

Living Rivers: Collective Agency in Carolina Caycedo's *Be Dammed*

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Carolina Caycedo recognizes rivers as living nuclei of extensive ecological networks. Born in London to Colombian parents in 1978, Caycedo draws attention to the privatization of water in South America and the environmental impacts of large-scale dams, whose construction and subsequent operation displaces millions of people worldwide and lays waste to local ecosystems. Caycedo describes rivers as social agents, a term that aligns with new materialist methodologies, such as those recently written by scholars such as Jane Bennett, that perceive human and nonhuman life, and even objects, as vital and responsive entities within complex networks of exchange.¹ Like Caycedo's work, new materialism disposes of the perception of the environment as simply a resource to be exploited for economic gain and instead recognizes the significance of the innumerable organisms and natural processes that comprise and sustain the world we live in. In this essay I take up a new materialist lens to read Caycedo's project, *Be Dammed* (2013 to Present), in which she works across media to counteract the anthropocentric perception of the environment that deems it subservient to human industry. In *Be Dammed*, Caycedo collaborates with local communities and resistance groups to create videos, multimedia sculptures, and participatory performances that contest the damming of rivers. This essay focuses specifically on Caycedo's *Geochoreographies*, or collaborative performances, and her *Cosmotarrayas*, or hanging sculptures. I argue that by employing memory, collectivity, and performance, Caycedo's *Be Dammed* project invites her audience, and in extension the larger global public, to adapt a greater attentiveness to the lively ecological networks that bind human practices and environmental devastation. In doing so, Caycedo protests the erasure of animate creatures from sites pegged for industrial development.

The Trouble with Dams

Building a towering concrete structure necessitates the clearing of land and everything on it. Consequently, those who live on the river's edge are bribed to relocate or, if

they resist, forcibly removed—often violently.² In 2009, the construction of Colombia's largest hydroelectric dam, El Quimbo, was given governmental approval by President Álvaro Uribe Vélez after nearly twenty years of rejected permits due to the dam's projected environmental impact on both the area's biodiversity and the communities who depended on it.³ The approval of El Quimbo instigated the formation of new coalitions who contested the dam's inevitable displacement of people and destruction of ecological health. Of particular concern were the impoverished farming and fishing communities who subsisted on the land and were now forcibly removed from their homes by Enel-Endesa, the corporation spearheading El Quimbo's construction. Unsurprisingly, Enel-Endesa is a Spanish-owned company and a subsidiary of an Italian utility company and their disregard for the local socio-environmental conditions of Colombia therefore continues the neocolonialist practice of foreigners (and especially Westerners) extracting and profiting from Latin American resources with little to no mention of the humanitarian and ecological consequences. Indeed, the systematic removal of bodies from sites of industrial development indicates the priorities of the controlling entity. In the case of El Quimbo (and any of the numerous dams that have been built throughout South America), both the government and corporations such as Enel-Endesa prioritize capital income over the lives of civilians. Enel-Endesa's effort to purchase, privatize, and subsequently profit from a strip of land inhabited by an array of animate beings objectifies and recolonizes a site that has already long been subjected to the whims of Western development.

The corruption of this system has leaked into the press, where little to no reporting of the violent removal of civilians has occurred. Recently over 270 people worldwide signed

1 Caycedo uses the term 'social agents' to describe rivers on her website. See Carolina Caycedo, <http://carolinacaycedo.com/esto-no-es-agua-this-is-not-water-2015>. Jane Bennett, *Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2010), xiii. Bennett links vitality with affect. "What I am calling impersonal affect or material vibrancy is not a spiritual supplement or 'life force' added to the matter said to house it. Mine is not a vitalism in the traditional sense; I equate affect with materiality, rather than posit a separate force that can enter and animate a physical body."

2 Large dams are estimated to have displaced over 40 million people worldwide. While all dams inherently affect their surrounding environment, large dams in particular are known to be ecologically destructive and productively deficient. For more on this topic, see Patrick McCully, *Silenced Rivers: The Ecology and Politics of Large Dams: Enlarged and Updated Edition*, (London: Zed, 2001). For a deeper look into people becoming displaced due to dam construction, see Rob Nixon, "Unimagined Communities: Megadams, Monumental Modernity, and Developmental Refugees," in *Slow Violence and the Environmentalism of the Poor* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2011), 150-151.

3 Carolina Caycedo, "Be Dammed," *Carolina Caycedo*, accessed October 29, 2018. <http://carolinacaycedo.com/wp-content/uploads/2015/11/BeDammedDAADBrochure1.pdf>.

and released an open letter outlining the brutality that has been invoked on those who resist displacement:

The region where the [Hidroituango] dam [in Colombia] is being built has been the site of more than 62 massacres in the last 30 years, with more than 3500 dead. These massacres facilitated the displacement of communities to make place for the project. Since the crisis started, several members of the Rios Vivos Movement—a social organization of riverside inhabitants opposing the construction of the dam—have been assassinated.⁴

The murder of resistant civilians is evidently part and parcel of dam construction, to the extent that the construction sites often become equipped with military presence to ward off any lingering or protesting residents. Caycedo's *Geochoreographies*, or collaborative actions, both revitalize the lives that have been disrupted and reconsider individual human subjectivities toward our animated planet and the social, political, and environmental fluctuations that affect it.⁵

Performative Protest

While the structure of the *Geochoreographies* is loose, activist groups, individuals, and Caycedo take part in collaborative actions that seek to reassert bodily presence on sites of displacement. *Be Dammed* is the result of years of field research, interviews, and collaboration with community members and previously established and sophisticated networks of local resistance groups such as Asoquimbo, or the Association of the Affected Peoples of Quimbo, and Jaguos por el Territorio. Within this dynamic Caycedo listens to the stories and lends her voice to their cause.⁶ The aesthetic or experiential component of the *Geochoreographies* is therefore formulated both dialogically and performatively, in an effort to make audible the voices that are otherwise silenced.⁷ Participants of the *Geochoreographies* therefore take part in community-building activities such as cooking meals together, organizing and participating in protests, and partaking in collaborative performances. In rebinding their own ruptured networks, the *Geochoreography* participants stress the significance of maintaining ecological systems rather than demolishing them in pursuit of capitalizing on natural resources. The *Geochoreographies* therefore often take place on sites of dam construction, where the participants counter the dam's erasure of life by moving their own

living bodies in concert with one another to envision the composite and dynamic organism that is the river.

For instance, Caycedo and 250 local community members executed *Geochoreography Ortiaguaz* (2015) as a means of exploring Colombia's Magdalena River as a connecting point between species, ecosystems, and social histories.⁸ In lying on the sand and linking their bodies to spell out words of resistance, such as "Rios Vivos," the participants asserted the river not only as a habitat for swarms of aquatic organisms, but as a living entity in itself, therefore visibly outlining the intricate ties between lively beings and materials that are disrupted by dam regulation (Figure 1). The participants' nonhierarchical methods of assembly were visibly spelled out when they aligned locally-gathered stones in the shape of concentric circles on the sand, an act that implied a sense of continuance or of becoming-with each other in troubling times.⁹ This motion of solidarity was certainly cemented by the materiality of the stones themselves: unyielding, organic, palimpsests of the river's environmental-historical memory (Figure 2).

In considering the histories of the river in a recent interview, Caycedo reflected on the Aymaran term *nayrapacha*, or "past-as-future," a notion that understands time as continuous and cyclical as the stones the participants arranged one after the other in concentric circles on the sand.¹⁰ In referring to the Magdalena as the Yuma River, its indigenously-given name, in another collaborative body-word performance, the *Geochoreography* participants blurred the boundaries between the river's past and present and alluded to its role as an ecological agent that continually evolves with the transforming social and political histories of Colombia. The river retains these histories as the ecosystem within and around it reflects the changes as time, people, and water move forward and disperse. As the participants continued *Geochoreography Ortiaguaz*, they repeatedly tossed and retrieved fishing nets into the river, defying their inevitably fishless future by performing a ritualistic carrying on of the quotidian tasks that would soon become irrelevant as the newly-built reservoir subsumed the river's perimeter and depopulated its waters. The river and all of its swimming inhabitants were therefore understood as reactive to the circumstances that impacted it and it is in this way a social agent—a living entity—that manifests the whims of human practices in its very constitution.

Recognizing the river's ecosystem as the complex and agentic network it is aligns with Bennett's theory of vital ma-

4 "Hidroituango Dam Crisis: We Demand Transparent Information that Privileges the People and the Environment, from the Government, EPM, and the Mainstream Media," June 11, 2018, <https://www.recuperare-lcauce.com/en/>.

5 Caycedo mentioned the term 'environmental-historical memory' in an interview. Carolina Caycedo (Artist), personal communication, January 31, 2019.

6 Ibid.

7 Grant Kester, "Dialogical Aesthetics" in *Conversation Pieces: Community and Communication in Modern Art*, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2004): 82-123.

8 At the time of the *Geochoreography*, the Magdalena's water was soon to be privatized by the Oporapa Dam, which was part of the Quimbo Hydroelectric Project.

9 I have Donna Haraway to thank for the term 'become-with,' who uses it consistently throughout her book *Staying with the Trouble: Making Kin in the Chthulucene* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2012).

10 Caycedo, personal communication, January 31, 2019. For more on *nayrapacha*, see Silvia Rivera Cusicanqui, "Aymara Past, Aymara Future," *Report on the Americas* 25, no. 3 (1991): 18-45. DOI: [10.1080/10714839.1991.11723133](https://doi.org/10.1080/10714839.1991.11723133)

terialisms, in which she questions why we perceive objects and materials as lifeless when they do indeed affect other things or beings, even if chemically. The ecological implication of this thinking is the ability to recognize not only the very interconnectedness of living beings in our many ecosystems, but also the agency inherent in even nonliving matter that, though it may not live and breathe, it retains a critical impact on the things that do. Caycedo's description of the river as a living agent is quite prescient considering the river's forceful currents, its cultivation of life and sustaining of elaborate webs of hungry creatures, or its sheer ability (though forced) to produce energy for entire cities of hectic humans to go about their days sending emails and riding subway trains. In recognizing the river as a living entity, Caycedo and her collaborators allude to both the agency and vitality that are hidden but present underneath the murky, moving surface of the Magdalena.

To be sure, while *Be Dammed* is created through conversation with activist groups and community members seeking palpable change, the project does not claim to outline a blueprint for achieving alternative energy production, but rather it focuses on consciousness-raising by offering a distinctive space in which to contemplate human individuals' subjective relations to the natural world, thus accentuating the connectivity between the politics, economics, species, matter, space, and time. Certainly, there are social practices such as the artist collective Ala Plastica that often do seek alternative development solutions to mega-construction projects such as dams. Like Caycedo, Ala Plastica collaborates with local communities to construct new social models to counter corporate privatization and destruction of land. However, the collective focuses on creating achievable alternatives to the corporate models of economic development, such as the cultivation of soil-stabilizing reeds as a natural system of ecological replenishment.¹¹ While such projects attempt to create sustainable models that counter environmentally destructive practices, Caycedo's work approaches these issues from an intellectual level by reading between the lines that have been fed to the public by the government, corporations, and mainstream media. In this way, her project arguably seeks alternatives to the very discourse of environmental issues.

While the implementation of stricter regulations on corporations would no doubt be welcome, *Be Dammed* instead takes to task the capitalistic and anthropocentric perception of the environment that led to these crises and therefore imagines how human practices could interact differently with our vibrant biosphere. The collaborative, conversational, and aesthetic dimension of the *Geochoreographies* thus operates as a perceptual experience, or as a process of working through the very social and political structures that have determined the river and its inhabitants as sub-

servient to the capitalist economy and subsequently finding new ways to subvert this thinking. The *Geochoreographies* therefore depart from the various activism already in place surrounding large-scale dams by harnessing the capabilities of ecological utopias to display the ties between social, political, and environmental developments—including our own mobility in forging new (and more sustainable) ways of enacting them. The notion of movement permeates the project both physically, by collectively moving the human body to maintain visibility on recently privatized land, and imaginatively, by creating a new discursive and relational dynamic to the mosaicked and animated networks that sustain our world.

Participation therefore serves as a platform on which to become-with each other in the present moment and envision a future in which humans have formed constellations of animacies and technologies that exist in a state of reciprocity rather than destruction. The *Geochoreographies* would not exist without the community members and activists who share their experiences with Caycedo. Their collective voices and actions therefore subvert the oppression that was imposed upon them by those complicit in the megadam construction. In this dynamic, participation becomes a liberating force, or a medium with which to claim agency in the face of the potentially catastrophic ramifications of social and environmental injustice. In maintaining systems of reciprocity, the performances are radical and perhaps representative of the sort of collaboration that humans are capable of taking up in order to build better relationships with our troubled planet.

Cosmic Ecologies

These counter-constellations of ecological reciprocity are continued in Caycedo's *Cosmotarrayas*, or hanging sculptures (Figure 3). Caycedo weaves into fishing nets miscellaneous objects such as shoes, garments, and plants that were relinquished to her by the fisher people whose use for them was rendered obsolete when the dam's construction eliminated the river's fish populations and consequently, their livelihoods. These *Cosmotarrayas* are assembled with one or several tree branches fastened at their centers to provide a support for both the attached objects and the net that is draped across them like an outer skin. Dangled from the gallery ceiling by a single cable, the assembled objects coalesce into corporeal forms that evoke a sense of home, of bodily presence as a means of resisting erasure, or of a continuance of what are otherwise fractured networks of life. The term *Cosmotarraya* is itself assembled from the notion of the *cosmos*, or a vision of the universe as a well-ordered whole, and *arraya*, a Spanish noun that translates to English as 'a cast net.'

These memory-laden objects recall Colombian artist Alicia Barney Caldas's *Diario* series, in which she compiles found objects into hanging sculptures to question the cycles of growth and decay that objects themselves experience in their interactions with their surrounded environment, as well as how these experiences speak to human practices and memory. Like Caldas's *Diarios*, Caycedo's *Cosmotarrayas*

11 See their initiative *Junco: Emergent Species* (1995) in Grant H. Kester, "Otros-Nosotros: An Interview with Ala Plastica," in *Collective Situations: Readings in Contemporary Latin American Art, 1995-2010*, ed. Bill Kelley Jr. and Grant H. Kester (Durham: Duke University Press, 2017), 259-278.

raise questions toward the previous owners of the assembled objects. In bridging the past and ongoing experiences of displaced peoples through their discarded objects, Caycedo once again aligns her work with the notion of *nayrapacha*, or the continuousness of time and the ability to reconsider the past in order to look into the future. The *Cosmotarrayas* therefore speak to the activism that persists even after the dam's completion and exemplify the collaborative and interdisciplinary networks that rebind fragmented publics. In all appearances, the *Cosmotarrayas* evoke a stillness that belies their history as mobile tools that were repeatedly thrown, gathered, and pulled through the water as it rushed through them, containing and sustaining life. In this way, their transformation from a utilitarian object to an art object mimics the dam's regulation of those lively bodies who occupy the river and the water's edge, and through their outward inertness these leftover objects bear the traces of the very forces who immobilized them.

The art-going audience of Los Angeles is therefore presented with otherworldly objects whose stories of displacement in the Global South critique the Western neoliberalist practices that the United States, too, takes part in. The work thus offers a heated commentary on the imbricated histories of colonialism, late capitalism, and environmental ruin that exacerbates loss of life, wealth inequality, and disempowerment. In taking to task these systems, the *Cosmotarrayas* strengthen the resistant voices of the displaced riverine communities in Colombia and push their stories into the national—and even global—memory.

In alluding to the presence of thousands of animated bodies, the *Cosmotarrayas* evoke a hovering and lifelike presence within the gallery, one not unlike the earlier work of Eva Hesse, whose woven work evoked a sense of bodily forms and social commentary. During this modernist moment, sculpture, as argued by Michael Fried, took on a lifelike presence in both its size and its invitation to the viewer to enter its surrounding space.¹² Parallel to this notion of sculptural presence, the bodies of Caycedo's *Cosmotarrayas* seem to levitate in the gallery, equally as adrift in the air between the floor and the ceiling as they were as fishing nets thrown into the air above the river's surface (Figure 4). As they loom above the viewer's head and cast shadows onto the walls of the gallery, the *Cosmotarrayas* both humble the viewer and beckon them closer to examine the objects entangled in the nets of the sculptures. The *Cosmotarrayas* are amalgamated with the very stuff that comprises the riverine communities, capturing within their nets the networks of life that the river fosters, from microorganisms to fish. Indeed, the crisscrossed weaving of the nets quite literally resemble these networks and are occasionally disrupted by an object that reminds the viewer of the human and nonhuman beings who, in reality, were indeed disrupted by dams such as the El Quimbo. With their shadowy, poignant presence in what is otherwise a

sterile space, the *Cosmotarrayas* metamorphose into celestial beings—born from a vision of the cosmos—and stand in as liaisons for all entities displaced by the building of dams.

Figuratively speaking, *Be Dammed* opens the floodgates for reinterpreting one's own position in relation to nature in order to develop a sharper criticality toward the financialization of nature and all of its vibrant entities. Despite the project's focus on themes of destruction and domination, it manages to prioritize the regeneration of social and ecological welfare. Theoretically, Caycedo could continue her *Be Dammed* project for years into the unforeseeable future. The global demand for energy production will not slow, and the support for large dams will likely parallel this trend. While one can hope for a rise in clean energy production, projects such as *Be Dammed* at the very least insist upon the entanglement of human practices, politics, and ecological welfare in order to offer new models for living. In joining forces with fellow opponents of ecological devastation, Caycedo illuminates a vision of our world as an exceptionally complex and vibrant mosaic in which even the very objects we carry, our histories, the infinitesimal organisms that go unseen, and materials like water are all vital to earthly experience.

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12 Michael Fried, "Art and Objecthood," in *Minimal Art: A Critical Anthology*, ed. Gregory Battcock (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995), 116-147.

Figure 2 [facing page, bottom]. Jaguos por el Territorio with Carolina Caycedo, *Geochoreography La Jagua*, site-specific collaborative action, 2015. Photo credit: Jaguos por el Territorio.



Figure 1. Jaguos por el Territorio with Rios Vivos and Carolina Caycedo, Geochoreography Oritoguaz, site-specific collaborative action with support of Mas Arte Mas Accion, 2015. Photo credit: Jaguos por el Territorio





Figure 3. Carolina Caycedo, *Cosmotarraya Yuma*, mixed media hanging sculpture, 2016. Photo credit: Carolina Caycedo.

Figure 4. Carolina Caycedo, *Cosmotarrayas*, mixed media hanging sculptures, 2016. Installation view at *Incerteza Viva*, 32nd São Paulo Biennial. Photo credit: Carolina Caycedo.



