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Water Knowledges: Engaged, Interdisciplinary Research and Practice

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The wars of . . . [the 21st] century will be fought over
water. . . .

—Ismail Serageldin (former Vice President, World Bank)

Aguakinesis

In a recent call to action, Josep M. Vilalta, the director of the Global University Network for Innovation, asked the key question: “how can the intellectual enjoyment of humanistic disciplines be facilitated and promoted in such a highly technical and utilitarian world?” Complementarily, he argues that humanities and arts in the 21st century must make common cause with the technical fields, seeking “frank and fruitful dialogue between science, technology, and the humanities, for the sake of the integral education of the people and in order to employ the best knowledge-integrating tools to deal with the human problems and realities of the early 21st century.” This Barcelona-based project — the Global University Network for Innovation — involving 230 institutions from 80 countries, speaks to similar concerns that animated the founders of *Imagining America* in the 1999 White House Millennium Council that gave rise to the latter organization, linking arts, humanities, design, and civic science in community engaged research and practice.

Yet, this call to rethink our intellectual investments, so stirring in concept, remains challenging in practice, as many of us still struggle to find a way to break out of our still-siloed disciplines, our scholarly divide from engagement with local communities, and our questions about how to create intellectual goods that are also tangible social goods. We are woefully short on strategies for how to work together, on many levels. In the particular instance described in this article, the co-authors come from engineering (Erika), social science (Carolina), and arts/humanities (Debra), creating — at the very least — an opportunity and necessity for patiently learning from one other and from one another’s disciplines, as we work our way through this collaborative project. To add to the complexity, other collaborators on the project that is at the core of this discussion also include a law professor, community members from several countries and several languages with varying levels of schooling, NGO activists, a music

producer, a filmmaker, photographers, plastic artists, performers, and university students from three institutions.¹ Thus, the core challenge in this first instance is methodological — how do we speak across academic disciplines, scientific and artistic forms, different languages, cultures, noncongruent understandings and local knowledges? What common vocabulary can we develop as we commit to a shared proposal? How does a civic engagement project with social justice goals contribute to any of the familiar forms of sharing knowledge, in any of our disciplines, or any of the communities with which we interact?

Aguakinesis was a multinational, multidisciplinary performance and installation project focusing on our relationship to water. This project, collaboratively developed over a period of nine months, and presented in four sites during 2018-19, involved a core group of artists, scholars, and community leaders from the United States, Mexico, Venezuela, Ecuador, and Colombia, working closely on issues of water and land rights, organizing, resistance, and sovereignty, alongside other community collaborators and students.

This generative process resulted in an installation featuring works of art and performance that were then combined in a modular, portable, and flexible manner into a traveling exhibition. The largest and most ambitious versions of the show took place at the Community School of Music and Arts in downtown Ithaca during Latinx Heritage Month, in October 2018, and at the Universidad Autónoma de Chiapas in Tuxtla Gutiérrez, Mexico in April 2019 during the Jornada de Ingeniería. They included installations, original music, live dance, participatory art activities, photographs, videos, and other artworks created by the participants. Smaller exhibitions took place at the Universidad del Magdalena, Santa Marta, Colombia (September 2018), and at Cornell University’s Global Grand Challenges symposium (November 2018).

For context and enriching parallels with this interactive and community engaged project, we were inspired by the work of people like the artist-activist Basia Irland, whose art — ice books, river essays, and hydrolibros — focuses on international water issues, reminding us that “we are water.” As Irland writes on her website: “Water meanders in and out of every discipline, so we can never have too many poets, hydrologists, urban planners, biologists, lawyers, writers, physicians, NGOs, or geologists working to amplify and aid water’s voice. One of the things that sustains me is that most of my projects happen within the context of a local community—and it is the people with whom I work who keep me going.”

We are likewise energized by projects like the “Arcadia Earth Museum,” the extraordinary interactive exhibit/installation showing in New York City in late 2019, as well as the more modest projects documented in the Winter 2018-2019 issue of *Bomb* focusing on water, that includes snippets of references to installations, graphic art, poems, music, essays, interviews, a collaborative ethnography, and a play. Among the projects excerpted in *Bomb*’s pages, we find many parallels between the thinking that went into *Aguakinesis* with Oscar Tuazon’s installation, “Water School”; direct, albeit coincidental, correspondences between Monique Verdin and Raymond Jackson’s collaborative photo-poetry-storytelling, *Return to the Yakne Chitto*, and the eco-photography competition in Chiapas; echoes of similar motivations in Johanna Lou Hoyer’s “Symphony for Wind and Waves” and Andrés Pérez Hernández’s original compositions for our show; even startling resonances between Stefan Helmreich’s personal essay, “Domesticating Waves in the Netherlands,” and Rosalie Purvis’ personal story of growing up in the Netherlands, along with the video of Erika Díaz, “Conquista del océano,” inspired in response to that story.

Additionally, in *The American Museum of Water*, prominent Mojave poet Natalie Diaz writes, in words that eerily echo the plight of indigenous communities suffering from a lack of water in water-rich Chiapas:

U.S. Companies buy the rights to water
in other countries. These American companies
do not know the stories or gods of those waters,
do not love them or the people who drink from them,
were not formed from them, have never said *Gracias*
to these waters, never prayed to them,
have never been cleansed by those waters.

The U.S. companies announce, with armed guards,
You can't drink from this lake anymore. The Natives
gather rain instead, open their beautiful mouths to the sky. . . .
(143)

Diaz explicitly brings into sharp focus the critical importance of the Native perspective, a concern threaded through our work as well. For instance, one of our central collaborators, Isabela Figueroa, a human rights lawyer, has been centrally involved in working for indigenous rights for the Mamo people in the Sierra Nevada/Santa Marta region of Colombia; one of her contributions to the exhibition was a video that

documented their struggle to retain access to their sacred lands and waters.

Another vision was brought by Peter Jemison, a Seneca leader from the Haudenosaunee confederacy. As he tells the stories of his people’s history with the U.S. government, he references a treaty with guarantees in perpetuity, signed by President George Washington, including beautiful, water rich territory recently threatened (until the 2016 New York State ban) with the highly polluting and invasive technique of hydrofracking for natural gas. It is a treaty his people have never violated, but that has been abrogated persistently over the last 250 years. His “Water is Life” mural tells part of that Seneca story. Other parallel stories speak to the Tsotsil and Tzeltal peoples of highland Chiapas, where water shortages in San Cristóbal de Las Casas, Chamula and San Felipe Ecatepec occur as the local Coca Cola plant drains away more than a million liters (300,000 gallons of water) a day.² Fundación Cántaro Azul works with communities that suffer from a lack of access to potable water, and Erika Díaz Pascacio engages local communities in the Río Sabinal urban watershed in clean-up efforts.

In each production of *Aguakinesis*, we invited community members to participate in conversations and workshops around the exhibit, on and off campus, and to collaborate on the show and in the community in different ways, depending on the location. Thus, for example, in Mexico we did an improvisation workshop for engineering students at the Universidad Autónoma de Chiapas (UNACH), and hosted an exhibition and a playback theater workshop, including interactive art activities, in the José Emilio Pacheco bookstore. We also worked with a local NGO, Fundación Cántaro Azul, on a leadership training for “gestoras de agua” in Berriozábal, Chiapas, a pilot program in remote communities, involving theatrical games and story circles to support capacity building among local women.

Here, our story runs into a major snag. Those of us who work in performance understand our projects to be timebound and evanescent. A performance is shown a limited number of times; a play has a run in a theatre and then the theatre moves on to the next show; a gallery is available for an installation for a specific period of time. In some sense this is absolutely fine; an art event like *Aguakinesis* is meant to stir conversation and add to community engagement with a call to action about the urgency and complexity of the issue we are addressing. And then the show closes. One issue, shared with anyone who works in live theatre or performance, is how to continue communication with our various audiences once the show has closed.

We have done academic presentations about this project in various professional locations, and this article is, of course, one more example of a traditional form of knowledge sharing in our academic circles.

Another, more important, concern is how to fulfill our commitments to communities and organizations we have touched with this work, and in whom we created certain expectations of continuity. The nature of artistic shows and performances runs up against other concerns when, as in shows like ours, the time-based installation is complemented by workshops that may raise expectations in the communities visited.

In the case of this project, more pointedly, it was clear that the workshops we did in the communities in upstate New York, Santa Marta, Colombia, and Chiapas, Mexico could not be one-off events. Rather they had to be viewed as opening moves in an ongoing, sustained conversation that committed all three of us to a much longer-term collaboration with community partners. Thus, to take one key example that we will discuss more fully below, the enthusiastic response to the pilot program in Berriozábal opened the possibility of extending our collaboration into a long-term partnership with both the municipal authorities and the NGO that has given us their trust. Carolina, for instance, now has plans to center her Ph.D. dissertation work on this project, including developing programs for NGO leaders and local performers and participating in workshops in another 30+ communities. Erika has found herself deeply drawn into discussions about watershed management and conflict resolution in areas where water access is hotly contested and often polluted.

Importance of Water in Our Dialogue

Our bodies are 60% water, a vital substance that needs to be constantly replenished. The World Health Organization (WHO) recommends a basic level of 20 liters of water a day per person for food and hygiene purposes, and their studies show that a shocking four out of ten people in the world are affected by water scarcity (United Nations, “Water”). Yet that is only part of the story. “Mere access is not enough,” says Kelly Ann Naylor, Associate Director of Water, Sanitation and Hygiene, United Nation’s Children’s Fund (UNICEF). In the WHO report on inequalities in access to safe drinking water and sanitation, the investigators found that more than half of the world does not have access to safe sanitation. Naylor continues: “Children and their families in poor and rural communities are most at risk of being left behind. . . . If the water isn’t clean, isn’t safe to drink or is far away, and if toilet access is unsafe or limited, then we’re not delivering . . .

this essential human right” (cit. in World Health Organization, “One in Three”).

While in densely populated areas pipe water is the least costly method to provide water, in rural settings where pipelines are unavailable people mostly rely on wells or community water supply systems (water trucks, vendors), which often cost several times more for a lower quality of water, worsening inequities between the rich and disadvantaged (UNESCO, “World Water Assessment Programme” [WWAP]). Inadequate access to water and sanitation was also associated with nearly one million deaths from diarrhea and cholera in 2019 (WWAP). Thus, improving access to water supply and sanitation services requires different approaches when addressing the needs of the growing population of urban centers vs. people in rural areas. This is very much true in the communities we work with in Berriozábal, where the municipal authority is sympathetic to the needs of far-flung communities in the district, but cannot afford the infrastructure to extend water pipelines.

Indeed, as if to confirm Serageldin’s statement that “the wars of . . . [the 21st] century will be fought over water” —originally formulated in 1995 as a dire prediction—, 1999-2000 brought us the Water Wars in Cochabamba, Bolivia. More recently, in June 2019, water completely ran out in Chennai, India, a city of over seven million people. The 21st century has seen the unofficial, but overwhelmingly visible recognition of the category of “climate refugee,” as people from many parts of the Global South flee the life-threatening effects of drought or flood. It seems that everywhere we look people are struggling with issues of water — too much water, too little water, contaminated water, politicized policies around pure water which (as in Chiapas, Mexico) is extracted by the multinational corporation, Coca Cola, for the booming bottled water market, leaving locals in this highland city literally high and dry (López and Jacobs).

At the same time, more privileged members of global communities (as in Santa Marta, Colombia) flock to beaches to enjoy swimming and water sports, closing the pathway to sacred sites for Indigenous people. Although the “Human Rights-Based Approach” (HRBA), outlined by the United Nations Sustainable Development Group, advocates for the fundamental standards and principles of non-discrimination and participation that requires active, free, and meaningful participation for stakeholders (UNESCO, “United Nations World Water Development Report” [WWDR]), inequity is particularly visible in remote, rural areas. Conflicts flaring up for access to water have been characterized by ineffectiveness and inefficiencies in water

management of government and institutions (Castro). This state of affairs is neither technical, nor “natural,” but rather a crisis of good governance (UNESCO, *Water*).

In many areas of Mexico, poor access to water has become a source of conflicts between communities. The water governance framework of Mexico spans multiple levels of government: federal, regional, state, and municipal authorities are all involved. However, municipalities are certainly principal actors in water governance. Water is regulated through a National Water Law and state-level laws. Various Ministries have a chief mandate ensuring the security and sustainability of Mexico’s water resources, as well as managing water rights and overseeing the development of the country’s hydrologic infrastructure (Kruckova and Turner). Since the 1980s, the federal government adopted a more decentralized model, giving a greater role to the state and municipal governments in water resource management (Gutiérrez Villalpando et al.). The Comisión Nacional del Agua (CONAGUA) operates at national and regional levels in thirteen divisions through Basin Agencies (Organismos de Cuencas), and it supports its operation through Basin Councils (Consejos de Cuenca) that tend to represent all levels of government, along with corporate users, citizens, and non-governmental organizations. Nevertheless, in practice they rarely amalgamate and represent all users (Kruckova and Turner). Low levels of education, poor management capacity, corruption, and a lack of will on the part of the authorities make the legal system inoperative and have severe effects on poverty, marginalization, discrimination and, ultimately, they represent an evident violation of human rights in these communities.

How should we respond to these challenges? This article focuses on one modest intervention that began with *Aguakinesis* and has now expanded into a deeper interaction with the challenges facing local communities in a specific municipality in Chiapas. We make no claims to large accomplishments, but rather celebrate small, realistic goals, and focus on how this collaborative project, along with its associated pilot programs and workshops, supports the goals of opening important conversations about water and facilitating the relationship and knowledge sharing on this topic.

Civic Engagement and Social Justice

Orlando Fals Borda, one of the founders of participatory action research, asks us to think about how the process of intellectual inquiry itself shapes the kind of story we tell in our research, and how the often-unexplored grounding inherited from intellectual disciplines

shape what we think, constrains how we think it, and affects how we **communicate** about our research. In a much-cited quote from a talk he **gave** in Atlanta, Georgia in 1995, Fals Borda addresses fellow social **scientists** with a challenge to reimagine our intellectual toolbox:

Do not monopolize your knowledge nor impose arrogantly your technique, but respect and combine your skills with the knowledge of the researched or grassroots communities, taking them as full partners and co-researchers. Do not trust elitist versions of history and science which respond to dominant interests but be receptive to counter-narratives and try to recapture them. Do not depend solely on your culture to interpret facts, but recover local values, traits, beliefs, and arts for action by and with the research organizations. Do not impose your own ponderous scientific style for communicating results, but diffuse and share what you have learned together with the people, in a manner that is wholly understandable and even literary and pleasant, for science should not be necessarily a mystery nor a monopoly of experts and intellectuals. (“Research for Social Justice”)

Those four points, cited above, continue to resonate. More than a half century after Latin American thinkers challenged the world to think and **not** differently about knowledge production, scholars and activists in the Global North, reeling in the wake of the most recent wave of **attacks** on higher education, are turning once again to thinkers like Fals Borda (or in some cases, rediscovering the wheel) for theories and **methods** of how to effectively work with our students, and with other **publics**, for the common good. Recent indigenous scholars like Kim TallBear re-emphasize these points, adding: “what we want is **democratic** knowledge production. . . . It is also helpful to think **creatively** about the research process as a relationship building process, **as a** professional networking process with colleagues (not ‘subjects’)” (2).

For Carolina and Debra, the methodology that led to *Aguakinesis* began with a decolonial theoretical foundation illuminated by thinkers like Paulo Freire and Orlando Fals Borda, and a story circle methodology adapted from Augusto Boal via Roadside Theater.³ Erika, an empirical scientist who has worked in industry and government, as well as university teaching, brings her rigorous process-based training to our work. We began our discussions with a core group of collaborators distributed across our various geographical spaces and explored our first ideas about the project in biweekly Skype meetings. From the very beginning, we recognized that for this project

to be truly collaborative, we needed to fully integrate all of our collaborators as co-producers and equal partners of both theoretical and grounded material knowledge, interrupting comfortable academic hierarchies and understandings of the respective roles of faculty, students, and community members. We began with a formal story circle, telling our water stories in turn, and then elaborating on these stories in subsequent meetings. These stories were translated into activist goals, into artistic projects, and into new ways of analyzing and commenting on key thinkers, leading as well to additional invitations to further collaborators. This shared and collaboratively constructed knowledge — conveyed through (his)story, photography, artwork, legal cases, and accounts of water management processes — served as a fundamental backbone to our collaborative thinking, moving the project forward.

Paulo Freire is a key interlocutor. Writing from Brazil around the same time as Fals Borda was formulating his theory of participatory action research in Colombia, in his influential *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (1968), Freire outlines and rejects the “banking” approach to knowledge in favor of an emphasis on co-creation. The banking model is familiar to us from traditional lecture formats, in which students are asked to passively take notes or learn from textbooks. Freire proposes a more agile, dialogic, theme-based approach: “In problem-posing education, people develop their power to perceive critically *the way they exist* in the world *with which* and *in which* they find themselves; they come to see the world not as a static reality but as a reality in process, in transformation” (83). There has been a cascade of work since the mid-twentieth century responding to Freire’s invitation, most recently in the outpouring of findings about the pedagogical value of the flipped classroom, and the increasingly convincing studies about the advantages of community engaged practice for learning and retention in all fields of study. More generally, however, we take Freire’s approach not just as a theoretical intervention in the field of formal education practice, but rather as a methodology for collaborative research and community-engaged work in a social justice setting more broadly.

Fals Borda challenges us to reimagine the orientation of our academic research, to theorize beyond structures inherited from Eurocentrism, something implicit in his second and third points of the Atlanta address to fellow social scientists: “Do not trust elitist versions of history and science. . . . Do not depend solely on your culture. . . .?” Fals Borda’s main concern here is with the developmentalist model of scientific inquiry that remains still too pervasive in northern circles and is often framed through a deficit understanding of “helping” less

fortunate people rather than beginning with an asset-based structure of collaborative work. Likewise, in a parallel way, a decolonial project that does not make its theoretical grounding accessible, that is primarily text-based and associated with the humanities fields, is not doing enough; it is, at worst, another form of elitism, a type of ventriloquism, another kind of colonialism. Along with Freire, Boal, Conquergood, and others, Fals Borda emphasizes that any discrete field of academic endeavor (elite science, art, history) — understood through a single cultural lens and the banking model of information transfer — is not enough. It is not enough to fit the complexity and flux of our times; it is not enough to illuminate the human stakes in making change possible; it is not enough for a social justice agenda that hopes to reach the many publics we need to engage.

The university setting and the flipped classroom represent one form of applying Freire’s concepts; the preliminary work we developed in the communities of the municipality of Berriozábal, Chiapas, offers a point of entry for critique. These workshops speak to an unstated challenge to Freire’s underpinning assumptions: what do we do when working with knowledge bearers whose culture has trained them to silence — that is, how do we get the collaborators to speak up for themselves and tell their stories?

For his part, following explicit inspiration from Freire, Augusto Boal strongly believed in turning passive theatre goers into what he calls “spect-actors,” who participate in the creation of meaning through interactions with the performance. Through the techniques he developed beginning in the 1950s, and consolidated in his *Theatre of the Oppressed*, Boal facilitated work in (mostly) marginalized communities, where people used theatrical devices to create and perform stories from their lives; the spect-actor is invited to interrupt the performance and propose new ways of resolving the dilemma posed. Boal’s influence was global, serving as the backbone for performance ethnography, documentary theatre, story circle methodologies, and playback theatre, among other recent developments: all are key methodologies behind our project(s).

Boal and Freire continue to be essential thinkers for NGOs as well. To take a case in point, we go no further than the world’s largest and longest-lived social movement, the Brazilian Landless Workers Movement (or MST, its Portuguese acronym for *Movimento dos Trabalhadores Rurais Sem Terra*). The MST is a poor person’s movement, with limited resources, yet it has over 1.5 million members and has inspired organizations throughout Latin America and the world. The organization is flexible, versatile, and innovative, using

dynamic, multidimensional networks to achieve its goals of creating opportunities for landless peasants to settle and work underused land. Along the way it also established 161 cooperatives, 4 credit unions, and 1,800 schools, as well as a national university (Carter 8-10). With a pedagogical practice directly inherited from Freire, and strategies borrowed from Boal, MST's educational goal is to help people think critically and act strategically. Thus, their schools teach critical thinking, while emphasizing the importance of cultivating organic ties with their base communities.

Our goal, like that of these key thinkers, is *concientización*, supporting activities that develop critical reflection skills to better deal with a swiftly changing reality. One setting for this work was institutional, and we recognize the pragmatics of a dialogue with sites of power, however constituted, as one important location for social change. Cornell's Global Grand Challenges symposium intentionally created a high-level forum for identifying key issues that would become central focal themes for university emphasis and investment, and we were delighted to learn that the university administration chose the theme of "migration" as its first focus. Likewise, UNACH's Jornada de Ingeniería brought together the entire university in a series of activities that celebrated accomplishments in both the arts and engineering.

However, the academic institution can never be the only setting; hence, our emphasis is on exhibitions and workshops in and open to other communities as an integral part of the interactive experience we called "*Aguakinesis*." For instance, although the members of these remote communities in the municipality of Berriozábal, Chiapas were not able to come to Tuxtla Gutiérrez for the installation and events around it at UNACH, the story circles used with two groups of women demonstrated the potential of arts and theater to create spaces for them to open up to dialogue and to develop the sense of community they needed to manage natural resources such as water.

There is very little formal, academic work done on the relation of women to the particular water rights issues in the rural areas of Chiapas, with the foundational work done by Gutiérrez Villalpando and her collaborators in the Río Sabinal and Cañón del Sumidero watersheds of Berriozábal as a rare exception. In that 2018 study, the researchers used the familiar social science tools of participant observation, recorded interviews with key individuals, and employed structured questionnaires to explore the question of women's participation in the *comités del agua* in 46 communities in these watersheds. As they say in their article, "there are practically no studies

on the participation of women in water management schemes, despite the recent occurrence of a series of climactic events as well as social and political issues related to water" (Gutiérrez Villalpando, et al. 455). In framing these key political issues, the authors remind us that "Chiapas is one of the Mexican states with the largest water resources and contributes 40% of the hydroelectric power of the country" (455). Thus, it is a state that is very rich in water; yet, 25% of the population, especially in rural areas, suffers from problems of water access and water quality. Many communities rely on natural springs that run dry for long periods of time, or wells located on private land to which they have only intermittent access.

The authors of that study were faced with a problem: despite the fact that almost all decisions about water are made by women, they have a very low representation on community decision-making bodies. According to the study, in the 46 communities surveyed, of the 25 with water committees, only 8 included women in their membership (457). The Gutiérrez Villalpando et al. project explores the reason for this puzzling mismatch, eventually concluding that there are two main barriers: (1) "in some Tsotsil indigenous communities . . . the participation of women in the water committees has been banned" (463), which responds to traditional "usos y costumbres" in many indigenous communities that limit all positions of authority to married men; (2) in other communities, "opportunities for female participation are only generated when these activities have low prestige among men" (463). In either case, then, women's voices go either unheard, or are unlikely to be considered at a time when the Mexican federal government is emphasizing a decentralized model of local control and co-responsibility.

This is the challenge faced by Fundación Cántaro Azul in their work on capacity building among rural women for leadership roles around water issues. Clearly, there are difficulties in working through existing water committees. Likewise, the traditional NGO's modes of coalition building or consensus building are insufficient, as they would rely on a model in which women are presumed to already have a place at the table. Thus, we piloted with Fundación Cántaro Azul a pair of workshops in local communities in Berriozábal that would take a step back in terms of capacity building, by creating opportunities for women to speak about water in a safe, woman-only space. But, first of all, to speak through a series of carefully calibrated, theatrical exercises and a story circle, women's stories about their relationship to water was given a central attention. Initially, some of the women had great difficulty telling their stories, while others struggled to find their position in the realities they have faced with water. Nonetheless, the fact of engaging

all of us in an experience that involved the body, stories, listening and memories, made it possible to break down power relationships and barriers to finding common concerns and creating a sense of community.

While these two-hour pilot exercises did not begin to address the very serious and real challenges the communities face, both the women in the communities and the facilitators for Fundación Cántaro Azul were highly encouraged by the results. Every single woman spoke; every woman had a story to tell. When small groups chose a particular story for reenactment in a tableau, the story tellers felt even more empowered — their stories were validated by the community, and suddenly they could see them from another perspective.

Paying attention is our first form of respect, as well as the core of the story circle methodology. Human beings love narrative, love to tell stories; however, the key to the story circle is not telling the best story, but rather being respectful listeners to others' stories, a form of active attention that is then, in Boalian fashion, put into the service of reflection and critique through our responses. In the best of cases, these responses open space for further reflection, additional interaction, more story. We don't have any academic conclusions to this project because, like life, and unlike artificially limited work, we see this project as a journey taken in the company of others, rather than a destination at which a lone scholar arrives.

Where We Go Next

We noted above that the workshops we did with Fundación Cántaro Azul were a woman-only space. We considered this a crucial feature, given that we knew many women from these remote communities would find the presence of men a severely constraining factor. Thus, the members of Fundación Cántaro Azul who organized the events and participated in them were both women: the photographer was a woman and the (male) mayor of Berriozábal was represented by a female municipal authority. Erika is one of only 10% of her colleagues in the Engineering College at her university who is female; Carolina and Debra — the two outsiders to Chiapas — are also women.

There have been several recent developments in the plan to return to Chiapas to do workshops with women in the 30+ communities of the municipality. First, Citlalli and Olivia from Fundación Cántaro Azul and Cynthia from Sistema de Agua Potable y Alcantarillado Municipal (SAPAM) have reported on visits to the area in the months following the workshops; they confirmed in a November 2019 Skype

call that the communities are indeed very interested in having us come (or return) to do more workshops and activities. However, they also report that the menfolk have expressed strong interest in getting involved, even to the point of saying that they might no longer allow their women to participate if men are not included. We clearly need to think about strategies that will be effective in this changing environment.

Second, community members have expressed interest in developing conflict resolution tools that can help them address issues arising from problems over access to water, especially during the dry season, an increasingly severe problem in recent years with climate change affecting the frequency and intensity of the rain. Carolina is working on team-building, theatrical exercises. Erika will be sharing conflict resolution techniques, as well as coordinating story circles in response to these concerns.

Finally, there is a developing interest in creating attractive community spaces for shared use. Erika plans to work with Fundación Cántaro Azul and local Water Committee members to collaboratively develop and paint murals in selected communities that would like to have them, bringing the artistic project that began with *Aguakinesis* full circle back to engaged, collaborative, artistic work. There is already another, very beautiful artistic project generated for other purposes by Fundación Cántaro Azul and the municipality, in which community members created models of water access and use in their communities to explain their concrete situation to authorities and representatives of NGOs.

Beginning modestly from sharing our own stories about water, *Aguakinesis* asks how we can complicate discursive frameworks around ecocritique and inequality studies, while remaining accessible, reaching towards a conversation about the complexity of water in a collaborative, interactive project. It operates at and across the boundaries of scientific research, performance (auto)ethnography, participatory action, installation art, and the college classroom. In this respect, the collaborators on this project are also part of a larger community of artists, scholars, and activists who are asking urgent questions about their role in the face of looming catastrophe. It is a complex and multifaceted activity, for which the traditional academic measuring sticks of experimental, or artistic, or academic success/failure do not quite hit the mark.

Notes

1. The principal collaborators on *Aguakinesis* were the following:
Professors: Debra Castillo (USA), Comparative Literature, Latina/o Studies, Cornell University — border theory, performance; Erika Díaz Pascacio (Mexico), Engineering, Universidad Autónoma de Chiapas, Mexico — watershed management, environmental protection, community engagement; Isabela Figueroa (Brazil-Colombia), Law, Universidad del Magdalena, Santa Marta, Colombia — international human rights, indigenous rights.
Ph.D. Students: Carolina Osorio Gil (Colombia/USA), Cornell University — development sociology, social justice activism in rural communities; Andrés Pérez Hernández (Colombia), Universidad de los Andes, Bogotá — journalism, music production, composer; Rosalie Tamar Purvis (Netherlands/USA), Cornell University — theatre arts, director and choreographer.
Community: Valentina Benavides (Ecuador-Ithaca, USA) — filmmaker and anthropologist; Cecelia Chapa Ochoa (Mexico-Rochester, USA) — artist; Margarita Gutiérrez Vizcaino (Mexico) — environmental engineer, Directora del Area de Incidencia y Cambio Sistémico, Fundación Cántaro Azul. Olivia Hernández Gómez (Mexico) — sociologist, facilitator, Fundación Cántaro Azul; Yonali Hernández Ávila (Mexico) — biologist, government representative, municipality of Berriozábal, Chiapas; G. Peter Jemison (Heron clan, Seneca nation) — artist, Site Manager, Ganondagan State Historic Site; Cynthia Ortiz (Mexico), Sistema de Agua Potable y Alcantarillado Municipal/Potable Water and Municipal Sewage System, SAPAM, municipality of Berriozábal, Chiapas; Mar Pérez (Venezuela-Ithaca, USA) — photographer, artist; Citlalli del Carmen Ventura Tamayo (Mexico) — biologist, facilitator, Fundación Cántaro Azul.
2. While the focus of this article is on water, the allusion to Coca Cola's depredations in Chiapas, and the adverse effect on the health of people without access to potable water who use Coke as a supposedly safer option, have been well documented by scholars like Alyshia Gálvez in her important book, *Eating NAFTA*.
3. We acknowledge the important work inspired by Dwight Conquergood as well, who opened up the vital and evolving field of performance ethnography in the late 1980s. In Della Pollock's helpful summary, the major contributions to ethnography from the field of performance studies include: 1. Refocus ethnography as a project of co-performers rather than a researcher and research

subject/object; 2. Reimagine scholarship in a performance framework; 3. Emphasize the doing, the kinetic value of action and activism (325).

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