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OTHER WAYS OF INHABITING THE WORLD. INDIGENOUS EPISTEMOLOGIES AND COLLABORATIVE ART PRACTICES IN THE WORK OF CAROLINA CAYCEDO, DESERT ARTLAB, AND JORGE GONZÁLEZ

Introduction

This article is part of a wider research project revolving around collaborative art forms related to ecology in the first two decades of the 21st century. The proliferation of artistic practices linked to socio-ecological issues in the contemporary art scene echoes a growing concern for environmental problems. Numerous reports on the state of the planet and the effects of anthropogenic climate change predict, in absence of urgent and effective mitigation policies, the destabilization of natural ecosystems and of the socio-economic and cultural structures that depend on them,¹ as well as a dramatic decline in the planet's bio-

¹ Masson-Delmotte, V. et al. (2018). *Global Warming of 1.5°C. An IPCC Special Report on the Impacts of Global Warming of 1.5°C above Pre-industrial Levels and Related Global Greenhouse Gas Emission Pathways, in the Context of Strengthening the Global Response*

diversity.² Some scholars associate the exacerbation of this ecosocial crisis³ to the global expansion of neoliberal capitalism.⁴ Moreover, a growing body of research in different fields traces connections between the degradation of natural ecosystems (together with their life sustaining processes) and the dynamics of colonialism, both in past and recent history.⁵ Several authors identify patterns of continuity between the extractive logic of neoliberal capitalism and structures of coloniality in terms of economic, geopolitical and cultural domination.⁶ According to Macarena Gómez-Barris:

to the Threat of Climate Change. Geneva. IPCC; Pachauri, R. K. et al. (2014). *IPCC Climate Change 2014: Synthesis Report. Contribution of Working Groups I, II and III to the Fifth Assessment Report of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change*. IPCC. Geneva: IPCC.

² Díaz, S., Settele, J., Brondízio, E., & T. Ngo, H. (2019). *Global Assessment Report on Biodiversity and Ecosystem Services*. Retrieved from: <https://ipbes.net/global-assessment-report-biodiversity-ecosystem-services>.

³ The term *ecosocial* (or socio-ecological) is used in this study to emphasize the inextricable link between ecosystem imbalances and the deterioration of social conditions. Prats, F., Herrero, Y., & Torrego, A. (2017). *La Gran Encrucijada. Sobre la crisis ecosocial y el cambio de ciclo histórico*. Madrid: Libros en Acción.

⁴ Foster, J. B., Clark, B., & York, R. (2010). *The Ecological Rift. Capitalism's War on the Earth*. New York: Monthly Review Press; Klein, N. (2014). *This Changes Everything: Capitalism vs. the Climate*. New York: Simon & Schuster; Koch, M. (2011). *Capitalism and Climate Change: Theoretical Discussion, Historical Development and Policy Responses*. Basingstroke: Palgrave Macmillan.

⁵ Clark, B. & Foster, J. B. (2009). Ecological Imperialism and the Global Metabolic Rift. Unequal Exchange and the Guano/Nitrates Trade. *International Journal of Comparative Sociology*, 50, 311-334; Crosby W., A. (2004). *Ecological Imperialism: The Biological Expansion of Europe, 900-1900* (Second). Cambridge University Press; Davis, H. & Todd, Z. (2017). On the Importance of a Date, or, Decolonizing the Anthropocene. *ACME: An International Journal for Critical Geographies*, 16 (4), 761-780; Nixon, R. (2011). *Slow Violence and the Environmentalism of the Poor*. Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press; Ross, C. (2017). *Ecology and Power in the Age of Empire: Europe and the Transformation of the Tropical World*. Oxford University Press; Whyte, K. (2016). Is It Colonial Déjà Vu? Indigenous Peoples and Climate Injustice. In J. Adamson & M. Davis, (Eds.), *Humanities for the Environment: Integrating Knowledges, Forging New Constellations of Practice*. London: Routledge Earthscan Publications; Whyte, K. (2018). Settler Colonialism, Ecology, and Environmental Injustice. *Environment and Society*, 9 (1), 125-144.

⁶ Gudynas, E. (2009). Diez tesis urgentes sobre el nuevo extractivismo. Contextos y demandas bajo el progresismo sudamericano actual. In J. Schuldt, A. Acosta, A.

the extractive view sees territories as commodities, rendering land as for the taking, while also devalorizing the hidden worlds that form the nexus of human and nonhuman multiplicity. This viewpoint, similar to the colonial gaze, facilitates the reorganization of territories, populations, and plant and animal life into extractible data and natural resources for material and immaterial accumulation.⁷

This predatory gaze is at the root of the despoliation of natural ecosystems and of past and present attacks on the integrity of Indigenous communities, their cultures, and territories. Among the implications of historical and contemporary forms of colonial power there is also what Boaventura de Sousa Santos defines as *epistemicide*, that is to say the erasure of Indigenous systems of knowledge, social organization and modes of interaction with the natural world in favor of the European anthropocentrism and rationalist paradigm of science.⁸

This essay focuses on collaborative art practices stemming from the dialogue with Indigenous epistemologies and addressing socio-environmental issues from a decolonial and post-anthropocentric perspective. The study aims to offer a modest contribution to a growing body of research examining the intersections between art discourses

Barandiarán, & A. Bebbington (Eds.), *Extractivismo, política y sociedad* (187-225). Centro Andino de Acción Popular, Centro Latinoamericano de Ecología Social; Machado Aráoz, H. (2013). Orden neocolonial, extractivismo y ecología política de las emociones. *Revista Brasileira de Sociologia Da Emoção*, 12 (34), 11-43; Svampa, M. (2012). Extractivismo neodesarrollista y movimientos sociales. ¿Un giro ecoterritorial hacia nuevas alternativas?. In Grupo Permanente de Trabajo sobre Alternativas al Desarrollo (Ed.), *Más Allá del Desarrollo* (185-211). Quito: Fundación Rosa Luxemburg; Venn, C. (2009). Neoliberal Political Economy, Biopolitics and Colonialism: A Transcolonial Genealogy of Inequality. *Theory, Culture & Society*, 26 (6), 206-233; among others.

⁷ Gómez-Barris, M. (2017). *The Extractive Zone: Social Ecologies and Decolonial Perspectives*. Durham: Duke University Press, 5.

⁸ Santos, B. de S. (2016). *Epistemologies of the South: Justice against Epistemicide*. New York: Routledge.

related to ecology and decolonial theories⁹ and to the decolonization of methodologies in the field of art history and criticism.¹⁰ My analysis concentrates on the recent work of artists Carolina Caycedo, Jorge González and of the collective Desert ArtLAB, whose poetics arise from longstanding collaborations with Indigenous communities that are often at the forefront of struggles for climate justice, territorial defense and bio-cultural diversity preservation. Beside the bibliographic review of theoretical contributions from different fields of knowledge, this study is also draws from semi-structured interviews with the cited artists and includes the close reading of a selection of their works.

Artistic Engagements with Indigenous Knowledges and Ecologies

The recent work of Colombian artist Carolina Caycedo focuses on the logic of extraction underlying neoliberal capitalism. The project *Be Dammed*¹¹ (2013-ongoing) comprises a constellation of works that reflect upon the destructive effects of hydroelectric power dams built on waterways. Starting from the case of El Quimbo dam on the river Yuma/Magdalena (La Jagua, Colombia) situated in a region the artist has

⁹ Alves, M. T. (2014). *El retorno de un lago*. México, D.F.: MUAC, Museo Universitario Arte Contemporáneo. UNAM, Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México, México, D.F.; Banerjee, S. (Ed.). (2012). *Arctic Voices: Resistance at the Tipping Point*. New York: Seven Stories Press; Demos, T. J. (2015). *Rights of Nature: The Art and Politics of Earth Jurisprudence*. Retrieved from: https://www.academia.edu/13895900/Rights_of_Nature_The_Art_and_Politics_of_Earth_Jurisprudence; Gray, R., & Sheikh, S. (2018). The Wretched Earth: Botanical Conflicts and Artistic Interventions. *Third Text*, 32 (3), 163-175; Monani, S., & Adamson, J. (Eds.). (2017). *Ecocriticism and Indigenous Studies: Conversations from Earth to Cosmos*. New York: Palgrave; and Sholette, G., Bass, C., & Social Practice Queens. (2018). *Art as Social Action: An Introduction to the Principles and Practices of Teaching Social Practice Art*. New York: Allworth Press.

¹⁰ Demos, T. J. (2016). *Decolonizing Nature: Contemporary Art and the Politics of Ecology*. Berlin: Sternberg Press.

¹¹ The title is a play on the words *dam* and to be *damned*.

a personal attachment to, the project has evolved into an investigation embracing other water related struggles in Latin America. Most of the pieces belonging to this series emerge from Caycedo's collaboration with Indigenous organizations and frontline communities affected by the neocolonial commodification and exploitation of rivers, often at the hands of transnational corporations. Through a wide range of media such as video art, drawing, installation, and performance, the artist illustrates the modifications in the geography, the ecosystems, and the ecosocial balances happening in these territories as a result of the construction of mega-dams. In the video essay *Land of Friends. Descolonizando La Jagua* (2014),¹² Caycedo intertwines fragments of interviews conducted with different individuals (a farmer, a fisherwoman, a political opposition leader, a local activist, among others) involved in the struggle to protect the Yuma river with footage documenting the dam development, ink drawings, and excerpts of the river's history recounted in the artist's own voice. Attempts to enter a more-than-human angle of perception are made by including film sequences portraying insects, flora, a stone and depicting the river itself as a living being. This polyphonic and situated narrative bridges territorial resistance and Indigenous rights with notions of climate, social, gender, and epistemic justice. The geopolitical and ecological implications linked to the creation of dams are exposed together with their less visible—yet equally profound—impacts such as the forced displacement of communities, the destruction of emotional ties and much of the local communities' livelihoods and cultural heritage. The attention devoted to Indigenous perspectives in Caycedo's work contributes to question the Eurocentric epistemic hierarchy, emphasizing the role of embodied knowledge, Indigenous worldviews together

¹² Carolina Caycedo, *Land of Friends. Descolonizando la Jagua*, <https://vimeo.com/94685623>.

with artistic imagination in the search for possible solutions to socio-environmental conflicts. According to the artist, her works constitute:

an invitation to prompt an epistemological transition [...] that may allow us to stop perceiving the territory as a landscape separated from humans and to understand that, as most Indigenous cosmovisions maintain, we humans need a multitude of other beings—plants, animals, minerals, atmospheric phenomena, etc.—to exist. The inability to perceive and cultivate the material, political, spiritual and emotional connections with our natural and social environment has led us to the current situation of climate collapse.¹³

In contrast to the objectification and dissection of the natural world typical of modern rationality, the artist tries to strengthen bonds of solidarity between water bodies, animals, trees, stones, and human communities, acknowledging their agency and identity. This approach resonates with the theoretical reflections of Colombian anthropologist Arturo Escobar and his conceptualization of relational ontologies, in which “*nothing pre-exists the relations that constitute it*. Said otherwise, things and beings are their relations, they do not exist prior to them”.¹⁴ These frameworks, which frequently arise in connection to Indigenous land movements and struggles, signify the entanglement of all kinds of phenomena and life forms. According to Escobar, they reveal “an

¹³ Carolina Caycedo, personal communication, 13 November, 2018.

¹⁴ Emphasis in the original. Escobar, A. (2016). Thinking-feeling with the Earth: Territorial Struggles and the Ontological Dimension of the Epistemologies of the South. *AIBR Revista de Antropología Iberoamericana*, 11 (1), 12-32, 18.

altogether different way of being and becoming in territory and place”,¹⁵ opening spaces of resistance to the dominant form of Euro-modernity.

Integrating Indigenous knowledges into the art discourse related to ecology is also at the center of the poetics of Desert ArtLAB. This interdisciplinary collective is formed by curator and educator April Bojorquez and artist and educator Matthew Garcia. Their work develops around the need to deconstruct imperial notions of landscape in the North American context and to revitalize native ecological practices. Drawing on their Chicano and Raramuri heritage, the artists contribute to reverse the common perception of the desert as a barren and hostile habitat by recovering the traditional knowledge of native cultures that thrived for thousands of years in the arid lands located in what is now the South West of the United States. The recuperation of this legacy becomes ever so relevant considering the acceleration of desertification trends driven by climate change in vast areas of the American continent and the world in general. Through multimedia installations, participatory actions and other creative formats, the artists present deserts and drylands as rich and complex ecosystems as well as contexts for reimagining our relation to the environment. Their recent project *Pueblo Field Site* (2016-ongoing) revolves around the reclamation of a plot of land in the high desert of southern Colorado (USA). Here, as the artists maintain, the intent is:

to recreate an Indigenous ecosystem, using the traditional knowledge present in our families and in the native communities of Arizona and Colorado, with the aim of decolonizing the concept of nature and wilderness typical of the

¹⁵ Escobar, *Thinking-feeling with the Earth*, 18.

North American imaginary -often based on the presence of lush vegetation- and to connect the aesthetics of the landscape to the notion of limit.¹⁶

Through a collaborative effort involving students and other members of the local community, the area was cleared of all waste and transformed into an edible landscape. Several native species were reintroduced, mainly cacti and other plants adapted to the extreme climate of the place, slowly attracting bees and other animals. Besides restoring the soil and ecological balance of an arid terrain, this intervention provides a space for perennial desert agriculture and also represents an aesthetic operation that aims to reconfigure the perception of abundance in the face of global change and dwindling natural resources. The work of Desert ArtLAB is also grounded in social practice and involves intergenerational workshops and community projects. These group initiatives often have a pedagogical focus and develop around the great variety of flora found in desert regions. Through experiential learning, the artists share the botanical, medicinal and ceremonial properties of species such as amaranth, corn, crass plants, among others, along with their relations to ancient mythologies, native science, and food habits. The regeneration and dissemination of this empirical knowledge not only contributes to the revaluation of Indigenous ecological practices, but also nurtures processes of self-determination, resilience and cultural reappropriation¹⁷ for cultures that have been subjugated and displaced by settler colonialism.

¹⁶ April Bojorquez and Matthew Garcia, personal communication, 26 January, 2019.

¹⁷ Hanley, A. R. (2018). *Lands between Us Lands Apart*. In *Trees Also Speak*. Old Westbury: Amelie A. Wallace Gallery, SUNY College.

Similarly, the artistic practice of Jorge González delves into the material culture of Puerto Rico and its Taíno, Afro-Boricua, and Can-Jíbaro heritage to interrogate omissions of ethnocultural diversity in the dominant historical narrative of the archipelago. In 2014 the artist founded *Escuela de Oficios*, an ongoing itinerant platform of collective work and interdisciplinary exchange involving Taíno artisans, educators, artists, cultural workers, students, and archaeologists. Besides mapping and reclaiming ancestral pottery, basketry, and furniture making practices in danger of extinction, the *Escuela* also holds public programs including exhibitions, conferences, workshops and self-directed learning gatherings. The project gains further significance considering the systematic marginalization of non-European heritage both under the Spanish rule and the more recent neocolonial influence of the United States on the country. Puerto Rico currently endures a *de facto* colonial status¹⁸ and is exposed to stratified forms of financial, political, cultural, and environmental colonialism¹⁹ amplified by the implementation of neoliberal policies. Moreover, due to its geography, the archipelago is especially vulnerable to the impacts of tropical storms whose frequency and strength have intensified as a result of climate change.²⁰

González's work is based on long-term collaborations with local artisans, researchers, and communities, and arises from what he defines as a

¹⁸ Gonzalez-Cruz, M. (1998). The U.S. Invasion of Puerto Rico: Occupation and Resistance to the Colonial State, 1898 to the Present. *Latin American Perspectives*. Sage Publications, Inc.

¹⁹ Atilés-Osoria, J. M. (2013). Colonialismo ambiental, criminalización y resistencias: las movilizaciones puertorriqueñas por la justicia ambiental en el siglo XXI. *Revista Crítica de Ciências Sociais*, (100).

²⁰ In 2017 Puerto Rico was hit by two consecutive hurricanes, Hurricane Irma and Hurricane María, that caused thousands of victims and devastated the island's infrastructures.



[Fig. 1]. Jorge González, *Escuela de Oficios*, 2019. Basket weaving in *Ensayos libertarios (Libertarian Essays)*, as part of the program of *Una extranjera peligrosa: Escuela de Oficios*, in collaboration with Monica Rodríguez and Julia Bogany, for the exhibition *Unraveling Collective Forms*, LACE, Los Angeles. Photo courtesy of Lluvia Higuera.

“process of recognition²¹ of the territory”. In this sense, the choice to focus on traditional crafts derives from the potential of these practices to “complement the act of thinking about the place and about the ecological concerns that traverse it”.²² In particular, the artist is interested in understanding how artisanship integrates other forms of knowledge. Often erroneously depicted as belonging to an extinct past, ancestral crafts of Puerto Rico are still practiced in different areas of the island and provide a dynamic space of inquiry where different strands of research in the field of ecology, archaeology, botany, art, and anthropology converge. A relevant example in that regard is the collaboration between

²¹ In Spanish, *reconocimiento*. Jorge González, personal communication, 13 December, 2018.

²² Jorge González, personal communication, 13 December, 2018.

González and the Taíno-descendant artisan family named Chévere from Morovis, a town in the central mountains of Puerto Rico. Here the implementation of cyclical workshops by *Escuela de Oficios* intersected archaeological studies on the Indigenous heritage of the place and the community struggles to declare the site a protected natural reserve. The use of locally sourced materials like cattail and other plant fibers, along with wood and clay, reinforces the link between the artifacts produced in the workshops and the ecologies of the locations the *Escuela* travels to. The effort to reinvigorate vernacular techniques materializes through references to traditional but also modernist and contemporary designs. The creation of settings of encounter and cross-disciplinary collaboration and debate, often mediated by nature, allows for diverse forms of thinking, interacting and working together to emerge, as well as new processes of cultural resistance and emancipation. As art curator Michy Marxuach affirms:

Encounters are not impartial: they imply closeness and define previous and subsequent negotiations that [...] generate new sensations and multiple questions, and enable us to imagine different scenarios. They are forms of habitability and create temporary configurations. They are in themselves movement and action in the making.²³

Conclusions

Whether adopting an activist approach, proposing different narratives about ecosocial struggles or cultivating pedagogical or cultural

²³ Marxuach, M. (2017). Guión y rayas: textos hablados o signos en un diálogo—un acercamiento a compartir sin comillas. Un intento de vincular o de alguna forma ser un signo auxiliar. *Herramienta Generosa*, 3, 156-159, 158.



[Fig. 2]. Jorge González, *Escuela de Oficios*, 2017. *Lectura bajo la cohoba* (*Reading under the Cohoba*), as part of the public program for *359 días en 19 meses* (*359 days in 19 months*), College of the Humanities, University of Puerto Rico, Río Piedras Campus. Photograph by Victor Pagán, courtesy of Embajada.

reappropriation processes, the described art practices strive to include Indigenous perspectives—without idealizing them—in the conversation around burning contemporary issues such as extractivism, climate breakdown, and biological and cultural diversity protection. In so doing they contribute to “politicize the relationship between art and ecology”²⁴ by showing the different dimensions of economic, environmental and epistemic injustice that affect Indigenous cultures. Also, through the visibilization and circulation of native knowledges, they incorporate into art discourse ethical positionings and epistemologies that question Western anthropocentric notions of nature, art and ecology and participate in the decolonization of these concepts. With their

²⁴ Demos, *Decolonizing Nature*, 8.

collaborative aesthetics, the works of Caycedo, González and Desert ArtLAB weave transdisciplinary, interspecies and intergenerational alliances that connect with the notion of relational ontology²⁵ and can be instrumental in the articulation of perceptual and cultural transformations in the face of ecological and cultural destruction. Finally, all the examined projects develop through long term commitments and collaborations, rely on sustained presence, and practice and experiment with forms of shared creation reducing the risk of epistemic extractivism.

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²⁵ Escobar, "Thinking-feeling with the Earth".

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