

The Laden River: Ignacio Piedrahita's Geological Stories of the Magdalena River

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Abstract The Magdalena River, considered the backbone of Colombia, carries a multitude of material stories through its waters. Ignacio Piedrahita's work, particularly in his travel diary *Grávido río* (2019) and the essay *La verdad de los ríos* (2020), emphasizes the Magdalena not only as a geological agent that shapes the Earth's surface through erosion and sediment deposition, but also as a product of human intervention. This perspective not only revalues the river as an active force in Colombia's reality – its agency and interconnectedness –, but also suggests, as Piedrahita does, the importance of the stories that the Magdalena tell us in the post-peace agreement context. In this regard, the river geological stories become a key element in reimagining social and environmental relations in Colombia.

Keywords Magdalena River. Grávido Río. Ignacio Piedrahita. Ecocriticism. Geological Writing. Blue Humanities. Non-human agency.

Summary 1 Introduction. – 2 Ignacio Piedrahita: A Geologist-Writer. – 3 Rethinking Time and Agency of the Magdalena River. – 4 Magdalena: A Laden River. – 5 Final Thoughts.

1 Introduction

If we consider geological time, the so-called 'deep time', the northern part of present-day South America appears relatively young compared to other continents.¹ For example, if we were to stand in the early Tertiary period, about 70 million years ago, the northern part of the future South American continent would have consisted primarily of the core of what is now the Central Andes, a segment of the future Eastern Andes, and part of the Sierra Nevada of Santa Marta – all submerged by the Tethys Sea, the only ocean at the time. By the Cretaceous period, around 60 million years ago, volcanic and tectonic activity along the Andes would have lifted the seafloor, creating an island arc that later gave rise to the Western Andes and the major mountains of the Central Andes. Intensified rainfall and increased erosion from the Central Andes eventually shaped what is now the Magdalena River Basin.² However, it was not until more recent processes – specifically the final uplift of the Central and Eastern Andes between 8 and 6 million years ago (Pliocene) – that it was fully consolidated. Today, the basin remains relatively young, with a defined upper course but significant instability due to ongoing dissection and sediment transport, which constantly alter its middle and lower courses. The geological narratives of the Magdalena River are just some of the many stories told by the materiality of the river basin – stories embedded in its waters, its stones, its beaches, its rocky bed, and the sediments it carries.

However, other stories also reach our ears when we talk about the Magdalena River. These are the stories of the “padre-río” (father-river) (Gómez Picón 1950, 12),³ which has been crucial since pre-Hispanic times as a place of transit between the Andean interior and the Atlantic exterior. During the Conquest, the Colony, and the early Republican period, it served as the vertebral axis (north-south) of the territory. However, with the arrival of the twentieth century and Colombia's integration into the global economy, this north-south axis was overshadowed by a more advantageous east-west orientation, relegating it to a secondary role. The stories of the Magdalena also

1 The Magdalena River is the main river of Colombia flowing northward about 1,530 kilometers. Its basin is home to nearly 70% of the population and is responsible for 80% of Colombia's GDP. All the geological references of the Magdalena River Basin are taken from Castaño Uribe (2003).

2 Sean W. Fleming suggests that asking which came first, the basin or the river, presents a “chicken-and-egg” problem, which can be seen as a positive feedback loop. In other words, although the canyon came first, since water only flows when there is a depression in the land, the basin is only consolidated through the action of the water flow (Fleming 2017, 12).

3 All translations are by the Author unless otherwise indicated.

speak of “el río de la vida” (river of life) (García Márquez 1981), but today it is seen as a ‘river of the dead’ filled with poisoned waters, extinct species, and human dead bodies. As Jason M. Kelly notes in *Rivers of the Anthropocene* (2017), freshwater ecosystems, particularly tropical rivers, are some of the most vulnerable of Earth’s ecosystems.⁴ The current degradation of the Magdalena reflects not only uncontrolled urbanization and industrialization processes but also anthropogenic activities such as dam construction, deforestation, the erosion of its soils and the introduction of invasive species in some cases narrating a past marked by drug trafficking. At the same time, since the mid-twentieth century, the river has also borne the weight of Colombia’s violent history, carrying the bodies of those murdered, handcuffed, mutilated, and dismembered. María Victoria Uribe has defined it as “liquid tombs” to speak about that “voices without body” of the Colombian violence and “whose bodies disappeared and whose remains lie piled up on the bottom of the rivers” (Uribe 2013, 20). In fact, the Magdalena’s waterscapes, like others in Colombia, has been used both to cause harm and destabilize populations, as well as to alter the senses and hide its horrors (Rodríguez Moreno, Díaz Melo 2018, 64). In the Magdalena, multiple stories of violence that have crossed Colombia, affecting both human and non-human communities with their multiple rhythms and scales.⁵ The waterscape of the Magdalena River has thus become a symbol of both destruction and resistance.

All these stories we tell about the Magdalena River emerge from its own materiality. In other words, as Serenella Iovino and Serpil Oppermann argue, “all matter, in other words, is a ‘storied matter’” (2014, 92). Similarly, in river basins, stories of the past, present, and future converge. Sean W. Fleming points out that “watersheds remember – culturally, geologically, ecologically – insofar as what happened before affects what happens now, and how things are now affects what is to come” (2017, 37). This explains why a river can return to its course after being diverted and cause catastrophes when the water flows again after months or years, encountering human presence. Like many other rivers in Colombia, the Magdalena River is both a witness and a victim of the multiple violences that have affected the country in the last decades. As suggested by the anthropologist Alejandro

⁴ In fact, the freshwater cycle is one of nine “planetary life support systems” currently at risk due to environmental change (Rockström et al. 2023).

⁵ Rob Nixon argues that there is a general inattention to a type of violence, which is “slow and long-lasting” (2011, 6). At the Magdalena River, this kind of slow violence co-exists with other forms of ‘fast violence’. For example, this can be observed in the chemical contamination of the river, which affects freshwater and fish supplies for downstream communities. This contamination is generated not only by official petroleum extraction but also by pipeline ruptures caused by armed illegal groups.

Camargo, violence and conflict have altered the memory of the rivers, embedding memories in the minds of those who live along their banks (Camargo 2023, 190). In the river's memories, not only does the changing materiality of the river (its current) converge, but also the stories it tells of a past that was, a present that is, and a future that could be. In this line of thought, what effects does bring to light the geological histories of the river have? How would our perspective on the Magdalena River's waterscape change if we recognized its geological past, its millennial timeline, and the deep interconnection of its basin? What would be the impact on its recent history, that of the past fifty years, on the power relations it establishes, on the memory of a country, and on the justice, we still owe to the river?

2 Ignacio Piedrahita: A Geologist-Writer

With the above in mind, I propose a closer look at the work of Ignacio Piedrahita (Medellín, 1973). Although he studied Geology, his professional career has largely revolved around writing. Piedrahita's literary training began at *Revista Universidad de Antioquia* where he wrote chronicles on a wide range of topics in each issue from 2000 to 2017. His literary work spans over three decades and has been primarily published by the Fondo Editorial de la Universidad EAFIT where the following works have been published: the short story collection *La caligrafía del basilisco* (1999), the novel *Un mar* (2006, reissued in 2023) – finalist of the Premio Nacional de Novela Inédita granted by the Colombian Ministry of Culture and winner of the V Convocatoria de Becas de Creación de Medellín in the same year –, and, lastly, the travel diaries *Al oído de la cordillera* (2011) and *Grávido río* (2019). He has also contributed to the chronicle book *Medias tintas. Crónicas y mentiras* (2002, co-authored with Andrés Burgos, Pascual Gaviria, and Juan Carlos Orrego Arismendi), published by Libros Rabodeají, and authored *El velo que cubre la piedra* (2018, with photographs by Carlos Felipe Ramírez), published by the independent publishing house Atarraya Editores. A new edition of this book, featuring illustrations by Yapi, was released in 2023, edited by the Medellín Metro and Comfama. Additionally, he published the essay *La verdad de los ríos* (2020), with a foreword by Ricardo Camilo Niño Izquierdo. Lastly, Piedrahita regularly contributes with essays and chronicles to local publications, such as the newspaper *Universo Centro*.

As can be observed, Piedrahita's writing is diverse and extensive, encompassing various literary forms: novel, short-story, essay, and chronicle. A defining characteristic that runs through all of his work is the constant interplay between his professional background as a geologist and his writing. The author himself describes his work as follows:

Nací en Medellín y vivo en las afueras de la ciudad. Estudié geología por amor al paisaje natural. Me interesa entender la vida humana en función del subsuelo de piedra que la origina y la sostiene en silencio. Los recorridos y el viaje, tanto urbanos como en el campo, son el insumo de mis escritos. Esta es la esencia de mi universo literario.⁶

I was born in Medellín and now live on the outskirts of the city. I studied geology out of a love for the natural landscape. I am interested in understanding human life in relation to the bedrock that both originates and silently sustains it. The journeys and travels, both urban and rural, are the raw material for my writing. This is the essence of my literary universe.

His writing arises from the encounter between the observation and imagination of the Earth, mediated by his geological knowledge. This allows the central question in his works to revolve around the complexity of the world around us and how literature is used to represent that complexity. In other words, Piedrahita's work involves more than just an ecological theme; it implies a narrative dynamic on multiple levels, one that is aware of the literary mechanism and the tradition in which it is embedded. Writer and columnist Carolina Sanín (2014), referring to Piedrahita's first travel diary *Al oído de la cordillera* (2011), describes this quality as a "geological humanism" since it seamlessly integrates the scientific explanation into the poetical description showing how the knowledge heightens the emotion.

In particular, *Grávido río* (2019) narrates the journey of a writer-geologist across the length and breadth of the Magdalena River basin. Piedrahita follows the path of his previous book, *Al oído de la cordillera* (2011), in which, through a series of interconnected episodes, he chronicled his journey through South America, following the Andes Mountains from Colombia to Tierra del Fuego. The book can be placed within the broad genre of 'travel writing', as described by literary critic Carl Thompson as a

constellation of many different types of writing and/or text, these forms being connected not by conformity to a single, prescriptive pattern, but rather by a set of what the philosopher Ludwig Wittgenstein would call 'family resemblances'. (2011, 26)

These common resonances link Piedrahita's book to a long and varied Latin American tradition of travel writing, beginning with the *Crónicas de Indias*, passing through the narratives of Romantic

⁶ Taken from Piedrahita's official website: <https://www.ignaciopiedrahita.com/bio>.

travelers of the late eighteenth century, and contemporary travel accounts.

Piedrahita's book is structured in seven chapters, in which different episodes intertwine, showcasing, first, the author's unique sensitivity to the surrounding environment and, second, his skill and emotional depth in narrating it. In this vein, Piedrahita blurs the sense of sight and merges it with the other senses, marking a departure from much of the travel writing about Latin America.⁷ The text proposes a journey where the traveler's experience is multisensory: tactile, auditory, olfactory, visual, and gustatory. The use of the first-person narrative helps shape this autobiographical experience, "seeks to make retrospective sense out of discrete experiences: to convert a mishmash of impressions into a coherent narrative" (Holland, Huggan 1998, 14). Furthermore, the book highlights not only the narrator's knowledge of geology and other related sciences (such as hydrology, physics, biology, among others) but also reveals an extensive literary formation, spanning from the ancient Greeks (such as Parmenides of Elea, Heraclitus of Ephesus, and Pythagoras) to William Shakespeare, and on to American poets like Walt Whitman and Henry David Thoreau. Additionally, Piedrahita's writing draws on the works of other travelers who have crossed the same territory in the past, both national and international, such as Fray Pedro Simón, Alexander von Humboldt, Robert J. Treffy, Agustín Codazzi, and Francisco Cisneros.

References and intertextualities abound throughout the narrative, as in the very characteristics of the work itself. For example, the title of the book, *Grávido río*, references a verse from the prologue-poem of José Eustasio Rivera's *Tierra de promisión* (1921).⁸ These references add various layers and strata to the work, enriching the travel narrative across the Magdalena River Basin. Similarly, the images accompanying the text add another layer. The cover image is the watercolor *Mompox en el Magdalena* – 1845, painted by Mark Edward Wallhouse, who is considered the first landscape artist in the history of the country (Deas 2013, 14) and a key painter in shaping the national landscape in the mid-nineteenth century. The contrast with the black-and-white photographs included within the text, used to visually reinforce the points developed by Piedrahita, adds yet another level to this stratification of the narrative.

⁷ On the predominance of the "Imperial I/eye" perspective in travel diaries, see: Pratt 1992.

⁸ This book precedes the novel *La Vorágine* (1924) and gathers some of Rivera's early poems. This poetry collection includes fifty-five sonnets divided into three parts, along with a prologue-poem. The latter, titled *Grávido río*, is included in its entirety at the end of Piedrahita's book, fostering a dialogue between the prologue-poem and the travel diary.

3 Rethinking Time and Agency of the Magdalena River

Throughout the journey in *Grávido río*, the writer-geologist focuses on understanding the various geological processes unfolding within the Magdalena River Basin, each with its own scales and timeframes. As mentioned, the narrative – through the traveler's multisensory experience and the layered text – invites reflection on the river's time and agency, highlighting its slow movement and vast, inhuman scale. This becomes evident early on in one of the first episodes, when the traveler encounters the Magdalena for the first time. The reflection begins not with the river itself, which is described as “el río lucía grávido bajo la canícula ardiente y el agua parecía un líquido más denso que ella misma” (the river looked gravid under the burning sun, and the water seemed a liquid denser than itself) (Piedrahita 2019, 17),⁹ but with the encounter that follows:

Pero al darme vuelta vi, detrás de la carretera, una pared hecha de arena y guijarros de un color crema claro, que bajo el pleno sol encandilaba la mirada. Dentro de la pared misma, los diminutos granos estaban dispuestos de formas particulares. Semejaban festones y especies de arabescos, como si una cultura antigua los hubiera diseñado. Tras cruzar la pista de asfalto, caminé hacia ella atraído por la sutil magia de las formas de arena. (17)

But when I turned around, I saw, behind the road, a wall made of sand and pebbles in a light cream color, which, under the full sun, dazzled the eyes. Within the wall itself, the tiny grains were arranged in particular patterns. They resembled garlands and kinds of arabesques, as if an ancient culture had designed them. After crossing the asphalt track, I walked toward it, drawn by the subtle magic of the sand's shapes.

This encounter might seem trivial to any other traveler, especially when compared to the vastness of the river on the other side of the road. However, this natural wall symbolized the portrait of the river's current, in its endless pursuit of the sea. A few paragraphs later, Piedrahita explains:

Los guijarros y arenas apiladas en la pared de la vía eran antiguas playas del río, registro de su curso antiquísimo. Y, al mismo tiempo, narraban lo que estaba sucediendo actualmente por debajo y en las orillas del cauce actual. Esa pequeña colina era un río

⁹ The original version in Spanish and the English translation are presented. All the translations of Piedrahita's books are by the Author.

duplicado hacia un pasado de sí mismo. El Magdalena no era solo la corriente que en ese momento fluía por su cauce, sino también aquella que había dejado su huella en esa barranca en otro tiempo. (Piedrahita 2019, 20)

The pebbles and sand stacked in the wall along the road were ancient river beaches, a record of its ancient course. At the same time, they told the story of what was happening below and along the banks of the current channel. This small hill was a river mirrored in the past. The Magdalena was not just the current flowing through its bed at that moment, but also the one that had left its mark on that cliff at some other time.

What Piedrahita uncovers on the banks of the Magdalena River is what Jeffrey Cohen defines as “geophilia” in his book *Stone. An Ecology of the Inhuman* (2015, 27): “Geophilia goes farther and recognizes matter’s promiscuous desire to affiliate with other forms of matter, regardless of organic composition or resemblance to human vitality”. In other words, how matter – here, sand, pebbles and stones – conceals different ways of expressing, organizing, and ultimately, acting. The wall along the roadside, usually overlooked by the traveler, can speak of a distant past and the history of a riverbed that has shifted over time. In fact, this cliff reveals how the Magdalena River is not the same as it once was.

At various points in the narrative, Piedrahita emphasizes the connection between matter and time. This perspective is central to the field of geology, as Marcia Björnerud explains: “[E]arly in an introductory geology course, one begins to understand that rocks are not nouns but verbs – visible evidence of processes” (2018, 8). The idea that rocks are in constant motion resonates with Piedrahita’s experience in the Tatacoa Desert, a semi-arid region located in the upper stretch of the river near the city of Neiva. While observing the different geological formations – particularly the torpedo-shaped towers or columns, built by hardened sandstone layers that can reach several meters in height – the narrator remarks:

Sentía una gran alegría al saber que aquello en apariencia tan inmóvil, era en realidad una gran coreografía. Bastaba ponerlo en cámara rápida para ver la danza de la tierra en su ciclo permanente. (Piedrahita 2019, 80)

I felt a deep joy in realizing that what seemed so immobile was, in fact, a grand choreography. It only took putting it in fast motion to witness the earth’s dance in its perpetual cycle.

The narrator discovers that in these seemingly immobile formations, there is movement – a “grand choreography” that unfolds over much longer, slower timescales.¹⁰ Matter possesses agency, manifesting in a scale and time that transcends the human. As Bjornerud explains, “the past is not lost; in fact, it is palpably present in rocks, landscapes, groundwater, glaciers, and ecosystems” (2018, 162), and this is precisely what the traveler perceives in these geological formations. In the next paragraph, the traveler continues:

Allí, en la soledad del laberinto, vibraba con la compañía de la naturaleza. El desierto me hacía sentir único. Miles de años atrás él estaba escribiendo sus poemas para este momento. Y ahora yo podía leerlos. Eran líneas simples acerca de los fenómenos que gobernaban sus formas, y tenía la sensación de que reflejaban mi estado interior. Todo tenía que ver con el agua y con los fragmentos de roca delicadamente removidos. Sus formas habían sido hechas, más que agregando, quitando. Eran los contornos del vacío que daba sentido aquel lugar. Lo etéreo de las nubes que cubrían el cielo no lo era más que el espacio dejado por la roca que me rodeaba. Había en ello una sutil insinuación del paisaje. Tal vez debería preguntarme que era no estar vivo, y entonces comprendería mejor lo que significaba estarlo. (Piedrahita 2019, 80)

There, in the solitude of the labyrinth, I vibrate with the presence of nature. The desert made me feel singular. Thousands of years ago, it had been composing its poems for this very moment. And now, I could read them. They were simple lines about the forces that shaped its forms, and I had the feeling they mirrored my inner state. Everything was connected to water and the fragments of rock gently removed. Its shapes had been formed more by subtraction than addition. They were the contours of the void that gave meaning to this place. The ethereal clouds that veiled the sky were no more than the space left behind by the rock that surrounded me. There was in this a subtle suggestion of the landscape. Perhaps I should ask myself what it means to not be alive, and in doing so, I would better understand what it means to be alive.

What is particularly interesting is how Piedrahita finds himself reflected in this observation while giving words to the landscape he is perceiving. The narrator is aware that he is made of the same matter

¹⁰ In line with what has come to be known as New Materialisms, Iovino and Oppermann argue: “Agency, therefore, is not to be necessarily and exclusively associated with human beings and with human intentionality, but it is a pervasive and inbuilt property of matter, as part and parcel of its generative dynamism” (2014, 3).

as the world around him, in this case, the desert and its rock formations.¹¹ The allegory of the poetry of the world is revealing. On one hand, it opens the possibility of writing through the “simple lines” that form the landscape – here, the different layers of the rock formations. On the other hand, it allows for a reading of the past through the “contours of the void”, that is, the “space left by the rock”. In this sense, as Jane Bennett adds, “if matter itself is lively, then not only is the difference between subjects and objects minimized, but the status of the shared materiality of all things is elevated” (2010, 13).

A recurring theme in *Grávido río* that deepens the invitation to reconsider the river's time and agency is what the writer and literary critic Cristina Rivera Garza has defined as geological writing, which, at its core, is a process of desedimentation (2022, 12).¹² As the author explains, geological writing is a “disappropriative writing as long as it works ethically and aesthetically with source texts, making them visible and even palpable in new ones” (2023, 16). This process of desedimentation becomes particularly evident in the book's fourth chapter. Here, as the traveler moves along the Magdalena River, he reaches the ruins of the town of Armero, destroyed by what is considered the second most devastating volcanic catastrophe of the twentieth century.¹³ The narrative pauses at a large rock,¹⁴ prompting the traveler to reflect on the magnitude of the event that occurred there. The narrator observes that this massive rock was most likely carried by the force of the avalanche that destroyed the town, “la cantidad de agua y lodo era equivalente a tres veces el río Magdalena, y avanzaba entre cinco y quince metros con cada tic-tac del reloj” (the amount of water and mud was equivalent to three times the Magdalena River, and it advanced between five and fifteen meters with every tick of the clock) (Piedrahita 2019, 92).

From this point onward, Piedrahita's geological writing becomes evident, as Rivera Garza explains: “[L]eads to a vertical reading that, in lifting layer after layer of the materials included, desediments the apparent immutability of power” (2023, 17). This verticality becomes

11 Karen Barad's theory of agential realism posits that “we are not outside observers of the world. Neither are we simply located at particular places in the world; rather, we are part of the world in its ongoing intra-activity” (Barad 2007, 184).

12 Rivera Garza defines “geological writing” by drawing on Kathryn Yusoff's critical work, which proposes a process of desedimentation aimed at dismantling the racialized and colonialist practices that underlie geology.

13 The tragedy of Armero occurred on 13 November 1985, when a mudslide (composed of mud, earth, and debris resulting from the eruption of the Nevado del Ruiz volcano) destroyed the town of Armero, located 50 km from the volcano along the banks of the Magdalena River. The disaster claimed between 23,000 and 25,000 lives and caused incalculable damage.

14 The narrative is accompanied by an image that portrays the magnitude of the stone between pages 92 and 93.

apparent when the traveler, having left the Magdalena River, follows the course of the Lagunilla River and ascends to the higher reaches of the mountain range, understanding the connection between the two. Only from the heights of the range, near the Nevado del Ruiz and at a distance from Armero, he grasps the material interconnectedness of the basin. And, also, the chain of events that led to the tragedy. This insight enables Piedrahita to explore the various layers and sediments of the tragedy, revisiting the accounts of Fray Pedro Simón in *Noticias historiales de las conquistas de Tierra Firme en las Indias Occidentales* regarding the 1595 eruption, as well as the writings of the English geologist Robert J. Teffry on the 1845 eruption. These fragments allow Piedrahita to suggest that, despite the tragedy of 1985, which occurred 145 years after the eruption described by Teffry, it was the “ciclo hermoso de la naturaleza, descrito y avisado con los mismos ruidos y las mismas expresiones” (beautiful cycle of nature, described and foretold with the same sounds and the same expressions) (Piedrahita 2019, 100). The key difference that led to the tragedy was that, by the twentieth century, a town of 25,000 people had settled on the fertile plain formed by the confluence of the Lagunilla River and the Magdalena River.

Me parecía asombroso que todo aquello se hubiera originado cerca de donde me encontraba. El silencio de la hondonada y sus cabeceras nevadas estaba pleno de ecos de erupciones y avalanchas como músicas desatadas. El Lagunilla unía a perpetuidad el poderoso nevado del Ruiz con el gran río Magdalena. Y Armero se había levantado en el camino de semejante lazo de amistad. (2019, 103)

It struck me as astonishing that all of this had originated so close to where I was. The silence of the valley, with its snow-capped peaks, was filled with echoes of eruptions and avalanches, like wild music. The Lagunilla River eternally connected the mighty Nevado del Ruiz with the great Magdalena River. And Armero had been built along the path of this powerful, enduring bond.

In this process of desedimentation, which once again situates the perspective within the very materiality of the world, it becomes clear how both textual and material layers reveal a tragedy that could have been avoided. As Piedrahita reflects, had he listened to the elders, everything might have been different, “pero en el tiempo en que vivimos los hábitos de la naturaleza parecen noticias bobas y desdeñables” (but in the time, we live in, nature’s habits seem like trivial and dismissible news) (2019, 101).

4 **Magdalena: A Laden River**

The reflection on the tragedy of Armero through its geological features opens the door to a broader contemplation of the materiality of the Magdalena River and its recent histories. However, before delving into this, it is important to analyze the journey proposed by Piedrahita. Unlike other recent travel diaries about the Magdalena, written by foreign authors for primarily international audiences,¹⁵ the journey in *Grávido río* is neither linear (following the river's course) nor unidirectional (ascending or descending the river). It is a circular journey that begins and ends in the rural area of Medellín – Piedrahita's home. Moreover, from the outset, it is clear that the journey's purpose is not to promote the Magdalena River, but rather it is driven by a desire. A ghostly Hamletian voice, as the narrator describes at the beginning of the narration, urging the traveler to explore and understand their surroundings. In this sense, Piedrahita challenges the traditional view of the river as merely a line drawn on a map or as an inert object in the landscape. Instead, he introduces the concept of the river as a broader entity, imbued with material histories, and central to the identity of Colombia. This idea is further developed in Piedrahita's essay *La verdad de los ríos*, published as part of the Hay Festival in Cartagena in 2020, just a year after *Grávido río*. In the essay, he reflects on the significance of rivers in Colombia and their importance in the post-conflict landscape following the 2016 Peace Agreement between the Colombian government and the FARC-EP.¹⁶ In particular, regarding the understanding of what a river truly is, he writes:

Solemos imaginar un río como una línea, ya sea porque observamos su trazado en un mapa o porque vemos sus aguas confinadas a un lecho entre dos orillas. Pero también podemos imaginarlo con la forma de una letra V, como si lo cortáramos con un gran cuchillo en cualquier punto de su cauce y hasta más allá de sus márgenes. En la parte baja de la letra corre el agua de lo que conocemos

¹⁵ Specifically, I am referring to *The Robber of Memories. A River Journey Through Colombia* by Michael Jacobs (2012, published in Spanish in 2018) or the acclaimed book *Magdalena: River of Dreams. A Story of Colombia* by Wade Davis (2020, published in Spanish in 2021). However, it is worth noting that, in the case of Davis, his translation achieved significant success in the Colombian book market.

¹⁶ It is important to note that the essay is an initiative of the Commission for the Clarification of Truth, Coexistence, and Non-Repetition (Comisión para el Esclarecimiento de la Verdad, la Convivencia y la No Repetición). This autonomous entity stems from the Peace Agreement and aimed to investigate Colombia's internal armed conflict over the five years following the signing (2017-22). Its final report is titled *Hay futuro, si hay verdad*, and can be consulted at: <https://www.comisiondelaverdad.co/hay-futuro-si-hay-verdad>.

propriadamente como el río, mientras que las líneas diagonales en picada representan las pendientes de las montañas por donde bajan los arroyos que van a dar a él. Cada una de las gotas de agua lluvia, así como los riachuelos que se van formando en las laderas, recae invariablemente en el fondo de esa V de valle. (Piedrahita 2020, 32)

We often imagine a river as a line – either because we see its path on a map or because we observe its waters confined to a channel between two banks. But we can also imagine it as the shape of a letter V, as though we were cutting through it with a large knife at any point along its course, extending even beyond its banks. In the lower part of the V flows the water we recognize as the river itself, while the sloping diagonal lines represent the mountainsides where the streams that feed into it descend. Every raindrop, as well as the small streams forming on the slopes, inevitably flows to the bottom of that V-shaped valley.

For Piedrahita, the river goes beyond the course of water itself; it also includes the surrounding mountains, the rivers, streams, and brooks that connect it, and the air that encircles it. In this sense, the Magdalena River is understood as the entire basin that allows for its existence. This perspective resonates with the critical work of Dilip da Cunha, who recognizes rivers as products of “visual” and “material literacy” (2018, 177-8), meaning products “of the act of separation [between land and water] facilitated by the drawn line in a chosen moment of water” (2019, 10), and as “means of colonizing rain” (2019, 12).¹⁷ Piedrahita’s journey breaks away from the narrow view of the river as only its main course and instead considers its three-dimensional “V” shape, acknowledging the complexity of its hydrological cycle and the interconnection between its parts. This invitation to comprehend the complexity allows for the development of alternative viewpoints on the various historical processes that have shaped – and continue to shape – the Magdalena River Basin. Specifically, it addresses how certain parts of the river, especially the Middle Magdalena Valley,¹⁸ have come to be what anthropologist Margarita Serje (2011) has defined as the “reverse of the nation”. In other words, a topography excluded from the national discourse

¹⁷ Cunha (2018; 2019) develops his argument based on the case of the Ganges in India. He suggests that the Ganges River is a modern invention, defined through the ‘colonizing gaze of Alexander’, which privileges the flowing water over the rest of the hydrological system, representing it through a line.

¹⁸ The Middle Magdalena Valley is an intermediate region of the river basin, typically defined between the city of Honda and the point where the river enters the plains of the Caribbean Sea. It is a region of great biodiversity, with countless natural and mineral resources.

and dialectically constructed between the extreme violence that defines it and the immense wealth it holds. Eden and hell are the images that converge around it. In the Middle Magdalena Valley, the river becomes both witness and victim to these multiple violences, with numerous human and non-human actors and victims, in various rhythms and scales.

Particularly in the fifth chapter of *Grávido río*, this complexity is explored in greater depth. The traveler's arrival in Puerto Berrío serves as a point of reflection, commenting on how various forms of violence – and the stories we tell about them – permeate the materiality of the river. Without resorting to the exoticism of violence, as other travelers do, Piedrahita succinctly explains how guerrilla, paramilitary, and narco violence have intersected in the Middle Magdalena Valley, affecting both human and non-human communities. He also notes that the waters of the river have become a tomb for the bodies swept away by the current. However, an alternative point of view is presented consistently throughout the chapter. Piedrahita proposes a reflection on the anthropogenic effects on the Magdalena River Basin, understanding it as a living organism whose degradation impacts the entire nation. At the beginning of the chapter, the traveler joins a group of scientists studying the recent and disproportionate floods of the river. The group's destination is a riverside village called Bocas de Barbacoas, where the aim is to study one of the marshes adjacent to the Magdalena River. The boat journey presents a new experience for the traveler in an amphibious geography still to be deciphered. Upon reaching the village, the traveler gradually becomes aware of the anthropogenic effects of intensive livestock farming and deforestation, which have been occurring since colonial times. Nowadays, Piedrahita notes, these effects have “llegaba al límite del exterminio” (reached the brink of extermination) (Piedrahita 2019, 134). He points out that the sediment from intensive deforestation has likely caused the blockage between the marshes and the river: “Tal como la sangre no logra fluir por una vena, así quedaba limitado el paso entre ambos cuerpos de agua” (Just as blood cannot flow through a vein, so the passage between the two bodies of water was restricted) (138). In this passage, Piedrahita uses a bodily metaphor to emphasize the interconnectedness of the basin and, especially, the consequences this has on the flow of the river:¹⁹

La irrigación de la sangre en los pulmones de un ser vivo y la manera como un río se nutre de los numerosos arroyos de las montañas en una gran red, no es una analogía hueca. En realidad, ambas

¹⁹ As Fleming points out: “The single most fundamental and overarching aspect or measure of a river is its flow [...] and how that varies over time and space” (2017, 37).

formas arborescentes obedecen a leyes matemáticas que explican lo que la intuición y la vida en la naturaleza ya se sabe: que solo sobrevive aquel sistema al que no se le impide su mejor manera de fluir. El Magdalena no solo es el río, es todos los ríos y lagunas que lo alimentan. Es incluso el agua que llueve y lentamente va a dar a él. Si en algún momento usamos esa agua, es él quien nos lo permite. (Piedrahita 2019, 138)

The irrigation of blood in the lungs of a living being and the way a river is nourished by the numerous streams from the mountains, forming a vast network, is not a hollow analogy. In fact, both branching systems obey mathematical laws that explain what intuition and life in nature already know: only the system that is allowed to flow in its best way survives. The Magdalena is not just the river; it is all the rivers and lagoons that feed it. It is even the rainwater that slowly flows into it. If at any point we use that water, it is the river that allows it.

It is the ability to flow that is the key to understanding how Piedrahita sees the Magdalena River and its surrounding bodies of water. Water is synonymous with life, and it is essential for the existence of Colombia. As Wade Davis argues, “we turned our backs on the river that gave us life”, but to deny it is to “betray all that we are as Colombians” (2020, 347). And as Piedrahita adds in his essay:

Bajo nuestra identidad como país, marcada por la historia, las tradiciones y otros asuntos de índole social, subyace una unión más fuerte y poderosa, que es la unión por medio de una telaraña irrefutable de agua, cuyos hilos más fuertes son el Cauca y el Magdalena. Esa telaraña tiene en Colombia la forma de un gran árbol acostado verticalmente sobre nuestro mapa. El tronco son estos dos ríos; las raíces son los numerosos cauces que nacen en la parte alta de las cordilleras; y las ramas son los canales y ciénagas en los que se desmiembra el Magdalena en la costa atlántica antes de entregarse al océano. (Piedrahita 2020, 31)

Beneath our identity as a country, marked by history, traditions, and other social matters, there lies a stronger and more powerful union: a union through an irrefutable web of water, whose strongest threads are the Cauca and the Magdalena. This web takes the form of a great tree lying vertically across our map. The trunk is made up of these two rivers; the roots are the numerous channels that originate in the highlands of the mountain ranges; and the branches are the canals and swamps where the Magdalena branches out along the Atlantic coast before giving itself to the ocean.

Piedrahita's emphasis on this "web of waters" that forms the nation highlights the different levels of entanglement that Colombia has with the Magdalena River. He argues that its materiality is intimately tied to the historical, cultural, social, and economic processes occurring in the country. In this sense "[l]o que cada habitante del centro del país haga con el agua, en su tierra o en las ciudades, van a sentirlo las poblaciones de las orillas de nuestros dos grandes ríos" (what each inhabitant of the country's interior does with the water, whether in the land or in the cities, will be felt by the populations living along the banks of our two great rivers) (Piedrahita 2020, 33). But it is also intimately connected with geological processes and with the realization that we are facing a non-human world with different scales and rhythms of action.

5 Final Thoughts

One of the principles of geology is uniformitarianism, which means that what happens today and how it happens is similar to how the same events occurred in the past. However, the concept of the Anthropocene has disrupted these paradigm, as human action accelerates the pace of present processes compared to those of the past. This acceleration of natural cycles breaks with the idea of a static world, highlighting that humans play an active role in the planet's evolution. *Grávido río* by Ignacio Piedrahita reminds us that the river is neither inert nor static, but instead has rhythms and scales that transcend human limits. Furthermore, the river is an interconnected system – not just a line of water, but a web of waters, a basin in constant communication with other bodies of water, the highlands and lowlands, and even the rain.

Here, Rivera's verse "Soy un grávido río", which gives the book its title, is enlightening. It speaks not only to what the river carries – whether geological sediments, chemicals, or human bodies – but also to its central role in the future of Colombia and its people. As Piedrahita mentions in his essay, focusing on Colombia's rivers, acknowledging the war that has affected them, and recognizing the poor management they have suffered will help in transforming them into "hilos conductores de una historia de Colombia equilibrada, que pretende ir en busca de su propia unidad, su propio mar de alentador sosiego" (conductive threads of a balanced history of Colombia, one that seeks its own unity, its own sea of encouraging tranquility) (Piedrahita 2020, 45). The future of Colombia will depend on the achievement of this awareness.

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