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Caring for the Dead: The Afterlives of Collective Bodies

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Ixil Mayans gather around a mass grave near Ixtupil. Photo: Rodrigo Abd/Associated Press. 2013.

The European colonial expansion marks the beginning of a death drive for underground resources. That its consequences are felt today in the form of global warming and other metabolic rifts is not a surprise. In the sixteenth century alone, this led to the death of 60 million indigenous peoples in the Americas, a mass genocide with global environmental impacts.¹ In this context, I have been investigating a series of

¹ The genocide of indigenous peoples that followed the arrival of Spanish armies to the Caribbean led as well to a massive reduction in atmospheric CO₂. This was due to a change in modes of production and, in particular, a massive decrease in the use

exhumations, with a focus on Latin America, while thinking about the practice of environmental architecture.² Exhumations—the removal of bodies from the ground so as to *reveal* or to give light—are a key to understanding resource extraction and its geological optics.³ However, in recent decades, exhumations have gained further prominence by supporting indigenous demands for the protection and restitution of ancestral territories; within the prosecution of human rights violations, owing to the development of forensic practices; or due to the new importance given to soil and material analysis within disputes on environmental justice. Located at the intersection of extraction and the resistance to it, exhumations are a crucial feature of how territorial, environmental, and political disputes are conducted. I am especially interested in how exhumations foreground political communities constituted in relation to grounds and territories, often in the form of complex intergenerational relations, extended kinship structures, or political alliances that cut across epistemic divides. The range of projects and communities that exhumations capture is, of course, extremely wide, but in the context of a discussion on the rights of future generations and architecture, two dimensions of exhumation are particularly important: the cultivation of intertemporal modes of coexistence and of kinfullness.⁴

Ixtupil, Guatemala, 2013

Anthropologists from the *Fundación de Antropología Forense de Guatemala* (Guatemalan Forensic Anthropology Foundation) are continuing a decades-long process of exhuming mass graves of indigenous peoples. The graves belong to Ixil Maya killed by the Guatemalan government under the dictatorship of Efraín Ríos Montt. According to the Guatemalan Commission for Historical Clarification, an estimated 200,000 people were killed during the “scorched earth” counterinsurgency campaigns that characterized Ríos Montt’s presidency. Here, exhumations had to be performed in the presence of local indigenous peoples, as there were important rituals to observe in order to care for the dead. For Maya indigenous peoples, a proper burial is a matter of reproductive justice: “death does not mean absence of life...the deceased community and family member becomes an ancestor, with whom the bereaved may remain in contact.”⁵ Moreover, the ancestors are “the true owners of the land, an ownership signalled by small stone altars in many corn fields and larger ones at important sites in the landscape where the living were invited

of forest fires for land management. This decrease was captured in Antarctic ice cores. See Simon Lewis and Mark Maslin, “Defining the Anthropocene,” *Nature* 519 (2015): 171–80.

² This text is part of a broader research titled *Ex-Humus*, which consists of activist engagements, writings, lectures, performances, and exhibitions. A previous version of the text was published as: Godofredo Pereira, “Collective Politics from Below,” *Dispatches* #001, February 15, 2019, <http://dispatchesjournal.org/articles/ex-humus> (accessed August 20, 2019).

³ For the geological optics that underpin both racism and resource extraction, see Kathryn Yusoff, *A Billion Black Anthropocenes or None* (Minneapolis, 2018).

⁴ The use of the term “kinfullness” here is indebted to Ruha Benjamin’s essay “Black AfterLives Matter: Cultivating Kinfullness as Reproductive Justice,” in Adele Clarke and Donna Haraway, eds., *Making Kin, Not Population* (Chicago, 2018), p. 65.

⁵ Carlos Marín Beristain, Darío Paez, and José Luis González, “Rituals, social sharing, silence, emotions and collective memory claims in the case of the Guatemalan genocide,” *Psicothema*, Vol. 12, No. Su1, (2000): 117–30.

to pay the dead their due.”⁶ This was the reason why disempowering the dead (the introduction of Catholicism) was so important to the colonial implementation of extractivist modes of production.⁷ The colonial model of coexistence—predicated upon a rigid distinction between living and dead—clashed here, with extended reproductive structures that span across time, whereby the ancestors are copresent with the living. If for the Maya, violence over the environment would always be understood as violence over ancestors, this is even more so today, as so many *desaparecidos* are still underground. In this context, exhumations highlight the importance of disputes over temporal forms of coexistence and, in particular, the importance of the dead in the resistance against capitalist modes of production.⁸

Salar de Atacama, Chile, 2019

Samples of water and brine are being exhumed for analysis by the Chilean First Environmental Tribunal (1TA). These samples are meant to provide evidence regarding the environmental impacts of the underground extraction of brine by the Sociedad Química y Minera (SQM) following several complaints by local indigenous communities.⁹ Lithium, present in brine, is a key component of batteries, and is immensely valuable to the global energy transition. It has the right of future generations to a decarbonized planet on its side, providing “green” public relations strategies to extractivist practices. Yet lithium extraction has led to large-scale protests against the granting of concession rights by all the communities and *ayllus* that border the Salar de Atacama. The same is happening across the whole Puna de Atacama, a region in the Andean plateau that spans Chile, Bolivia, and Argentina, where most of the world’s lithium reserves are located. It is not only that lithium mining requires the extraction of massive amounts of water, which kills some of the desert’s most fragile ecosystems, but also for locals, the Salar is both a fragile ecosystem and a living being. Many Andean peoples and, in particular, the Atacameños, inhabit extended relations of kinship under a “fractal” system of relations that extends from the body to the house, the *ayllu*, and the mountains—and whose main connecting line is water, required for life and reproduction in the desert.¹⁰ If, from the perspective of global pathways to decarbonization, lithium appears as a key element of the future, from the perspective of many local peoples, its extraction is equivalent to disrupting socio-environmental relations of reciprocity with nature and their cyclical time structure. Different temporalities thus imply different environmental politics.

⁶ Carlota Mcallister, “What are the Dead Made of? Exhumations and the Materiality of Indigenous Social Worlds in Postgenocide Guatemala,” *Material Religion* 13, No. 4 (2017): 522.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Gladys Tzul Tzul, “Rebuilding Communal Life: Ixil women and the desire for life in Guatemala,” *Women Rising in the Americas*, NACLA Report on the Americas, Vol. 50, Issue 4 (2018): 404–07.

⁹ SQM is one of the world’s leading lithium producers. Until recently, it was run by billionaire Julio Ponce de Leru, the son-in-law of Dictator Augusto Pinochet. The complaints that led to this investigation were made by the communities of Peine and Camar, as well as by the Consejo de Pueblos Atacameños.

¹⁰ Within this, the importance of mountains is key “as they are the ones that keep and distribute water” for which ritual payments need to be made every year. See Alonso Barros, “Desarrollo y pachamama: Paisajes cognitivos en el Desierto de Atacama,” *Estudios Atacameños* 13 (1997): 75–94.

Lago Agrio, Ecuador, 2005

Scientists exhume soil and sediment samples to confirm that oil contamination resulted from decades of negligence by Chevron/Texaco during the company's extraction activities in the region.¹¹ This investigation was part of the famous lawsuit *Aguinda v. ChevronTexaco*, initiated by local peasants and indigenous communities in 1993 and that has since then grown to international attention.¹² While the court case has been unsuccessful so far, the exhumation of soil core samples became a key point of articulation between historical and contemporary extractive politics in Ecuador. This was particularly so after 2008, when Ecuador introduced the right to *buen vivir* (good living) into its constitution—that is, the necessity of living in harmony with the cycles of *Pachamama* (Mother Earth) and the cosmos, and as a consequence, to recognize and protect the rights of nature.¹³ A radical concept of kinfullness has therefore emerged from the cosmology of Ecuador's originary communities, where peoples and environments are understood to be part of the same kin. In other words, kinship is understood as a radical interconnection between soils and peoples; it provides one of the most relevant precedents across the world for anti-extractivist modes of coexistence. This has come to fruition most prominently with the Yasuni-ITT initiative of keeping oil underground. In 2007, Ecuador announced its commitment to preventing the exploration of oil reserves in the Ishpingo-Tambococha-Tiputini oil fields of Yasuní National Park. The effort to leave the oil underground had three main objectives: to protect indigenous peoples living in voluntary isolation, to conserve the unique biodiversity of Yasuní National Park, and to avert the CO₂ emissions that would result from the extraction of hydrocarbons. The project was eventually scrapped in 2016 due to lack of funds, but it was a watershed moment that inaugurated the global keep-it-in-the-ground movement.

Chocó, Colombia, 2013–16

The sampling of mud from the riverbanks of the Atrato River to confirm mercury contamination took place during the same period as the exhumation of several children who died due to contamination, along with workers swept away by mudslides. The Atrato has long been the site of daily mining activity, both alluvial and open-pit vein mining, resulting in widespread destruction. The river is located in a region that bears witness to violent histories of colonial dispossession, slavery, and conflict between guerrillas,

¹¹ “100 Percent of Inspected Well Sites Show Contamination,” Clean Up Ecuador (campaign website), October 18, 2005, <https://chevrontoxicocom/news-and-multimedia/2005/1018-100-percent-of-inspected-well-sites-show-contamination>, (accessed August 20, 2019).

¹² For an analysis of the legal case against Chevron from the perspective of recent literature on intersections of nature and culture, see Paulo Tavares, “Murky Evidence,” *Cabinet: Issue 43 Forensics* (August 2011).

¹³ Article 275 of the Ecuadorian Constitution indicates that the nation’s development should take place with respect for the idea of “*sumak kawsay*” or “*buen vivir*,” which refer to the necessary state of balance that should exist between people and the environment. Article 277 adds that in order to guarantee *buen vivir*, the state should protect the rights of “persons, collectives, and nature.”

paramilitaries, and the government. The exhumation of soils and peoples supported a demand presented by the NGO Tierra Digna, which represents multiple Afro-Colombian and indigenous organizations from the Department of Chocó. As a consequence, in 2016, the Constitutional Court of Colombia granted legal rights to the Atrato River basin and its tributaries, protecting them from widespread gold mining and its concurrent deforestation and environmental contamination.¹⁴ For the first time, a court ruling addressed the government's history of abandonment and racial discrimination toward Afro-Colombian peoples. The judgment recognized "the Atrato River, its basin, and tributaries as an entity subject to rights of protection, conservation, maintenance and restoration by the State and ethnic communities."¹⁵ Government and community representatives were tasked with representing the river's rights, making them "the guardians of the river" under the framework of biocultural rights.¹⁶ At stake in the exhumation of mud was the important recognition of the inherent kin between the river and its peoples—both the living and their ancestors.

Coexistence

"All kinship, in the end, is imaginary. Not faux, false or inferior, but as Alondra Nelson shows us, a creative process of fashioning care and reciprocity" Ruha Benjamin¹⁷

There are too many bodies. Some of these have been exhumed, some remain underground: the bodies of disappeared detainees from Chile, Argentina, Brazil, El Salvador, Guatemala, or Peru that are still to be found; bodies of farmers killed by forestry and agribusiness, such as Berta Cáceres and Chico Mendes; the bodies of all those others who continue to lose their lives today at the forefront of environmental resistance, and the millions of indigenous peoples bodies murdered over the last 500 years; the black bodies who died in the Atlantic passage; the bodies of workers and slaves killed inside the devilish mines and plantations of settler colonies; the bodies of animal spirits, of world-bearing tortoises, and beer-drinking jaguars; the bodies of bees and wasps, and the billions of other insects eradicated in the name of monocultures; the bodies of bacteria, of worms, of black soil, water, gold and oil; the bodies of chthonic entities with their own lives and modes of existence; the bodies of rivers, mountains, *mayllkus*, *apus*, and

¹⁴ Judgment T-622/16 (The Atrato River Case), Constitutional Court of Colombia (2016), translated by the and available at Dignity Rights Project, Copyright © 2019.

¹⁵ Quoted from the Constitutional Court Judgment T-622/16 (The Atrato River Case), *ibid.*

¹⁶ "The central premise on which the conception of bioculturalism and biocultural rights is based on a relationship of profound unity between nature and the human species." Quoted from the Constitutional Court Judgment T-622/16 (The Atrato River Case), *ibid.*, p. 37.

¹⁷ Ruha Benjamin "Black AfterLives Matter: Cultivating Kinfullness as Reproductive Justice," in Adele Clarke and Donna Haraway, eds., *Making Kin, Not Population* (Chicago, 2018), pp. 64-65.

other such family members; the bodies of all those too far away from us to be named and counted, all the bodies of those who are gone, all the bodies of those yet to be born.

Practicing exhumation as care for the dead reminds us that bodies are always collective. To exhume is, of course, to search for evidence, for justice and reparations, and, more important, for the possibility of mourning. But it is also a practice of care for soils, spirits, and peoples, so as to hold them in the realm of coexistence. The exhumed are biologically dead but environmentally alive. Dead in the material sense of their decomposing bodies, but alive in terms of the collective existential territories that they animate. If the dead are the true owners of the land, as in Guatemala, could it be because the dead are in continuity with the land, the soil, and the trees? To empower the dead and the modes of coexistence they speak of is to open the door to intertemporal modes of coexistence and intergenerational practices of care. Practices that are, as such, inherently environmental. Exhumations then, make kin as a form of environmental resistance. And more importantly, they remind us that we need to care for the dead, because environments speak through them, and because their voice, is the song of the revolutions to come.