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2021

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UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA SAN DIEGO

Rizomas, Ecofeminism and Ecocinema in the Twenty First Century Climate Emergency

A thesis submitted in partial satisfaction of the requirements
for the degree Master of Fine Arts

in

Visual Arts

by

Carolina Montejo

Committee in Charge:

Professor Babette Mangolte, Chair
Professor Anna Joy Springer
Professor Michael Trigilio
Professor Alena Williams

2021

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University of California San Diego

2021

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Dedication

To my ancestors, especially Ana Franco and María de los Santos Cárdenas,

To my grandmothers Matilde Cárdenas and Rosalba Tarazona,

To my mother Angélica and my sister Paola,

To my daughter Olivia,

Epigraphs

“Today we are faced with a challenge that calls for a shift in our thinking, so that humanity stops threatening its life-support system. We are called to assist the Earth to heal her wounds and in the process heal our own - indeed to embrace the whole of creation in all its diversity, beauty and wonder. Recognizing that sustainable development, democracy and peace are indivisible is an idea whose time has come”

Wangari Maathai

“Digging deep is what art is all about.”

Agnes Denes

“There is no single concept of nature; it embraces everything that is fluid, changing, and mysterious. Ultimately, however, to “know nature” on earth is to live within it and to revere it in every way.”

Carolyn Merchant

“We must shake our conscience free of the rapacious capitalism, racism and patriarchy that will only assure our own self destruction.”

Bertha Cáceres

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ABSTRACT OF THE THESIS

Rizomas, Ecofeminism and Ecocinema in the Twenty First century Climate Emergency

by

Carolina Montejo

Master of Fine Arts

in Visual Arts

University of California San Diego, 2021

Professor Babette Mangolte, Chair

This paper presents the historical and theoretical context that supported the creation of my thesis film *Rizomas* and its relation to feminism, ecology, and climate justice. Through a framework based on research, practice, and experimentation of digital and analogue media techniques, as well as artistic mediums such as performance, poetry and installation, I put forward personal experiences with ayahuasca and their influence on the progression of my work. Additionally, I address the critical theories and artistic influences that were imperative during my creative process, while highlighting the importance of wholeness, care, and life affirming action

as guiding principles. Lastly, I focus on the ways in which these findings and the eclectic nature of the film traced a new ethical framework that I will carry on in my future as a researcher and filmmaker.

Keywords: Ecofeminism, ecocinema, art, feminism, ecology, film, ayahuasca, performance art, advocacy, documentary

Introduction

Under the bodily effects of Yagé—a vernacular term from Colombia for the entheogenic substance of Ayahuasca—socially-constructed notions of the world as a series of binary hierarchies are revealed as illusions. The boundaries that systematically refrain us from seeing the interdependence of form, perception, and place across lifeforms and social groups are dissipated by rituals of song and imagination that attempt to chant truth into existence. The veracity of the experience is such that even in complete surrender and respect for its spiritual unfolding, one can recognize the gestures of colonialism and the coming together of natural and human histories with all their contradictory baggage. The journey is consequential, as Mother Ayahuasca presents themselves as a force that extracts, expands, and inhabits all at once. Their power is not ruthless, but can not be mistaken for a recreational commodity one will exit untouched. ‘Coming together’ with ‘*la medicina*’¹ is a process of time that will ultimately signify ‘coming into one’s own’; yet the self will not be separate from the rest of the world.

Through oral tradition, Colombian yagé-culture has told the myth that ayahuasca ‘finds you when you are ready.’ If you are not, they will be as elusive as a bird in flight. For years I heard this story and wondered if my time would ever come. Interested in psychology and transformation, but fearful of psychological confrontation, the idea of an unhinged mind, as well as the discomfort of the body, I distanced myself from the many stories told by friends and acquaintances and focused on seeking other types of knowledge. In the years that led up to becoming a graduate student at UC San Diego, I sorted through books and memories with no other guide, but my instincts and a handful of authors and artists that had remained in my

¹ In Colombian yagé-culture, ‘*la medicina*’ is an alternate term for Ayahuasca

thoughts from my undergraduate years. My artistic approach was experimental in nature, framed outside of scholarly efforts of mastery, and focused on using photography to express and question the symbolic cycles and disturbances of my subconscious. Keeping writing by my side as an intimate amulet, I looked towards classic and modern literature and philosophy like signs on a roadmap that would steer my own ideas. The stylistic progression that James Joyce modeled from *Dubliners* to *Ulysses* was an aspiration to experiment from the farthest and most incomprehensible parts of my psyche, while Virginia Woolf's *Orlando* and *A Room of One's Own* became the evidence of oppression and emancipation that lead me to question my weakest points, as well as those of the culture I was embedded in. With Plato's *Republic*, I was prompted to unfold my internal monologue into discourse, and Umberto Eco and Italo Calvino's *Norton Lectures (Six Walks in the Fictional Woods and Six Memos for the Next Millennium)* amplified the role of narrative strategy as a tangible bridge into the moving image—a challenge that could “weave together different kinds of knowledge and different codes into a pluralistic, multifaceted vision of the world.” (Calvino, 2006)

As I was intellectually awakened by these ideas, the visual components of my work were influenced by the history of photography, mainly through the work of early pictorialists such as Oscar Rejlander and Henry Peach Robinson. Their early compositing technologies coincided with my own desires to expand the representational and narrative properties of still images and eventually led me to several years of photographic experimentation that included digital manipulation, *mise-en-scène*, and performance. While immersed in ‘the photographic’ at my collaborative gallery Galería MÜ² in Bogotá, I constantly felt held back, and longed for

² Galería MÜ was a fine-art photography gallery I co-owned and co-directed with my husband Andrew Utt in the Macarena Art District in Bogotá, Colombia from 2010-2015

a transition into writing, a component of my work that had remained entirely private until then. In 2014, my work, *Era: Fragments of an evolving Landscape* [later known as *Mission Ceres*] (see figures 1-3), became an opportunity to test what I had learned and broaden the technical scope of my work. Linking visual and literary narratives with technology, philosophy and information, I wrote a short story about C.A.L.I (Containing. All. Landscape. Information) an artificially sentient satellite built to awaken in a post-human outer-space and create a ‘self’ based on an archive of images, human memories and scientific facts. In addition to the story and several related poems, *Mission Ceres* became a body of work with over 50 photo-composites, two site-specific installations, as well as a series of videos, books, and objects.



Figure 1: Photo Composite titled ‘Stream’, Part of Mission Ceres, Inkjet print, Variable dimensions,
Carolina Montejo, 2018

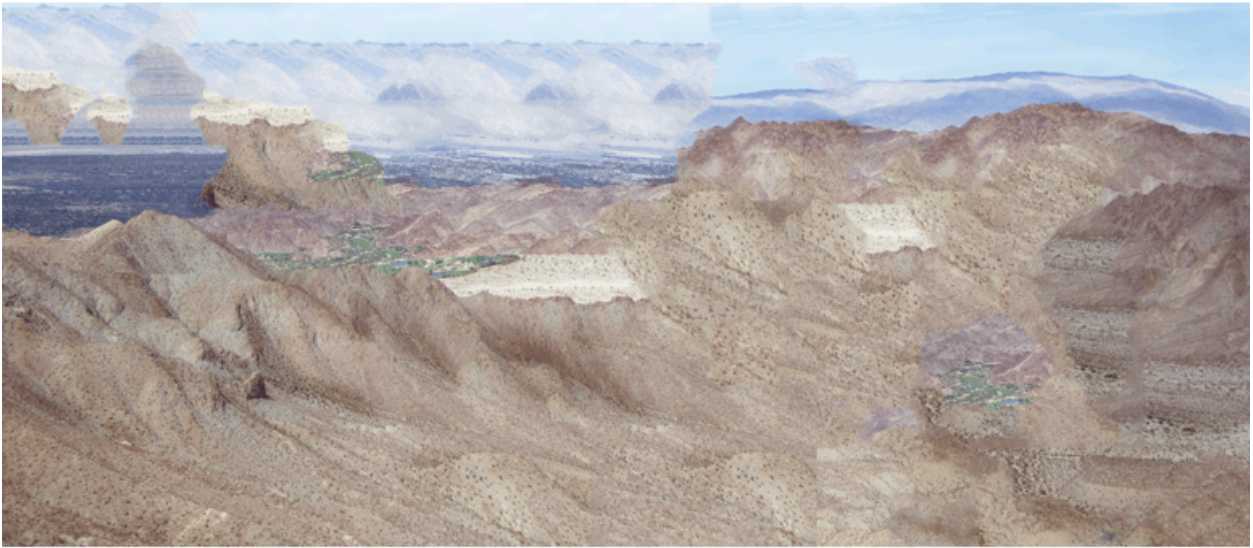


Figure 2: Photo Composite titled ‘Heavy wind picking up speed on Palm Springs Desert’ Part of Mission Ceres, Inkjet print, Variable dimensions, Carolina Montejo, 2016



Figure 3: Bending of Spacetime, Part of Mission Ceres, Inkjet print, Variable dimensions, Carolina Montejo, 2016

Over the past three years my interest in the idea of nature as a futuristic, topographical, and tech-mediated repository shifted toward questions centered on the biological and bio-politics. Initially focused on tactile and chemical plant-human intersubjectivity, relations between the organic and the intellectual, and the role of plant evolution and precolonial wisdom, I created the short film *Leffas I, Small Fusion* (2019, 16 min; see figure 4). Reaching back to my dormant interest in Yagé—and prompted by a series of vivid dreams in which I ate my houseplants, mud, and other earthly substances—I borrowed the term ‘Leffas’, first coined by German Renaissance physician Paracelsus, and his belief in the astral body of plants. With this starting point, I told the story of a misplaced plant from the Amazon entering an urban space in the United States and coming into contact with a man who after buying it from a nursery, decided to ingest its leaves, and in so doing wandered into a psychedelic experience filled with fear and mystery. To support the filmmaking process, I focused my academic research on anthropological views of ayahuasca history and chemistry, as well as ethnopsychology and psychedelics, mainly through the works of authors Marlene Dobkin de Rios, Richard Evan Schultes, and Michael Pollan. Their work provided a historical outline of the development and effects of psychedelics in western cultures and the diverse experiences and knowledge systems they set in action across the American continent. They also furnished a context to address the problematic relations between plants and humans and how they intersect with colonial-era patriarchy, the extraction industries, and the larger capitalist system that underwrites them. Consequently, I came to terms with how these facts have greatly impacted the environment, as well as the social wellbeing of diverse communities in the Global South, especially those where sacred plants—traditionally used by indigenous cultures—have become synonyms of war and violence.



Figure 4: Promotional poster for the short film ‘Leffas, Small Fusion’, 16 minutes, Carolina montejo, 2019

During the summer of 2019, Mother Ayahuasca finally found me. After a decade of working through my phobias and a year of research on psychedelics, I had overcome my fear. With the intention of continuing my field work for the second part of my film, I visited the Amazonian cities of Leticia, Manaus, and Tabatinga and participated in my first Yagé ceremony in the Eastern ranges of the Colombian Andes. Even though my investigation had prepared me for the experience, it all seemed to diminish in comparison to my immersion in the spirit of the forest and the mind-altering rituals that accompanied the ingestion of the plant brew. Starting with a series of well-thought actions that included fasting, contacting a trusted shaman, and identifying a safe landscape for our small group of practitioners, the experience of ingesting ayahuasca developed into an episode of indigenous and Catholic syncretism

guided by animal and plants motifs and chants to the religious figures of Mary and Jesus. Under the effects of yagé, hierarchies between the *human* and the Earth as *other* started to lose meaning during the first intake of the brew, and a new space of consciousness emerged by the third ingestion. This state of awareness revealed the Earth as an existing utopia, bare and magical, resistant to any attempts to be or become “otherworldly” or “oppositional.” Moss was suddenly alive . . . and necessary, birds carried pieces of the ecosystem’s language, the wind was something I could *be* for a fraction of time, and trees were sacred manifestations of the interconnectedness of all life. When I closed my eyes, however, these moments of contemplative ecstasy and recognition of flora and fauna transformed into physical sensations accompanied by repetitive, digital-like imagery that I could not detach from my own mediated visual culture. Eight hours into the experience and approaching the final phase, a social shift brought the small group back into a state of profound and rooted conversation and communal care. The following day, after many domestic flights, and feeling more sentient than ever, I arrived in the jungle and continued having a drift of psychoactive sensations as I flowed down the Amazon river. From this vantage point I could see three borderless countries cohabit, places where the consequences of social and environmental destruction were more entangled with human fate than ever before.

Upon returning from the trip, my interest in individual experience shifted towards a socially-driven inquiry that went beyond the fictional. Such new views coincided with the beginning of my second year at UCSD and the making of the short *Displace/Anchor* (2019, 6 min.; see figure 5), which was selected that same year for the MFA Screenings at the 109th Annual CAA conference in Chicago. The film juxtaposed a montage from the Amazonian

journey with a speculative two-voice conversation guided by a matrix of human and plant categories of placement, mobility, and cooperation. Alongside this experimental approach to filmmaking, I wrote a preliminary twenty-five-page script for my thesis film *Rizomas* (titled *Leffas II: Vertical Unconscious* during my second year). The script was tightly structured as a classic narrative that included character development, as well as a chronological storyline affixed to a science-fiction backdrop. However, as my ideas continued to expand, the script was heavily redacted and had completely disappeared by Spring 2020. In its place appeared the possibility to reinvent my understanding of narrative strategy and to incorporate the non-hierarchical teachings of my ayahuasca journey.



Figure 5: Still shot from the film ‘Displace/Anchor’, 6:35 min, Carolina Montejo 2020

During the same time, visions of embodiment and intersubjectivity between humans and ecosystems were shifting towards social participation, and, as a result, I joined the campus-wide climate justice movement *Green New Deal at UCSD*, for which I later co-directed the documentary *This Is The Deal: Building a Green New Deal at UCSD* (2020,

with A. Salehian; 20 min). This new framework I was investigating around cause and effect between systemic fossil fuel extraction and consumption, scientific data, and oppression of marginalized and impoverished communities, coincided with Professor Mangolte's feminism seminar, which allowed me to focus my research on ecofeminism—a philosophical and political position that examines and confronts patriarchal binary structures that have historically oppressed nature, as well as fem bodies and the environment. The investigative process that resulted set the foundation for a series of independent, yet related, works in performance, poetry, and installation, including *Birth of Telepathine*, *Untitled Matter*, *Carbon in the Wind*, *Sphere-Rose- Place*, and *A Waiting Forest* [January-June 2020] (See figs, 6-10), all of which eventually became scenes in my thesis film *Rizomas*.

This initial process considered various aspects of and arguments around feminism, especially historical ties between women, ecology, and the industrial Scientific Revolution (Merchant, 1983); the development of ecofeminist corporeality (Phillips, 2016, p. 57); the linkages between the climate emergency and gender-based violence in the Global South (IUCN, 2019); the environmental activism of the Green Belt Movement lead by Wangari Maathai in Kenya, and Chipko, an Indian forest conservation group born in the 1970's. Equally important was the early history of body art and installation in the United States and Europe through the work of Carolee Schneemann, Marina Abramovic, Pina Bausch, and Agnes Denes. From that point on, my research and artistic production entered a period of uncertainty and change, in which I began to recognize and digest the simultaneous historical and theoretical dimensions ecology, social justice, and gender politics, and their convergence with their practical and ethical implications in film and media art, and the ways in which "they examine the role of the physical setting in creative productions, the values expressed in

relation to the environment, and the correlation between what a culture says about the environment and how it treats it; conceiving of place as a critical category, that looks for correspondences among gender, class, ethnicity, and nature, and asks how culturally produced works affect our relation with the natural world.” (Willoquet-Maricondi, 2010) As such, I realized that where *Leffas I, Small Fusion* presented an isolated plant-human relation—occurring in a controlled urban environment and going through an individual journey—*Rizomas* operated in a plural, fluid space that crossed species and geographies, as well as gender, language, and race. The intentional fear and desire of *Leffas* had progressed beyond my original vision of a trilogy of ‘awakening’, and in the process it had shed the conventions of linear storytelling.



Figure 6: Documentation of the performance ‘Birth of Telepathine’, Carolina Montejo, 2020

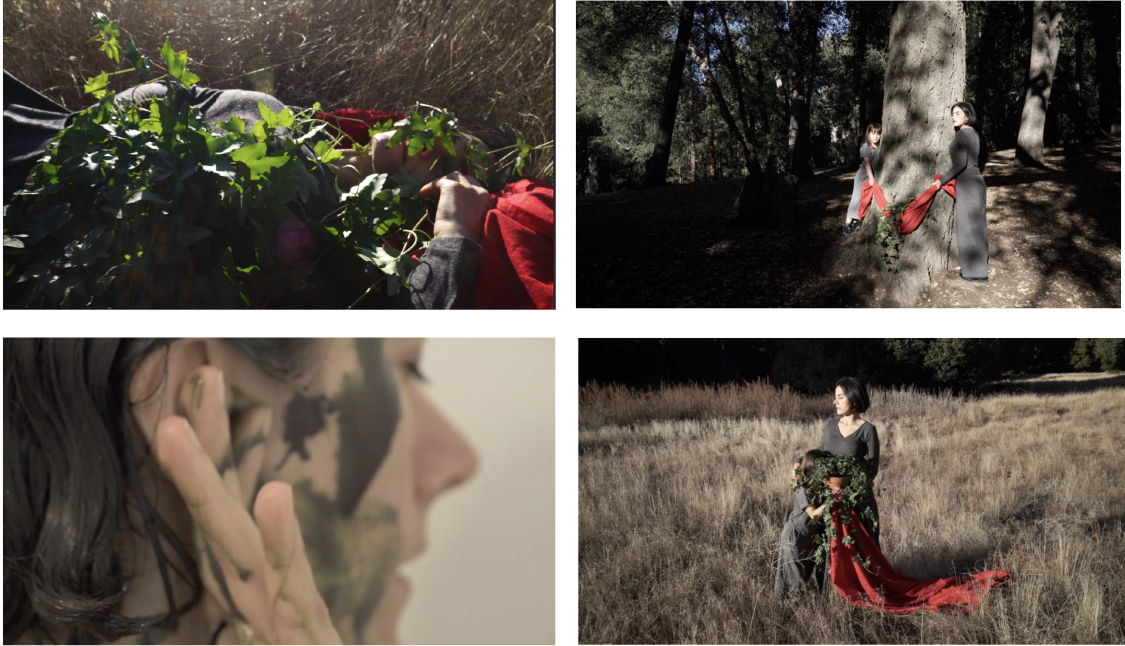


Figure 9: Still shots of the short film 'Sphere, Rose, Place' 5 min

Carolina Montejo, 2020



Figure 10: Documentation of the installation 'A Waiting Forest', Carolina Montejo, Open Studios 2020

The transitional gaze between the alienated character and setting of *Leffas I*, and the confrontational, yet reconciliatory position of *Rizomas*, responded to my own realizations and ideological shortcomings, their path towards the understanding of ecology and intersubjectivity as spaces that have been historically tainted by cultural hegemonic values delivered through media, as well the need to compassionately question my own patriarchal upbringing in Colombia, the influence on my work and thinking of white-male conceptual practices, as well as my own position as a new American. This process of learning—and unlearning—was accompanied by the structuralist analysis introduced by Professor Cruz in Spring 2020, and by way of additional research on the biological workings of geophyte plants as non-hierarchical systems of cooperation; and of liverworts as evolutionary-resistant organisms that presented models for utopian ideals found in the plant kingdom. These developments gave way to the figure of the rhizome as a guiding principle for an alternative film script, and to the term *ecofemiotopia*: a site for feminist eco-pluralistic thought, where social relations, biological realities, and diverse subjectivities could reimagine and rebuild the earth, as well as resist the exploitation of human and more-than-human bodies.

Articulating the bio-socio-political framework of my practice with the experimental poetics of my filmmaking have manifested an undulating flow during my three years of candidacy, one in which text and image have found a way to act simultaneously between the precision of words, the plurality of oral tradition, the atmospheric components of sound, the performative possibilities of the body, and the constancy of the the material world through the moving image. Each of these components are present in *Rizomas* as branches that touch on documentary practices, ethnographic collaborations, poetry and voice-over narration, 3D

modeling and animation, analogue and digital technology hybrids, and social advocacy. The next pages present diverse components of my practice through five sections that connect with the development of the film; the first is a brief history of ecofeminism framed upon a pluralistic and multi geographical lens, the second addresses influences from art and nature, the third proposes a recognition and critique of the prefix *eco* in the vanguard of our culture, and the fourth, introduces a field log informed by nomadic subjectivity, ecocinema, and sensory ethnography, in which perception, place and imagination guide my critical stance as filmmaker . The closing Appendix contains the speculative document titled *Welcome to the Ecofeminist System* and the poem *Carbon in the Wind*.

1. Ecofeminism, A Brief History

1.1 Parallel waters

For millennia, western patriarchal religions worshipped a disembodied male god living in the unknown who had created nature. Female identity was associated with the earth and oscillated between the roles of being passive and sensitive, (Merchant, 20) creative and nurturing (7), chaotic and destructive (127), and in need of masculine dominance (168). This fact did not happen suddenly, but was an intentional effort, which—according to ecofeminist historians, such as Carolyn Merchant—was exacerbated by the industrial scientific revolution and the belief that for “as long as the earth was considered alive and sensitive, it could be a breach of human ethical behavior to carry out destructive acts against it.”(3) Such overarching attachments influenced generations to yearn for an incorporeal heaven floating outside of this world, while a material underworld sat deep in the ground accompanied by crawling creatures, fruits and rhizomes, water and bones. That is the logic I was born into as a girl growing up in Colombia’s Catholic culture. Earth was the place we were laid to rest, and even then, you needed protection from its touch, first by embalming chemicals, then by casket, and finally by a square space lined with concrete.

Beyond religion and death, soil as a place of savagery has been systematically used to uphold the white-male master narrative that built Europe and spread erasure and slavery through Africa and the Americas. In Ronald Takaki’s description of “American Progress,” a painting from 1873, he defines the contrast between the white woman as a symbol of progress and expansion by “signifying the union of womanhood with technology” while placing her above “a stormy sky where buffalo, a bear, and Indians” flee towards the mountains. (Takaki, 97) Indigenous people, always cast as “dark” in this imaginary, were bound to the earth like

soil while white bodies, distant from earthly disposition, were closer to god and therefore, claimers of a Manifest Destiny.

In Colombia, the union between the state and the Roman Catholic Church resulted in an “intransigent, integral, and social catholicism” (Poulat, 1983), which shifted Christian values into nationalism, and relegated patriarchy and gender oppression to the home, and subsequently towards every structure of community life. Countless missions settled during the early colonial period transferred native values of kinship (Miles, 49) and interconnectedness (Machiorlatti, 62) towards a monotheistic unity in which masculinity was the holy product of life, and community shifted towards servitude and inferiority. (Leon, 14) The subordination of native women, as well as racialized subjects (including Indigenous, Mestizo, Mulato, Zambo and Black), was present through various forms of oppression that for women included sexual objectification, rape, and other forms of physical violence (11), and consequently signified ostracization from political discourse, as well as the denial of economic sovereignty. Impoverished by peninsular and criollo Spaniards, who considered themselves racially and ideologically superior, a new ethnic -and gendered- elitism was deeply ingrained in the country’s bio-political landscape.

The overlap with more-than-human life forms came at the expense of the region’s vibrant biodiversity and geographical makeup. On the one hand, it was water and gold; on the other, tropical, Andean, Amazonian, and Caribbean flora and fauna; and then, in a third and almost impossible bonanza, a series of sacred plants protected by lush and difficult to access jungles: coca, cannabis, as well as the earthly components of yagé, Banisteriopsis Caapi and Psychotria Viridis. These ecological conditions were some of the initial counter forces to colonial ideologies, as they were constant reminders of the cosmocentric relationship native

people had with the sun and the moon (Gomez, 2019), and the ways in which they influenced all lifeforms of nature. However, as Indigenous people originally utilized the ritualistic similarities of catholicism to worship their gods and Pachamama, (2019) the acculturation process via Spanish language and Catholicism, and later genetic and cultural mestizaje, (Briceño Guerrero, 1966 as cited in Gomez, 2019) favored Christian tradition, which in time assimilated these practices as traditions that were completely catholic. (Gomez, 2019) The many communities that were able to fully resist the transculturation, among which stand the Arhuaco, Wiwa, and Kogui of the Sierra Nevada de Santa Marta, still fight for the sovereignty of their land and their right to protect the mountain's ecosystem.

The natural-cultural and socio-political conditions that delivered Latin America to the twentieth century prompted the development of various branches of feminism that adjusted to the priorities and backgrounds of each region and their own histories of colonization, primarily carried out by Spain, but also by Portugal and France. Among these conditions, the conservative values of the church, U.S imperialism, dictatorships, wars, and deep histories of gender inequality and oppressive racialization meant that feministas were articulating social and gender justice into their political struggle. Within the Latin American feminist movement of the 1930's, described by Katherine Marino in her book, "Feminism in the Americas," the *Feminismo Americano* mobilized in Cuba by Ofelia Dominguez, and in Panama by Clara Gonzalez, had a cohesive understanding of feminist action beyond the political rights and civil equality of women. The contributions made throughout various decades and across countries sought to "push for the liberation from multiple and overlapping forms of oppression -against patriarchy, U.S Imperialism, fascism and often, racism."(Marino,10) This articulation with human rights, which went on to make important contributions to feminism on a global scale,

traced early links to an 'ecological' or interdependent view of justice that explicitly addressed the need for protections and policies that acknowledged the issues that arose for Latin Americans, as well as for communities in similar conditions around the world.

Some of the discriminatory views that people from Central and South America had systematically endured from Europe and North America, were oftentimes transferred into the educated elites that lead important political groups such as Pan American feminism (Marino, 27). These junctions were visible within this movement, which often discriminated Spanish-speaking feminists and centered English, Italian, and French cultural and racial superiority as standards for the right to lead. Examples of these views are evident in public comments made by feminist leaders such as the Argentinian Alicia Moreau who described “the existence of “two types of women that represented two different stages in evolution. The earlier was the “hispano-colonial type”: catholic and backward, “the direct descendant of a woman born in the home formed by the union of a Spaniard and an Indian, a home ruled entirely by the father.” (29)The more progressive and enlightened social reformers were the Argentine-European, from the homes transplanted to this side of the sea by current immigration.” (29) Additionally, during the 1922 Pan American Women’s conference, North American feminist leader Carrie Chapman Catt, denied Mexican feminist Elena Torres from “discussing oil, land, immigration, and the exploitation of Mexican laborers in the hands of U.S mining companies” (37) all topics that were already articulating what ecofeminism would come to address in the 1970’s.

As for Colombian feminism, even though Georgina Fletcher and Claudina Múnera’s political activism granted women and girls access to secondary and university level education in the 1930’s (Cohen, 2001), the principles that guided these rights still held subordinate views

on gender that placed sexual misconduct as a female responsibility by holding that women were also expected to “learn to control their negative emotions when faced with conflict and act in appropriate ways, especially in sexual matters, as they were required to hold good reputation among their circles, who would judge them as the moral compass of men.” (238) Such views carried on beyond 1957 when female suffrage was obtained, and continued to decline throughout the 1960’s when the civil war between leftist guerrilla and the far right paramilitary set the country on path of political violence, only heightened by the imperialist drug wars of the 1980’s and 90’s -which additionally relied on the destruction of the land and its ecosystems. During this time, violence against women grew not only from the armed conflict itself but from its intersections with historic, domestic and ethnic manifestations of the war. (Amador, 2017) The insecurity of women and girls in both metropolitan and rural areas meant the rise of femicide, which continued a spiral of domination that used the “female body as a strategy for war, given that it expresses patriarchal power over a specific territory.” (Tobón, 2015, 10)

The parallel destruction of wildlife, bodies of water, and forests due to the extractive industries of oil, gold, logging, and monoculture across Latin America was the direct influence of rising hegemonic systems that used, what is referred today as the Global South, as a site for the production of raw materials that mobilized the added value-technologies of Europe China, and the United States. (11) Since the 1990s, manifestations of the ideals and activist spirit of ecofeminism came about strongly in Latin America, mostly through indigenous leadership and the work of various female-led movements such as the National Council of Popular and Indigenous Organizations of Honduras (COPINH), created by environmental activist Bertha Cáceres in order to address the oppression of the Lenca communities due to illegal logging and

territorial rights. Cáceres, who was murdered in 2016 by the Desarrollos Energéticos Company DESA, protested for almost 10 years against the construction of the Agua Zarca Dam on the Gualcarque River. In the twentieth century, the struggle of the Waorani people of the Ecuadorian Amazon led by Indigenous activist Nemonte Nenquimo has recently brought attention to the many injustices on Amazonian ecosystems and communities perpetrated by local governments and their alliances with the fossil fuel industry, as well as the meat and agriculture industries.

As for ecofeminism, it would not be until the 1970's that the term started to emerge across diverse parts of Africa, India, Europe, and the United States; and even though Latin America at large does not appear as an early historic referent of the movement, it is worth noting the relation between its critical framework and the struggles, and realities that have oppressed the continent, its ecosystems and communities. It is also worth acknowledging the contributions made by *Feminismo Americano* and Pan American Feminism towards the establishment of the motto that “women’s rights are human rights” (Marino, 241) and the importance this had in articulating the silent and coercive powers that uphold patriarchy, capitalism and racial supremacy as destructors of the earth and its inhabitants. As such, ecofeminism appears as a counter hegemonic force that decentralizes a single fight, and sees the the coming together of cis and transgender women’s political struggle, the sovereignty of BIPOC communities, and the restitution in value of all life forms on the planet, as inextricable from a wholesome view of justice.

1.2 Global Overlap

One of ecofeminism's earliest references has an organized activist gesture at heart: the Chipko Movement. Taking the Hindi word Chipko 'to embrace' as its mantra, the group originated from the work of Indian environmentalist and social activist Chandi Prasad Bhatt and the Dasholi Gram Swarajya Mandal Movement -DGSM, which in 1970 was a force of opposition for the large-scale logging industry in the Himalayas. Some of the movement's first actions in 1973 and 1974, were responses to complex systems of oppression based on market economy expansion, which affected not only women, but whole communities of mountain peoples living in an unstable social structure. The ecological components of Chipko have been successful in laying out the interconnected framework that appears in the junction of social injustice, gender-based oppression, and environmental degradation. However, it has been the mediatization of the movement's image that has, on one hand, made it easy to attack ecofeminism from a male logic, and on the other, has altered the crucial ways in which Chipko illustrates "how it is impossible to develop respect for nature without considering the ways in which nature itself adversely affects those living marginalized or impoverished." (Boff, 1993) This fact can be addressed when considering that even though Chipko had an environmental struggle at core, it was also a way for rural communities to "save trees for their own short-term economic well being, so they could take forest exploitation into their own hands and channel the profits to their local industries to pressure contractors and governments to better their conditions. This also worked to ensure long term economic well being by maintaining sources of fuel and fodder, preventing landslides and preserving springs. Additionally, the movement was concerned with protecting trees and demanding a forest system which would meet the requirements of the people."(Webber, 1988)

Women were particularly concerned with said requirements for “they had the most to lose from deforestation, as the gatherers of firewood and fodder leaves, as well as carriers of water, and the knowledge, that flow from mountain springs depended on adequate forest cover.” (Webber, 615) Such reasons moved them to create their own circles within the larger Chipko movement, and find ways in which their own thoughts and actions could power the larger extent of negotiation and legislation. One particular event that centered female legacy on Chipko rose as an urgent radical action faced in 1974, when all the men from the village were called to official headquarters in order to be compensated for land that had been appropriated by the army. This call was in fact a decoy, and when the men left, a group of lumber contractors arrived at the forest in order to cut down over 2000 trees. Noticing the scheme, a group of 27 women and girls directed by the women’s circle leader Guara Devi, ran to the Reni forest and confronted the loggers. By resisting until the men returned, the protesters contributed to the suspension of the order. Images of the women embracing the trees, in this and other major protests, have served as symbols of resistance and of Satyagraha, the Gandhian non-violent protest.

Ecofeminist actions like these were addressed in the late 1970’s, continuing into the present, by female volunteers of the movement such as Vandana Shiva. Shiva, who in her academic beginnings was training as a nuclear physicist, came to abandon the field upon learning the devastating consequences of radiation across diverse life forms. In the years following, Shiva developed ‘subsistence ecofeminist theories,’ which focused primarily on politics, and tenaciously acted on her findings in order to protect women and nature. Shiva believes that ecofeminism differs from other feminist theories, in that it seeks to overcome the general

hierarchical dichotomy of the western world which have “up-ended women as superior to men, and perpetrated the view of nature being superior to culture, and so on,” and continues by stating that “Women’s liberation cannot be achieved without the simultaneous struggle for the preservation and liberation, of all life on this planet, from patriarchal capitalism.” (Mies, Shiva, 2009)

A similar market-centered oppression, which also resulted in environmental degradation, affected the people of Kenya in the 1970’s after almost 40 years of British colonization. Kenya, a country with thriving biodiversity up until the 1920’s, suffered mass deforestation as a consequence of the monoculture of tea and coffee, in addition to religious imposition and the destruction of an ancestral culture that respected other life forms. In 1977, political activist and environmentalist Wangari Maathai, started noticing that women across Nairobi were constantly bringing up how the lack of trees presented problems for their livelihood, as streams and food became scarce and firewood was difficult to find. Maathai, who had a bachelor’s in science, and an MFA in biology from the University of Pittsburgh, came up with a simple yet powerful solution: the women should start planting trees. The Green Belt Movement (GBM) resulted from this social acknowledgment, and the first action of planting seven trees was held on world environment on June 5, 1977, in a procession supported by the National Council of Women of Kenya (NCWK). In order to promote and sustain the planting, Maathai offered women a small compensation for each tree that took root, and soon trees started growing everywhere, as women and their communities saw the benefits firsthand.

However, Maathai knew that the environmental issues were only the symptoms of “disempowerment, disenfranchisement, and loss of traditional values” (Maathai, 1977) that had been inherited from colonialism and exacerbated by patriarchal and capitalist views imposed by the government, and as a response, “the Green Belt Movement instituted seminars called Community Empowerment and Education to encourage individuals to acknowledge the role one plays in politics, economics, and environmental issues.” (DeLap, 2013) But Maathai’s ideas paired with her gender were not received with sympathy by political leaders, and she came to be imprisoned, beaten and threatened throughout her life, as well as publicly recognized for being an ‘uncontrollable woman’ who did not know how to ‘act as women should.’ Despite all this, Maathai continued her work with the GBM until her death in 2011, contributed to planting over 51 million trees across Kenya, empowered over 30,000 women with forestry and food processing training, and partnered with a number of environmental movements around the world that built on the legacy of her work to advance the intersection of women’s rights, social justice and ecology.

In 1974, only three years before the Green Belt Movement had emerged far from academia, French feminist Françoise d’Eaubonne had introduced the term ‘ecofeminism’ in her book *Le Feminisme ou la Mort* (Feminism or Death). It was here that she presented the notion that “society’s disregard for women was comparable to its contempt for the environment.” d’Eaubonne, who Co-founded the *Mouvement de libération des femmes* (MLF; Women’s Liberation Movement), and was imperative in the founding of the *Front homosexuel d’action révolutionnaire* (FHAR; Revolutionary Homosexual Front), as well as the *Mouvement Ecologie et Féminisme* (Ecology and Feminism movement), held that “Profit was the last face of power,

and capitalism the last stage of patriarchy” and urged her Marxist peers to evaluate both stages beyond the concept of class struggle, as “patriarchy was immediately a society of adults against children, of one class against another, of one nation against another, and ultimately, of all men against each other: the war of all against all.” (d’Eaubonne, 1978)

The work that Shiva and d’Eaubonne, and that of many other radical and cultural feminists, provided the necessary grounds for identifying the instrumentalization of the ‘natural resource’ as a series of life forms and materials to be extracted, dominated, and consumed; an imposition which erased an organic view of the world connected with human life in a series of mutually caring actions and processes. Such a consideration of the world can be traced back to Greek and Roman mythologies such as Demeter/Koré or Ceres/Proserpina, where nature and the female body are bound to the patriarchal actions of rape and control, and beyond that, to the cultural and environmental agreements that have been imposed on femininity (not exclusively of women). d’Eaubonne believed that the synthesis of feminism and ecology would provide a way to exit this type of thinking and “return in force which can be called, using the sexist language of patriarchy, “feminine values”, that is to say, the pre patriarchal values arbitrarily [and monolithically] attributed since that time, to the entire female sex, in theory, to conserve them, but in reality, to discipline them and render them impotent; pacifism, as opposed to aggression, egalitarianism, as opposed to dominance, the recreational, as opposed to unlimited exploitation [in the name of profit or progress], the knowledge of limits, in opposition to the negation of limits” (Roth-Johnson, 1999)

The reclaiming of the long-lost goddess figure, who now exchanged places with lioness, plant and river, opened western women to “the experience of knowing Gaia. This new discovery powered many female-centered spirituality groups in syncretism with traditional religions of Indo-Asia, as well as with Christianity. This fact became a contesting point with the academic views of ecofeminism, as it was a symbolic and spiritual face of the political struggle. Nonetheless, it is important to consider, that the shifting of the patriarchal paradigm was, naturally, bound to touch on diverse fields, as well as with the public and private spheres of women or female-identifying persons of different cultural and racial backgrounds, both impoverished and living in capitalist societies.

A North American contribution to the ecofeminist wave can be noted in the appearance of the Institute for Social Ecology, ISE. Established in 1974, and incorporated in 1981, this organization has “played a historic and catalytic role in movements against nuclear power, GMOs & biotechnology, global exploitation, and for indigenous rights and women’s liberation. They have also been a crucial resource for engaged scholars and students, having collaborated with colleges and universities throughout the American Northeast and beyond.” (ISE) In 1978, and under the leadership of Ynestra King, the Institute developed the first curriculum in a feminist approach to ecology in their campus in Vermont. Key actions in pro of ecofeminist frameworks throughout the years included the Women and Life on Earth Conference, the Women and Life on Earth/Women’s Pentagon Action, The first Eco-Feminist Conference, as well as the seminar on “Social Perspectives on Women and Ecology”. It should be mentioned however, that between 1996 and 1998, the institute’s curriculum and activist action ceased to include the ecofeminist typology, or the relation with women, in their communications.

1.3 Materiality and Justice

The tendency to push back against ecofeminism at the turn of the twentieth century is a noticeable gap in western academia. Nonetheless, both Ynestra King and Vandana Shiva, as well as a number of scholars from different disciplines, are active ecofeminists working globally to bring attention to the intersections between feminism and animal violence, land tenure, energy production, deforestation, climate change, mining, industrial production, and technology, among many others. Additionally, the resurfacing of the movement in the early 2010's introduced *materialist feminism* to the conversation, which highlighted how discourse, culture and language have for long ruled feminist theory and social constructionist models, a fact that has been incredibly productive in addressing the junctions between power, knowledge, class and race, among others. While pivotal in the struggle for female equity across private and public arenas, these constructions have intentionally distanced themselves from materiality, particularly that of material bodies. Reframing feminism within the realm of nature presents tension between post-modern views that seek to deconstruct oppositional frameworks through language, and the modernist belief in the material. (Alaimo, Hekman, 2008)

Withdrawal from materiality, however, fails to recognize that “women have bodies; these bodies have pain as well as pleasure. They also have diseases and are subject to medical interventions that may or may not have cures over those bodies. We need a way to talk about

those bodies and the materiality they inhabit. Focusing exclusively on representations, ideology and discourse excludes lived experience, corporeal practice and biological substance from consideration. It makes nearly impossible for feminism to engage with science in innovative, productive or affirmative ways - the only path available is the well-worn path of critique. Moreover, bracketing or negating materiality can actually “inhibit the development of a robust understanding of discursive production itself, since various aspects of materiality contribute to the development and transformation of discourses.” (4) In the same sense, the materiality of nature as an active agent should be considered not only as parallel, but in direct relation with the female body. There is a need to understand the transformative processes, interactions, and material consequences that deterioration of these natural systems has over the social construct of human life, without failing to consider that not all female bodies have easy access to basic energy and sustenance, education, or market participation. Material feminism forces discursive feminism to look back on the women that are most oppressed, those still living without any signs of having gone through a ‘first wave’, those living in the parts of the world where most forest are being destroyed, most water is being polluted by mining, and more land is being seized and privatized by oppressive geopolitics, and resources conquered by geo-technological empires.

Examples of such oppression appear in the 2020 report by the International Union for the conservation of Nature, which documents the systemic way in which women are “beaten, verbally and sexually harassed, raped and killed by forest guards or owners when collecting forest products,” (Castañeda et al, 2020) which are necessary for the well-being of their communities, but become more difficult to obtain when resources are scarce. The difficulty and time-consuming nature of these activities, combined with fear and trauma, prevent women and

girls from “investing in other areas of livelihood, including education, income activities and leisure time.” (Castañeda et al, 2020) A fact that so obviously presents itself as the vicious circle feeding capitalism and patriarchy³. A spiraling circle that has overgrown to a point where hugging trees to stand up for one’s rights is no longer an option, and can only be seen by critics as a distant and ‘romanticized’ symbol, but when analyzed, only reveals the loss of a much needed social naiveté, a benign form of care and respect. Against this background, the role of materialism in ecofeminism is crucial and resembles the work of Vandana Shiva’s subsistence theories, as well as that of emerging works in ethics, epistemology, and politics which reframe the body, and try to “bring back materiality without abandoning social construction.” (Alaimo, Hekman, 5)

2. Under the Influence of Art and Nature

The history of ecofeminism, performance, and land art have been productive in addressing the materiality of the female body, as well as the physicality and territory of nature. During the early process of creating Rizomas, visual influences ranging from the Demeter/Persephone myth, to the Chipko embrace, and the Green Belt Movement, (See figures 11, 12, 13) prompted an approach to materiality from distinct dimensions that included the relationship between mothers and daughters, women to their communities, as well as women in response to threats to their land and livelihood. As an initial response, I looked to Adrienne Rich’s *Of Woman Born*, in which, among many interpretations of literature, art and history in relation to feminism, she presented the idea that “before sisterhood, there was the

³ More information on links between women and socio-environmental issues related specifically to Colombia can be found in the 2015 study by Gloria Tobón Olarte, titled *Mujeres, Conflictos Socioambientales y Resolución 1325 de las Naciones Unidas, Red Nacional de Mujeres en el marco del Proyecto Diálogos Democráticos para la Seguridad Ambiental (PDDSA)*

knowledge —transitory, fragmented, perhaps, but originally crucial—of mother and daughterhood.” (1976) This resonated with my own positionality as a cis woman, mother, daughter, artist, and climate justice advocate, especially in relation to her research on the Demeter/ Persephone myth, which linked the Earth —via agriculture and sustenance —with the endangerment of the female body, hence the mother-daughter relationship, even before recorded history. (Rich, 239) Taking these elements into my own practice, as well as its connections to my Yagé journey, and the construction of the speculative worlds developed in *Leffas*, *Small Fusion*, I created the performance *Birth of Telepathine*—an original character from the first year film that acted as a medium between plant and human worlds— (See figure 14 and 15). Centered in an empty room with a planting container where I stood covered in green and brown fabrics, I started channeling pain through sound. Guided by overlapping memories of personal agony during the arduous birth of my daughter, as well as feelings of empathy for the suffering of oppressed and raped women and their placement within deforestation, mining and oil extraction, I shoved the branch of a dead tree in my mouth with one hand while being covered from the public’s view. One by one, I took off layers of fabric with my other arm, slowly revealing the human form. As this happened, three women and gender non conforming collaborators entered the space dressed in linen robes reading sections from the Report on Gender-based Violence and Environmental Linkages. (IUCN, 2019) As the readers halted, my body was revealed wearing a red jumpsuit; the dry branch in my mouth finally pulled away letting out a scream. After the howl, and the recognition of my liberated human voice, the performance ended.

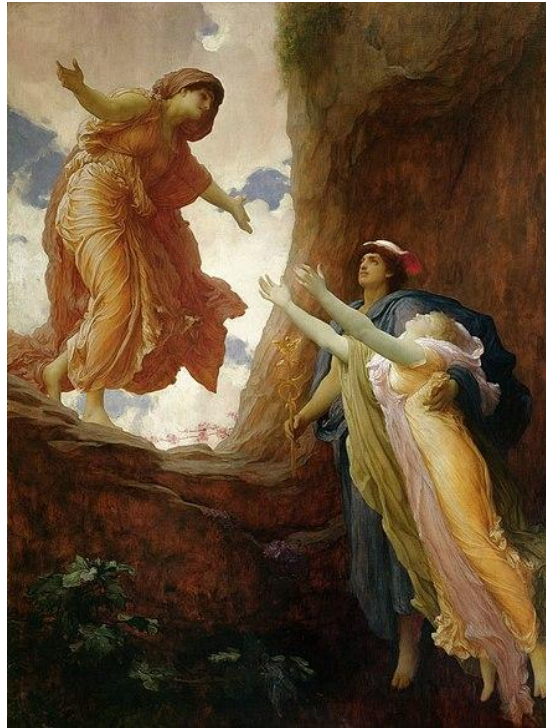


Figure 11: The Return of Persephone, by Frederic Leighton, 1891, obtained through Wikiland

www.wikiland.com



Figure 12: Archive Images from Chipko Movement (1973), obtained through World Rainforest Movement, 2015,

Bulletin 21,



Figure 13: Archive image from Green Belt Movement (1970's), obtained through Center for Global Awareness, 2016

<https://thecenterforglobalawareness.wordpress.com/>

The incorporation of *Birth of Telepathine* into *Rizomas* meant adapting the performance to the film's script in order to reveal, not only the relation to affliction, but the birth as an action that Hannah Arendt (1958) has proposed as the realization of freedom, the capacity to begin, to start something new, to do the unexpected and affirm the reality of the world. To address this, I created a 16mm sequence (See figure 16) that explicitly showed the internal world of the character, which was conveyed in peaceful interaction with nature through scenes of plant motifs, gardens, and mountains; a child's hands appearing occasionally, signaling the presence of an offspring. The movement of the character through the natural space ended on the cusp of a mountain where the child emerged, separated, and finally danced away from what had been until then, the main body. Together, the sequences attempted to expand the dimensions of intimacy with the materiality of nature, the process of birth, and the potential reconciliation of

nature with humanity. An important influence in the development of the mise-en-scène was the work of German choreographer Pina Bausch, specifically her work *The Rite of Spring*, as adapted by German filmmaker Wim Wenders in the film *Pina*. (2011) The call to Spring was consequently related to the *birth* of a new season, as well as to the chaos and sacrifice that intersect in order to produce freedom as something other than the ability to choose among a set of possibilities. (Arendt, 1958) However, this alternative view of the ritual, evidently overlapped with the myth of Demeter and Persephone, which in this case reimagined the sacrifice by halting the rape of patriarchy and replacing it with a transition in which mother and daughter remain together, and build the world anew.



Figure 14: Still shot including *Telepathine* from the short film *Leffas, Small Fusion*, 16 min, Carolina Montejo

2019



Figure 15: Still shot from the short film *Rizomas*, Carolina Montejo 2019

Further research on the relation of materiality, nature and the female body in contemporary art introduced influences such as Marina Abramovich's *Balkan Erotic Epic* (See figure 16) and Agnes Denes *Wheatfield* (See figure 17) both of which intersected with my own experimentation with performance and installation, as well as the recollections of mother nature's material manifestation during my ayahuasca journey. One of the most persistent memories was deep into my third intake of the brew, when I emerged from a long period of hiding under a green blanket suddenly moved by an impulse to touch and smell the earth. Upon walking to a nearby field where grasslands and fresh mud rooted me into the wholeness of the ecosystem, I explored a long path that led to a valley. Following the flight of a bird and the mist left by the recent rain, I sat under a single tree and was mesmerized by its physicality; birds nests in diverse points of its branches, flowers and moss hanging in clusters, insects and luscious vegetation growing around it. Even though I had always felt a special connection to trees, I had never felt such reciprocity and sentiency. I lingered, unable to move and feeling

completely humbled by its presence and its connection to everything around it, myself included. At this point, I had not done research on Chipko or Green Belt, nor had I ventured into performance, but once the information caught up with my memory, my ideas developed naturally.

In winter of 2019, as I watched *Balkan Erotic Epic*, I thought of what it meant to touch a body in correspondance with intuitive perception and among diverse types of matter that were more than human. With an opportunity to perform at a local art show at the Episcopal Church Saint James by the Sea in La Jolla, it was easy to select the location of my piece *Untitled Matter* once I encountered a single standing *Dracaena Draco* Tree in the church's sacred burial grounds. During one hour and for three consecutive days, I set up two kneelers and a red light strip and proceeded to connect with the matter of the tree, as well as the substance left behind by the hundreds of bodies that were now dissolved into its roots. I touched, smelled, listened, spoke, climbed, held, and attempted to establish reciprocity with its living force, while attendants kneeled towards nature, sensuality and femininity. As an adaptation for Rizomas (See Figure 19), I invited friends to different locations including small local forests, and urban settings to perform their own intimate interactions with trees. With a handheld digital camera and minimal direction, I documented them as they embraced, caressed and related to their presence. Off-camera, and through voice recording, the collaborators narrated memories of a time when they felt most attuned to nature.



Figure 16: Still shot from 16 mm sequence of the film *Rizomas*, Carolina Montejo 2019

Meanwhile, the spatial components of the material world connected with my interest in urban ecology, forestry and local advocacy. As such, I developed the installation *A Waiting Forest* for Open Studios 2020, in collaboration with Chris Johnson, manager of the community gardens on the UCSD campus, and custodian of many young trees at the Eleanor Roosevelt College plant nursery. Taking over one of the studios on the lower east wing of the Visual Arts Facility, I lined the room with mirrors and filled the floor with mulch gathered from local eucalyptus trees. Over 35 trees in their temporary pots were moved into the room and arranged throughout. A wall text on the entrance described how the extensive growth and construction on campus meant that many trees were cut daily to make room for the expansion. In addition, the new trees at the nursery, most grown from seeds, awaited the moment to be transplanted to the earth. Inside, a sound installation narrated by a female voice reproduced the conversation by the astronauts on board of Apollo 8 and the moment in which they took *Earthrise*, the first image of Earth from space.



Figure 17: Still shots from *Balkan Erotic Epic*, *Women massaging Breasts*,
Marina Abramovich, 2005, obtained through Vocal Media

<https://vocal.media/>

Even Though *A Waiting Forest* was not formally included in *Rizomas*, the micro political action it manifested was an important conceptual gesture that introduced me to the work of Agnes Denes, specifically with her piece *Wheatfield-A confrontation* (1982) in which she planted and harvested 1000 pounds of golden wheat on a two-acre field in New York City's Battery Park landfill. The installation, which embraced the spirit of 'Think Globally, Act Locally', so imperative to the climate justice movement, was an opportunity to reflect on its correspondence with the type of affirmative critical thinking found in the work of Wangari Maathai, thus prompting me to search collaboration with grassroots organizations in Latin America and expanding the vision of my film towards documentary film practices and ethnography through the Tinker Field Grant I received in 2020, of which I will expand in the following section.



Figure 18: Archive image of the installation Wheatfield by Agnes Denes, 1982

Image obtained through Elephant Art

<https://elephant.art/>



Figure 19: Still shot of the film Rizomas, Carolina Montejo 2019

3. The Ecosphere

If the prefix *eco* (greek *oikos* meaning 'home' or 'house') is a starting point for thinking of the ecosphere, then, what defines a home? Environmentalist and educator C. A. Bowers states that this socially constructed linguistic term must be a "reminder of where humanity is domiciled, while expressing no prejudice in favor of organisms, hence no denigration of earth, water, and air as less than organisms, as merely their environment. It implies equal importance among all components, while also implying that everything existing within the Ecosphere, including the human race, is a subdivision of it, and therefore, less important than it. The Whole Home is the prime reality, all else is fragmentary, disarticulated, lost, and meaningless until conceived and experienced in the context of the Ecosphere." (Maricondi, 2010) When thinking of the home as *location* we start furnishing its extension with diverse groups; human and more-than-human communities, cultural *and* natural histories extended into traditions which soon reveal that a domicile on earth is not only bound by place and immobility, but by time and displacement. The home *in movement* sees adaptation as survival, and has historically signified the edification of binary hierarchies that systematically uphold the supremacy of a single gender of humans, and in turn, have constructed species, race, and class. From there, the categorization of the inhabitants of the ecosphere has meant that difference is a measure for dominance and subordination, and *the home* is marked with borders and targets that only seem to disappear when convenience calls for resources and territory. What does it mean to be whole again? What defines justice in the ecosphere when so many life forms move simultaneously to inhabit the same location?

The materiality of the *home* is undoubtedly its 'prime reality', but not its only possibility. The realm of perception provides extensive ground for subjectivity and

entanglement between lifeforms and among social communities. Within the plane of sense and experience there is potential for disrupting the grid-logics that have become our status quo. To be *complete* is to embrace the worldview shared by most -if not all- native and indigenous peoples, which expresses an “ecology of wholeness where separation and disconnection cause dis-ease, and where integration and connection foster vibrant health and abundance.” (Stan, Mosquin, 2004) Thus, wholeness is not ‘unity,’ it is the recognition of difference and overlap in physicality as well as of sense and experience. However, these immaterial spaces of identity, imagination, and virtuality are not mere projections, they itinerantly seek embodiment within the *oikos*, and since the rise of the information age in the early Twentieth century, and more so today in the 21st, technology and software have often provided this possibility.

How can a material home in such urgent need for plural *and* interspecies ethics travel through spacetime entangled with the acutely active human imagination? Within *Rizomas*, the sequence titled *Virtual Ecology* (See figure 20) presents a version of plant-human relationality inspired in the Chipko ‘embrace’ as an intersecting point for eco-techno-imagination. Using the building information modeling software *Autodesk Revit* and *Lumion*, the piece approaches memory as a starting point for manifestation and enmeshment. Followed by a handheld camera and guided by their senses, the three people in the sequence touch, see, smell and recognize the agency of nature within the urban environment. The narrative recount that follows them throughout speaks of instances when they understood themselves as inseparable from the concept of ‘nature’. In between the performances appear computer generated landscapes and humanoid figures that tangentially reference the story and introduce a home within the mountains inhabited by animals, plants, and people. The distinct aesthetics of the images and the camera movements bring forward the idea of *home* we have consented on through decades

of mediated real estate bonanza and postcolonial luxury architecture.



Figure 20: Still shot from the ‘Virtual Ecology’ sequence in the film ‘Rizomas’, generated with Lumion and Autodesk Revit Software, Carolina Montejo, 2021

In this way, the *home* is unveiled as a space of human fantasy, a place that despite being tainted by the energy-dependent world of the ‘digital’, still leaves an open a gap for re-imagining the relations between the organic and artificial worlds of form. The intention of this rendered depiction is to give a new use to a tool centered in uniformity and marketed land expansion, and instead, create through it a simultaneous domicile for subjectivity and world-building. In this place designed with samples of repurposed materials and built to incorporate community views with intimate space, justice looks like birds talking to people, plants and insects growing among objects, and difference as non-exclusionary. From a transversal view, the people in the urban setting bridge the artificial possibility with their voice, pastoral gaze, and relatable materiality. In this sequence, *home* exits the ‘domicile’ and becomes a state of mind in which personal history and generational aesthetics are indexes of the mobility and all encompassing nature of the ecosphere.

It is within this periodic shift that a new meaning of *eco* has developed. During the first two decades of the Twenty First Century, this prefix is less concerned with the limits of the *home* and more so with describing a series of social and scientific approaches to knowledge, usually centered around the ‘environment’ and the complex systems that comprise it. *Eco* is now short for a category that recognizes the agency, interactive capacity, and autonomy of flora, fauna, and other living matter beyond *human* presence; yet considers the responsibility of individual and collective views of humanity on the balance of such *places*. Between 2020 and 2021, the last years of production of *Rizomas*, the sense of home shifted with the outbreak of Covid-19. The domicile as planet forcibly came to terms with its own material vulnerability, and this surfaced a socio-political uprising that spoke directly to us, the privileged, and our numerous possibilities for development, interaction, and escape.

Consequently, my sense of home took various routes, on one hand it provided safety and anchoring that resembled the immobile, yet living force, of plant-life. I rejoiced in this immobility and settled into the roots and underground components of domestic life. However, as a new American, expatriation became more painful and apparent as my native land and human-circle became distant and impossible to reach physically. The stagnancy and emotional longing also connected with my filmmaking, which just as everything else, was in need of immanent revision. However, even though logistical and creative issues denied interaction and travel, I had plenty of tools at my disposition: my research on ayahuasca and ecofeminism; firsthand experience with yagé; the work with the Green New Deal; the development of previous performances and installations done during the second year; the experimental script for *Rizomas* (See figure 21); and finally, and a disposition for intimate outreach and networking.

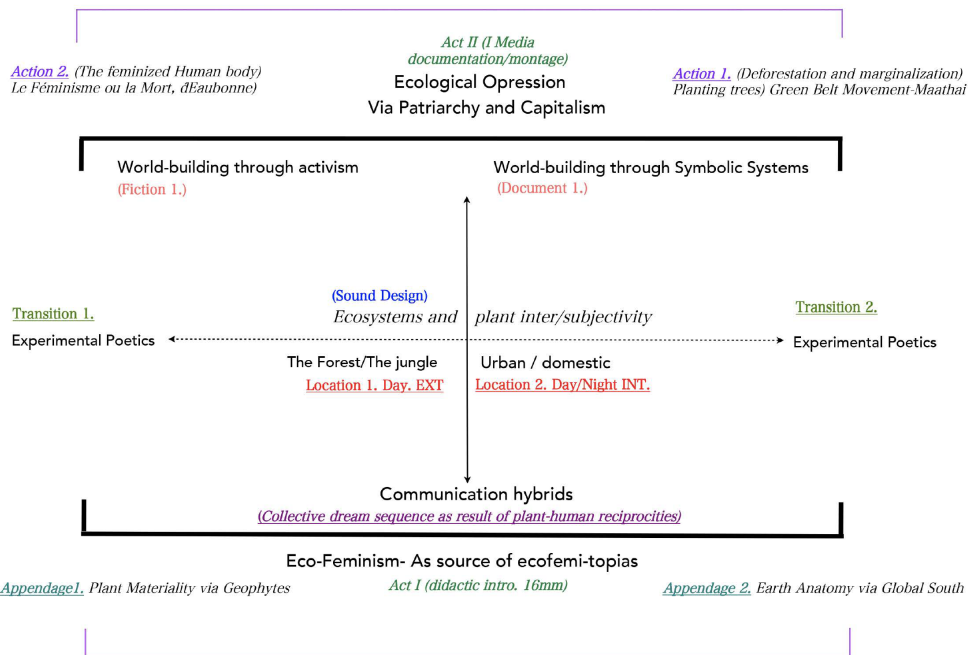


Figure 21: Experimental script for Rizomas, Carolina Montejo, 2021

As every so often throughout history, a global emergency erased the imaginary borders that contain us within nations, and left us to deal with simultaneous views: our collective space, our domestic surroundings and kinships, and our virtual identities. In order to uncover and recognize difference, inequality, and placement within ‘the system,’ our own gaze shifted towards our institutions and communities making our labor within the home explicit and prompting us to re-engage with the value of individuals and social groups that support wellbeing and comfort in the extended home of our towns and cities. The entanglement of the ecosphere manifested its malfunction and also signaled our next collective challenge, the intersection of social justice with the climate emergency, and its link to capitalism, patriarchy and oppressive racialization. Through our unrestricted connection to information and media, many of us saw our sense of self decentralized, and a personally, as has happened with my

relation to nature during the yagé ritual, a slow ego-dissolution multiplied my capacity to recognize the uncomfortable difference between our sense of home and that of the plural other.

During this time of shifting views, this prominent media consumption brought me to discover how video game developers such as *Strange Loops Games* have seen ‘potential’ in ecology and simulation as platforms for experiencing the effects of the accountability of human action on the planet, but have failed to propose counter hegemonic practices around our interconnectedness and agency. In their promotional video, the online game *Eco* (see figure 22) depicts pristine CGI scenes of a world where various ecosystems (mountain lands, underwater, and prairies, among others) are inhabited by a few animals. Subtitles guide the viewer to discover that this world is at risk of extinction and its survival is in their hands. A single male-performing human in ‘lumberjack’ garments cuts down a tree and starts to build a home, as this happens, a new text prompts the viewer on their mission to ‘collect and use resources from the ecosystem’. The scene cuts to a small group of log homes devoid of inhabitants (both human and more than human) that later emerge as a city made of brick and concrete. Aerial views sweep through diverse landscapes that settle on a second male figure, hunting with bow and arrow. Subsequent shots present emerging agricultural practices, mining, food preparation and trade. As the presence of industry becomes more explicit, the scenes turn eerie and a solution is introduced: the viewer can access satellite imagery, infographics and other technological resources to implement laws, charge taxes, and block off sections of the planet for wildlife preservation. The closing images show a world filled with oil extraction fields and high tech weapons as a translucent meteor-type figure crosses by. A typographic design reads ECO, play-eco.com



Figure 22: Promotional image for the online survival game ‘Eco’, Strange Loops games, 2018

In this version of the ecosphere, we can not be whole again, and justice is centered in an anthropocentric model that is quick to remind us of our current ecological, climatic, and social emergency. The absence of life as a series of subjectivities and communal intersections is evident, and in its place the attention sits on the male gaze of patriarchy and capital, where technocratic values limit our capacity to imagine a truly different planet. The meta-technological approach that could have lingered, among many interactions, on the ‘thousands of live simulations of plants’ that the game claims to have, veers towards an oracle-machine, which looks at itself in the eye, uses the earth as stage, and locates fear as a guiding light. The potential that the software has for bridging our era within the *home in movement* disappears under digital beats and a dualist, unrevised idea of ‘civilization.’

The ethical stance of virtual platforms and media arts is an important conversation when attempting to locate *ecology* in our era, as it speaks to what Rosi Braidotti calls “the necessity to think with the times and in spite of the times, not in a belligerent mode of oppositional consciousness, but as a humble and empowering gesture of co-construction of social horizons

of hope.” (Braidotti, 2004) A necessary extension of feminist eco-plural *gazes* into the realms of specialized knowledge, that fluidly and ‘rizomatically’ join together the practical and mainstream imaginaries, thus countering the toxic ‘common sense’ which prevents contemporary generations from conceiving regenerative systems. However, such spacetime fluxes are often uncomfortable to engage with, as they require the de-centering of humanity without misanthropy, whilst recognizing justice, equity and diversity of various human and more than human communities.

With the intention of engaging with such diverse variants of feminist thought, post humanism, and social and climate justice, the sequence within *Rizomas* titled *Welcome to the Ecofeminist System* (See figure 23), reaches out to another form of computer generated image: the scientific animation. During the rise of digital imagery in the 1990’s, Botanical Biologist Dr. Lawrence Jensen and animation specialist Andrew Chung, worked from the University of Auckland in New Zealand to produce a collection of educational videos titled *The Secret Life of Plants*. Using sections from their visualizations of moss, I introduce a close look at these plants and their unique becomings. A human VoiceOver narration welcomes the viewer to a world of justice, where the sun’s energy and life-giving power reference multiplicity, materiality and transformation. Following the 3D-modeled shapes, we are presented with oblong extensions, surface closeups, water droplets and growing vegetable limbs. The ecofeminist system is not centered in humanity, yet understands ethics beyond biological variation. The succeeding recognition of systems of human oppression mentioned in the narration, such as patriarchy and racial supremacy, attempt to bridge the *timespace* of the *virtual* with the realities of human history and agency among life. Elevating these non vascular plants as autonomous sites for utopia that have inhabited the earth for hundreds of

millions of years, intersects with our own sociobiological existence, and the potentialities of our current technological tools. Even though the speed at which these tools appear and their often problematic uses, the truth is that “if our virtual models of whatever sort are leading us to unhealthy relationships with our own environment, then we need to change those models, not fantasize about abandoning virtuality.” (Ulman, 2001, as cited in Willoquet-Maricondi, 2010)



Figure 23: Still shot from the sequence ‘Welcome to the Ecofeminist System’ from the film ‘Rizomas’ by Carolina Montejo, Original footage from “The Secret Life of Plants’ by L. Jensen and A. Chung, 1999

Shifting those models is a simultaneous task between virtual and tangible worlds that has been developing through feminist actions and movements that intentionally create frameworks of resistance and community. The Grassroots Global Justice Alliance (GGJ) led by Cindy Weisner takes the prefix *eco* back to the ‘oikos’ and reclaims the economy as the *management* of the home. Through a critique of the current economic system, which only

recognizes the visible levels of production —investment, productivity, and capital— and neglects the invisible levels of the economy —such as nature, care, and reproductive labor— the movement proposes an *Antiracist Regenerative Feminist Economy* lead by women and gender non conforming people. (Weisner, 2021) Within this structure, *Eco* appears as a relationship between environment, wildlife, social groups, and other political dimensions that have an impact on development and well being. As such, the model views materiality and discourse through their effects on food sovereignty, sustainability, bodily self determination, climate justice and buen vivir.⁴

Incorporating the economy into the wholeness of *ecology* presented itself as a crucial turning point in my understanding of the future of ecofeminist organizing and the ecosphere. How were women in the Global South, and particularly in Colombia, responding to such ideas and frameworks? Where did *Feministas* and environmental movements stand in proposing counter hegemonic actions in diverse parts of such communities? How could Rizomas elevate these voices? With these questions in mind, and the support of the Tinker Field Research Grant I received in 2020, I set out to reconfigure my pre-pandemic research plan and connected with *Red de Mujeres Construyendo Futuro [Network of Women Building the Future]*, a group of Colombian feminists from marginalized outskirts of Bogotá, who have been working together for over 19 years planting urban gardens in locations such as Ciudad Bolivar, Arbelaez, and Sibaté. Through a series of conversations and correspondence, I learned about the ways in which their micro political action was in line with the ideas of GGJ even though they were not aware of the model.

⁴ *Sumac Kawsay*, or *buen vivir* in Spanish, meaning "good living", rooted in the *cosmovisión* (or worldview) of the Quechua peoples of the Andes, describes a way of life that is community-centric, ecologically-balanced and culturally-sensitive. (Balch, 2013) The concept is related to the tradition of legal and political scholarship advocating legal standing for the natural environment. The approach is a break away from traditional environmental regulatory systems, which regard nature as property. (Community rights Pioneers, 2019)

The collaboration that came from our conversation can be seen in the sequence titled *The Ecofemitopia*, (See figure 24) a self-documentation of constituents from the three communities as they plant and tend to their gardens, some of which emerge in extreme conditions of marginality. Their struggle and resistance was in sync with my own view of utopia, which was not that of escapism and perfection, but of participation, care and community as an active response to patriarchy and injustice. Their fight to make their placement in the economy visible, and their reinvention of territory and sovereignty in right relation with each other —and with nature— started to answer the question of wholeness that is necessary to rebuild a home where everyone has a place and a benign function.



Figure 24: Still shot from the sequence “The Ecofemitopia” featuring “Red de Mujeres Construyendo Futuro” from the film ‘Rizomas’ by Carolina Montejo, 2021

4. Rizomas, a field-log on media ethics and ecocinema

What would it mean to extend a feminist eco pluralistic gaze onto our contemporary ecosphere? And how could that gaze foster action in the material world of cinema and media art?

The central inquiries in the reexamination of my practice due to the global pandemic have been seemingly operational and focused on locations, performers, and budget. However, as the state of urgency unfolded, these concerns branched out towards questions often addressed by ecocinema studies and the ways in which filmmakers can expand the parameters and ethical practices surrounding ecologically-minded media productions. As such, I approached Sarah Pink's *Doing Sensory Ethnography* and found that the framework of perception, place and imagination she presented was an opportunity to continue engaging with ecocentric ideas of wholeness and entanglement as a guiding ethos. Starting with perception (and the senses), I thought about how these may inform a filmmaker's approach to documenting or situating a scene in a space where more-than-human relations interact with a specific human culture, and how the eco-auteur as ethnographer can elevate their senses "not as the achievement of a mind in a body, but of the organism as a whole in its environment, tantamount to the organism's own exploratory movement through the world." (Gibson, 1972, as cited in Pink, 2012) Such an approach would attempt to blur the hierarchies that come with *directing* and *creating*, while also informing the ways in which both -production and conceptual vision- are framed to consider the values and social realities of natural and human histories of perception.

Additionally Timothy Ingold's views of place, presented a second parameter to address the values of eco-centered films, a position that proposes how "places do not exist so much as

they ‘*occur*’” (Ingold, 2008, as cited in Pink, 2012, 11), and in which the “idea of place is produced through movement that ‘occurs along the lifepaths of beings’ as part of a ‘meshwork of paths.’” (Ingold, 2008, as cited in Pink, 2012, 11) Still in conversation with wholeness, this view would center locations as living systems where the film crew actively acknowledges their correspondence with the space, and in which stories, performances, documentations, and other formal aspects would leave room for shifts, and in situ experimentation. This would have an impact on the type and quantity of equipment used, the ecological footprint of the production, as well as its effect on the human communities that share space with the natural or urban landscape. Thus, the eco-minded film would strive to be minimally invasive, portable and highly adaptable.

Considering imagination as the final component of this framework, I found Arjun Appadurai’s visions of collective imagination very helpful in establishing an ethos for the practice of ecocinema, especially as he suggests “that because imagination has come to play such a central role in a world where mass media permeates many areas of people's lives, ‘These complex, partly imagined lives must now form the bedrock of ethnography that wishes to retain a special voice in a transnational, deterritorialized world.’” (Appadurai, 1996, as cited in Pink, 2012, 17) This recognition of imagination as an equally malleable and participatory occurrence, heightened by a globalized and mediated world, speaks of the ways in which media-makers in general, but especially those of us concerned with the intersections of climate and social justice, must approach the filmmaking process. There is now more than ever a need for creative practices that detach from *grandeur* notions of creativity and focus on the way collective imagination can resist hegemonic views upheld by species, gender, race and class, among others. How are these relations portrayed and what behind-the-scenes practices and attitudes accompany them? How

might filmmakers learn from sensory ethnography in order to “develop an awareness of how she, he, or they become involved, not only participating in ‘other people’s’ practices, but also in anticipating their co-involvement in the constitution of places, and to identify the points of intervention of her, his, or their own intentionality and subjectivity.” (Pink, 2012, 21)

In researching, writing, and producing *Rizomas*, the criteria of perception, place and imagination came forward through my own developing eco-feminist gaze and the techniques, voices, and experiences that were integrated along the way. The perceptual components attempted to connect the physical to the conceptual, the ‘grounded’ to the utopian, as well as the analogue to the digital, while constantly engaging with the environment as a shared flux between plant, human, animal, and beyond. From a practical point, these collaborations resulted in an experiment of community, sustainability, and remoteness that revealed the places where labor was most equitably necessary, and where it could be replaced with re-use, refrain, and recycle practices available within networks of information and low-tech gestures, such as building human connections, repurposing existing technologies, and collaborating with grassroots organizations. Such was the case with the 3D-animated botany archive of Dr. Lawrence Jensen, which I obtained by corresponding through email and subsequently receiving a copy through post. These animations provided scientific insight on the sensibilities of the plant kingdom, while locating a historical perspective of how 3D modeling and animation have changed our own perception of natural and human worlds. In contrast, yet extending the question of the senses, the *Virtual Ecology* sequence presented the current trends, aesthetics and commercial values given to digital spheres, and the ways in which we can reframe these technologies and bring them into conversation with our own memories, stories and relations to natural and social worlds.

The *occurrence* of place both on and off-camera, as well as during the editing process was equally important to the film's ethical, collaborative and conceptual approach. The various adaptations of *Untitled Matter* took place within a flexible structure that allowed for exploration and intimacy, as well as the performer's recognition of agency within a larger living system. Simultaneously, memory and oral tradition attempted to blur spatial and material hierarchies that extended the concept of *location* into the realms of speculation and critique. Such transits were highlighted by the film's jumps between styles, viewpoints, and voices, which eventually arrived on the concept of Bradiotti's nomadic subjectivity and its acute awareness of the nonfixity of boundaries, in which the nomad has a sharpened sense of territory but no possessiveness about it, and in which there are multiple places to call home and rest up on. (Braidotti, 2011)

Taking the historical, theoretical, and practical consideration of ecofeminism, as well as further knowledge on the climate emergency —not contained in this thesis— yet researched simultaneously through my documentary film work for the Green New Deal at UCSD, I was able to establish a personal stance as a filmmaker; one that acknowledged the importance of *unimagining* the world as I had seen it through my local *and* media culture for so many years and in turn, practicing *co-imagination* via pluralism, care and revision. Personally, my intention was that of a micro-political action that affirmed life —both human and more than human—and proposed a counter hegemonic *ecofemiotopia*. Such practices and gestures were nurtured by my role as a Teaching Assistant in the Dimensions of Culture Writing Program at Marshall College and my interaction with a diverse array of social justice frameworks and histories regarding race, gender and class. The consideration of my positionality, and that of the individuals and

communities that participated in the film was a moment of growth within the creative process of Rizomas, and a new perspective on the topics I wish to address moving forward, as well as the relations, voices, and imaginations I aim to weave with my own creative involvement in the world.

Similarly to the profound journey I experienced in my coming together with mother Ayahuasca, the process of making Rizomas was guided both by stillness and contemplation, as well as by an inexplicable desire to transit, shift shape, and to connect with knowledges and systems that have been forgotten, yet are latent *and* manifest all around us. Additionally, the rigor of the Visual Arts Masters of Fine Arts program, as well as the *meshwork* of environments, living forces, human friends, mentors, peers, and family, extended this feminist ecopluralistic gaze beyond the finite timeline of my MFA Candidature, and located it as a practice I could extend through my continued academic and artistic research on ecology, feminism, and climate justice.

5. Appendix

Welcome to the Ecofeminist System

I introduce you to a model for our future. Look at it closely, as all of its components speak of multiplicity and justice, of substance *and* beauty.

The ecofeminist system grows rhizomatically, embracing all of its components. The plural other builds membranes of accumulated knowledge to protect you against erasure and dualism.

The ecofeminist star nurtures this ecosystem, yet its connection to a larger entanglement of elements is what kindles bodies of water, fosters vegetation, and transforms all vitality.

To acknowledge its parts is to experience a life where there is no violence, only *careful* resolution,
where difference is recognized yet de-centered,
where energy flows in the becoming of integrity.

Within this model have developed for centuries plants of all sizes that give home to ecotopias of harmony and equity. Community networks that fight against the toxic sediment left by carboniferous and patriarchal periods.

Notice how the oblong communication vessels send out signals of pleasure and resistance.

Reach for the systems filaments of interspecies exchange and celebration.

Observe the horizontal growth creating a non-hierarchical distribution of nutrients.

Participate in the shedding of excess and the redistribution of materiality.

Welcome to the feminist eco system.

Carbon in the Wind

I heard her say it was the Third Age of Carbon,

From the future we sit on the dead,

 roots under the city.

Digging to find our round bodies,

that only possibly could bear life,

and did.

From her voice came a scream,

as I woke up from dreaming that someone shot you in the throat.

Crying for weeks at a time,

wanting to escape the violence,

that only leaves a heavy trace

 Of carbon in the wind.

The metaphor is gone or flickers.

The carbon is not a symbol of beauty extinguished,

it is the burning of forest,

the melted living world

 rolling in human form.

Rivers growing hot like rubber over concrete

pushing poison through our leaking bodies.

Our uncomfortable, beautiful existence.

They let it burn.

Real carbon,

of chemical condition and less simile

The kind that threatens my child, our friend,

your pumping heart,

the trees,

the monkey tucked in a bed of leaves

A rat living in the walls,

the ice melting to mud as limbs sweating to come afloat.

The natural world that we are part of.

Affecting everything

that will only live,

to be carbon in the wind.

Invisible reason.

Embodied through all you enslave.

telling us that there is a down,

and an east from west.

Our blood will not

count numbers in your war,

But still drips down the back of my leg

Into the ocean,

To feed the fish and the piranha

The last standing eyeless creature

That completes the language of the living earth.

Why does it matter if I have one green eye, dark hand, flat breast

brown neck

stem,

a foot or a thousand wings,

Chlorophyll or antenna in place of hoof.

if none of them can breath

With all the carbon in the wind.

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