>19</sup> Romano, Nunzio. 1999. "Water retention and movement in soil," in *Handbook of Agriculture Engineering Vol 1: Land and Water Engineering*, eds. H.N.van Lier, L.S. Prereira and F.R. Steiner, 262-284. Washington: ASAE.

agriculture. The goal of these alternative methods is to restore the soil to its original vitality while ensuring the productivity of agave plantations.

The key to regenerative agriculture lies in planting agave in close proximity to other carefully selected plants based on the ecological needs of the land and the community's requirements. For example, *milpas* and fruit trees, such as *nísperos* (loquats), *duraznos* (peaches), and lemons are known to thrive in the region and offer edible options for community members to sell or consume.<sup>20</sup>

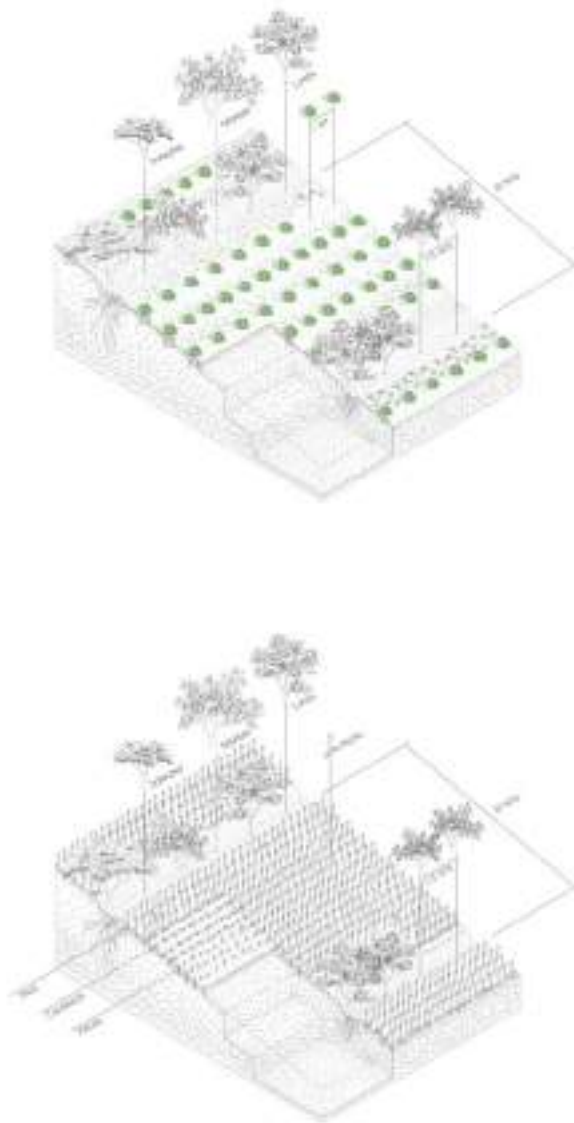
By intercropping agave with these taller trees, the soil will benefit from shading, which helps to cool the ground and retain water. This, in turn, conserves nutrients

and promotes the growth of beneficial microorganisms. The synergy between the plants creates a thriving microenvironment that nurtures the agave while also revitalizing the overall environment.

In addition to intercropping, orientating rows of planting so they are perpendicular to the mountain's slope is beneficial. This adjustment allows the soil that accumulates near the base of an agave plant and its root systems to catch and retain water, instead of being channeled downhill between rows (Kwan Leung, Garg, and Wang Wai Ng 2015).<sup>21</sup> This practice enhances water absorption and ensures that the precious resource is optimally utilized for the growth and well-being of trees, agave, *milpa*, and other types of vegetation.

<sup>20</sup> INSO (Instituto de la Naturaleza y Sociedad de Oaxaca) has conducted surveys in many communities throughout the Valles Centrales of the State of Oaxaca, and has found these species to be particularly resilient and prosperous. The information was shared by INSO member Francisco Roldán Vera.

<sup>21</sup> Kwan Leung, Anthony, Ankit Garg, and Charles Wang Wai Ng. 2015. "Effects of plant roots on soil-water retention and induced suction in vegetated soil." *Engineering Geology* 193 July 2: 183-197.



**Figure 7.** These drawings outline the practices of regenerative agriculture that are to be implemented in the farmlands of Agua del Espino. Rows of fruit trees are interspersed with rows of agave, and natural weeds are left untouched to fill the in-between spaces. The trees and weeds shade the soil and maintain its nutrients, fostering the agave's growth and avoiding monoculture practices. Instead a more complex and diverse ecosystem is encouraged.

Similarly, in other areas of farmlands, *milpa* can also grow in proximity to fruit trees. These practices of regenerative agriculture preserve the health of the soil while enhancing the productivity of the desired crops (Khangura, Ravjit, et al. 2023. "Regenerative Agriculture—A Literature Review on the Practices and Mechanisms Used to Improve Soil Health," *Sustainability* 15). Courtesy: Enlace Foundation.

## Distillation and Adobe Bricks

The significance of agave cultivation and mezcal distillation to the townspeople of Agua del Espino cannot be overstated. As a crucial source of sustenance and livelihood, traditional practices are deeply rooted in the community. However, the cultivation of agave subjected to the ever-increasing market pressures has left a distinct mark on the landscape. The initiatives outlined so far—water catchment, reforestation, livestock management, and regenerative agriculture—are largely focused on mitigating this footprint. The following final proposal, however, works directly in hand with the agave distillation process, utilizing its byproducts to support the *ejido* with sustainable building practices.

The process of agave cultivation and mezcal distillation is a taxing and complex art passed down

through generations within the community of Agua del Espino. Unlike many modern industrial production methods, the mezcal produced maintains its small-scale artisanal roots. In 2017, the *ejido* housed but one mezcal maestro, which was sufficient for all of the town's celebratory and distributary needs. Now, in 2023, the maestros have grown in number to an environmentally demanding thirteen.<sup>22</sup>

Indeed, market pressures continue to exert their influence on agave cultivation, primarily driven by the time-consuming nature of the process. Harvesting agave for distillation requires the entire plant to be used, and the agave plant is only viable for mezcal production once it reaches maturity, a process that takes a minimum of eight years (Paez-Lerma et al. 2022). This prolonged maturation period places significant strain on agave farmers, who face immense

<sup>22</sup> In April 2023, while coordinating the adobe fabrication initiative and surveying current productions of mezcal in order to access their byproducts, it became known that thirteen *palenques* are currently active mezcal producers.

challenges and financial constraints, as they dedicate land to crops that may not yield returns for up to a decade. Yet, mezcal remains central not only to the culture but also to the economic independence of Agua del Espino; an understanding of the culturally significant distillation process and the resources it consumes will be integral to any future collective endeavor.

After the agave plant is harvested, its core is roasted, crushed, and milled, then combined with water in wood barrels to ferment. The process takes several weeks culminating in the distillation process, which leaves behind several byproducts. The first of these byproducts is a largely unharmed, fibrous material called

*bagazo*. Far more problematic is the second byproduct: an acidic solution called *vinaza*. Under current conditions, after distillation, this acidic liquid is often poured onto the ground and left to leach into the soil. The *vinaza* contaminates the aquifers through acidification, which not only damages the environment but poses health risks to the townsfolk (Betts 2018).<sup>23</sup>

To avoid releasing these byproducts into the environment, an exploration led by Alejandro Montes of COAA (Consultorio de Asesoría Arquitectónica) recovered an ancestral practice that gave them new life.<sup>24</sup> Montes led a workshop in Agua del Espino with students from the University of Toronto, encouraging them to explore the ancestral practice of making adobe bricks from *bagazo*

<sup>23</sup> Betts, Richard. 2018. "We've Started A Revolution: The Dirty Truth About Mezcal Part II." Medium. <https://yobetts.medium.com/weve-started-a-revolution-the-dirty-truth-about-mezcal-part-ii-f7acfc995145>.

<sup>24</sup> Alejandro Montes began his work with earth bricks using *vinaza* and *bagazo* in partnership with mezcal producers Del Maguey. See more: <https://delmaguey.com/traditional-building-workshops-in-sta-catarina-minas-upcycling-mezcal-by-products/>.

and *vinaza*. Together with local mezcal maestro Don Herminio, the students experienced firsthand the alchemy of turning distillation byproducts into a sustainable building material with deep historical roots. The group molded mixtures of dirt, *vinaza*, and *bagazo* into earthen adobe bricks, creating a sustainable and economic building material for the expansion of homes in the ejido.

Currently, Agua del Espino is peppered with ubiquitous concrete block construction. Propaganda by the concrete industry vilified earth construction associating it with disease and poverty, while concrete was posited as a hygienic staple of the modern developed world.<sup>25</sup> Yet, these assumptions do not account for the incredibly poor thermal

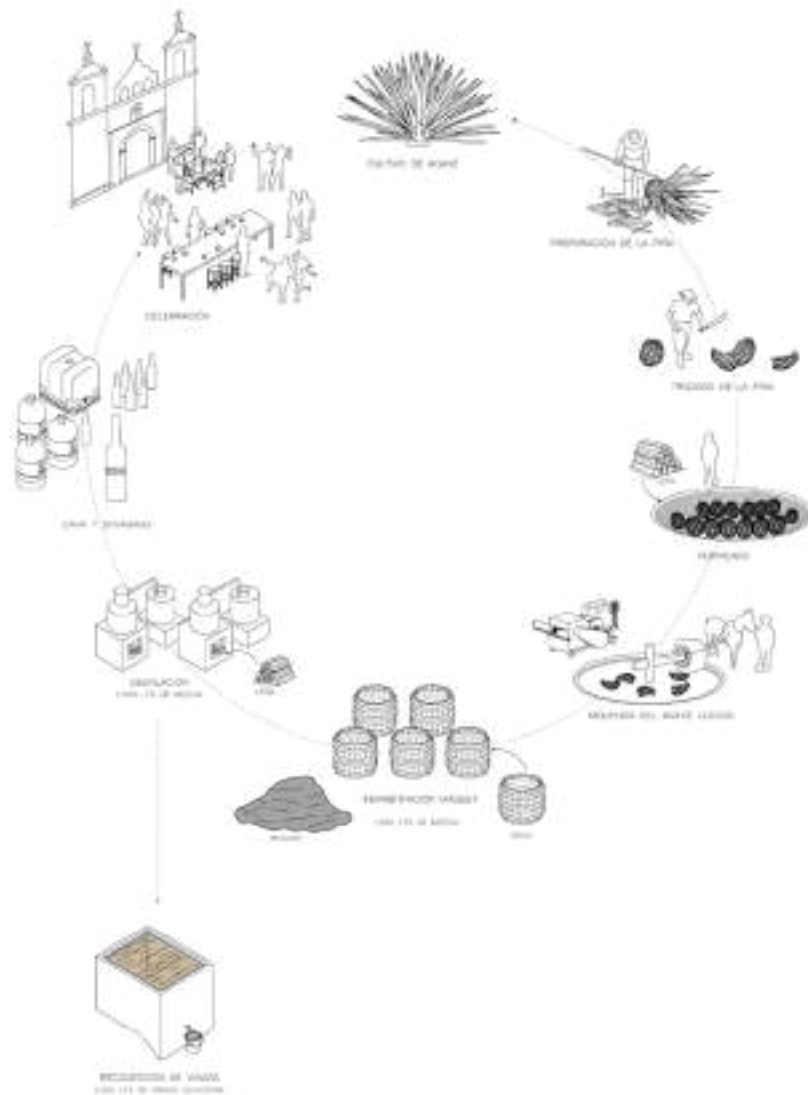
performance of the concrete block in arid climates like Agua del Espino. Returning to earthen construction not only provides an economically efficient and environmentally sustainable alternative, but also a far more efficient natural thermoregulation in man-made structures (Ben-Alon 2023).<sup>26</sup>

In essence, water, once seen merely as a resource for agricultural and industrial processes, has become a thread that weaves together tradition, sustainability, and community identity. Through this process of adobe brick formation and construction, water, harvested from aquifers and sullied in the mezcal distillation process, is transformed and reconnected with the community's forgotten traditions and culture.

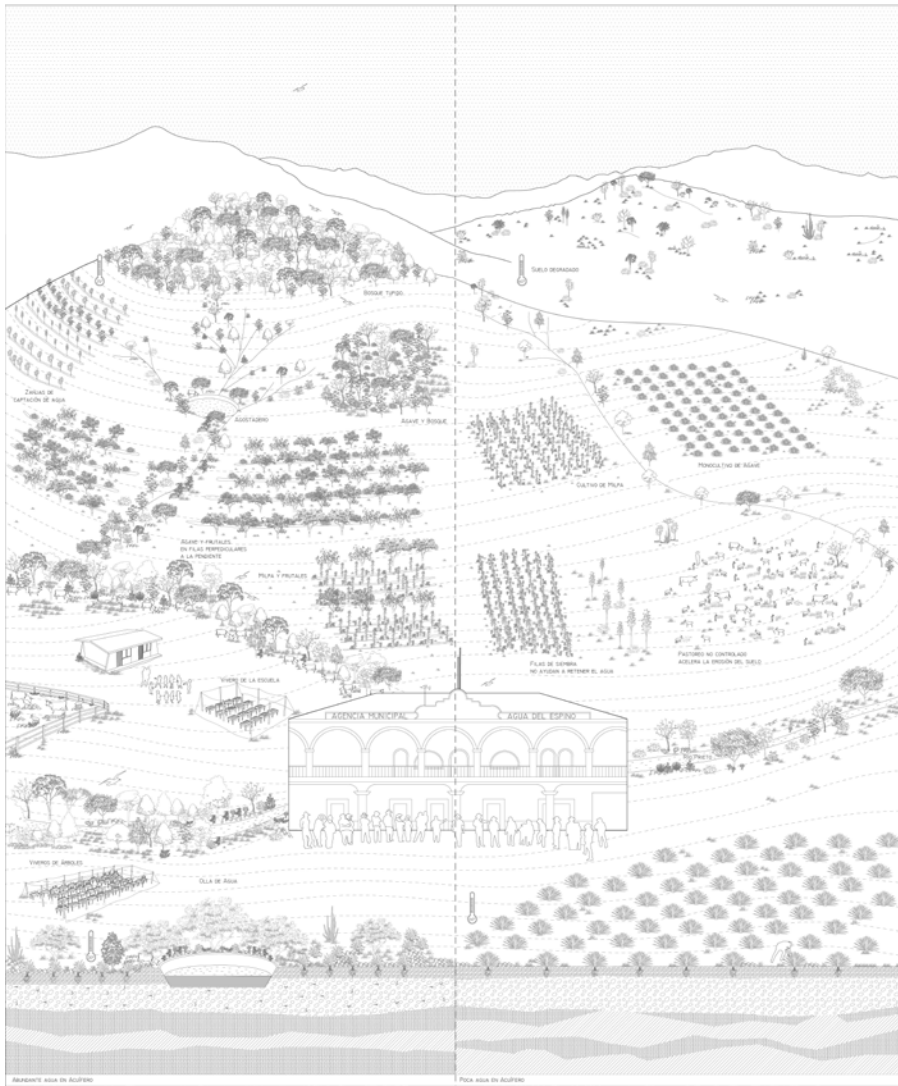
<sup>25</sup> Center for International Earth Science Information Network (CIESIN) Columbia University, Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean (ECLAC), and Centro Internacional de Agricultura Tropical (CIAT) 2005. "Poverty Mapping Project: Unsatisfied Basic Needs." Socioeconomic Data and Applications Center (SEDAC). <https://doi.org/10.7927/H45X26V8>.

<sup>26</sup> Ben-Alon, Lola and Alexandra R. Rempel. 2023. "Thermal comfort and passive survivability in earthen buildings." *Building and Environment* 238.





**Figure 8.** This diagram displays the intricate process of mezcal distillation. The process begins with an agave plant, which has grown to maturity over 8-12 years. The entire plant is then harvested and its leaves are shorn to reveal the core (the *piña*). This core is then placed in an earthen pit-oven and roasted for several days. The roasted cores are milled, crushed, and combined with water in large wooden barrels and left to ferment for eight days, with nothing but the natural yeast already in the air. This fermentation process leaves behind a fibrous byproduct called *bagazo*. The fermented liquid is distilled and becomes mezcal, but also produces an acidic liquid byproduct called *vinaza*. Finally, the mezcal is bottled, packaged, and sent to market or used in local celebrations (Paez-Lerma et al. 2022). Courtesy: Enlace Foundation.



**Figure 9.** The right side of this image shows the current state of the land. The hills are largely depleted of vegetation and vertical rows of monoculture agave plantings dapple the landscape. The soil has become lethally warm to the organisms that feed it, due to the systematic removal of wild-growing ground cover around cultivated crops. Livestock is left to pasture uncontrolled. The left side of the image is a depiction of the landscape following the proposed initiatives of reforestation, regenerative agriculture, and water catchment. The hilltop is brimming with vegetation and water basins collect and filter flowing rainwater. Agricultural patches are planted in mixed compositions in horizontal rows perpendicular to the predominant slope and livestock are carefully corralled. The healthy landscape is defined by its plentiful greenery and abundant water flowing in the Prieto River. Courtesy: Enlace Foundation.

## Conclusion

The Prieto River, once a lifeblood for Agua del Espino, has been reduced to a dry riverbed, leaving the community grappling with the harsh reality of water scarcity. The underground aquifers, once reliable sources of water, are now facing the ominous threat of permanent depletion due to over-extraction and a lack of replenishment. The skies, no longer generous in their rainfall, are hesitant to bless the town with much-needed precipitation. Clouds pass by without releasing a single drop of rain, leaving the land parched and the people longing for the nourishing touch of a refreshing downpour. Even the rainy season no longer guarantees a full crop cycle. Farmers continue their work relying on scant hope to feed the farms, livestock, and aquifers that sustain their community.

In the current state of the landscape, the journey of a water droplet departing from

the cloud cover is met with numerous challenges, leaving a meager chance for retention within the ecosystem. As the droplet lands on the rolling mountain range of Agua del Espino, it finds nonexistent plant cover to shield it from the relentless beating sun and the scorching earth below. The lack of vegetation exacerbates the speed at which the droplet barrels down the mountain, with little opportunity to nourish and replenish the remaining trees along its path.

As the droplet passes through vertical rows of agave, it picks up speed, sweeping away valuable nutrients from the topsoil. The absence of sufficient ground cover, exacerbated by agave monoculture, contributes to soil erosion, degrading the overall health and fertility of the land. Before the droplet is granted a chance to sink into the deep aquifers below the surface, the unforgiving heat of the land takes its toll. Evaporation occurs

rapidly and the droplet returns to the clouds without fulfilling its potential to contribute to groundwater replenishment. Even if the droplet is fortunate enough to find its way into one of the water catchment basins, its fate is quickly sealed as it becomes a source of sustenance for eager, thirsty livestock. The precious water is consumed by the animals, leaving the already parched landscape without a chance to benefit from the resource it so desperately needs.

The initiatives advanced by Enlace and ReThink, together with the Department of Landscape Architecture at the Harvard Graduate School of Design, the Instituto de la Naturaleza y Sociedad de Oaxaca and the community, are keen to change the fate of the hapless droplet that falls upon Agua del Espino. Through a comprehensive approach encompassing water catchment, reforestation, regenerative agriculture, sustainable

livestock management, adobe brick construction, and youth education, these initiatives seek to revive the community's cultural practices while greatly lengthening the lifespan of each precious drop.

Once these practices are fully in place, a droplet that falls on the landscape will embark on a purposeful journey designed to maximize its positive impact. Entering a water catchment basin, the droplet will be absorbed into the soil, generously nourishing surrounding native plants. As it flows down the mountain, the droplet will encounter a harmonious ecosystem, shaped by a combination of horizontal plantings of agave, fruit trees, and *milpa*. These strategic plantings will form a natural buffer that will slow down water flow, allowing the droplet to either feed vegetation or seep deeper into the ground until it replenishes the aquifers, restoring the community's vital groundwater resources.

The droplet's adventure will not end here. It will be carefully pulled to the surface by wells and utilized in the traditional art of mezcal distillation from the agave plant. The resulting *vinaza*, combined with *bagazo*, will be transformed into sustainable adobe bricks. These bricks will serve as building materials, constructing new homes for the growing families of Agua del Espino.

Within these growing families lies the future of Agua del Espino's enduring prosperity; the children are the guarantors of the community's future. INSO's dedicated education initiatives and conversations with elders have helped villagers realize the importance of their land knowledge and the pressing need to pass it on to their youth. The community has agreed to reintroduce into the school curricula regular nature walks, as a way for the children to connect with their ancestral homeland and cultural heritage.

Any number of trajectories can be drawn to survey the nearly 2,000 hectares of land by foot. As these paths become more regularly frequented, key elements in the landscape such as the markings that delineate the boundaries of communal land and the wider *ejido* can be recognized and surveyed on a regular basis. The intention is to cultivate a sense of ownership and responsibility among the young citizens for the land that has sustained their community for generations. By learning these boundaries, the children have a chance to appreciate the interconnectedness of their landscape and the need to protect and preserve it for future generations. Furthermore, as they walk through the lush valleys, ascend the rolling hills, encounter growing trees, polyculture agave fields, and the healthy soils of their home, the children tune into the importance of preservation and sustainable management.

Through these experiences, propitiated and overseen by the local schools and authorities, the children forge a profound bond with the land, water sources, and local flora and fauna. They learn about the seasonal rhythms, the natural cycles of water flow, and the importance of biodiversity. This intimate knowledge lays the foundation for their future roles as stewards of the land, to ensure its well-being and health for generations to come.

As the day concludes, the children, together with their community, celebrate the return of the Prieto River with a profound sense of pride and joy. Together, they listen to the generational flow of water as it sings in the background, alongside the echoing success of the mezcal *jícaras* (an ovoid fruit that is cut into two half spheres and dried becoming a small cup) that acknowledge their collective efforts.

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# To Exist in Another Way. *Acahual*, Ecological Narratives and *Nepantlera* Species

Mauricio Patrón Rivera  
& Ana Emilia Felker Centeno

## Abstract

In November 2021, we started Topote de Acahual, an ongoing educational program in the Los Tuxtlas Biosphere Reserve, the northernmost rainforest of the Americas. Artists, *ejidatarixs* (owners of *ejidos*, a Mexican form of collective land ownership), farmers, forestry technicians, nursery growers, and biologists got together to imagine the reforested jungle in an area that was affected by the preeminence of livestock farming. In this article, we collect part of the learnings from fifteen days of workshops, where we tuned in with the forest in the following ways: we filled dozens of bags with soil in the Vivero de Tebanca to imagine a hydrocommon horizon from the *tequio* (collective work); we emulated the music of plants; we wrote their autobiographies; we designed a signage system to know their location in the community; we created educational materials, such as fanzines and posters that encourage reforestation.

Based on these and other activities, in this article we conceptualize the *acahual*, the ecological narratives,



and the *nepantlera* species as three aesthetic practices that allow us to influence jungle reforestation and conservation of its bodies of water. The *acahual* is an uncultivated land, a border between meadow and forest; in its apparent non-productivism we find its ecological power as a base unit for jungle regeneration. We use ecological narratives as a dialogic method, as an approach and cooperation with more-than-human agencies. Under the critique of the Anthropocene, we approach the forest from the paths without imposing our presence or language, but through listening, music, working with the soil in the Vivero, the camouflage of the *nahual*<sup>1</sup> that allows us to exist in other ways. By making use of these alternative languages, the audiovisual nursery growers act as *nepantlera* species, turning the *acahual* into a new jungle.

<sup>1</sup> A *nahual* is the dual or animal spirit of a person according to Mesoamerican cosmogonies. In popular belief, shamans who can communicate with their *nahual* acquire some of its characteristics.

## Introduction. Vivero de Tebanca against the Meadows

This article addresses the narrative, artistic, and pedagogical practices developed in the Protected Natural Area (ANP for its acronym in Spanish) of Los Tuxtlas, Veracruz, Mexico. Specifically, the concepts of “*acahual*,” “ecological narratives,” and “*nepantlera* species” are explored as part of a methodological-ecological framework to imagine a hydrocommons life. These concepts emerged from the Topote de Acahual educational program<sup>2</sup> carried out at Vivero de Tebanca, a nursery focused on jungle reforestation and

the recovery of its springs, in response to the ecological disaster brought about by the meadows (induced grassland or invasive grass).



Location map of the Tebanca *ejido* on the shores of Catemaco Lagoon and part of the Los Tuxtlas Biosphere Reserve.

Located on the shore of the Catemaco Lagoon (18.397799, -95.012581), Vivero de Tebanca is a spring recovery and productive reconversion

<sup>2</sup> The Topote de Acahual is an educational program that began thanks to the support of Fundación Jumex, A.C. and Vivero de Tebanca A.C. We want to thank you for your complicity with the Tuxtlas reserve, its waters and its inhabitants; with Vivero de Tebanca’s team, which is: Antonio Azuela, David Antonio, Esteban Azuela, Esteban Oltehua, Isidro Belli, Ismael Parada and Maximina Juárez; with the management team of Topote de Acahual (which we are part of) and its team: Aldo Lugo, Dan Sánchez D. Vil, Emilia López, Esteban Azuela, Fernanda Barreto, Kweilan Yap, Melissa Bolaños; and with the Audiovisual Nursery Growers, who are: Amelia Lucho, Angélica Vargas Salazar, Aureliano Gómez Juan, Brissa Guadalupe Domínguez, David Antonio, Edith Carrera Sánchez, Elías Márquez, Esteban Oltehua, Isidro Belli, Ismael Parada, Jenny Cárdenas, Jocelyn Azeneth, Jorge Luis Sáenz, Lidia Cervantes Calixto, María Espíndola, and Maximina Juárez.

project that started in 1998. For the past 25 years, *ejidatarixs*, peasants, nursery growers, forestry technical engineers, artists, teachers, and self-taught workers have gathered there to learn how to take care of the jungle. Los Tuxtlas reserve is a complex ecosystem: more than three thousand species of fauna and more than three thousand species of flora grouped in mesophilic mountain forests, coniferous forests, oak forests, evergreen forests, hydrophilic vegetation, and mangroves. It takes various bodies of water—lakes, streams, springs, waterfalls, ponds, and rivers—to sustain this multitude. The forest is water.

Deforestation has accelerated in the last 40 years. According to the Sierra de Santa Marta Project report, published in 2011,<sup>3</sup> the forest area of the Los Tuxtlas

Biosphere Reserve lost 30,074 hectares between 1980 and 2011, which corresponds to 19.41% of its total area. It is important to consider that, in 1995, just one year after the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA), the induced grasslands area grew bigger than the forest area.

The report details (44):

«in the Los Tuxtlas Biosphere Reserve, the landscape transformed by human activities from the NON-Forest categories stands out. The set of these categories occupies 53% of the ANP territory and it is noticeable that the dominant land use in the reserve involves induced grasslands, whose coverage represents 51% of the reserve with 78,970 hectares.»

As a consequence, during 2022, the municipality of Catemaco

<sup>3</sup> Proyecto Sierra de Santa Marta, A. C. 2011. "Actualización de la tasa de cambio del uso de suelo en la reserva de la biosfera de los Tuxtlas" (National Commission of Protected Natural Areas, October 2011), 50. Accessed March 7, 2024. [https://simec.conanp.gob.mx/pdf\\_evaluacion/tuxtlas.pdf](https://simec.conanp.gob.mx/pdf_evaluacion/tuxtlas.pdf).

recorded 3% less rain than its historical average (Sánchez Lemus and Pradilla 2023).<sup>4</sup> Statistics on economic and territorial use and census of species are useful in diagnosing the problem; however, we wonder if reversing these statistics is the only way to achieve jungle regeneration and recover its streams and springs. How to build an ecological narrative that translates the phenomenological experience of this data? What is the appropriate language—whether scientific, artistic or from resistance—to imagine a future for the jungle?

Although deforestation is a trend, the Topote de Acahual educational program seeks to interrupt that logic and open a creative space to face these

questions. Beyond the State and its conceptualization of the forest as a natural resource, Topote de Acahual opens up what Raquel Gutiérrez (2017)<sup>5</sup> calls an “interior horizon,” to update and take care of the common as a space for inclusive politics that relies entirely on water: the hydrocommons.

### The Power of Acahual

With participation from the community, Vivero de Tebanca has managed to recover 216 springs to return water to the northernmost rainforest of the Americas. This has been achieved thanks to the reconversion of induced grasslands towards the new forest or *acahual*. *Acahual* is secondary or disturbed vegetation, which arises spontaneously in forest lands.

<sup>4</sup> Sánchez Lemus, Saúl y Alberto Pradilla. 2023. “Las alarmas de la emergencia climática en México están encendidas”. N+. Acceso el 20 de noviembre de 2023. [https://investigaciones.nmas.com.mx/desplazamiento-climatico-la-migracion-que-no-vemos/?param\\_1\\_nombre\\_estado=Veracruz&param\\_2=catemaco#interactivo-lluvias](https://investigaciones.nmas.com.mx/desplazamiento-climatico-la-migracion-que-no-vemos/?param_1_nombre_estado=Veracruz&param_2=catemaco#interactivo-lluvias).

<sup>5</sup> Gutiérrez Aguilar, Raquel. 2017. *Horizontes comunitario-populares. Producción de lo común más allá de las políticas estado-céntricas*. Madrid: Traficantes de sueños, 27.



Program invitation poster, placed on a road in the Tebanca *ejido* with the Catemaco Lagoon in the background.

They are resting spaces for the land, which become borders between grasslands and the jungle.

The word *acahual* has Nahuatl roots. According to the *Gran Diccionario Náhuatl*,<sup>6</sup> it is an “abandoned *milpa* (vacant land that was an active *milpa* growing system about five years before,

and now has grown trees),” or also: “*acahual*, a planted *milpa* area, ungrown, and with weeds.” Whereas the *Diccionario de la Real Academia de la Lengua Española*<sup>7</sup> defines it as “a sunflower species, very common in Mexico,” or a “tall grass with a thick stem that usually covers fallow fields.” The ungrown lands are filled with *acahuales*

<sup>6</sup> Compendio Enciclopédico Náhuatl. 2012. *Gran Diccionario Náhuatl*. UNAM, INAH, SUP-INFOR. Accessed March 7, 2024. <https://gdn.iib.unam.mx/diccionario/acahual>. <https://gdn.iib.unam.mx/diccionario/acahual>.

<sup>7</sup> Real Academia Española. 2023. *Diccionario de la lengua española* edición 23.6. RAE. Accessed March 7, 2024. <https://dle.rae.es/acahual>.

until they become an *acahual* themselves. Seen from Western agricultural logics, as a patch of uncultivated land, an *acahual* could mean a waste of territory and time, but for native peoples and their agroecosystems, it is a chronotope of rest and maintenance.

In Los Tuxtlas, where the forest has been so devastated that more than 50% is now for productive uses, the *acahual* can be a frontier for narrative and ecological resignification. The *acahual* is Vivero de Tebanca's



The Vivero de Tebanca nursery as a learning space.

action field: they work in a property around one thousand square meters, which annually maintains an average inventory of thirty-five thousand plants from more than eighty species—all of them native to the area, including some considered in NOM-059<sup>8</sup> under a risk category.

Nursery growers with experience in forest management walk through the jungle to collect the seeds and seedlings of these species. These are cared for and preserved at the Vivero and then planted in the *acahuales*, making deals with *ejidatarixs* interested in reducing meadows in favor of reforestation. The Vivero provides the plants and they provide the land.

### Multispecies Relationships

Nursery growers monitor the trees they have planted themselves. For example, a year ago, Isidro

<sup>8</sup> Secretaría de Medio Ambiente y Recursos Naturales. 2010. "Norma Oficial Mexicana NOM-059-SEMARNAT-2010." SEMARNAT. Accessed March 7, 2024. <https://www.gob.mx/profepa/documentos/norma-oficial-mexicana-nom-059-semarnat-2010>.

Belli visited a ceiba tree that he planted. It was loaded with seeds from which much more ceibas will grow. They call them "parent trees." This reconversion work is an exercise in ecological imagination; also of reconnection with the *acahual* as a space for dialogue with the forest, for maintenance and reproduction in opposition to productivism. The *acahual* allows us to slow down the transactional conception of the forest as a natural resource; it pauses the induction of grassland for livestock, and, through its activation, it allows its caretakers to become part of the jungle.

Vivero's work goes against the *doxa* or neoliberal common sense (Acanda González 2021)<sup>9</sup> that operates through livestock farmers, agroindustries, or even government reforestation

programs such as *Sembrando vida*, which promotes "agroforestry systems of timber and fruit trees."<sup>10</sup> In the face of this logic that prioritizes profit with little intervention from the State, it is critical to create pedagogical and aesthetic frameworks to protect the jungle.

At different times, the work of Vivero de Tebanca has involved educational initiatives. Nursery growers go to elementary and middle schools; they receive visits from children, but also young students and researchers. They have relationships with organizations such as La Otra Opción Ecological Reserve,<sup>11</sup> located near the Sierra de Santa Marta central area; Los Tuxtlas Tropical Biology Station of UNAM's Institute of Biology; the Universidad Veracruzana;

<sup>9</sup> Acanda González, Jorge Luis. 2021. "El neoliberalismo como ideología y sentido común". *Textos y Contextos* 23. Universidad Central del Ecuador, 28. Accessed November 20, 2023. <http://portal.amelica.org/ameli/journal/588/5882574001/5882574001.pdf>.

<sup>10</sup> Programa *Sembrando Vida*. Accessed July 28, 2023. <https://www.gob.mx/bienestar/acciones-y-programas/programa-sembrando-vida>.

<sup>11</sup> *Reserva Ecológica La Otra Opción*. Accessed July 28, 2023. <https://laotraopcion.mx/>.

the Institute of Ecology of Xalapa; the Higher Technological Institute of Zongolica, and they also work with hundreds of *ejidatarixs* from five agricultural centers in Los Tuxtlas.

### Audiovisual Nursery Growers

Joining community knowledge and the needs of the Vivero, in 2020, we initiated the Topote de Acahual educational program. The goal was to train audiovisual nursery growers who could develop visual materials to strengthen the Vivero's 25 years of work recovering springs. As David Antonio (forestry technician and nursery grower) says, to recover the jungle and its water means "to exist in another way"<sup>12</sup>: to stop the capitalist fast pace of capital in order to coexist with other species.

The first edition of the program consisted of a series of meetings to discuss and create teaching materials around what we call



"Otros modos de existencia" [Other ways of existence]. Poster made with frottage technique.

ecological narratives. By this, we mean creative ways of expressing the relationship between the jungle and its human and non-human inhabitants, within the Capitalocene—understood as the current geological period in which the planet has been altered by means of production, consumption, and waste. The starting point was to consider that these capitalocenic practices are not essential to all humanity, that it is possible to create alternative practices that reinterpret land and water as protagonists and, based on this recognition, to dedicate time to listen and build community around them.

<sup>12</sup> David Antonio Zúñiga, communication during the Topote de Acahual program, November 25th, 2021.



We seek to explore a territorial relationship close to Colectivo Altepeee's proposal (2018),<sup>13</sup> when they say:

«For us, the territory is the space where life is established, where the water flows, the wind blows, the trees grow, houses are built, the town is organized, and time unfolds. The territory as we know it today has not been shaped by us alone. At the beginning of time, it was the climate and the major changes in the universe; then came life and the first beings that shaped it over millions of years. Lately, our grandparents, with their work and ways of life, have taken it towards various paths. Some have learned to collaborate with the mountains and rivers, to care for and respect each other, to treat each other as equals. Some others don't understand this connection with nature.»

Therefore, we launched this educational program to talk with the jungle, understanding it as an infracellular communication system, as a biome, and as a biosphere—as a leading epistemic force of its own regeneration. The sensitive forms of this communication go beyond words, leaning towards resonance. It implies trying to replicate their sounds, observing their shapes and textures, working their land through the *tequio*. We turn to pedagogy and art to provoke situated dynamic frictions, such as those we will show below, to collectively ask ourselves about what type of coexistence the jungle can establish with its inhabitants,

<sup>13</sup> Colectivo Altepeee. 2018. *Palabra y territorio*. Self-publication by Colectivo Altepeee, Mexico, 10. <https://es.scribd.com/document/600438186/La-Palabra-y-el-Territorio-ColectivoAltepeee>.

and what are the ethical and political provisions for a visual ecology of Los Tuxtlas.

Our first meeting, in 2021, focused on training seventeen people from the region as audiovisual nursery growers—those who know how to cultivate the ecological narratives that interweave the jungle with their community. The idea was that they also could act as cultural managers within other initiatives, based on critical thinking about the jungle.<sup>14</sup> In one of the workshops to make posters, which were later installed around the community, the following phrase arose: “I came to learn, but I ended up teaching.” This synthesizes the program's spirit, a never-ending exchange of knowledge. The program included workshops on reforestation, reconversion, creative writing, self-publishing, embroidery, music, forest iconography, and

lettering. We also did walks through the reforested plot/museum and through the Benito Juárez *ejido* jungle, as well as community work at the Vivero, filling hundreds of bags with soil and then planting pepper seedlings in them.

While we filled the bags, we started an open microphone session where we talked about *chaneque* legends and the history of the ancient Olmec inhabitants; we also read poems, listened to music and danced. In this encounter, the design of the



View of the creative writing and embroidery workshops.

<sup>14</sup> Topote de Acahual has continued in the form of artistic residencies. Fernando Montiel Klint and Nuria Montiel have exchanged knowledge with the Tebanca nursery growers. In addition, Jenny Cárdenas Pérez, one of the audiovisual nursery growers, has developed workshops for children. These projects are still ongoing.

didactic sequences was based on collaboration between peers, breaking established hierarchies—humans/nature, teacher/student, artist/farmer, budget makers/beneficiaries—and creating visual imaginaries through work, as opposed to a reflection process without praxis. We sought to escape Cartesian epistemology, which presumes to get to know objects completely, and instead, we tried to resonate with the

environment without attempting to trap it in definitions (Morton 2018).<sup>15</sup> We practiced sensory exercises such as blindfold walking through the fields, holding our shoulders making a line, in order to learn to listen, not only to the nursery growers but to the jungle itself. From such exercises, we developed an aesthetic dialogue with the jungle. The following species guided our path: *ojochil* (*Brosimum alicastrum*),



Listening to the jungle.

<sup>15</sup> Morton, Timothy. 2018. *Being Ecological*. London: Penguin, 91.

*chagalapoli (Parathesis lenticellata), ceiba (Ceiba pentandra), palma chamaedorea (Collinia elegans var. angustifolia), cedro rojo (Cedrela odorata), flor de corazón (Talauma mexicana), pimienta (Pimenta dioica), cocuite (Gliricidia sepium), amate blanco (Sapium nitidum), and suchil (Cordia megalantha).*

At the beginning, when we released the open call and were touring the towns and villages, we asked the candidates which plant they wanted to work with and if they had any special memory associated with that plant. We obtained some revealing answers, such as Angélica Vargas Salazar's<sup>16</sup>:

«I want to work with the *ojoche* because I like its fruit. When I chose it, I remembered when I was a child, especially because at my grandmother's house there is a ravine where a small stream runs through avocado trees and bean pods, and there is an *ojoche* tree. So it was impossible not to remember how when we visited my grandparents, they let us go to the ravine to play; there was nothing better than going there, it was magical because, to go down, we had to pass through the highly valued *hojas de piedra*, which my grandmother used in her kitchen to make sweet or *masa cocida* tamales. There was a small bridge, a piece of old wood, about 50 cm wide, to avoid stepping into the stream, but for our little feet it was not so easy to avoid. I still remember that, precisely in that section of the stream, there were *topotes*, I don't know how they

<sup>16</sup> Angélica Vargas Salazar, communication during the Topote de Acahual program, November 25th, 2021.

got there, but they were there and we wanted to catch them to eat them, but we never did because it was forbidden. As we walked along the stream that was like my grandmother's backyard, we reached the widest part of that stream and, standing as a little island, there was the *ojoche*, a large tree that filled that part of the land with leaves, where we could play; sometimes we would find some of its fruits lying around and sometimes my grandfather, who collected all the seasonal fruits, had a small portion saved for us to share. Now that I'm writing and remembering it, the *ojoche* followed me during all my elementary education, when I was always there playing with my sisters and cousins.»

The *ojoche* reminded Angélica of *hojas de piedra*, avocados, bean pods, the ravine, the stream, and the *topotes* (threadfin shad - *Dorosoma petenense*), a fish endemic to Los Tuxtlas. The uniqueness of a species is immediately connected to its environment. So we decided that each nursery grower would work with a different species, with their leaves, their seeds, their sounds, flavors, even if they were not on the list of plants. As facilitators, we tried to pay attention to this epistemic symbiosis. In some ways, the pedagogical design of the program allowed cross-contamination of the life experiences of each audiovisual nursery grower. As the days went by, from getting to know each other and sharing the experience with the plants, a common vocabulary emerged, Los Tuxtlas' language, which allowed us to be a joint *acahual*, a fallow land with jungle vocation.



### Translating the jungle.

We settled as a group of more than 30 people, joining the countless living beings growing at that moment in the Vivero, and the elements such as soil, wind and water, also microscopically inhabited. On the walk to the Benito Juárez Ecological Reserve, one of the guides of Colectivo Anolis,<sup>17</sup> who was from this community, told us about the pioneer species. We continued in line along the path, passing back the information, beyond the noise curtain of the waterfall.

In a small clearing, when we could stop to rest, Fernanda Barreto<sup>18</sup> proposed an exercise on graphic translation of reality: drawing abstractions of the different elements of the reserve and their social and physiological relationships. An hour later, already at the Vivero, we continued the exercise, but now to create a critical cartography of the flora species that grow there. We displayed our doodles to turn them into signage.

We ventured classifications to know the properties of each species without having to use Spanish. We created symbols according to their uses: edible, medicinal, timber; according to their location, such as the *riparias* that only grow on the river banks; those that are dangerous to touch, the aphrodisiac ones, the sacred

<sup>17</sup> Colectivo Anolis. Accessed July 28th, 2023. <https://www.facebook.com/profile.php?id=100060317454120>.

<sup>18</sup> Fernanda Barreto (São Paulo, Brazil, 1988). Artist, translator, cultural manager interested in educational and pedagogical practices. Master in Visual Arts from UNAM, with an emphasis on art and environment. *Oigo la tormenta* is the research she has developed over the last three years about the phenomenon of the north wind in Veracruz.

ones; depending on the way the community relates to them. With some classifications such as “dangerous,” the semiotic language was reinforced, with others such as “affective,” we leaned towards a poetic function. Once satisfied with the symbols and their meaning, we translated the messages of each plant. The ceiba tree, for example, has three symbols that combine to generate a single one: it is sacred, it is central in symbiotic relationships, and it is a pioneer.

Thus, the Topote de Acahual practices were established in the poetic function of language, suspicious of the standardized ways, especially scientific and governmental, of naming the issues of Los Tuxtlas, its water, and its people.

### Ecological Narratives

When touring the state of Veracruz, it feels like observing a paradise of green meadows.

When digging a little deeper, it is clear that these miles and miles of pasture are actually a result of deforestation. This type of land use results in the degradation of groundwater reserves. Lack of water in the rainforest is an ecological disaster. This year, in Catemaco, the temperature was 0.94°C higher than the historical average (Sánchez Lemus 2023). Nursery growers know that water shortages will become more frequent.

“Disaster is its own imminence,” says Maurice Blanchot (1995).<sup>19</sup> In his aphoristic work, the philosopher draws the constant threat of fragmentation, the star that explodes into pieces. We are always on the verge of disaster, with the feeling that it already happened but without being able to place it in time. A similar uncertainty appears when trying to grasp the environmental crisis, mainly the deforestation that leads to deteriorating bodies of water. It is an ongoing

<sup>19</sup> Blanchot, Maurice. 1995. *The Writing of the Disaster*. Nebraska: University of Nebraska Press, 21.

CATEGORIAS PLANTAS VIVERO DE TEBANCA

	COMESTIBLE
	SAGRADA
	MEDICINAL
	ENDEMICA
	PROTEGIDA
	PIONERAS
	ACTIVIDAD ECONÓMICA
	AFECTICA
	NATIVA
	RELACIONES SIMBIÓTICAS
	EXÓTICAS
	MADERABLE
	AFRODISIACAS
	PELIGROSAS
	RIPARIAS
	PSICOACTIVO

Signage created to access the uses and relationships of each plant.



apocalypse that we have been surviving for decades, one that has been annihilating us with its slow heat wave. We feel its presence, but it is impossible for us to name it, to tune in to communicate its seriousness, to take action on the matter.

The environmental crisis is mostly a meaning crisis, because we cannot imagine a less harmful way of existing, or the ways to save ourselves from our own toxicity. The problem overwhelms us, the amounts of alarmist information on the subject saturate us until we become apathetic. At Vivero de Tebanca, they have faced this dilemma for years: how to communicate the problem to both politicians and residents, so that they go on to deliberate about this issue in their assemblies and join the reconversion tasks—how to find sustainability beyond livestock. Part of our work as Topote de



### Writing autobiographies of the plants of Los Tuxtlas.

Achual has been to help Vivero de Tebanca produce teaching materials, renew discourses to communicate the crisis, and create ecological narratives.

After a long morning writing plant biographies in the first person, which were included in the fanzines we made, it was time to shake up written language to approach other sensitive forms of communication, in which humans are not above nature but rather acknowledging our absolute dependence. We stood in a circle and Melissa Bolaños,<sup>20</sup> who facilitated this

<sup>20</sup> Melissa Bolaños is an artist and musical composer, pianist and diatonic accordionist. As a member of Bruma Laboratorio de Artes Contemporáneas, she facilitated the conversation “Sinfonía de un ecosistema” on November 17th, 2021. She studied Music at

activity, suggested that we try to translate the sound of some of the plants in the Vivero. Then Melissa spread a blanket on the floor and placed all kinds of utensils on it, from a frying pan and other household items to a jar with seeds. After playing with the objects, each one found the sound of the chosen plant; one by one, we presented them, moving from noise to a symphonic garden. In particular, Don Esteban, a worker from the Vivero, who until now had less prominence in the activities, came to a sound that truly evoked the *suchil*.

The *suchil*, also known as yellow bay leaf, is a tree with a thick body and almost without forks, thirty to fifty meters high. It grows in rainforests and is ideal for the recovery of degraded soils and the protection of groundwater reserves. As if agitated by the wind before the rain, Don Esteban shook from

his feet up to his raised hands, uttering a chant that ended in “shhhh.” He knew the *suchil* for years, he had planted it and seen it grow; with sound and body language, he showed us man and plant in harmony.

Attunement is a key concept to begin addressing ecological narratives, not from reason but from senses, in this case, hearing. To explain what ecological thinking involves, Timothy Morton (2018, 89) proposes from object-oriented epistemology that it is impossible to completely know things, beings, and natural phenomena; the most we can do is tune in with them. In this approach, humans are not at the center but rather drawing on carefully towards them, without imposing presence or language, without establishing hierarchies but rather interconnections.

If we speak in our language with plants, with water, with other

Universidad Veracruzana, where she currently studies agroecology. She has a permacultural project in Rancho Viejo Tlalnelhuayocan. Her work converges between nature, arts, and the body.



Tuning in with the jungle, one leaf at a time.

living and non-living elements, they will not answer. There is a silence that makes them unreachable in their entirety, but we will get some information from them if we know how to tune in, and this requires taking some time. Today, we receive ecological information in a form that Morton (2018, XXV) calls a landfill/garbage dump: overwhelming amounts of data on global warming, for example. However, most of the population is unable to experience these data as real. Informing ourselves in an alarmist way does not make

us environmentalists; on the contrary, it blocks us from being in tune with the ecosystem.

One way to confront this issue from ecological narratives involves understanding the anesthesia that surrounds us, from a phenomenological perspective. To think of ways of accessing information that can overcome the anticipatory fear of disaster that generates evasion. It is not enough to know how much water is lost per year, it is necessary to touch the *suchil*, to try to know its sound when the

wind touches it. Morton (2018, XXXVI) says that, sometimes, it is more scientific to tell one's own experience than quoting data; in this way, ecological writing is deeply self-reflective, it requires a storytelling of our own experience from the subjectivity of the gaze.

These human efforts to tune in with the jungle and reforest it, as well as recovering the springs, have an inner horizon as their point of departure. That is, “a set of aspirations and desires, not always logically coherent among themselves, that encourage the deployment of a collective struggle, and which are expressed at a particular moment in history” (Gutiérrez Aguilar 2017).<sup>21</sup> In this interior horizon, the exercise of hydrocommons goes hand in hand with work, with the *tequio*, with the invention of ways of naming natural processes outside the



Walkabout and frottage in the reforested plot of Vivero de Tebanca.

productivist language. Through the different dynamics, we came to understand that ecology is not an accumulation of alarming data but a dialogic method without conclusions, a form of approximation and cooperation.

### *Nepantlera* Species

Pioneer species have the quality of growing and maturing faster than others in degraded soils. They attract water, fix nitrogen, and create shade: a microclimate that allows less resistant species to grow. Pioneer species develop

<sup>21</sup> Gutiérrez Aguilar, Raquel. 2017. *Horizontes comunitario-populares. Producción de lo común más allá de las políticas estado-céntricas*. Traficantes de sueños, 27.

a posthuman ecosis that Miguel León-Portilla (1976)<sup>22</sup> defines as “the process of making or organizing the house [...] the set of transformations that, in its own benefit, a community undertakes [...] to develop its existence.”

Avoiding militaristic terms, instead of pioneers, we propose to use *nepantlera* species, those that know how to inhabit a degraded soil—between the induced grassland and the resisting forest—fertilizing it with their patience (and apparent unproductivity) for the species to come. The jungle and its water make ecosis in the *acahual*. Being in the *acahual* implies being the *acahual*. It means entering a mode of collective and metasocial harmony. In pre-Hispanic Mesoamerican cultures—and later enhanced by Chicano philosophy—being

the *acahual* implies the practice of *nepantlism*. “*Nepantla* is understood as an in-between space in which Mesoamerican peoples have faced transculturation for centuries and from where they have endured suffering for the purpose of survival” (Hoechtl, Lozano and Gutiérrez 2020).<sup>23</sup>

As León-Portilla (1976, 19) has pointed out by studying primary sources, *nepantlism* was originally understood as dangerous: “‘being left in the middle,’ one of the greatest dangers of contacts regulated by forced pretensions,” since the Nahuatl term designates those who grew up in a massacred culture and can’t adapt to Western norms, violently imposed by colonization. “Let us die now, let us perish now, since our gods have already died...” (León-Portilla 1976 19), said the

<sup>22</sup> León-Portilla, Miguel. 1976. *Culturas en Peligro*. Ciudad de México: Alianza Editorial Mexicana, 21.

<sup>23</sup> Hoechtl, Nina, Rian Lozano and María del Socorro Gutiérrez-Magallanes. 2020. “Teaching Gloria Anzaldúa’s Theories in Practices in Mexico in words and images.” *Teaching Gloria E. Anzaldúa, Pedagogy and Practice for Our Classrooms and Communities*. The University of Arizona Press, 205.

“Indigenous wise men” quoted by Fray Bernardino de Sahagún.

Chicana feminists, especially Gloria Anzaldúa, have claimed this place of wound as a place of action. From practice, as Hoechtl, Lozano and Gutiérrez (2020 205) point out, “In our pedagogical processes, we have learned that we have been or have become *nepantleras* ourselves, those who inhabit an in-between space.” We come from disaster, but we refuse to die, and from there, we must imagine an ecological future.

### Toward an Ecological Pedagogy

Moving toward an ecological pedagogy implies, like an embroidery movement, coming and going: from *where we come from* to *where we are going*, from the meadows to the forest, crossing the *acahual*. Teaching processes in which we reveal ourselves vulnerable show the wounds of race, class, gender,

and anthropocentrism that divide us like ravines. Living in the *acahual* is, to a large extent, talking about that wound.

bell hooks (2021)<sup>24</sup> reminds us that, “liberatory pedagogy really demands that one work in the classroom, and that one work with the limits of the body, work both with and through and against those limits: teachers may insist that it doesn’t matter whether you stand behind the podium or the desk, but it does.” The *nepantler* body moves in the choreography of teaching. Moving the body to deintellectualize it, bring it closer to working with the land, hydrocommunicate it.

Veracruz is one of the states with the greatest livestock activity in Mexico, which is why convincing residents to convert meadows into forests is a challenge that workers at Vivero de Tebanca have faced for years. In Los Tuxtlas, this

<sup>24</sup> hooks, bell. 2021. *Enseñar a transgredir*. Madrid: Capitan Swing, 187.

type of economic activity and land use has proven to have environmental consequences such as damage to groundwater reserves, increased temperatures, decreasing rain levels, and water scarcity in an area that is known for its humid weather, rain, and bodies of water.

Creating ecological narratives that confront the disaster allows us to understand the situation without alarmism, but rather to develop tools to transform it. One way has been to encourage livestock farmers to create living fences, to plant trees to establish plot limits, and to make that a starting point to gradually gain ground from livestock. But these types of achievements have required a culture change from years of public policies that encouraged deforestation.

In this context, the developing the Topote de Acahual workshops represented a change in the imagination of a more sustainable future. But it wasn't only about proposing another

understanding of the *acahual* and its potential fertility, or planting a visuality that allows Tebanca residents to feel closely linked and part of the *acahual*, to participate in the recovery of the jungle and its bodies of water. It was also relevant in the sense of promoting forms of organization beyond government programs and assembly decisions in the *ejidos*. By listening to the jungle, we found a pedagogical and community collaboration model in the *acahual*.

The educational program unfolded in a context of job and economic precariousness. For this reason, a large percentage of the budget (20%) went directly to the audiovisual nursery growers, to let them know that time spent creating new non-productivist ecological narratives is as important as any other work. In addition, they were encouraged to shake off their students' role with other actions such as participating in the work of the Vivero, in the production of the program, doing

teamwork for transportation, installing chairs and tables, washing dishes, serving food, etc. At the assembly, we had a session to explain how we obtained resources for the project and prepared an exchange to grant them certificates as audiovisual nursery growers—which strategically serves them to improve their resumes—without reinforcing hierarchies. At the beginning of the program we made an exercise: each person would observe their “secret friend” to, based on their tastes, design and make them an embroidered piece that they would give them at the end, along with their diploma, thus creating a network of recognition and affection. Finally, to extend the educational program towards reforestation, fifty plant species were given to the audiovisual nursery growers that owned plots. In addition, the Vivero's forestry technicians will follow up on them so they can begin their own *acahual* process.

For the Vivero, there was a new set of materials that explained their work, their vision, and characteristics of some of the plants they grow: a series of 14 fanzines and 12 posters that we placed in visible places in the populated center of the Tebanca *ejido*; a signage system for the Vivero plants, which makes it easier for nursery growers to take the routes; a recipe book with edible plants from Los Tuxtlas; an audio diary with didactic sequences from the program, and the necessary infrastructure to activate the Vivero as a social center.



Putting up posters in the Tebanca community with phrases that summarize the collective learning of the program.



## Plant Face

In short, our work seeks to displace human centrality in favor of water and its jungle, embracing the point of view of *nepantlera* species. We understand the educational program as a tuning process, in which audiovisual nursery growers acquire tools from artistic practices to work on the collective imagination and, thus, become the first line of shadow for the *acahuales* of their community. As bell hooks (2021) says, to work on the body limits, both of the collective and the human body. The chairs and work tables were scattered throughout the Vivero, between the seedlings, the seedbeds, and the compost bin that was now our classroom.<sup>25</sup> No one was sitting anymore; there was continuous light rain for several hours and the

audiovisual nursery growers were moving around the space waiting to hear the call of a leaf or plant.

From artistic practices, one way to honor these *nepantlera* species is through the metamorphic exercise of the *nahuales*. That is why the participants of the educational program were invited, as Melissa Bolaños says, to think like air, like water, like leaves, like fish: “How do ferns listen to wind? For the fish, is water a noise, music, or sound?”<sup>26</sup>



A portrait of the jungle and its people.

<sup>25</sup> This refers to bell hooks' description of a non-hierarchical classroom: “I still remember what I felt when I entered the first class in which we changed the way we sat: we went from being in rows to sitting in a circle where we could see each other's faces. That change forced us to recognize the presence of the other. We could no longer sleepwalk towards knowledge.” hooks, 196.

<sup>26</sup> Trigger questions in the “Symphony of an ecosystem” workshop facilitated by Melissa Bolaños.

The audiovisual nursery growers put their faces behind the leaves, as if they were masks; their hands on the bark, their eyes behind the eyes of the Topote who wonders what water is. At the call of Dan Sánchez D. Vil, the photographer who documented the workshops, all of us plant-faced bodies placed ourselves for a family portrait. A banana leaf, a breadfruit leaf, a *chamaedorea* palm, a *goeppertia*... The dogs in residence, Roque Dalton and Hiena, understood that something was happening, and they also wanted to participate, so we put their leaves as hats. The official photo of the *acahual* nursery and its *nepantlera nahual* species was taken and we were fully embodied.

**Mauricio Patrón Rivera** (Mexico City, 1984) Researcher, writer, and communicator. He holds a PhD in Hispanic Studies from the University of Houston. He completed the Independent Studies Program of the Barcelona Museum of Contemporary Art (MACBA), specializing in critical theory and museum studies. Mauricio has worked around water and its defense since his bachelor's thesis *Entrevistas sobre el uso estratégico del agua y la biodiversidad en México*. He has written texts for projects such as the exhibition *Waters, Rivers and People*. He also works in strategic communication for movements in defense of water and territories.

**Ana Emilia Felker** (Mexico City, 1986) Researcher and curator. She holds a PhD in Hispanic Studies from the University of Houston. She completed the Independent Studies Program of the Barcelona Museum of Contemporary Art (MACBA), specializing in critical theory and museum studies. She is currently completing the post doctoral program in Political Studies at UNAM. Ana Emilia is the author of the book *Aunque la casa se derrumbe* (UNAM, 2017). She won the 2015

National Journalism Award with a chronicle about the EZLN. In 2015, she co-curated an exhibition about Mexico City's drainage system at the Centro Cultural Border. In her upcoming book, to be published by Editorial Almadía in 2024, she gives agency to the Río Bravo to talk about ecological and racial violence on the Mexican border.

Ana Emilia & Mauricio are part of the *Topote de Acahual* collective since its conception in 2020. In 2014, they created the collective *Tepetongo. Balneario Crítico*, which developed several exhibitions and activities around ecology, queer theory, and critical cartography in Mexico City.

Translated from Spanish by Sylvia Monasterios.



**HYDRO\_\_\_**  
***commons***  
**MAP**

*entre—ríos*  
HYDRO\_\_  
*commons*  
MAP

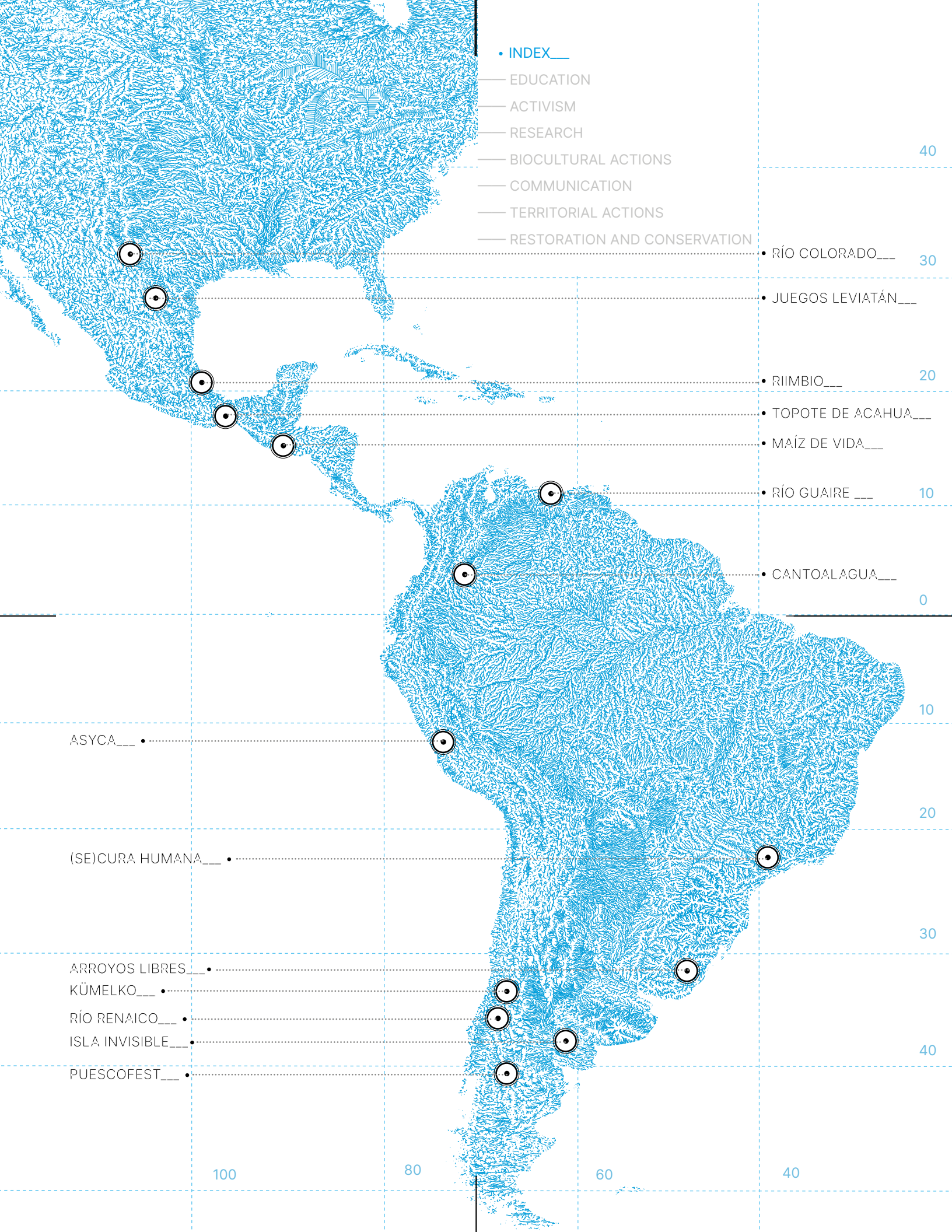
This map features a selection of initiatives, collectives, and communities that are actively involved in the care of different aquatic ecosystems across Latin America. This Hydrocommons Map compiles an index of actions that span research, activism, and dissemination strategies, with the aim of establishing parameters to track, connect, and contrast emerging and established projects in the region. Each project is presented as a downloadable, individual record. The categories of actions come directly from the projects included in this first edition of the map and offer an initial taxonomy designed to establish an unfolding directory of practices that cultivate forms of hydrocommons.

editors\_ LISA BLACKMORE & ALEJANDRO PONCE DE LEÓN  
design project\_ TERESA MULET  
map source\_ AQUASTAT (FAO)

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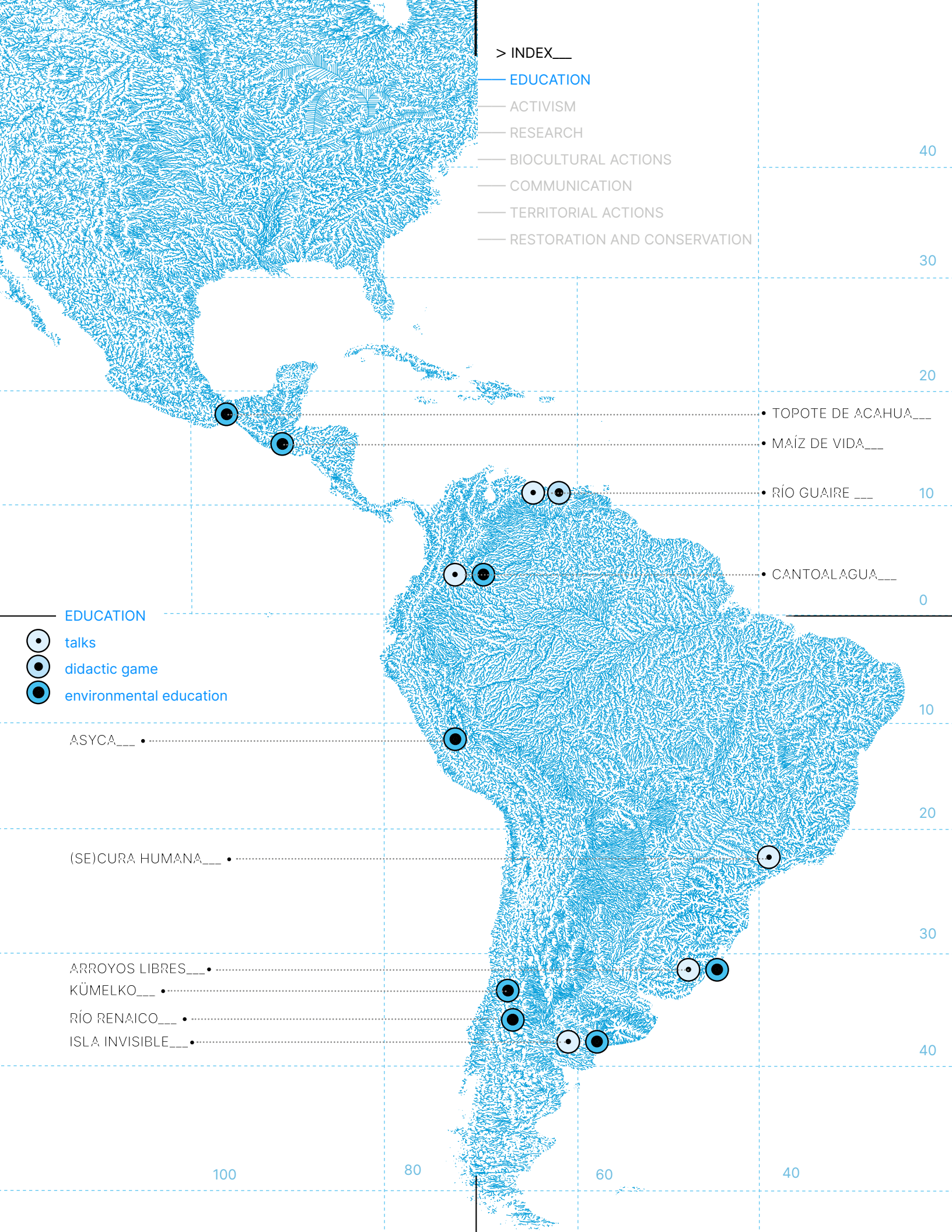
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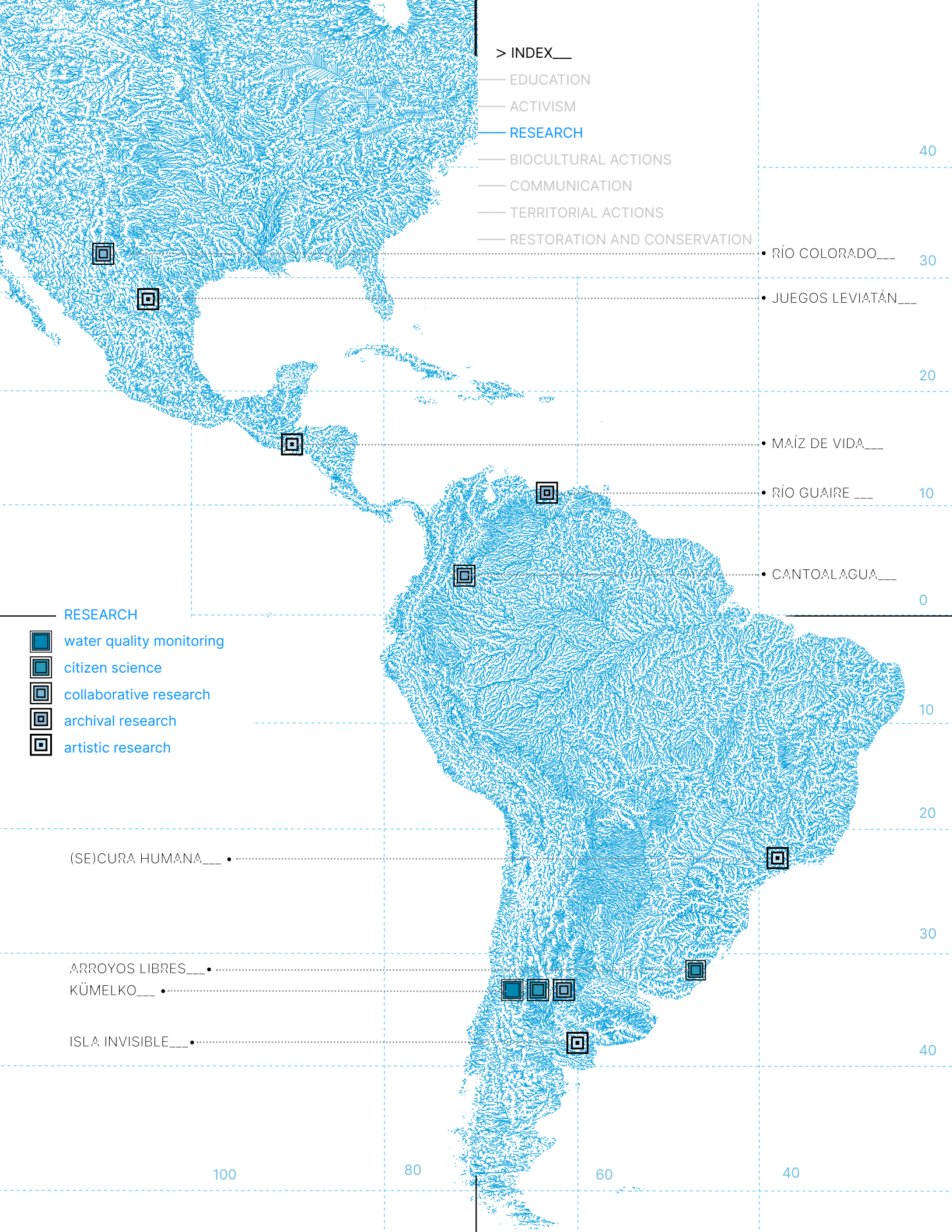
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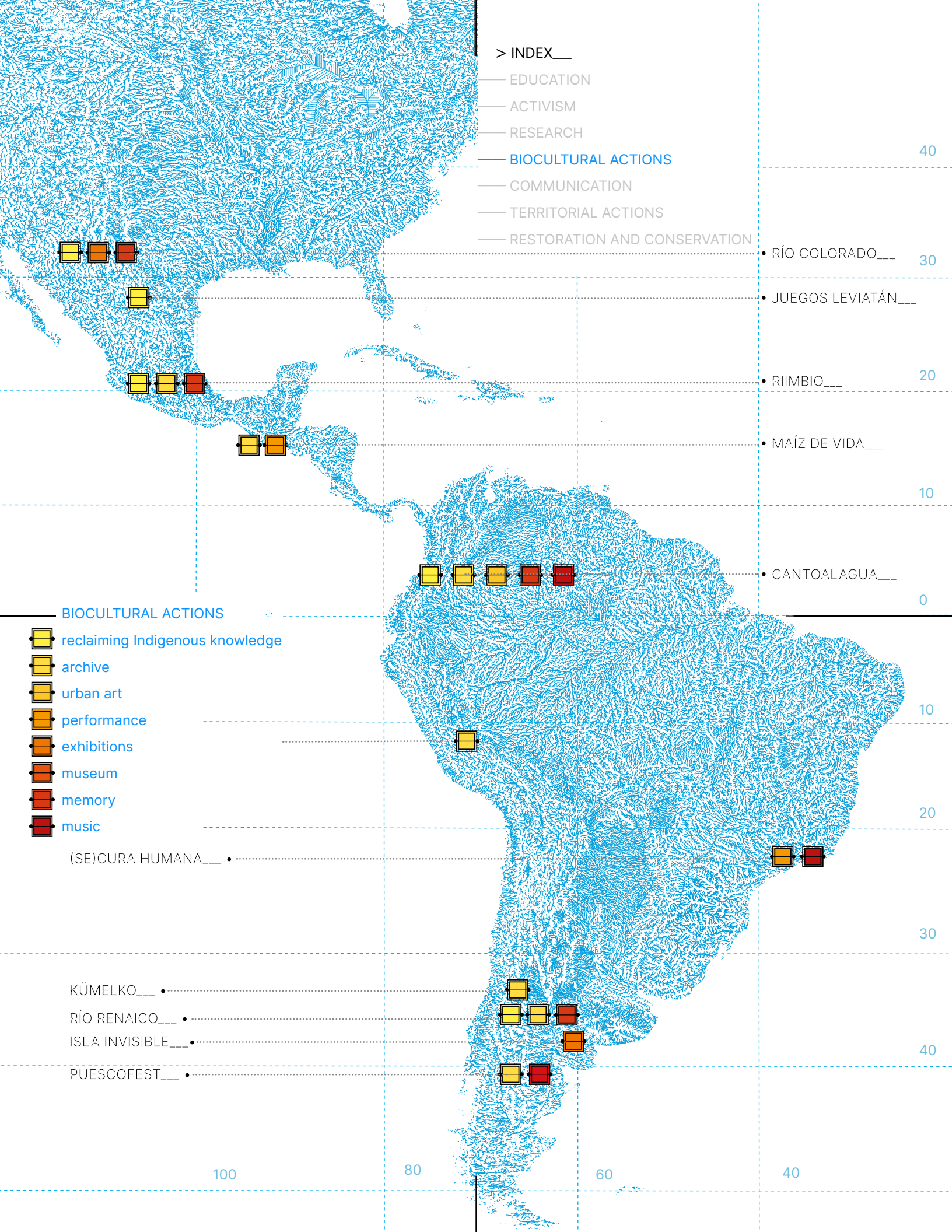
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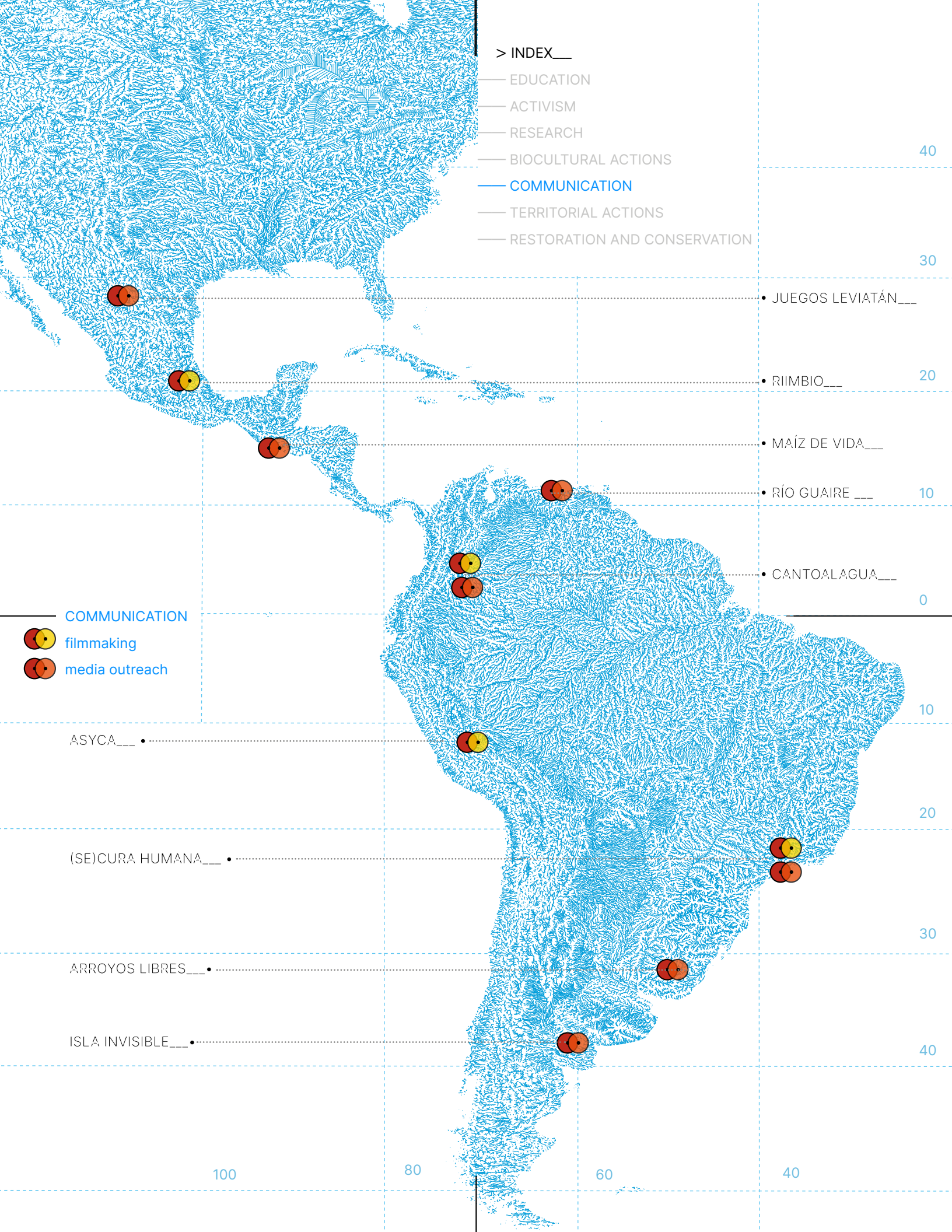
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# ARROYOS LIBRES

[foundation 2020]

This outreach and dissemination project researches, analyzes, and reflects on the history, current situation, and future possibilities of urban streams and rivers, especially underground ones. The project monitors successful cases of river and stream renaturalization worldwide. It organizes educational walks and disseminates its research through social networks, digital media, books, articles, and talks. The organizers also create urban interventions to landmark the presence of underground streams.



Courtesy: Arroyos Libres.

Buenos Aires, ARGENTINA  
34.6037, 58.3816  
[@arroyoslibres](#)

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# ISLA INVISIBLE\_\_\_

[foundation 2017]

This platform for artistic research renders visible processes taking place at the Bahía Blanca estuary that are coordinated by Ferrowhite Museo Taller and the Islote de la Gaviota Cangrejera Natural Reserve. It generates local estuary experiences that foster narratives for a sensitive approach to an invisibilized territory. Currently, it operates as an artistic collective made up of creators at Bahía Blanca and the city of Buenos Aires. The project participates in exhibitions, provides educational talks, and coordinates a cycle of residencies.



Photo: Agustín Eduardo Rodríguez.

Bahía Blanca, Buenos Aires Province, ARGENTINA

-38.7176522, -62.2654871

[@islainvisible](#)

[www.islainvisible.wordpress.com](http://www.islainvisible.wordpress.com)

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# (SE)CURA HUMANA

[foundation 2014]

Urban, aquatic, and artistic guerrilla movement that takes direct action towards promoting citizen access to water in public spaces. The collective builds pools in urban concrete, installs water parks on sidewalks, and brings hidden springs back to life. It works to question water management in the city of São Paulo, evoking memories of hidden and polluted rivers, and fostering reflections on the future of bodies of water through urban installations, films, performances, ephemeral artistic actions, and music.



Photo: Karen Menatti, Inteligencia Artificial de Flavio Barollo, 2017.

São Paulo, BRASIL  
23.5558, 46.6396  
[@securahumana](#)  
[www.securahumana.com](#)

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# KÜMELKO: LABORATORIO DE RESTAURACIÓN BIOCULTURAL\_\_\_

[foundation 2022]

This restoration lab is focused on affects and water, which was started by diverse groups in the Biobío river basin and the Nahuelbuta mountain range. Kümelko is a pilot for biocultural restoration in the Pangué micro-watershed, located at the foothills of the Nahuelbuta mountains. In this historically and biologically rich area, the project addresses socio-environmental issues like deforestation, intensive agriculture, forestry monocultures, and the Chilean state's usurpation of Mapuche lands.



Photo: Felipe Zanotti. Courtesy: Kümelko.

Pangué micro-basin, Nahuelbuta, Biobío, CHILE  
-37.430863, -72.423928

@kumelko

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[foundation 2016]

This community museum is organized by the “Salvemos el río Renaico” [Let’s Save the Renaico River] Social Collective and artist Marcela Moraga. This community action declares the Renaico River biocultural heritage. The Museum holds a collection created by neighbors’ associations, youth collectives, local artists, and schools. It does not have a physical building, but unfolds through environmental schools for children and youth, beach cleaning actions, political activism, and more. The project tackles environmental conflicts such as the reduction of river flow caused by forestry companies’ extraction of water.



Photo: Marcela Moraga.

Renaico River, La Araucanía region, CHILE  
-37.671709, -72.5832643  
[@riorenaico](#)  
[www.riorenaico-mca.org](http://www.riorenaico-mca.org)

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# PUESCOFEST

[foundation 2014]

This festival promotes the care of ancestral territory, combining sports, art, music, culture, and good living practices (*buen vivir*). It combines an international whitewater kayaking championship and a celebration of Mapuche culture. The festival includes art exhibitions, music, dance, workshops, crafts, and a food fair. The organizers offer training for local cultural managers, artists, athletes, and environmental agents. It also engages local communities in Villarrica and Pucón, who participate in cultural activities.



Photo: Matías Veras.

Whitewater Txankura leufü, Mallolahfken Lake, Puesco, Curarrehue, La Araucanía region, CHILE  
-39.5336559, -71.5564709

@puescofest  
[www.puescofest.org](http://www.puescofest.org)

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# CANTOALAGUA

[foundation 2010]

Cantoalagua is a global community that seeks to raise awareness about the importance of water, as a life-giving substance, through singing, art, and collective actions. Cantoalagua is held every year on March 22, International Water Day. On this day, people all over the world gather in seas, rivers, streams, lakes, ponds, and wetlands, to sing for the healing of the Earth's waters.



Courtesy: Cantoalagua.

Transnational project based in Bogotá, COLOMBIA

4.7110°, 74.0721°

[www.cantoalagua.com](http://www.cantoalagua.com)

[@cantoalagua](https://twitter.com/cantoalagua)

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# MAÍZ DE VIDA

[foundation 2017]

This multi-territorial association focuses on regenerating the web of life, visibilizing the culture and wisdom of the Q'eqchi' nation. It promotes care practices around water, forests, and rivers through research, cultural initiatives, and economic revitalization. *Maíz de Vida* collaborates with communities, local and ancestral authorities, artists, and spiritual leaders to strengthen ties between identity and territory, and to contest the reductive narrative of water as a mere resource.



Photo: Juan Esteban Calderón. Courtesy: Maíz de Vida.

Cahabón River, Tzuntz River, Salinas River, Negro River, Sebol River, San Simón River, Copones River. San Juan Alcalá neighborhood, Cobán, Alta Verapaz, GUATEMALA -90.3708300, 15.4708300

@maizdevida [www.maizdevida.com](http://www.maizdevida.com)

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# ARCHIVO FAMILIAR DEL RÍO COLORADO

[foundation 2020]

This collaborative project explores the relationships between people, ecosystems, settlements, and water. It gathers documentary records—especially family archives—to study how memories are constructed in contingent relationships with waterbodies using collaborative and interdisciplinary methods. The project unfolds through art practices that explore territorial experiences through affects, fiction, and analysis; considering the asymmetric tensions that shape the Mexicali border at geopolitical, institutional, and bodily scales.



Courtesy: Archivo Familiar del Río Colorado.

Colorado River Delta, Mexicali, Baja California, MÉXICO  
32.60268, -115.38879

@archivofamiliar\_riocolorado

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# LOS JUEGOS DEL LEVIATÁN\_\_

[foundation 2017]

This artistic research project began by reading poetry to the whales of El Vizcaino Bay and Desert. The organizers develop, experiment, and document interspecies performative practices based on an art-science research program. The project has produced an extensive catalog of historical and ethnographic information, aims at transforming narratives about the relationship between humans and gray whales and seeks to understand emerging interactions as part of an interspecies cultural system.



Photo: "Los Juegos del Leviatán: Meyjibén" (2021)  
©Stultifera Navis Institutom.

Ojo de Liebre Lagoon, Baja California Sur, MÉXICO  
27.8484872, -114.24202  
[www.stultiferanavis.institute/los-juegos-del-leviatan](http://www.stultiferanavis.institute/los-juegos-del-leviatan)

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# (RIIMBIO) RED DE INVESTIGACIÓN E INCIDENCIA DE LA MEMORIA BIOCULTURAL DEL VALLE DE TEOTIHUACÁN

[foundation 2022]

This research and advocacy network for biocultural memory gathers academic, grassroots and community-based organizations, civil society, and local authorities. It confronts the silencing of biocultural memory and the omission of practices, knowledge, and worldviews of communities linked to the San Juan River. The project organizers hold community ethnocartographic mapping workshops, collective interviews, knowledge sharing, river *dérives*, and flora and fauna identification. Its digital platform will host an archive of audiovisual material, texts, photographs, audios, and collaborative cartographies of collective memories.



Photo: Red de Juventudes Teotihuacanas.

Valley of Teotihuacán, State of Mexico, MÉXICO

19.4990468, -99.0410752

@red\_juteo

[www.urdimbrecomunal.blogspot.com](http://www.urdimbrecomunal.blogspot.com)

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# TOPOTE DE ACAHUAL | VIVERO DE TEBANCA





[foundation 1998]

This reforestation project and plant nursery recovers springs and works to repurpose lands to make them productive. It unfolds together with *ejidatarios* (communities engaged in use of common lands), farmers, plant nursery workers, forestry engineers, artists, teachers, and self-taught individuals who are learning to care for the rainforest. The project implements educational programs in the plant nursery, based on narratives that link the forest and society, the countryside and the city. It also trains plant nursery workers in filmmaking, as cultural managers, and offers courses on reforestation, land conversion, creative writing, self-publishing, embroidery, music, forest visual culture, and plant labeling.



Photo: Dan Sánchez D. Vil.

Lake Catemaco, ejido of Tebanca, Catemaco,  
Los Tuxtlas Veracruz, MÉXICO  
19.33333, -96.66667  
[www.viverodetebanca.com](http://www.viverodetebanca.com)  
[@vivero.de.tebanca](https://twitter.com/vivero.de.tebanca)

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# ASOCIACIÓN DE SIEMBRA Y COSECHA DE AGUA (ASYCA)\_\_\_

[foundation 2021]


The association is a territorial planning project that weaves ancestral and current forms of knowledge to promote good practices in water management, community living and food sovereignty. It advocates for “water sowing” and harvesting through local practices that retain water for use during droughts. The project aims to strengthen hydrosocial identity through environmental education, connecting young people with ancestral water knowledge. It organizes field actions with peasant communities and local schools to map important places and histories in ancestral water culture.





Photo: Vered Engelhard.

Farming community of San Pedro de Casta,  
Huarochirí, Lima, PERÚ  
-12.05806282, -77.05467175  
[@asociacion.aysca](https://www.instagram.com/asociacion.aysca)

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# RÍO GUAIRE

[foundation 2020]

This multidisciplinary initiative seeks to rehabilitate and highlight the importance of the Guaire River in Caracas. The project organizes walks to rediscover the river, as well as lectures to connect collective conservation efforts across the hemisphere. By implementing pedagogical actions, Río Guaire develops strategies for helping children understand how they can contribute to river conservation through everyday practices. The initiative also houses an online archive that documents how the river features in literature, art, and historical records.



Photo: Elisa Silva.

Capital District and Miranda State. Caracas, VENEZUELA  
10.497616, -66.891456

@enlace\_arq

www.rioguaire.org www.ciudlab.com

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[laescuela.art](http://laescuela.art)