Stories Come to Matter: Water, Food and Other Entanglements

edited by
Santiago Alarcón-Tobón and Enric Bou

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Abstract

This volume contains some of the contributions to a workshop on Environmental Humanities, in particular to ecocriticism topics in relationship with two subfields: Blue Humanities and Food Studies. Specifically, the contributions are focused on two key entanglements: water and food, both of which serve as critical examples of how matter and meaning are intertwined. The chapters cover a wide variety of issues: Latin American water issues linked to indigeneity and social justice, the meaning of the Magdalena River in Colombia, fish, the true meaning of 'paella', or a reimagination of traditional Jewish Venetian menus from an ecocritical perspective. All are aimed to deepen and broaden the discussion about meaning and matter, emphasizing the significance of stories and imagination while outlining the vast network of agencies that shape our world.

Keywords Blue Humanities. Food Studies. New Materialisms. Iberian Studies. Latin America. Venice.

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Stories Come to Matter: Water, Food, and other Entanglements

Stories and Matter: An Environmental Humanities Debate

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This volume is the result of a 'giornata di studio' that took place in Venice in December 2023 devoted to the Environmental Humanities and in particular to ecocriticism topics organized in collaboration with NICHE (THE NEW INSTITUTE Centre for Environmental Humanities) at Ca' Foscari University of Venice, and under the umbrella of the Master of Environmental Humanities. The main goal was to offer to the Ca' Foscari community an opportunity to exchange ideas about new trends in Ecocriticism particularly in relationship with two subfields: Blue Humanities and Food Studies. In the workshop participated writer and cook Fuchsia Dunlop, an expert on Chinese cuisine, in conversation with NICHE's director Francesca Tarocco and Enric Bou. Other participants included: Damiano Benvegnù (University of St. Andrews), Robert Davidson (University of Toronto), Rosi Song (University of Durham), and Neus Penalba (University of Cambridge). Only Paul Merchant (University of Bristol), Ignacio López Calvo (University of California – Merced), and Sasha Gora (University of Ausburg), along with Shaul Bassi, Santiago Alarcón-Tobón, Enric Bou, from Ca' Foscari University of Venice, could send an article to this volume which albeit incomplete

provides a good idea of the discussions held during two days in the windy venetian winter.

Inspired by the introduction of *Material Ecocriticism* (Iovino, Oppermann 2014), the meeting aimed to deepen and broaden the discussion surrounding the intricate entanglements between meaning and matter. The goal was to emphasize the significance of stories and imagination while outlining the vast network of agencies that shape our world. Specifically, we focused on two key entanglements: water and food, both of which serve as critical examples of how matter and meaning are intertwined. As Iovino and Oppermann state, "all matter, in other words, is a 'storied matter'" (2014, 92). Additionally, the meeting sought to extend the dominant discussions from an English-speaking context to include perspectives from other geographical regions, such as Italy, Spain, and Latin America.

In the case of Italy, ecocriticism has gained significant traction over the past decade. The works of Serenella Iovino provide a notable example of this development. Her early work, *Ecologia letteraria: una strategia di sopravvivenza* (2006), drew on the conceptual frameworks developed within the English-speaking ecocriticism context. However, this approach evolved with the coining of the term "material ecocriticism" in collaboration with Serpil Oppermann (2012; 2014). A key example of this shift is her book *Ecocriticism and Italy: Ecology, Resistance, and Liberation* (2016), where Iovino examines the "forces, signs, wounds, and messages of creativity dispersed on Italy's body, always keeping in mind the link between the ecology, both cultural and physical, of this country and the world's larger ecology of ideas and matter" (1). As Iovino demonstrates in the case of Italy, landscapes of crisis are profoundly intertwined with landscapes of imagination. This perspective has also inspired other collective volumes, such as *Italy and the Environmental Humanities: Landscapes, Natures, Ecologies* (2018), edited by Iovino, Cesaretti, and Past, which seeks to reimagine Italy as a hybrid, plural, and eloquent place, demonstrating the wide spectrum of approaches within the environmental humanities. Another example is the volume *Italy and the Ecological Imagination: Ecocritical Theories and Practices* (2022), edited by Damiano Benvegnù and Matteo Gilebbi, where the guiding question is: What lessons does Italy offer regarding the relationship between the non-human and the current socio-environmental crisis? As a recent study argues,

> by listening to what Italian landscapes, minds, and ecologies have to say within the Environmental Humanities global conversation will not likely stop the melting of the ice caps or the destruction of rainforests, but it will certainly contribute to making such a conversation richer, more inclusive, and diverse. (Cesaretti, Biasillo, Benvegnú 2023, 3)

After a long period of little interest (or neglect) about ecocriticism in the Hispanic and Iberian world, recently the situation has changed dramatically in a positive way. Not too long-ago Luis Prádanos could write:

> As of now, our field is failing miserably in addressing the cultural implications of the Anthropocene, largely ignoring it in a disturbing way. It seems that Spanish cultural and literary studies are in a state of unconscious denial, actively avoiding this debate or, still worse, not being able to notice these pervasive 'hyperobjects,' such as global warming, which Timothy Morton describes as being 'massively distributed in time and space relative to humans'. (2016, 26)

In the case of the Iberian Peninsula, several crises coincide and overlap in the ecocritical discussion: climate change will likely affect dramatically due to its geographical location and climatic conditions; second, it has an overwhelming dependence on foreign fossil fuels; third, its soil depletion and water scarcity is quickly increasing due to European agricultural laws; and finally, over-construction of houses and useless macro-infrastructures (TGV network) shows conspicuous lack of planning that borders with collective insanity (Prádanos 2016). Beilin and Viestenz (2016a; 2016b) have worked on a similar direction to enhance the interest in eco issues. Beatriz Lindo Mañas has provided a short overview of interest about ecocriticism in Spain (2020). Two recent edited volumes, Prádanos *A Companion to Spanish Environmental Cultural Studies* (2023) and Afinoguénova, Anderson and Ingram's, *Digestible Governance. Gastocracy and Spanish Foodways* (2024) are proof on the rapid changing nature of the field.

While the number of works addressing these topics continues to grow each year in the Italian and Iberian world, in the Latin American context, the field is experiencing a boom, expanding the scope and the limits of the field. As Lisa Blackmore and Gisella Heffes noted in the introduction to a recent dossier on the new directions of Environmental Humanities in Latin America, the field can be defined as

> a rapidly consolidating discipline that cross-fertilises methods and perspectives stemming from the social sciences, arts and humanities, natural sciences, and Indigenous thought, to critically interrogate environmental histories and confront contemporary challenges. (2022, 105)

Notably, Latin American critics over the past decade have employed a wide range of theoretical frameworks to address regional environmental issues, with particular emphasis on the global anthropogenic impact and the interconnected dynamics of capitalism, colonialism,

and racism. One recent example is Gisella Heffes' *Visualizing Loss in Latin America: Biopolitics, Waste, and the Urban Environment* (2023) suggesting that "the aesthetic praxis that emerges in/from Latin America is permeated with a rhetoric of waste––a significant trait that overwhelmingly defines it" (9). Heffes' book illustrates how environmental humanities in Latin America have been moving towards developing their own conceptual and critical framework in recent years, overcoming Anglo-ecocriticism and taking into account the language, traditions, and perspectives of the continent. This trend is also particularly evident in the subfield of Blue Humanities, where new viewpoints have emerged from the Latin American perspective, such as "tidalectics" (DeLoughrey 2019), "liquid ecologies" (Blackmore, Gómez 2020), "liquid indigeneity" (Merchant 2020) or "hydrohumanities" (DeWolff, Faletti, López Calvo 2022).

2

The starting point of the meeting was around what would happen if we turn our attention to the materiality of our world as new materialisms propose (for a panoramic overview: Emmett, Nye 2017, 139-63; Jones 2018, 244-7; Tuin 2018, 277-9). In general terms, the approach of new materialisms, are characterized by an attempt to decenter anthropocentric views of the world, turning a look at the materiality that surrounds us and proposing to understand non-human entities/bodies/objects as vibrant, vital or as participating in forms of distributive agency (Diener 2020, 2). In other words, new materialisms seek to abolish old distinctions between animate and inert matter, problematizing the binarisms that such anthropocentric vision has constructed: 'matter-meaning', 'body-mind', 'civilization-barbarism' or 'culture-nature'. For this very reason, according to Iris Van Der Tuin, new materialisms can be thought of as a research methodology "for the non-dualistic study of the world within, beside and among us, the world that precedes, includes and exceeds us" (2018, 277).

Although it is not easy to locate a starting point for new materialisms, these approaches owe much to the developments in the fields of Science and technology studies (STS), especially in their relationship with culture, in authors such as Donna Haraway or Bruno Latour. In addition, the approaches of new materialisms since that time have acquired multiple influences ranging from the revision of philosophical traditions (Lucretius, Spinoza, Bergson, Merleau-Ponty), feminist theory (Judith Butler, Elizabeth Grosz, Luce Irigaray), anthropology (Tim Ingold, Philippe Descola, Viveiros de Castro), cognitive sciences (Francisco Varela and Humberto Maturana, Gregory Bateson) to the revision of the ideas of ecological postmodernism (Alfred Whitehead). All of this has given rise to the proliferation of new concepts and

terms that explain why it is necessary the use of the plural instead of the singular to define the field.

Diane Coole and Samantha Frost, editors of the volume *New Materialisms: Ontology, Agency, and Politics* (2010), proposed in the introduction: "How could we ignore the power of matter and the ways it materializes in our ordinary experience or fail to acknowledge the primacy of matter in our theories?" (2010, 1). Undeniably, the materiality that opens up the Anthropocene era is reflected in the heterogeneity of the approaches that attempt to answer this question. Some key concepts are "viscous porosity" (Tuana 2008), "vibrant matter" (Bennett 2010) or "trans-corporeality" (Alaimo 2010). Despite the differences in the proposals and their philosophical origin, all these approaches propose in general a shift of attention towards all that is non-human within and outside of us. This observation is especially pertinent to the examples explored in this volume. As Stacy Alaimo explains, "perhaps the most palpable trans-corporeal substance is food, since eating transforms plants and animals into human flesh" (2010, 12). Although eating may appear to be a straightforward activity, various material agents can emerge throughout the process from dirt to mouth. In the case of water, one might argue that human bodies are bodies of water: "we leak and seethe, our borders always vulnerable to rupture and renegotiation" (Neimanis 2017, 2). This suggests that we are immersed in the world around us and within us. As Astrida Neimanis observes, the wateriness of human bodies verifies that "the human is always also more-than-human" (2017, 2), and we are inseparable from the ecological concerns that shape and define our world.

In this regard, Simon Diener observes in a recent review of books in the field of new materialisms: "heterogeneity is a defining characteristic of the conversation and perhaps one reason that it continues to produce such generative thought across the disciplines" (2020, 2). Likewise, new materialisms are not only heterogeneous, but have been constituted as a generative thought facilitating the constitution of new methods and terminologies that allow the creation of opportunities for applied work in different disciplines. In this regard, he adds that the multiple approaches of new materialisms are "an important reminder that we need not have settled all the theoretical conundrums of ontology to effect concrete" (2020, 4).

In other words, critical thinking in the context of the climate emergency cannot be confined to the idea that critique has been exhausted, nor can it be limited to its mere refinement for practical utility. Furthermore, new materialisms preserve the foundational activist component of modern ecological thought. As Oppermann asserts, it is the ethical responsibility embedded in such approaches that remains crucial in a world shaped by the consequences of the climate emergency (2023, 43). In this regard, aquatic issues are not merely

ecological concerns; they also carry ethical and socio-cultural imperatives shaped by discursive formations (Oppermann 2023, 11). As Steve Mentz proposes, a framework such as the "poetics of planetary water" (2023, 1) look to address the urgent global challenges of our ecocatastrophic era. On the topic of food, Stacy Alaimo argues that the food we consume transforms our bodies bite by bite; however, this process is far from one-sided, as it is deeply intertwined with social, economic, and political forces (2010, 13). Indeed, food systems can be understood as intricate networks – both global and local – that encompass people, processes, and products (Hubbell, Ryan 2021, 122).

Referring to this aspect, Tobias Skiveren adds that "the new materialist interest in ontology is driven also by a methodological aim: to reconfigure affective patterns of response and incite more positive engagements with the world" (2023, 191). Despite the criticisms that new materialisms have received for their citation politics and claims of innovation or the reading of a flat ontology in their presuppositions as posited by Marxist eco-theory in recent years (Diener 2020), the three arguments discussed above – heterogeneity, generativity, and ethical responsibility – show the potential of new materialisms' line of thought. These characteristics resemble the proposals developed by Rosi Braidotti in her book *Posthuman Knowledge* (2019) regarding what she defines as posthuman convergence and which make posthuman knowledge possible: singularity, multiplicity, criticality and focus on justice. In addition, one can take into account what Serenella Iovino and Serpil Oppermann observed: "questioning the dualistic paradigms of transcendental humanism, new materialisms rethink ontology, epistemology, and ethics – being, knowing, and acting – in terms of a radical immanence" (2012, 450).

Furthermore, as Iovino and Oppermann state, what is at the heart of the discussions on new materialisms is the search for new models that allow theorizing on the one hand the connections between matter and agency and on the other the entanglement between bodies, natures and meanings (2012, 450). In Donna Haraway's words they are "semiotic-material generative nodes" (1992, 67), about how the dynamics of matter work and the configurations they assume. Karen Barad's "theory of agential realism" formulated in her book *Meeting the Universe Halfway* (2007) resonates with the above. Here the feminist thinker and quantum physicist shows the symmetrical entanglements between matter and discourse that allow her to develop an onto-epistemological vision of reality. Matter in Barad's terms is not immutable, nor passive or independent, but matter "refers to phenomena in their ongoing materialization" (2007, 151). That is to say that matter has a power of determination that allows it to assume tangible forms (bodies) in constant interaction with each other. The configurations resulting from this exchange show how material processes occur from a constant and indissoluble interaction of agencies or

"intra-action", i.e. "the mutual constitution of entangled agencies" (2007, 33), where matter and meaning are reciprocal and co-implicated, to use Barad's term. As a result, the intelligibility of reality is not a characteristic that depends on humans but "an ontological performance of the world in its ongoing articulation" (2007, 149). In a similar vein, Coole and Frost add that the crucial step is from "matter is" to "matter becomes", i.e. "it is in these choreographies of becoming that we find cosmic forces assembling and disintegrating to forge more or less enduring patterns that may provisionally exhibit internally coherent, efficacious organization" (2010, 10).

This poses a direct challenge to the Cartesian illusion of seeing humans as something separate from the world around them, moving away from the idea of human exclusivity or superiority over those "others" that inhabit the planet. In this order of ideas, the presuppositions of new materialisms resonate with the notions of Tim Ingold whose works from anthropology propose that the conception of the human must start "not as a composite entity made up of separable but complementary parts, such as body, mind and culture, but rather as a singular locus of creative growth within a continually unfolding field of relationships" (2000, 4). This view allows him to develop his perspective of "dwelling" which suggests that humans "are brought into existence as organism-persons within a world that is inhabited by beings of manifold kinds, both humans and non-humans", asserting that what we are accustomed to call as social relations (between humans) are only "a sub-set of ecological relations" (2000, 5). In conclusion, we could remind that "by moving from a subject/object epistemology to a human-nonhuman performative onto-epistemology, new materialism becomes a theory and practice of posthumanism" (Iovino, Opperman 2012, 456).

3

During the meeting participants presented many different conceptions of materiality. The chapters included in this volume are witness to the variety on interests and approaches that provided ground for a fruitful discussion. Ignacio López Calvo in "The Hydrohumanities and Latin America" examines the state of the humanities with a focus on water issues in Latin America, establishing connections to indigeneity and social justice. He highlights Latin America's leadership in best practices, sustainability, and water conservation projects. The essay reviews academic studies on the topic and analyzes how violence against environmental activists in the region is reflected in its cultural production, including literature, films, and documentaries. In the conclusion he advocates for the integration of humanities studies – specifically those centered on water – as a means to address current environmental crises.

Paul Merchant's "Constitutional and Ecological Entanglements in Contemporary Chile" reviews the outbreak of protests known as the estallido social in Chile in late 2019 and early 2020's that parked widespread demands for a new constitution to replace the one implemented by dictator Augusto Pinochet in 1980. While ultimately unsuccessful, many of these initiatives employed inventive and creative methods to challenge the role of the non-human environment within the country's constitutional framework. Engaging with thinkers such as Bruno Latour and Eduardo Gudynas, the chapter examines contemporary Chilean cultural production that advocates for a new, interconnected constitutional settlement.

Santiago Alarcón-Tobón's chapter "The Laden River: Ignacio Piedrahita's Geological Stories of the Magdalena River" focuses on the Magdalena River, considered the backbone of Colombia, a river that 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 landscape 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.

Sasha Gora's "To Steal a Fish" focuses on Deborah Levy's novel *Hot Milk*, Sofia escorts her mother to Spain in search of a cure for her mother's paralysis, only for the doctor to suggest a cure for her. To remedy her lack of courage, the doctor prescribes that she steals a fish. At the market she eyes a tuna, but pronounces it 'too big,' before she slips a dorado into her basket. Gora asks about further meanings of stealing a fish, or if is tuna truly 'too big' to steal? In response to these questions, she approaches the topic of how 'stories come to matter' by weaving together notes about swimming with Atlantic bluefin tuna together with reflections on storytelling and structure, matter and meaning.

Enric Bou's "Taste and Flavor. Variations on the Paella" proposes a reflection on the foodways in the Hispanic world that are heterogeneous and conflicting and allow us to study how people think with food, using it to mark identities and establish power relations. Food is also related to memory and thus generates a grammar. The reflection culminates with the case of paella, a non-existent dish, which is demonstrated through a brief overview of its history and a reading of a chapter from Los mares del Sur by Manuel Vázquez Montalbán, a noted food critic and novelist.

Shaul Bassi's "Eating Under Water: Speculative Jewish Gastronomy in Venice" manages to mix the two main topics of the meeting: water

and food. The essay explores the intersections of food, culture, and resilience through the lens of speculative Jewish gastronomy in Venice. It begins with general reflections on the nexus between food, religion, and ecology, before examining the project *La cucina ebraica del futuro* (Future Jewish Cuisine), which reimagines traditional Jewish Venetian menus from an ecocritical perspective. The text reflects on how food serves as a site of cultural memory and environmental speculation, highlighting gastronomy's dual role as a material and symbolic medium for addressing environmental challenges, envisioning sustainable futures, and negotiating identity under precarious conditions.

4

In closing we may remind what Fuchsia Dunlop explained about the materiality and strangeness of Chinese food:

> In China, I would say that people generally experience eating as a really fully multi-sensory experience. And if you talk to someone Chinese about the pleasures of food, they almost always mention not only the flavour and the smell, but also the mouthfeel kǒu gǎn, the texture of the food. And that's an absolutely integral part of the quality of a dish and the enjoyment of food. And so I think in China, there's, you know, in England, people are very self-conscious about eating, relatively speaking. You know, you're not supposed to make any noise. You're meant to be a very quiet and polite and user knife and fork. But in China, it's much more, I think, a much more sensual engagement with food. You know, you can make little noises, you can spit out bones using chopsticks. It's very gentle and tactile. It's like an extension of the hand. And so people, I would say, you know, you can eat something like a dux tongue and it's not about the destination, the meat, it's about the journey, it's about the playful interaction of the food with your teeth and your tongue. And that's part of the farm of eating. So that's what I mean by the grapple factor. So that means that ingredients that a Westerner would simply throw in the bin become potentially exciting and interesting delicacies in China. And I would say that Europeans, historically, have looked down on Chinese people and have this idea that only desperate, you know, poor people would eat something like a chicken's fur. But this is simply not true because you have ingredients like this, like, you know, ducks, feets, duck tongues, imperial delicacies. You know, it's throughout society, people enjoy eating ingredients that are very puzzling for Europeans
>
> […]
>
> And I think that, I mean, I'm always say to people, you don't have to enjoy texture. You don't have to enjoy eating unusual ingredients

> and unfamiliar ingredients to love Chinese food. I mean, Chinese food is popular all over the world. And there are absolutely countless delicacies that anyone can eat from any background, you know. So, you know, roast duck, char siu pork, fantastic vegetarian cooking. There's something for everyone. So I think that, yeah, there are many all kinds of, I mean, in Italy, you have fantastic pasta. In Northern China, they have so many different kinds of noodle and that's a real point of contact. So I think there's plenty to share and plenty in common, but just if you want to fully experience Chinese food, which I highly recommend, it's worth considering texture differently and just trying to understand that it can be delightful in itself. And I find often with foreigners, you know, non-Chinese people that once they start thinking about this, it's like opening a door in the mind. And then, I mean, when I first went to China, I could not understand why anyone would bother eating a duck intestine, right? Slithery, no flavour. It's just, I thought it was like eating rubber bands. But after some time of eating them in China with friends who hugely enjoyed them. Now, I really enjoy this ingredient because of the lovely, slightly contradictory, slithery, crunchy mouthfeel. So I think it's a very interesting way of unlocking greater pleasure in food. (Dunlop 2023)

At a time of pressing changes, it is necessary to better define the role should literature, cultural studies, the Arts, and Humanities in general play when it comes to radically changing the imaginary of the dominant economic culture, and contributing to the design and promotion of the future. The Environmental Humanities must play a pivotal function in reshaping imaginaries and fostering new cultural narratives that are capable of making sense of our contemporary world. The challenging realities of the Anthropocene can be more effectively comprehended through stories that are grounded in a critical engagement with the subject matter.

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Stories Come to Matter: Water, Food, and other Entanglements
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The Hydrohumanities and Latin America

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Abstract This essay examines the state of the humanities with a focus on water issues in Latin America, establishing connections to indigeneity and social justice. It also highlights Latin America's leadership in best practices, sustainability, and water conservation projects. The essay reviews academic studies on the topic and analyzes how violence against environmental activists in the region is reflected in its cultural production, including literature, films, and documentaries. Finally, it advocates for the integration of humanities studies – specifically those centered on water – as a means to address current environmental crises.

Keywords Hydrohumanities. Latin America. Ecological activism. Water. Social upheaval.

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In recent years, the struggle for access to safe water resources in Latin America has been increasingly connected with indigeneity. For example, Quechua women in Umpuco, near Puno, in the Peruvian Altiplano, are struggling to find access to water for their alpacas in the face of increasingly severe drought as a result of climate change. Resorting to ancestral indigenous knowledge, they resort to a technique they describe as "planting and harvesting the rain":

> Esta práctica, arraigada en los Andes desde antes de los incas, consiste en recolectar el agua de lluvia de las zonas más altas (siembra) para recuperarla después en las más bajas (cosecha). (Jabiel 2024, s.p.)
>
> This practice, rooted in the Andes since before the Incas, consists of collecting rainwater from the highest areas (sowing) to later recover it in the lowest areas (harvest).[1]

Imitating the irrigation canals of their ancestors, these women collect the water of the Japulaya spring and bring it down, through a kilometer of pipes, to their community. By also building reservoirs and infiltration ditches to prevent rain runoff and retain the water, they have recovered, according to Jabiel, hundreds of hectares of their prairies with native Andean grasses that help water retention.

Meanwhile, despite the pressure and threats he suffered, Román Guitián, chief of the Indigenous community Atacameños del Altiplano, located in Antofagasta de la Sierra, managed in 2024 to convince the Supreme Court of Justice of the province of Catamarca, in northern Argentina, to stop lithium mining in the Salar del Hombre Muerto. He decided to join forces with environmental organizations after several mining companies dried up the Trapiche River, one of the most important rivers in the region, and seven new projects threatened to also destroy the Los Patos River, one of this community's scarce water resources (Gulman).

Latin America is, in fact, taking a leadership position in water conservation projects and good practices that are being emulated in Europe, the United States, Asia, and Africa. For instance, a British city, Norfolk, has recently adopted the Fondos de Agua program, which was implemented twenty years ago in Quito, Ecuador, one of the

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1 Unless otherwise stated all translations present in this essay are by the Author.

twenty-six Fondos de Agua that exist in eleven Latin American countries. According to Paula Caballero and Marianne Kleiberg, this plan

> incluye acciones de conservación como la implementación de estanques permeables, franjas de protección y la gestión del suelo; así como acciones para monitorear y evaluar los recursos hídricos de la región. (Caballero, Kleiberg 2024)

> includes conservation actions such as the implementation of permeable ponds, buffer strips and soil management, as well as actions to monitor and evaluate the region's water resources.

This Latin American approach to water security and sustainability is part of the different Soluciones Basadas en la Naturaleza (Solutions Based on Nature), which propose alternatives to engineering infrastructure, such as the restoration and conservation of coral reefs, mangroves, and other ecosystems in order to avoid floods and slow down waves (Caballero 2024).

These types of solutions are emerging in Latin America perhaps because it is one of the regions more drastically affected by climate change. As Lorena Arroyo (2024) has pointed out, natural disasters continue to create chaos in the region, from droughts in the Amazon River, to the destruction caused by Otis, a category 5 hurricane, near Acapulco, Mexico, in October 2023, to the drought in Mexico City and the threatened water supply in São Paulo, to the devastating floods in Rio Grande do Sul, Brazil, in May 2024, to the existential threat to 365 Caribbean islands that could disappear due to the raise of water levels by 2050, to the lack of rain in the Panama Canal.

Yet in Latin America, where climate change is increasingly becoming a source of social upheaval and where, paradoxically, one of every four Latin Americans does not have appropriate access to water even though the region is host to 30 percent of the planet's water resources (Arroyo 2024), ecological activism can be a deadly business. Although water is a human right, explicitly recognized by the United Nations General Assembly on 28 July 2010, through Resolution 64/292, many people still have to give their life to have access to it. Thus, in 2019, Samir Flores, a thirty-five-year-old activist member of the Frente en Defensa de la Tierra y el Agua (Defense of Land and Water Front) was assassinated by the organized crime group Comando Tlahuica when he was leaving his residence, the day after he protested the construction, initiated in 2012, of a thermoelectric project and pipeline by the Popocatépetl volcano in the Mexican state of Morelos. The project, supported by Mexican president Andrés Manuel López Obrador, had been denounced by academics and residents because of its adverse environmental impact and its overuse of water in an agricultural area where water is urgently needed.

A 2021 report from the environmental rights organization Global Witness described Latin America as the deadliest place in the world for environmental activists. In 2020 alone, there were 165 deadly attacks on land and environmental defenders, with 65 in Colombia (where one-third of the activists were of Indigenous or African ancestry), 30 in Mexico (half of the attacks were against Indigenous communities), 20 in Brazil, and 17 in Honduras. Although most of these deadly attacks were linked to the logging industry, many were also related to water appropriation, including demonstrations against the construction of hydroelectric dams. On September 24, 2020, for example, the thirty-four-year-old Indigenous Mexican activist Óscar Eyraud Adams was murdered in his residence in Nejí, Tecate, Baja California, for fighting for the Indigenous Kumiai community's water rights, as their aquifers were being dried up by large beer and wine companies during a severe drought. Unfortunately, the Global Witness report (2021) states, these predatory companies' attackers can act with impunity, as 95 percent of these murders in Mexico go unpunished. The report concludes that an increasing number of murders related to climate change are being committed:

> We tend to associate the climate crisis with its environmental impacts – unbearable heat, air pollution, rising seas, burning forests, or super-storms. Yet the date on attacks against land and environmental defenders […] show that the unaccountable exploitation and greed driving the climate crisis is also having an increasingly violent impact on people. (Global Witness 2021, 15)

These murders of activists are just the tip of the iceberg, revealing widespread environmental injustice and the increased vulnerability of minorities and the poor to industrial pollution, natural disasters, and the effects of climate change, particularly as they relate to small-scale agriculture and ranching.

This type of violence against environmental defenders is beginning to be reflected in Hispanic cultural production, as evident in the 2010 film *También la lluvia* (*Even the Rain*, directed by Icíar Bollaín, Spain, Mexico, France). In this film within a film, a film crew that travels to Cochabamba, Bolivia, in 2000 to shoot a film about the Spanish conquest of the Americas finds itself in the middle of the Cochabamba Water War. It turns out that an Indigenous actor named Daniel (Juan Carlos Aduviri), who has a significant role in the historical film that Mexican filmmaker Sebastián (Gael García Bernal) is directing, is also leading the demonstrations against the government-supported privatization of the city's municipal water company and the increased water rates after it is sold to a powerful international corporation. Daniel is beaten up by the police during a protest and later he is almost arrested a second time, and his daughter

Belén's leg is seriously injured. In the closing scenes, Daniel, grateful for the help he has received from Costa (Luis Tosar), the Spanish executive producer of the film, to save his daughter, presents him with a small container of Bolivian water as a gift. The water war in Cochabamba will reappear in the documentary film *Ríos de hombres* (*Rivers of Men*, directed by Tin Dirdamal, Mexico, Bolivia, 2011), where we hear about the international corporation's attempt to privatize even rainwater, about a mother who lost her son, and a general who was ordered to attack his own city, among other protagonists of the confrontation. The tragic problem with water access in Bolivia is also addressed in the interactive journalistic 'webdoc' *Bolivia's Everyday Water War* (2016), financed by the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, which combines data journalism with documentary storytelling.

Likewise, at the intersection of neoliberal extractivism, environmental justice and Indigenous worldviews, in the ecocritical documentary film *Water for Life*, directed by Will Parrinello, we find three persons from Latin America who risk or lose their life to protect the rivers of their communities despite death threats and the killing of people close to them. In the end, after years of terror and abuse but also determination and strategy, their small but significant victories give us a message of hope in humankind and the power of non-violent struggle. Films like *Water for Life* can serve as inspiration for communities facing similar environmental threats from governments and/or corporations.

In the volume *Hydrohumanities. Water Discourse and Environmental Futures* (De Wolff, Faletti, López-Calvo 2021), which I coedited with Kim De Wolff and Rina Faletti, we encourage humanities scholars to take a leadership role in the urgent discussions about an anthropogenic climate change crisis that is threatening the very survival of human beings in this planet. More specifically, we claim that humanities scholars' interdisciplinary, cultural approaches to water sustainability, drought, flood, and other extreme water-related events are a valuable complement to the sciences and other nonhumanities disciplines and can lead their findings. The volume, which tries to bridge ocean-centered scholarship ("the oceanic turn" or "critical ocean studies") and research focused on rivers, works around three different themes: the agency of water ("how water, under its own power, is harnessed by and ultimately confounds human desire and control" (De Wolff, Faletti 2021, 10)); fluid identities (connections between water and urban or national imagined communities); and cultural currencies (challenges to the technical and economic logics dominating public water conversations). *Hydrohumanities* emphasizes relationships between water and power, not only focusing on human power over water but also on "how water is itself powerful, not merely a substance to be fought over" (De Wolff, Faletti 2021, 6). It also calls

for an activist move into praxis, emphasizing what the hydrohumanities can do to change the world:

> Theoretical interventions must be carried into practices. Though concerned with alternative conceptualizations, we build on field-defining efforts to *practice* environmental humanities by addressing water problems in the world. (De Wolff, Faletti 2021, 8-9)

By exposing environmental injustice and suggesting ways to solve these problems, the hydrohumanities have the potential to contribute significantly to policymaking in relation to water. For example, addressing environmental injustice in Yucatán and, particularly, how groundwater contaminated by carcinogenic, agricultural pesticides is affecting local Mayan women's health (through cancer and toxic substances in mothers' milk and blood), Angel Polanco Rodríguez and Kata Beilin argue:

> [T]he passage of toxins between bodies of water, soil, and human flesh, and the resulting illnesses and struggle for health are deeply significant processes in which culture becomes transformed by an economy in which gain is more important than health and well-being. (2019, 183)

Later, they add:

> On June 5, 2018, while everybody's attention was taken by the World Cup, the Mexican government signed ten decrees that eliminated protection of three hundred water basins containing 55 percent of the available water in the country. From now on, there will be no legal obstacles for concessions to corporations needing water for their industrial ventures such as fracking, mining, soft drink and beer production, and others. (2019, 185)

This type of research lays bare the increasingly inseparable relationship between water and power in Latin America (e.g., the takeover of communal water by international corporations, often in collusion with governmental authority). It also shows the potential connection between hydrohumanities research and praxis, and between water-related concepts or ideas in the humanities and tangible actions focused on water access and environmental justice in general. If hydrohumanities research can truly contribute to rethinking the water economies that continue to destroy the environment in Latin America and to harm the livelihoods of disadvantaged groups, often Indigenous communities, then not only will societies and governments learn to appreciate the social value of the humanities but, more importantly, we may be saving lives, both human and nonhuman.

This is the way in which we can, from the hydrohumanities, connect thoughts (reconceptualizing water as well as water-human relationships) to actions (fixing environmental problems, saving the planet and ourselves), thus turning some of our research into tools for resistance against environmental injustice and health hazards.

Crucial discussions about water and other environmental uncertainties in Latin America have been taking place for decades in the humanities, which also have the potential to lead scholarly research from other disciplines. The hydrohumanities – the term 'blue humanities' is almost always specific to the study of oceans – turn our disciplines toward human interaction with oceanic, fluvial, and lacustrine bodies of water throughout history as a significant subfield of interdisciplinary inquiry. Taking aquatic imaginaries – both material and metaphoric – as an analytical framework, hydrocriticism (to use Laura Winkiel's term) explores the entanglement between the anthropogenetic climate crises, sociopolitical instability, and power relations inequalities in their relation to water (Winkiel 2019). These include the tense relationship between water, extractivism, and indigeneity in Latin America. Indeed, Indigenous perspectives, worldviews, and knowledge production on water and the natural world, which often adopt a decolonial outlook on imperialism and modernity, are finally being reconsidered, as they offer cultural meanings of water as something other than a commodity. Regarding water, for example, Polanco Rodríguez and Beilin, referencing Patricia Macías, explain:

> For Yucatec Mayas, water is changing and alive, and human consciousness needs to be attuned to water. In Mayan culture, humans communicate with water and recognize that water responds emotionally. (Polanco Rodríguez, Beilin 2019, 173)

Along these lines, in the chapter I cowrote for *Hydrohumanities* (López-Calvo, López Chavolla 2021), we analyze, from the theoretical perspective of new materialism, the Peruvian José María Arguedas's novel *Los ríos profundos* (*Deep Rivers*, 1958) and the Colombian Philip Potdevin's novel *Palabrero* (2016). Potdevin re-creates the shocking real-life rise in suicide rates among the Indigenous Wayúu community in the Guajira Peninsula of Colombia, after an international mining company contaminated their water and air, dried up the Ranchería River (*Rainkeriia* in Wayuunaiki language), and turned part of their ancestral territory into a wasteland, thus continuing the historical violence against Indigenous groups since colonial times. Ultimately, the destruction of the local land and aquatic sources becomes inseparable from the historical exploitation of Indigenous people: rivers embody Indigenous suffering and are witnesses to it. Besides the life-and-death significance of water for the Wayúu, we explore the differential relationships with water and the natural world presented in

Indigenous worldviews. In Arguedas's novel, water's agency materializes in the symbolic, cultural, magical, and salvational significance of mountain rivers for Peruvian Quechua communities.

For the hydrohumanities, therefore, the trope and cultural metaphor of water becomes the analytical point of departure for the study of cultural production, as well as of sociopolitical and economic events in Latin America. Within the framework of a renewed sensibility toward spatiality, the concepts of space and place, and the connections between geography and history, the imaging of waterscapes in Latin American studies – engaging oceans, rivers, lakes, or wetlands as the axis of the analytical framework – has been gaining increased interest over the last three decades. In my own field of literary and cultural studies, hydrocriticism often addresses environmental injustice and hydraulic practices in connection with race, ethnicity, class, and gender. Echoing decolonial and postcolonial discourses, it critiques the ecocides brought about by Western modernity. The hydrohumanities encourage us to reconsider the relationship between human beings and the environment: water, and nature in general, should not be understood in terms of consumption. In this sense, following posthumanist and new materialist theories that acknowledge the agency of objects, the hydrohumanities recognize the agency of water. Human beings are decentered and presented as another element of the natural world. Interdependence is the key concept: we are one of the species in an ecosystem (Earth) and, since we are interconnected to the other living systems on the planet, we are harming ourselves by damaging them. As a blunt example, there is what Stacy Alaimo (2010) refers to as a trans-corporeal relationship between humans and the more-than-human: the toxicity that may affect fish in rivers and the ocean will also harm the human beings who eat them.

Water is no longer conceived of as an economic resource or a setting for human interaction; it is, instead, entwined with culture. It is understood that humans are all connected to water and other natural elements, which have agency and a right to share Earth with us. Thinking 'with' instead of only 'about' water (Blackmore, Gómez 2020), water is no longer seen as just a mere commodity to be contained, managed, and sold. Instead, it may, for example, be interpreted as embodying different levels of hegemonic power or resistance, as evoking collective shared memories, or even as representing the survival of an ethnic group under siege by predatory extractive corporations (the case of the Wayúu in Potdevin's *Palabrero*).

As part of the environmental humanities, the hydrohumanities share the same ethical commitment, adopting social politics, environmental justice, and even activism, and conceiving of bodies of water as signifiers of power, resistance, historical memory, and identity. With all their associated symbolic meanings, seascapes, riverbeds, lakes, and wetlands thus become valuable hermeneutic and epistemic

tools to interpret national and identitarian discourses, anti-hegemonic writing, or to critique some of the flaws of Western modernity. Within the agenda of water sustainability, the hydrohumanities also study the scarcity or absence of water in certain regions. Two decades ago, for example, Mark D. Anderson examined the sociopolitical ramifications of the cultural construction of risk through drought narratives in Northeastern Brazil in his *Disaster Writing. The Cultural Politics of Catastrophe in Latin America* (2001), a comparative study of the cultural production elicited by natural disasters in Latin America. As he explains, until the 1930s, literary tropes and symbolic abstractions were often a substitute for the use of statistics and scientific measurements in risk assessment. Anderson's chapter analyzes a long list of Brazilian drought narratives, proving that the Brazilian negative view of the Northeastern drought as a disaster was consistently mediated by cultural production, which, in turn, influenced perceptions of cultural citizenship and politics: Euclides da Cunha's classic *Os sertões* (*Rebellion in the Backlands*, 1902), for instance, depicts the drought-stricken environment as the source of the creation of a rebellious race that cannot adapt to democracy.

The same issue of drought in Northeastern Brazil has been recently revisited in Javier Uriarte's *The Desertmakers. Travel, War, and the State in Latin America* (2020). Exploring, among other texts, Euclides da Cunha's 1901 essay "Fazedores de desertos" ("Desert Makers"), later partly incorporated into *Os sertões*, Uriarte analyzes the connection that the Brazilian author makes between drought and war (the Canudos war, in particular): drought produces starvation and hopelessness, which, in turn, lead to rebellion and war. In this way, this type of hydrocritical research invites us to rethink the relationship between the more-than-human and the human worlds, between the environmental and sociopolitical, which so often go hand in hand.

Beyond oceans, rivers, and lakes, chapter four in Axel Pérez Trujillo's *Imagining the Plains in Latin America. An Ecocritical Study* (2021) offers ecocritical analyses of canonical texts by Francisco Aquino Corrêa, Guimarães Rosa, and Manoel de Barros about the Pantanal wetlands in the southern Brazilian state of Mato Grosso do Sul (the other chapters focus on literature about the Pampas, Altiplanos, and Llanos). Another example of exciting hydrohumanities work is Elizabeth M. Pettinaroli and Ana María Mutis's coedited issue of *Hispanic Issues On Line*, "Troubled Waters. Rivers in Latin American Imagination", which focuses on knowledge production related to rivers in Latin American literature, from utopian to dystopian outlooks:

> [O]rdeals of human survival, contested symbols of identity, and complexity that beggars the power of human narrative: emblems of blighted hopes, arteries of future prosperity, and determinants of human culture. (Pettinaroli, Mutis 2013, 14)

The different essays examine how writers have found in the representation of flowing waters a locus of contestation of the foundations of Latin American imaginaries, including the established symbolic value ascribed to national landscapes: connection vs. boundary; life vs. paths to death; identity vs. transformation; continuity vs. change (Pettinaroli, Mutis 2013).

Because water is so often conceived as a source of life, it should be no surprise that it is often a central element in art. Lisa Blackmore and Liliana Gómez edited the essay collection *Liquid Ecologies in Latin American and Caribbean Art* (2020), which considers the place of water, flow, liquidity, and fluidity as tropes, metaphors, and material signifiers beyond the mere concept of resource. In their own words,

> *Liquid Ecologies in the Arts* confronts, from the remit of Latin America and the Caribbean, the challenges posed by cultural studies scholars in recent years that involve defamiliarizing water and moving beyond paradigms that objectify or romanticize it as a resource. The ask is not to think *about* water but *with* it. Our departure point for positing liquid ecologies as a new critical, theoretical and analytical framework for cultural production was that water is never simply water. (Blackmore, Gómez 2020, 2)

Avoiding presentism, the hydrohumanities and hydrocriticism also study the misguided environmental understandings, water economies, and ideologies of the past that have progressively led to the current hydraulic challenges of the Anthropocene. The hope is that this academic research may guide us to a more conscientious human interaction with water and the rest of the natural world, as well as to more just and sustainable aquatic futures. Socioecological justice, the environmental humanities, and the hydrohumanities (hydrocriticism) are fundamental in a region like Latin America, where economies continue to be fundamentally based on natural resource extraction. Altogether, beyond market theologies, the hydrohumanities seek to incorporate humanities scholars' research into the academic struggle for sustainability regarding water in Latin America, which other disciplinary fields had traditionally led. As the epigraph that opened this essay suggests, it has become increasingly clear that economists and scientists cannot solve these water problems alone.

As to the relationship between the hydrohumanities and literary criticism, literary texts reflect the material idea of water in many different ways. From the perspective of ecocritical, sustainability and new materialism theories, for example, one can study the significance of water for Wayúu indigenous communities in the Guajira Peninsula of Colombia, as represented in the Colombian Philip Potdevin's novel *Palabrero*. This novel portrays how, since international mining companies began to steal water resources from the Wayuu ancestral lands,

suicide rates grew exponentially among the members of this indigenous group. Potdevin's *Palabrero* suggests that rivers and, by extension, the natural world are more than inorganic objects for their indigenous or culturally indigenous characters. Albeit written by a non-indigenous writer, Potdevin tries to incorporate an indigenous perspective of nature that provides agency (or at least symbolic agency) to rivers as dynamic living beings. In his text, rivers talk to the protagonists, calm them down, remind them of the deep native roots of national culture, or hold the key to the survival of indigenous communities. Whether guided by cultural or existential survival, indigenous characters also conceive of rivers in Colombia as a central part of their cultural and national identity. This same theoretical perspective of new materialism regarding the agency of objects can also be used to interpret the symbolic, cultural, magical, and salvational significance of water (of montane rivers in particular) for Quechua communities in Peru, as re-created in the Peruvian José María Arguedas's (1911-1969) novel *Los ríos profundos* (*Deep Rivers*, 1958). Arguedas chose to center the novel's title on rivers, those deep rivers at the top of the Andean Mountains that preserve the deepest roots of native Peruvian culture. Tellingly, his first short-story collection was titled *Agua* (*Water*, 1935). Following native cosmogony, for Ernesto, his protagonist, the Apurímac River, the swelling of the Pachachaca and other montane rivers, breaching their banks, represent and announce the final awakening and liberation of indigenous people. Eventually, the fact that the agency of deep montane rivers purifies the protagonist's hurting soul reminds us of the native roots of Peru and announces, when flooding, the upcoming emancipation of the Quechua in the novel.

All in all, the way in which the hydrohumanities and hydrocriticism as socioenvironmental approaches in Latin American Studies can move from the realm of thought to that of praxis is revealed by Gus Speth, founder of World Resources Institute and cofounder of Natural Resources Defense Council, when he stated:

> I used to think the top environmental problems were biodiversity loss, ecosystem collapse, and climate change. But I was wrong. The top environmental problems are selfishness, greed, and apathy […] to deal with those issues we need a spiritual and cultural transformation – and we scientists do not know how to do that.

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Constitutional and Ecological Entanglements in Contemporary Chile

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Abstract The outbreak of protests known as the *estallido social* in Chile in late 2019 and early 2020 sparked widespread demands for a new constitution to replace the one implemented by dictator Augusto Pinochet in 1980. While ultimately unsuccessful, many of these initiatives employed inventive and creative methods to challenge the role of the non-human environment within the country's constitutional framework. Engaging with thinkers such as Bruno Latour and Eduardo Gudynas, this chapter examines contemporary Chilean cultural production that advocates for a new, interconnected constitutional settlement.

Keywords Constitution. Archipelagic thought. Chile. Bruno Latour. Delight Lab. Estallido social.

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1 Introduction

On 14 October 2020, a group of women in black mourning clothes processed to the waterfront in the Chilean port of Valparaíso, where they held a symbolic funeral for the Chilean constitution, copies of which were thrown into a boat alongside fragments of text indicating ideas and social norms that the group wished to consign to the past (among them *patriarcado* and *machismo*). The act was accompanied by chants such as "Sin libertad, sin igualdad, no hay derechos ni dignidad. Regresa por donde viniste. Hoy, hundimos el miedo" (Without freedom, without equality, there are no rights or dignity. Go back to where you came from. Today, we drown fear).[1] The boat then left the pier and made its way out to sea, where, implicitly if perhaps not physically, the offending texts were consigned to the deep.

This performance was the work of LasTesis, a Valparaíso-based feminist group which shot to international prominence in November 2019 with *Un violador en tu camino*, a street performance addressing the complicity of the state and society in perpetuating rape culture (for an analysis of the transnational impact of this performance, see Martin, Shaw 2021). This action was just one of many artistic interventions in Chilean public space since the *estallido social*, or social uprising, of October/November 2019. The immediate causes of this extraordinary social movement, which led to a Constitutional Convention and a proposed replacement for the current constitution (which dates from the dictatorship of Augusto Pinochet), might not appear at first glance to be related to the climate crisis or other ecological issues. The rejection of the proposed new constitution in September 2022 moreover leaves the path forward unclear.[2] This chapter argues, nonetheless, that the ecological focus of many artistic initiatives that emerged in the run-up to or as part of the social movement towards a new constitution merits close attention, not least because these initiatives challenge the peripheral status accorded to ecological concerns in the current constitutional framework, and suggest a more holistic view of human entanglement with the nonhuman world. In interventions by the artistic collective Delight Lab, and in works such as the documentary *Alas de mar* (Mülchi) and *Archipiélago* (Godoy, Lértora and Agosín), a questioning of hegemonic modes of aesthetic representation in the context of ecological crisis can be viewed as a call for a new, ecological constitutional settlement that may yet be answered.

1 Unless otherwise indicated, all translations are by the Author.

2 At the time of writing (October 2024), the July 2022 constitutional draft had been rejected in a plebiscite, as had a second, much more conservative draft (in a referendum in December 2023).

2 Constitutional Derangement

A focus on artworks and artistic interventions which call into question the possibility of representation might seem to sit awkwardly with the contention that the same works point their viewers towards the possibility of a new, ecological constitutional framework. After all, do not all (democratic) constitutional processes and structures entail a degree of representation? Bruno Latour engages with questions of representation in his influential positing of a new Constitution, to replace the modernist Constitution that "saw debates over ecology merely as a mixture to be purified, a mixture combining rationality and irrationality, nature and artifice, objectivity and subjectivity" (Latour 2004, 129). Latour's definition of representation is, however, characteristically idiosyncratic: in the glossary provided for *Politics of Nature*, two senses of the word are provided. The first is "one of the two powers of (political) epistemology which forbids all public life, since subjects or cultures have access only to secondary qualities and never to essences". The second is "the dynamics of the collective which is re-presenting, that is, presenting again, the questions of the common world, and is constantly testing the faithfulness of the reconsideration" (248).

Latour's constitutional proposal is, as the capitalized orthography of his Constitution suggests, more concerned with the high-level, metaphysical organization of knowledge and life than with the possibility of specific, located constitutional reforms. The two 'houses' described in his proposed constitution are given the daunting task of composing a common world, and Latour makes clear that he regards the terminology of parliamentary democracy as 'outdated' and simply playing the role of "a white flag waved in the wind so that we can finally negotiate" (2004, 165). The simultaneous specificity and abstraction of Latour's proposal, then, make it of limited use for an analysis of a specific case of potential constitutional change in Chile. It is striking, moreover, that among the human actors that Latour identifies as crucial for the construction of a new constitution, there is no mention of artists or creative practitioners, though the constitution itself is described as a work of art. This task is left to scientists, politicians, economists, and moralists (161-3).

This chapter argues, conversely, that creative work, especially when it tests conventional categories of aesthetic representation, is precisely the kind of activity that can afford the formation of better, more inclusive collectives of humans and nonhumans. It argues, moreover, that such work can be seen as a civic endeavor, consonant with the constituent process currently underway in Chile. In that sense, I am advocating, in a specifically ecological arena, the notion of art as a civic agent put forward by Doris Sommer. For Sommer, works of art "on grand and small scales" can "morph into institutional

innovation" (2014, 3). To illustrate this notion, Sommer gives the now famous examples of Antanas Mockus' use of pantomime artists to regulate traffic in 1990s Bogotá, and Augusto Boal's development of "legislative theater" to improve inclusion and conflict resolution in the city government of Rio de Janeiro (2014, 2). How, though, to assess the relation between cultural agency in a broad public sphere and the mechanics of the creation of a new constitution?

This is where an at least partly Latourian approach can be productive. Kerry Whiteside assesses the ability of Latour's proposals to inform "change in the actual constitutional structure of representative democracies", arguing that Latour's proposal that "*every* reflection on governance must take 'nature' into account" can act as a powerful challenge to current democratic practices. Whiteside notes, however, that any actual processes of political-ecological change in the constitutional arena are likely to rely on concepts of agency, deliberation and reasoning that would qualify for the pejorative adjective 'Modernist' in Latour's thought (Whiteside 2013, 200, 202). For Whiteside, Latour is mistaken to view the environmental crisis as a failure of the scope of representation – the problem is not that nonhumans have no effective representatives, and the solution is not simply to expand representation. The problem is rather the current representational paradigm itself, from which, in this account, Latour never quite detaches his proposals. What is needed, Whiteside argues, is precisely a *constitutional* process, one that determines new paradigms for what counts as representation, because

> Republics as we know them have stabilized modes of representation that consistently fail to take 'Nature' into account to a degree commensurate with the gravity of the unprecedented, world-altering phenomena that we have collectively unleashed. (2013, 203)

At this point, Whiteside's argument comes rather close to that advanced by Amitav Ghosh in *The Great Derangement*, his analysis of the modern novel's inability fully to deal with the scale and nature of the effects of climate change. The artistic works to be discussed here offer some hope that Ghosh's diagnosis of a 'great derangement' in the modern novel's attitude to the climate crisis need not extend to other forms of aesthetic action. Whereas the realist literary novel, for Ghosh, traffics in probabilities that obscure the (improbable) real, and in 'settings' that are disconnected from global networks (2017, 59), the artworks to be discussed here ask their spectators to look again at their apparently banal everyday environments and to see, hear and feel them anew. These are works that often resist containment within one medium, and that engage their spectators on multiple fronts – they are multisensory experiences. And they are precisely concerned with the ways in which experience exceeds conventional

structures of *representation*. We might think of them, then, as an aesthetic response to Whiteside's call to "make good the defective ability of existing representative institutions to take up concern for 'nature'" (2013, 200).

A focus on Chile may nonetheless seem a stubbornly national framework for thinking about global ecological concerns, but I think it is possible to argue, *pace* Ghosh's skepticism on the utility and fairness of the nation-state, which he views as a correlate of the novel (Ghosh 2017, 59), that the nation can be a framework for an honest and thorough engagement with the realities of the climate crisis. In the artworks discussed below, the nation is at least implicitly posed as a framework for understanding the problem, and for imagining potential solutions. The fact that the management and conservation of bodies of water, from rivers and glaciers to the Pacific Ocean, emerge as key issues of concern means that the nation cannot be the ultimate horizon of this discussion, but it is perhaps a starting point. In the action by LasTesis with which this chapter began, for example, the ocean is figured as a space for renewing the constitutional framework of the nation.

Before moving to consider the artworks in detail, though, it is important to have a clear sense of the existing constitutional architecture and the ways in which possible changes to it have been sketched out. The current Chilean constitution contains only one substantive reference to environmental matters: Article 19 (Section 8) guarantees "el derecho a vivir en un medio ambiente libre de contaminación" (the right to live in an environment free from pollution) for all, and goes on to state that "es deber del Estado velar para que este derecho no sea afectado y tutelar la preservación de la naturaleza" (it is the duty of the State to ensure that this right is not affected, and to safeguard the preservation of nature) (Constitución Política de la República de Chile, Article 19, Section 8). This promised right has not, however, proved enforceable, as the proliferation of highly polluted 'sacrifice zones' demonstrates (Ramírez Nova 2020). By contrast, the 2022 constitutional proposal included an entire chapter dedicated to nature and the environment, and the first article in that chapter (number 127) states that "la naturaleza tiene derechos" (nature has rights) (*Propuesta de Constitución Política* 2022, 45). The chapter goes on to set out a duty for the state to protect biodiversity, establishes a category of "bienes comunes naturales" (natural common goods) with special protections for water, and creates a body charged with protecting the rights of nature – the Defensoría de la Naturaleza.

The proposed constitution thus went a long way towards implementing ideas advocated by many activists and scholars of political ecology. One prominent member of the latter group, Eduardo Gudynas had suggested to the Constitutional Convention's commission on the environment that a new constitution, rather than determining an

economic model for the nation, should consider what kinds of value nature possesses, beyond the economic (as realized in Chile's current extractivist economic model). These might include, Gudynas argued, aesthetic and historical value, as well as the value ascribed to nature by indigenous peoples, and a concept of "simples valores ecológicos" (simple ecological values). A recognition of these kinds of value at a constitutional level would then, Gudynas suggested, necessitate a constitutional guarantee of the rights of nature (Comisión sobre Medio Ambiente, Derechos de la Naturaleza, Bienes Naturales Comunes y Modelo Económico 2021). In what follows, I argue that the challenges to representation, or expanded forms of representation, of the ecological artwork emerging alongside and from within Chile's recent social movements encourages a reframing (whether legal or otherwise) of human relations with 'nature', in a manner consonant with Gudynas's submission to the Convention's environmental commission.

3 Delight Lab: Projecting Alternative Futures

The Chilean *estallido social* provoked an explosion of politically oriented creativity, or 'artivism', to use a term with Latino/a and Chicano/a roots. Yet with the exception of LasTesis, perhaps no group has become more publicly associated with the *estallido* than Delight Lab, an experimental audiovisual design studio whose projections on the Torre Telefónica in Santiago de Chile's Plaza de la Dignidad (known before the *estallido* as Plaza Italia) have become emblematic instances of contemporary protest aesthetics. The projections have, moreover, generated significant repercussions within existing institutional structures. To give just one example: on 19 May 2020, while Delight Lab were projecting the word 'HUMANIDAD' (HUMANITY) on the Torre Telefónica, an unmarked truck protected by members of the Carabineros (Chile's principal national police force) used its headlights to block out the projection. After a legal action in the Chilean courts was unsuccessful, "Delight Lab recurrirá ante la CIDH tras rechazo de la Corte Suprema a reconocer censura en su contra" (Delight Lab appealed to the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights, alleging censorship of their work). The collective has also taken an explicit interest in the new constitutional process, projecting the word 'RENACE' (IS REBORN) when there was a decisive national vote for a new constitution in later October 2020.

Beyond the immediate context of the *estallido* and its aftermath, much of Delight Lab's work has linked a revaluation of indigenous knowledges and peoples to an enhanced ecological sensibility. María José Barros has documented interventions carried out in collaboration with Corporación Traitraico in the Chilean part of Wallmapu,

the ancestral territory of the Mapuche people. Barros argues that the projection of images on the banks of the Rawe and Pilmaiken rivers, protesting the planned construction of hydroelectric dams by a Norwegian corporation, contrasts a Mapuche spiritual understanding of rivers as the means by which the souls of the dead return to the sea with the Chilean state's willingness for water rights to be bought and sold like any other commodity (Barros 2020). In the most recent edition of the Santiago a Mil theater festival, the collective presented *Espíritu del agua*, in January 2021, a series of animations projected on water towers across Santiago and in Concepción, a city in the south of Chile. *Espíritu del agua* begins and ends with the following incantation in Mapudungun, performed by the Mapuche *Werken* 'cultural elder' Joel Maripil, which puts forward a vision of human existence as inherently fluid:

> Del agua salimos y al agua volveremos. Hemos sido río, vapor y hielo. Hemos andado en corrientes que suben y bajan, que se hunden en la tierra o se disuelven en el mar. El océano es el gran espíritu del que todo emerge y al que todo regresa; somos fragmentos de él, lágrimas de gozo o tristeza que salen en cuerpos y regresan en espíritu. (Delight Lab 2021)
>
> From water we came and to water we will return. We have been river, vapor, and ice. We have moved in currents that rise and fall, which sink into the ground or dissolve in the sea. The ocean is the great spirit from which all emerges and to which all returns; we are fragments of it, tears of joy or sadness that go out in bodies and return as spirit.

Here, we find an identification of human embodiment with water that recalls Astrida Neimanis's conception of humans' watery embodiment and Stacy Alaimo's notion of "trans-corporeality at sea" (Neimanis 2017; Alaimo 2012). This notion of fluid and mutable corporeality allows a call for the conservation of bodies of water to be rendered as a call for the preservation of human souls: "Las almas regresan al mar a través de los ríos. Pero así como los selk'nam, los ríos viven amenazados por la codicia de las personas desconectadas de la tierra" (Souls return to the sea through rivers. But like the Selk'nam, rivers are threatened by the avarice of people who are disconnected from the land) (Delight Lab 2021). Moreover, the projection of crashing ocean waves on a concrete water tower, and the prevalence of fade cuts and close-ups of flowing water in the audiovisual montage, ironically relegate the infrastructure of modern water management, with its insistence on containment and separation, to the status of mere background for the envisioning of a different, more fluid relation between humans and their environment. The

projections also reclaim the infrastructure of a privatized water management system as a resolutely public forum for experimental forms of aesthetic representation.

It is possible to imagine a critique of Delight Lab's interventions along the lines of that advanced by David Chandler and Julian Reid in their excoriating analysis of the 'speculative turn' in anthropology: for Chandler and Reid, the work of Eduardo Viveiros de Castro, Marisol de la Cadena, and others seeks to "distil Indigenous knowledge as method or analytics' that allows the development of a new branch of speculative philosophy" (Chandler, Reid 2020, 498). It should be acknowledged, of course, that Andrea and Germán Gana Muñoz, the siblings who make up Delight Lab, are not themselves of indigenous descent, and so it might be said that their work makes use of indigenous concepts in the service of their own creative ends. Yet the fact that many of their interventions have taken place in Wallmapu, in collaboration with Mapuche actors (such as Corporación Traitraico and Joel Maripil) and were designed to raise awareness of political and ecological realities affecting the lives of Mapuche communities, suggests that that critique would not be entirely fair in this case. The importance of political context to the works produced by Delight Lab can be seen, for instance, in the timing of *Espíritu del agua*, which was presented in the run-up to elections for Chile's Constitutional Convention, held in May 2021. It has therefore been seen as a call for the new constitution to abandon the privatized water rights of the 1981 Water Code, an offshoot of the 1980 constitution that is still in force today.[3]

It is far from the only such call. To give just one further example: in September 2020, the ecological magazine *Revista Endémico* issued a call for 'posters for an ecological constitution', posters designed to encourage the Chilean public to vote for candidates for the Constitutional Convention who espoused ecologically conscious positions. Launching the call, the director of *Endémico*, Nicole Ellena, noted that there was a long tradition of graphical activism in Chile, and offered a view of art and design as "herramientas de cambio, [cuyo] rol es clave para darle una voz a nuestro planeta y sus habitantes no humanos" (tools of change, [whose] role is key to giving a voice to our planet and its non-human inhabitants) ("Convocatoria abierta para campaña 'Carteles para una constitución ecológica'" 2020). Ellena's phrasing here clearly allocates the (envisaged) posters a representative role, not only in aesthetic terms but also politically, and thus recalls the debate around Latour's propositions discussed above. The posters that were eventually selected by *Endémico*'s editorial team,

3 On the uniquely privatized nature of post-1980 water management in Chile, see Budds 2004.

meanwhile, are heterogeneous and impossible to fully categorize as a group, though there are some common features across the individual works. These include the use of bright colors, clear lines, and bold block text (all of which indicate, of course, the close relation of these works to posters and placards carried in the protests that took place between October 2019 and early 2020). Several of the selected posters include no text beyond the phrase "constitución ecológica" (ecological constitution) itself, while others opt for short slogans, such as "de la tierra venimos, a sus entrañas volveremos" (we come from the earth, and we will return to its entrails) and "la ecología es más importante que cualquier ideología" (ecology is more important than any ideology). One poster reworks Chile's national motto, "por la razón o la fuerza" (by reason or strength), into "ni por la razón ni por la fuerza / por la fuerza de la naturaleza" (neither by reason nor by strength / by the strength of nature). What these three examples have in common is a ceding of protagonism to a non-human actor, variously named as the earth, ecology, or nature.

Here, again, we witness a point of contact with the 2022 constitutional proposal's establishment of 'nature' as a subject of rights. There is a connection with Delight Lab's work, too, in that *Endémico*'s initiative demonstrates a commitment to art's place in the public sphere. It is perhaps misleading to refer to a singular 'public sphere', however, as the posters are available in an open-access virtual exhibition on the *Endémico* website, as well as on *Endémico*'s social media channels, but have also been exhibited in physical spaces, such as in the Parque Cultural in Valparaíso in June 2021.

The form of the interventions described above, which combine written or spoken language with audiovisual media, and moreover use language in a way that exceeds simple indication of a signified object, mean that they can be viewed as examples of an 'ecological avant-garde' in Chile.[4] Where Ghosh argues that the novel "always align[s] itself with the avant-garde as it hurtles forward in its impatience to erase every archaic reminder of Man's kinship with the nonhuman" (2017, 70), a perspective from Chile offers a more complex conception of avant-garde practice. Somewhat paradoxically, a work like *Espíritu del agua* stages a rupture in our typical modes of relating to our surroundings, transforming a water tower into a projection screen, but orients this rupture in experience precisely towards a reminder of 'kinship', in Ghosh's terms, between humans and their nonhuman environs. I have already briefly suggested above that it is no accident that this project makes use of watery environments in suggesting this connection. In what follows, I expand on this observation

4 For an analysis of the history and present of ecological avant-garde practices in Chile, see Merchant 2020.

to suggest that an 'archipelagic' reading of cultural production might offer a way of imagining an inclusive ecological constitution.

4 An Archipelagic Constitution?

The notion of 'archipelagic thought' is rather more familiar in Caribbean and Pacific Island contexts than in studies of the cultures of the Southern Cone: through the work of Édouard Glissant, for instance, or in Epeli Hau'ofa's now-canonical notion of the 'sea of islands', which values islander knowledge and relations with marine and island environments above the colonizer's view of the ocean as the empty space in between:

> There is a world of difference between viewing the Pacific as 'islands in a far sea' and as 'a sea of islands'. The first emphasizes dry surfaces in a vast ocean far from the centers of power. Focusing on this way stresses the smallness and remoteness of the islands. The second is a more holistic perspective in which things are seen in the totality of their relationships. (Hau'ofa 1994, 152-3)

Craig Santos Perez has recently drawn on Hau'ofa's groundbreaking work in his analysis of the diasporic cultural identity of Chamoru islanders (Perez 2020). And beyond Oceania, Brian Russell Roberts and Michelle Ann Stephens have suggested that an "archipelagic American studies" can offer a way of "decontinentalizing" our understandings of space and identity (Roberts, Stephens 2017). A way, in other words, of recognizing the cultural and political value of apparently marginal or in-between spaces like islands, seas, beaches and inlets, and the people who live in them. Jonathan Pugh and David Chandler, meanwhile, argue in *Anthropocene Islands* that "work with islands has become productive in the development of many of the core conceptual frameworks of Anthropocene thinking" (Pugh, Chandler 2021, 2). This is in part because of their frequent position on the front lines of environmental change (rising sea levels), but also because of how islands often come to constitute distinct but related ontological units, for their inhabitants and also for those who visit and study them. In that respect, they are ideal places for thinking through the ever more complex relational entanglements between humans and nonhumans, and indeed between humans and other humans, that characterize our contemporary world.

Chile is, in geographic terms, unquestionably an archipelagic nation: one need only to look at a map to establish that. South of Puerto

Montt, the land fragments into hundreds of islands.[5] Through an analysis of some recent documentary films and a multimedia sound art/installation project, I will argue here that a decontinental or archipelagic understanding of the Chilean nation, which foregrounds shared exposure to and entanglement with the world, might provide a productive basis for the elaboration of a truly inclusive ecological constitution.

In Patricio Guzmán's documentary *El botón de nácar*, we meet Martín González Calderón, a Yaghan man from Tierra del Fuego who explains how the Chilean Navy's strict control over maritime space has made it almost impossible for him and his family to travel by boat using the skills and techniques passed down over generations. Guzmán also speaks to Gabriela Paterito, a Kawésqar woman who recounts a long journey by canoe that she made when she was a girl, and the director prompts her to state that she does not feel Chilean at all. In Guzmán's film, indigenous mobility by water in the Patagonian archipelago is presented as lost to the past, and impossible in the present.[6] Other filmmakers have taken a different approach to these issues, however. In 2016's *Tánana, estar listo para zarpar*, for instance, we meet Martín González Calderón again, but this time at much greater length. The documentary's directors Alberto Serrano Fillol and Cristóbal Azócar do not provide an explanatory voiceover. Instead, the camera follows González Calderón as he goes about his daily life, and then seeks to build a boat in which he can recreate a childhood trip around the False Cape Horn, near the southern tip of the continent, that he undertook with his father. González Calderón explains the intertwining of his memories and the landscapes and seascapes of the archipelago in fragments, and on his own terms: local ecological knowledge is not offered up to the viewer for easy consumption in this case.

Another documentary from 2016, *Alas de mar*, exhibits some similar characteristics. Here, the director Hans Mülchi does provide a voiceover, but it is intermittent and reflective. The film follows the journey by boat of two Kawésqar women, Rosa, and Celina, back to the region where they grew up. The voices of Rosa and Celina are much more prominent than that of Mülchi, or indeed that of the European anthropologist who is traveling with them. It is not only the human voice that counts, though. Both *Tánana* and *Alas de mar* contain long sequences in which the only sounds audible are the sounds of travel by sea: the flapping of a sail, the rush of the wind, the crash of waves against the hull, or the roar of a motor. This openness to the sounds of the marine environment allows the spectator to share in

5 This is without even considering Rapa Nui (Easter Island), the island some 4,000 kilometers from the South American continent that is administered by Chile.

6 For a more detailed discussion of how Guzmán consistently relegates indigenous experience to a separate timeframe, or even a separate world, see Merchant 2022.

the embodied experience of the protagonists in a way that escapes any definitions that might be imposed by spoken or written language. It is precisely because *Alas de mar* and *Tánana* do not offer definitive answers to the question of the relation between indigenous identity and Chilean identity that I find them valuable to think with. The people whose stories are told in these films have been displaced from their childhood homes (as is the case for Rosa and Celina) or are held in place by the state's unwillingness to allow maritime travel outside of specific, limited purposes (in the case of Martín). And yet we see them strive to retrace past journeys and reclaim certain modes of mobility as an essential part of their heritage. In fact, indigenous identity itself appears as fluid and mobile in these films. Martín notes that while he understands much of the Yaghan language, he cannot speak it well himself, and in *Tánana* we see him teaching boatbuilding techniques to family members who are clearly of mixed heritage. In *Alas de mar*, Rosa and Celina share weaving and construction techniques with their fellow travelers.[7]

These films' acts of representation, their visions of mobile and changing identities, present a source of inspiration for a plurivocal or even plurinational political order, of the kind that was represented by the formalized participation of many indigenous groups, including the Kawésqar and the Yaghan, in the Constitutional Convention, and eventually codified in the 2022 proposal, which describes Chile as "plurinational, intercultural, regional y ecológico" (plurinational, intercultural, regional and ecological) (Propuesta 2022, 5). The fact that 61.89% of voters rejected this vision of the country in September 2022 makes it evident that there is still much work to be done in communicating the value of such visions. This much was becoming clear even before the 2022 referendum: the house of the Kawésqar representative at the Constitutional Convention, Margarita Vargas, was burnt to the ground in October 2021 (though no one was harmed) ("Incendio destruye vivienda de convencional Kawésqar en Magallanes" 2021).

Might there still be room in an eventual new constitution for the varied "ecological epistemes" on display in these films (Escobar 2020, 62, quoting Leff, *La apuesta por la vida*)? Paradoxically, perhaps, the failure of the 2022 constitutional proposal makes the persistence of cultural objects that articulate such ideas even more important, even when the very limited distribution circuits for documentary film in Chile restrict the extent to which the works discussed above can be seen to act in the modes that Sommer envisions in her articulation of cultural agency.

7 Portions of this paragraph and the preceding one were first published in a blog post by the author (Merchant 2021).

It is for this reason that I turn, as a form of provisional conclusion, to a multimedia project titled *Archipiélago*, which began in 2018 and has evolved across several platforms and formats. In 2018, the artists Fernando Godoy, Esteban Agosín and Carlos Lértora hired a boat and undertook three journeys of 4-10 days each around the archipelago of Chiloé. During these journeys, the artists lived on the boat, which they thought of as a kind of laboratory, and used hydrophones and other recording equipment to capture the sounds of the underwater seascape around the islands, paying particular attention to how the sounds of human activity (for instance through salmon farming) were interfering with sounds produced by other actors within the ecosystem. Godoy has stated in an interview that the group set out to understand the impact of 'extractivism in the sea', in the form of the extensive salmon farming that takes place in the south of Chile, by exploring its sonic effects. In addition to recording the sounds, Godoy and his collaborators also turned the boat into a broadcaster, sharing the underwater seascapes online via radiotsonami.org.

However, in Godoy's account of the project, this activity soon proved unsatisfactory, and the group of artists realized that in order to make sense of the sounds they were recording, they needed to turn to local residents, and record the stories of those who had lived on and interacted with the ocean, whose way of life was on the brink of disappearing. This content, alongside the underwater sounds, was then also transmitted via FM radio, so that it could reach local communities (*Panel 1*, 2021). The documentation of the project includes a documentary directed by Lértora (2019), an installation at the Museo de Arte Moderno Chiloé in 2019, and a book (Godoy 2023). Thus *Archipiélago*, which started in response to a particular ecological disaster (the *marea roja*, or toxic algal bloom, of 2016, which may have been caused by the dumping of dead salmon) (Armijo et al. 2020), has evolved in relation to the people and environments with which it has interacted. The project is both singular and multiple and seeks a variety of forms of representation. These two facts alone render *Archipiélago* a helpful model for considering the possible forms of a new ecological constitution. Godoy, Lértora and Agosín's project illustrates why the archipelago as lived and imagined space is a useful conceptual tool for articulating the complexity of human-nonhuman (and human-human) relations in contemporary Chile. As Yolanda Martínez-San Miguel and Michelle Stephens put it:

> the archipelago calls for a meaning-making and rearticulation that responds to human experiences traversing space and time. Archipelagoes happen, congeal, take place. They are not immanent or natural categories existing independently of interpretation. Yet

> they can also become an episteme, an imaginary, a way of thinking, a poetic, a hermeneutic, a method of inquiry, a system of relations. (Martínez-San Miguel, Stephens 2020, 3)

This conception of the archipelago as a plurivalent episteme is consistent with Gudynas's call for a new Chilean constitution to embrace, or at least engage with, multiple values for nature. Writing elsewhere, Gudynas has argued that "the recognition of plural valuations, including intrinsic values in non-humans, is an openness to other sensitivities and practices that generate different moral mandates, public policies, understandings of justice" (Gudynas 2019, 241). The aftermath of 2019's *estallido social* has to date seen two failed attempts to generate consensus around a new set of constitutional principles, in 2022 and 2023. A question thus remains: how can artistic interventions of the kind examined here generate such "openness to other sensitivities"? Might we imagine a Chilean variant of Boal's "legislative theater" (Sommer 2014, 50-60), a kind of 'constitutional theater' embracing an archipelagic vision of the nation, as a mechanism for achieving a still-elusive consensus on new shared values within a constituent process? There is no guarantee of success, but where constituent assemblies, conventions and councils have failed, perhaps creative methods should be given a chance to take on Latour's challenge of composing a common world.

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Stories Come to Matter: Water, Food, and other Entanglements
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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.

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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 anthropocenic 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 coexists 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 Bjornerud 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`.

> propiamente 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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Stories Come to Matter: Water, Food, and other Entanglements
edited by Santiago Alarcón-Tobón and Enric Bou

To Steal a Fish

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Abstract In Deborah Levy's novel *Hot Milk*, Sofia escorts her mother to Spain in search of a cure for her mother's paralysis, only for the doctor to suggest a cure for her. To remedy her lack of courage, the doctor prescribes that she steals a fish. At the market she eyes a tuna, but pronounces it 'too big', before she slips a dorado into her basket. But what else might it mean to steal a fish? And is tuna truly 'too big' to steal? In response to these questions, this essay approaches the topic of how 'stories come to matter' by weaving together notes about swimming with Atlantic bluefin tuna together with reflections on storytelling and structure, matter and meaning.

Keywords Bluefin tuna. Fish ranches. Extinction. Cuisine. The Mediterranean Sea. Malta. Storytelling.

1 Notes, Fragments, Flashes

The sun is always blazing in Deborah Levy's 2016 novel *Hot Milk*. Sofia escorts her mother from England to Spain in search of a cure for paralysis. But at the clinic the doctor also suggests a cure for Sofia. She lacks courage, purpose – the doctor's diagnosis – and so he instructs her to steal a fish. At Almería's market Sofia pokes the mouth of a monkfish and considers silver sardines – too small – and tuna – too big – before she slides a grumpy dorado into her basket. To steal a fish is the doctor's prescription for acquiring boldness. Here theft is from the market, from the cashier and the sea hunters she must pay. But what role does the sea itself – the water – play in this theft? What else might it mean to steal a fish and what worlds do fish

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story? And is tuna really 'too big' to steal? In the tune of these questions, this essay weaves together textual and material fish fragments to tell global tuna tales.[1] It is also an effort to exorcize how swimming in circles with Atlantic bluefin tuna has been haunting my understanding of the relationship between eating and ecology, of how appetites act as architects and redesign the world.

Because it is nearly impossible to pin down this champion of a swimmer to just one place, I posit that the slipperiness of fish and their disregard for terrestrial categories make them compelling to think about, to think with. "To Steal a Fish" is, thus, in dialogue with my larger interest in slippery stories, in the kitchen as a space of "cultural geography" (Oden, Dooley 2023, 10), and in how recipes trace the contours of local environments and, in contrast, how culinary cultures draw beyond and challenge their borders. I am also interested in beginnings and endings, in fishy stories and storied fish. Taking up the prompt that guides this publication, here I think with tuna to reflect on how 'stories come to matter'.

Stories connect dots and this essay exaggerates these dots by serving (messy) notes rather than (neat) sections. It is a collection of points that my research has gathered and an attempt to connect them. To draw lines between the dots. To craft a narrative between the notes. To turn stars into constellations. To weave together bits and pieces and to collect the crumbs they leave behind. More specifically, I am framing these points as notes. I call them notes, but you can also call them fragments, flashes, and perhaps even a tribute to and gesture toward the recent emergence of flash ethnography (see McGranahan 2023). But instead of presenting a singular flash, it explores the plural – a collection of flashes – and the idea that each note, despite its brevity, is its own whole. Less of a solo cigarette and more chain smoking.

Here I take inspiration from my former colleague Kris Decker, an STS scholar who structures his talks as a series of footnotes – often skipping numbers along the way, replicating what it is like to try to record observations in the field – in tandem with the writing of Black studies and literary scholar Christina Sharpe and her book *Ordinary*

1 This essay previews the thinking that scaffolds the title I am currently writing for Reaktion Book's 'Edible Series' – a small book about a big fish with an even bigger title, which is *Tuna. A Global History*. "To Steal a Fish" aims to complement, rather than to replicate, this book by sharing a more personal tale of swimming with tuna. *Tuna. A Global History* will wend from the Mediterranean Sea to the Atlantic and Pacific Oceans, touring boats, freezers, and canneries, auctions, markets, and grocery stores, lunch counters, dinner tables, and kitchens. Its final destination is a reflection on appetites, overfishing, and culinary sustainability. In sum it asks: how have tastes in tuna changed over time and how have these changes, in turn, influenced and threatened tuna species and their futures?

Notes.[2] A more classic introduction and conclusion frame these dots, but experiments with notes and narrative – in the section titled "Tuna Tales" – bulks up the distance between them. Notes that reflect on stories and fish and studies of both. With this method of writing, I aim to draw attention to the relationships between storytelling and structure, notes and narrative, matter and meaning.

2 Tuna Tales

Note 1

What does it mean to lose a fish? Loss shadows theft and I have been thinking about extinction, in general, and culinary extinction, specifically. About what it means to lose something, to mourn a recipe, a species, an industry, a way of life, a world. In *Lost and Found*, writer Kathryn Schulz traces the experience of finding love on top of that of losing her father. As a concept, loss is expansive. It "encompasses, without distinction, the trivial and the consequential, the abstract and the concrete, the merely misplaced and the permanently gone", she writes (2022, 6). And whether a wallet or a recipe, a loved one or a species, loss, to Schulz, seems "fundamental to the problem of how to live" (7). Loss – as defined by something being gone, seems to have something urgent to say "about being here", about the present, and about what comes after.

Note 2

My note app is collecting words to stretch into sentences, phrases to expand into paragraphs. But, much to my chagrin, it is also collecting emojis. Whenever I write tuna, my phone turns it into a sushi emoji: a perfect rectangle of a fillet of tuna fish straddling vinegared rice. But I guess my phone is not wrong. As a cultural historian, I mostly study fish fragments: geographical bits and pieces of fillets and cheeks,

2 I also draw inspiration from what I consider a seminal two-part essay by writer, artist, and environmental historian Jenny Price: "Thirteen ways of Seeing Nature in LA" (2006). Price, however, follows a more linear listicle format than what I attempt here. I would also like to thank the participants of the workshop and conference where I first attempted presenting this, and for their feedback, their curiosity and encouragement: *Wine, Place, and Space. Global Geographies of Wine Cultivation, Production, and Consumption* at the Katholische Universität Eichstätt-Ingolstadt and the European Association of Social Anthropologists' 2024 *Doing and Undoing with Anthropology* Conference at the University of Barcelona.

tongues and livers, bellies and roe, stuffed into cans and propped up on ice, listed on menus and fanned across plates.

Note 3

Last year my Instagram feed flashed a meme of four AI produced images in response to the prompt "salmon in the river". Single portion fillets, no heads or tails or bones or skin, "swim" upstream – the kind of salmon that obediently stands on guard behind a thick layer of plastic in a grocery store's refrigerator section. I filed the image as a perfect example, if an exaggerated one, of what it is like to study fragments, and how imaginations of a food can obscure representations of an animal. In contrast, this essay aims to be about the whole fish – the nose to tail body complete and intact of the Atlantic bluefin tuna – and encountering it in its home waters, although not on its own terms.

Note 4

Tuna is everywhere. Raw, canned, or cooked, it stars in countless cuisines, from sandwiches and sashimi to casseroles and carpaccio, and from tartar and tostada to pizza and poke. A saltwater fish, tuna is one of the world's most popular seafoods and despite its omnipresence it is expensive as often as it is cheap. Both everyday and endangered.

This is, in part, because the tuna family is large, encompassing multiple species and subspecies. When it comes to its culinary lives, a handful dominate: skipjack, yellowfin, albacore, bigeye, and, most controversially, the three bluefin species (Atlantic, Pacific, and Southern). Although bluefin only makes up one per cent of the world's tuna catch, it makes up two-thirds of its value.

Note 5

What some cultures had dismissed as a 'poverty fish' and "good only for cats and Italian immigrants", has since become a culinary star (Pinchin 2023, 36). This transformation marks 'the bluefin rush' (38) – an example of fish as an industrial resource, a means with which to create wealth, to fashion 'red gold', and a 'stock' to manage. Because of the global rise of sushi in the 1970s, Atlantic, Pacific, and Southern bluefin populations plunged (see Rath 2021). The success of tuna the food comes at a price for tuna the fish.

Note 6

In *The Lion's Historian. Africa's Animal Past*, Sandra Swart recites a proverb remembered by Chinua Achebe: "Until the lion has a historian of his own, the tale of the hunt will always glorify the hunter" (Swart 2023). I am wondering what it might look like to be the tuna's historian. But tuna, of course, is never a single fish even when it is. This connects to what anthropologist Arne Kalland calls "the superwhale". The creation of a singular, anthropomorphized concept oversimplifies diversity and collapses all species and their distinct traits into one (Kalland 2012, 41). By spotlighting only bluefin, I am somewhat guilty of doing the same in this essay. Journalist Karen Pinchin calls bluefin "'charismatic megafauna' – a category of large, big-eyed beasts […] that serve as placeholders in the public imagination – and have come to represent the health of our oceans and the overfishing that besieges them" (Pinchin 2023, 4). Bluefin as shorthand for overfishing. Bluefin as shorthand for unsustainable appetites.

Note 7

For decades there have been discussions about how best to manage this stock and, increasingly, efforts to introduce tuna to farms.

Note 8

Another word for farm is ranch.
Another word for ranch is pen.
Another word for pen is cage.

Note 9

Friday 10 November 2023

I take the ferry from Gozo to Malta at 09:30 am. It is late and so I will be as well. But time is often more elastic, its gatekeepers more forgiving, when you are on an island, or so I have been told.

Onboard I photograph a tuna sandwich packaged in plastic in the convenience store: "Tunisian white". I walk out to the deck, sit in the sun, and dip into Christina Sharpe's *Ordinary Notes*. The book reminds me of seas that have become graveyards and here I am about to pay to swim in one. I eat half a package of industrial shortbread and drink an 'Innocent' green smoothie. I do not buy the 'Tunisian white'.

Sharpe's notes make me think about the geography of racism, the geography of violence. And how often these geographies are wet, submerged. I study how she drops quotes with a casual "here". Following Sharpe's lead, I will leave these here. Note 73 (her note not mine). "[W]hether one admits it or not, one is oriented to one's work from the location of the body and all that that may mean" (Sharpe 2023, 114). The body as beginning: this is where the research starts.

Here is another one; and this one has a name. Note 188. *Terra: Terror: Terroir*.

> What lingers is here: now and now: here, a tug that times and untimes. You are thrown into a past that is a future tense. Tongue strains. What flavors place, what place flavors. Relation is made here. Rock to soil, soil to sweat, sweat to water, water to microbes, microbes to memory, memory to work. Ghost to ghost. Ghost as what lingers. A haunting flavor. It used to taste like. (2023, 263)

What does tuna taste like? The sea? Like salt? Like time and untime? Like it used to?

Note 10

I arrive at the dive center. M.'s skin still wears the summer sun, even though it is November. He hands me a pile of forms. "Are these also for snorkeling?" I inquire. "Oh no", he answers, taking them back. "Is this your first time going to the tuna farms?" he asks. "Absolutely", T. replies, standing by my side.

Malta has two seasons: high and low. The presence of tourists followed by their absence. During high season, M. escorts tourists from the shore to the sea, teaching them how to dive, pointing out the local fish. His job when the tourists are not there is working on the tuna farms.

Note 11

I should probably tell M. that I am not a strong swimmer, but I do not. I can barely hold my breath long enough to cure the hiccups. My stomach is susceptible to the drama of waves, mimicking their wake between my throat and my mouth, unleashing tides of their own. But I am also a researcher. A writer. I promise myself that out there, out at sea, I will focus on swimming. I will forget about skill. I will ignore the story that I tell about how I am not a good swimmer.

Note 12

"'You'll Never Believe What Happened' Is Always a Great Way to Start" is the title of the first chapter in Thomas King's 2011 book *The Truth About Stories*. Like the other four, it starts the same way. It follows the same formula. He repeats the exact paragraph, word by word, at the beginning of each of the five chapters.

> There is a story I know. It's about the earth and how it floats in space on the back of a turtle. I've heard this story many times, and each time someone tells the story, it changes. (King 2011, 1)

The structure and details might change but the story, he concludes, remains the same. To wrap up the intro, King writes: "The truth about stories is that that's all we are" (2).[3] I story and, therefore, I am. I tell and, therefore, I feel.

King shares facts and feelings from his life not to dump his experiences onto readers or audition for their empathy, but, instead, to model and to instruct how stories work, "to suggest how stories can control our lives" (9). He tells stories to study them, to take them apart and then piece them back together. This leads up to the lines that I come back to again and again, that I repeat in my writing and regularly recite in my speaking. "For once a story is told, it cannot be called back. Once told, it is loose in the world", King warns (10). His advice? "So you have to be careful with the stories you tell. And you have to watch out for the stories that you are told" (10). Between the lines, he's asking a bigger question. What kind of worlds do different stories create?

And what happens to these worlds if the stories change?

The tail trails the top. The first chapter ends the same way as the four that follow. King asks you to take the story he just told. "It's yours", he writes.

> Do with it what you will. Tell it to friends. Turn it into a television movie. Forget it. But don't say in the years to come that you would have lived your life differently if only you had heard this story. You've heard it now. (King 2011, 29)

I have heard it now. You have heard it too.

3 This idea holds hands with Joan Didion's most repeated quote: "We tell ourselves stories in order to live" (Didion 1979, 7). This star of a sentence opened the first essay in her 1979 collection of the same name: *The White Album*. In 2006 it then became the title of the book equivalent of her greatest hits album.

Note 13

You will never believe what happened. You will never believe what I saw: 50 meters wide and 50 meters deep. 20 cages with 200 million euro worth of bluefin tuna. Each fish weighs between 200 and 600 kg.

We leave the dive shop and board the small open boat, a rigid inflatable – something I associate with recreational summers on lakes and not physical labor out at sea.

Our destination is cage seven, but first we will drop by cage six where "they're hunting this morning". Depending on the wind, it will take about 20 to 30 minutes to reach the 'farm'. The wetsuit turns my body into a sleek surface of synthetic rubber. The wind slides down it, catapulting back into the air.

M. turns off the engine as we approach number six. I pull out my phone, swiping for my camera app. A large boat is parked next to the underwater cage. A handful of men in wetsuits swim with snorkels in their mouths and small guns in their hands. "They're clearing the cage", M. explains, "harvesting them all". A short swim then a fast shot. The tuna's body springs to the surface. The boat fishes it out. It looks more like a crane constructing a skyscraper than a hook catching a fish. Maybe the scene will make more sense when I rewatch it on my phone?

Each tuna goes from one boat to a second, where it is frozen in a flash, and then shipped to Asia: China or Japan. Some tuna are auctioned off whole. Others are first filleted.

Note 14

M. starts the engine, steering the boat to the left. We circle the cage, taking the long way to reach the next one to its right. He passes over the flippers. "Jump in", he says. "But don't swim too close to the center".

Because the water that flows over their gills delivers them oxygen, tuna cannot stop moving. The ancient Greek word *thuno*, the predecessor for *thunnus*, means to rush or to dart. Pablo Neruda captures this in his poem "Ode to a Large Tuna in the Market", calling the fish a "torpedo from the ocean depths, a missile that swam" (Neruda 2007).

In a cage, that missile swims in a circle, which creates a vortex. If you swim too far in, it might pull you under.

Doing my best to forget that swimming is not one of my strengths, I strap the goggles to my eyes. I take a deep breath to bob above and then snorkel below the surface of the Mediterranean to swim clockwise in the company of Atlantic bluefin, to hitch a ride on what feels like an underwater merry-go-round that rewrites the song *Hotel California*. Instead of champagne on ice, there is tuna frozen in such a flash that it still counts as fresh, but the same doubts remain – about

what is heaven versus hell, about steely knives and the master's chambers, about checking-out without being able to leave.

Note 15

I swim clockwise, but it is not a decision. The tuna current pulls my body in that direction, making it the only path to follow. What do the men on the ships think of tourists like me? They are paid, not a lot, or at least not enough, to endure tough conditions and I pay, a lot, to witness them. Ignoring the guns in their hands, the men snorkeling in wetsuits made me feel more comfortable, less alone, to brave the water.

But I am swimming somewhere I have no business being. Where I am out of place. To be able to swim where I should not.

Swimming with tuna is like one of the spinning rides at Oktoberfest that I never have the stomach to try. Some can buy a ticket to ride. Others will spin round, baby right round, like a record baby, right round, right round, until they are hunted, until they die, until they turn into dinner. An Anthropocene underwater merry-go-round.

One circle is enough. I pull myself back onboard. We watch T. go for another round. "That's tuna sweat", M. points out to me. It takes a moment to clock what he is flagging: the white that forms a layer of a puddle on the water's surface. "It's omega 3. They use it in cosmetics", he explains.

Note 16

Before there were pens there were traps – a technique practiced by the Phoenicians starting around 1000 BCE that became *tonnaro* in Italy and *almadraba* in Spain, meaning "place to hit and fight". Traps take advantage of how tuna swim in circles, slowly coaxing, as Pinchin details, "each giant fish toward the one-way channel of the net's mouth, where it entered a terminal pen from which it could not escape" (Pinchin 2023, 143). Tuna farms have now grafted a new meaning to 'terminal pen'. Fishers net wild young tuna and escort them to pens where they feed them and fatten them until they reach peak adult size, until they reach 'slaughter weight'.

Note 17

That night at the hotel restaurant we ask about the fish charcuterie on the menu. "It is tuna pancetta", the waiter details. But I am not ready to eat tuna. Its color is as dark as the sunset, as red as blood. When will I eat tuna again? When will I be ready to stomach the trouble that is eating, to eat with the trouble?

Note 18

By the time Paul Greenberg published *Four Fish. The Future of the Last Wild Food* in 2010 ranches removed "more tuna from the wild than […] traditional fisheries" (Greenberg 2010, 105). Tuna, as Greenberg argues, represents "the final frontier of fishing" and the move away from "national territorial waters" to "the 'high seas' […] owned by no one and fishable by anyone" (94). Human appetites have ventured further and further out into the ocean.

Two nights before I swam with tuna, I visited a grocery store on Malta's northern island of Gozo called The Lighthouse. I studied its collection of tinned tuna. None of it was from Malta:

- The Philippines (soybean oil)
- Thailand (sunflower oil)
- Ecuador (sunflower oil)
- Indian Ocean (sunflower oil)
- Vietnam (sunflower oil)

I am not able to buy tinned tuna from Malta in Malta, but I can pay €300 to swim with them (€250 for the boat and €50 for the guide to the farm).

Note 19

In 2011, the International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN) Red List of Threatened Species catalogued the Atlantic bluefin tuna as endangered. In 2021, the IUCN removed Atlantic bluefin from the endangered category, and yet many of its regional populations continue to be depleted. It still, however, classifies its relatives the Pacific bluefin as near threatened and the Southern as endangered.

Note 20

In *Red Gold. The Managed Extinction of the Giant Bluefin Tuna*, environmental governance scholar Jennifer E. Telesca writes about commodity empires and the highly criticized International Commission for the Conservation of Atlantic Tunas (ICCAT). Instead of understanding "the rapid extermination of a former ocean giant" as a "tragedy of the commons" Telesca asserts that "this tragedy finds its roots in the commodity form" (Telesca 2020, xvii). This pays tribute to Rebecca Claussen, Stefan Longo, and Brett Clark's 2015 book *The Tragedy of the Commodity*.

Note 21

A colleague sent me an article in *The Guardian*: "Swim with the Fishes: Is Tuna Tourism Just a Bit of Harmless Holiday Fun?" (Kevany 2024). The Spanish company Balfegó, which describes itself as peddling "Sustainable bluefin tuna" and has a restaurant in Barcelona (and who declined my interview request), is now "one of just a handful of companies offering fish-farm tourism […] but environmentalists are concerned that it is a sector with the potential to grow". One of the company's spokespersons, however, describes the tours as "educational" – "a way to help people understand how we farm tuna".

Note 22

Before I swam with tuna, I read cultural studies scholar Elspeth Probyn's account of doing the same. Swimming with tuna unmoors ontologies, she writes, as bluefin "complicate any strict division between wild and domestic, natural and private property" (Probyn 2016, 83). Would she swim with them again? "The answer is a resounding no", she asserts. This is because: "To swim with tuna is to swim in an aquarium where the species are meant for the table" (97). It is to swim in a marine feedlot.

3 To Spill, To Steal, To Story

Jonathan Gold, the first food writer to win the Pulitzer Prize, was terrible with deadlines. When he died in 2018, American food media – especially in his hometown of Los Angeles – turned their print and online pages into eulogies cataloging all that he had done to get other writers to take food seriously. All that he had done to get his fellow food critics to stop paying attention to only fine dining establishments and to give the taco truck down the street the attention it deserved. Yes, Gold was a pro at detailing the texture of a tortilla, the spring of a noodle, but he was terrible with deadlines. Ruth Reichl remembers:

> If you were his editor you gave him fake deadlines, hoping that if you could convince him that you needed it before you actually did, you might get the copy on time. (2018)

"Good luck", she warned. "To Jonathan, deadlines were merely a suggestion" (2018). Deadlines did nothing to discipline his perpetual lateness.

I wish that I had never read this. As my editors know, this is a symptom that I too demonstrate – one that not even over a decade of

living in Germany, a country lauded for respecting time and worshiping punctuality, can cure. No matter how fiercely a deadline looks me in the eye, I meet its stare, match its intensity, and then let it melt in my line of vision from a strict rule to, as Reichl describes, a soft suggestion. This text has been no different. The abstract was due on a Saturday in June. "I will get it to you by the end of the weekend", I vowed. That Sunday I was traveling from Perugia, where I was presenting a paper about turtle soup and culinary extinction at a conference, home to Munich. A train strike shook up the Italian leg of my travel plans. I caught the bus to Rome, instead, and from there the airport train, and, finally, my flight. I had calculated that between one leg and the next there would be time to drink coffee and pen an abstract about stealing fish, about slippery tales of swimming with tuna, about how stories come to matter.

The first hiccup to my plans was a spill. As I napped on the bus, my puffy bag that I tasked with schlepping my essentials, from toiletries to laptop, fell to its side, spilling the expensive serum that promised to calm the sunspots my forehead has started collecting as I age. The serum, instead, swirled into a stain that the cover of my notebook swallowed. May it help the pale gray cover with its spots and achieving a more even tone and texture.

The second hiccup was a theft. At the train station in Rome, a colleague and I grabbed a seat upstairs. We took turns watching each other's bags, while the other one cruised the cafeteria downstairs for lunch. She went first. I then did a full circle to end up where I had started: the sushi counter next to the stairs. I bought a tuna maki roll dusted with paprika – which tuna the package did not say. Just as I was about to pay, someone else's body checked mine. An early lunch hour rush, I thought while regaining my balance. I tapped my card and returned my chunky, leather wallet – the texture of pebbles and the color of night –, to my purse. As I reached for my tuna sushi, a thief fished my wallet out of my purse.

I did not notice until about half an hour later, when my sushi was gone and I was ordering a coffee – the one that was supposed to fuel the abstract I still had to write. "Un cappuccino", I requested only to reach for my wallet and to feel its absence. "My wallet, it's gone!" My colleague calmly paid for both of our coffees, while I took in the scene, inhaling the theft and weighing what to do. "Have you cancelled your bank cards?" asked a tall man with a dark nest of curly hair and thick glasses. He left his seat, a couple of tables over, and approached mine. "What happened?" I walked him through the choreography of my sushi purchase, which started with my wallet and ended without it. "I live in Germany too", he told me. I noticed his navy tote bag, its white letters spelling "TUM" – the name of another university in Munich. The cafeteria staff pointed us in the direction of the train station police office. He walked with us, pulling not

only my suitcase but also my colleague's. "Where are you from?" she asked him. "Palestine", he replied. One word rendered my loss no loss at all. A wallet you can replace. People you cannot. Is death a form of theft? I wondered. Is to steal a life to steal from life?

When I reached the airport I did not work on my abstract. Instead I called a friend, telling her about the stranger's generosity, about how silly I felt to have needed his help. All the cards my wallet held – including proof of my permanent residency status in Germany, the magic piece of plastic that allows border agents to wave me in with my Canadian passport and welcome me to stay in Europe forever – I could replace. Annoying, yes. But in the grand scheme of things – even in the lesser scheme of things – losing my wallet did not matter. I still had my phone, my passport, my culture, my country.

A loss shocks, Schulz argues, not because it defies reality, but because it reveals it. Loss, therefore, offers lessons about scale: the world is

> so enormous, complex, and mysterious that there is nothing too large to be lost – and, conversely, no place too small for something to get lost there. (Schulz 2022, 19)

But the fundamental paradox of loss is that "it never disappears" (75). Presence exposes absence. Absence becomes presence. And whether or not you call on the word 'Anthropocene' to describe the present, our collective now is marked by loss. The loss of winter. Too few fish. Too little ice. The bluefin's loss of a whole sea to swim in.

In *Hot Milk* Sofia considers tuna 'too big' to steal. After she, instead, purloins the grumpy dorado, she brings it home and cuts it open. It spills so much blood that Sofia imagines that if someone "banged on the door to claim their stolen goods", she "would literally have been caught red-handed" (Levy 2016, 79). Who might that someone be? The market cashier? The sea? The water? Its fellow fish? After my swim, I boarded the boat and on the ride back to land I was sick. Since then I have been wondering if sea sickness is a method of sorts, a means of attunement, of navigating estrangement, and, perhaps, a way of thinking with fish, of thinking with water, and a path back from the 'tragedy of the commodity'.

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Stories Come to Matter: Water, Food, and other Entanglements
edited by Santiago Alarcón-Tobón and Enric Bou

Taste and Flavor: Variations on the Paella

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Abstract Foodscapes in the Hispanic world are heterogeneous and conflicting and allow us to study how people think with food, using it to mark identities and establish power relations. Food is also related to memory and also generates a grammar. The reflection in this essay culminates with the case of paella, a non-existent dish, based on its history and a reading of a chapter from *Los mares del Sur* by Manuel Vázquez Montalbán, a noted food critic and novelist.

Keywords Celebrations. Food and memory. Identity. Paella. Manuel Vázquez Montalbán.

> Hence the link between narrative form and affect: the form of narrative is the configuration of emotionally charged circumstances created by the telling. (Caracciolo 2021, 5)

1 Celebrations (Thanksgiving)

During the two weeks leading up to 23 November (Thanksgiving in the US, 'Saint Gibin' in Puerto Rico and the Dominican Republic) I have been literally bombarded with two kinds of messages: Black Friday madness (or stupidity); and last-minute advice from the NYT on how to get ready for the biggest cooking experience of the year

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without falling into desperation. Many articles dealt with how to prepare a festive dinner without too much stress. The emphasis was on economy ($100 maximum budget), avoiding anxiety, organization (how to establish an order in the preparation of the dishes, etc.). On the same day, 23 November, I received one, perhaps the funniest one: "The Thanksgiving side dishes our readers called a 'wild success'".

Thanksgiving is commonly associated with a narrative of Pilgrims and Native Americans coming together for a peaceful feast, symbolizing unity and gratitude. However, critics argue that this narrative can be misleading and overlooks the darker aspects of history. The concept of hypocrisy regarding Thanksgiving often revolves around the historical context of the holiday and the way it is celebrated today. As we know, the "basic patterning of story is affective, and it is organized around generic expectations that tap into the forms of emotional experience" (Caracciolo 2021, 7). As stated by this author,

> affective structure serves as a magnet, attracting a multitude of other patterns (textual as well as social and ideological) and staging the ways in which they reinforce or undermine one another. (7)

His conclusion is that narrative is an "extremely capacious and flexible macroform" (7). We could go even further as this is another way of referring to an almost classical concept, the invention of tradition, a concept that was introduced by Eric Hobsbawm and Terence Ranger in their 1983 book *The Invention of Tradition*. Hobsbawm's introduction makes a clear distinction between new traditions and others that claim to be old but that are often quite recent in origin and sometimes invented. This "invention" is distinguished from "starting" or "initiating" a tradition that does not then claim to be old (Hobsbawm, Ranger 1983, 1).

One aspect of hypocrisy is the romanticized version of the Pilgrims' arrival and the subsequent colonization of North America. The traditional narrative tends to downplay or ignore the negative consequences for Native American communities, such as land dispossession, cultural assimilation, and the tragic impact of diseases brought by European settlers. This criticism reflects concerns about the selective and idealized interpretation of history associated with Thanksgiving. We could think of "terraformation" as Amitav Gosh does in his latest book (2021).

Additionally, the disconnect between the historical roots of Thanksgiving and the way it is celebrated today can be seen as hypocritical. While the holiday is ostensibly about gratitude and coming together, it has also been criticized for reinforcing certain stereotypes, promoting consumerism (particularly with Black Friday sales), and overshadowing the ongoing challenges faced by Native American communities.

In recent years, there has been a growing awareness of these issues, and some people choose to use Thanksgiving as an opportunity to reflect on the broader historical context, acknowledge the suffering of Native American communities, and engage in discussions about reconciliation and justice. As with any holiday, perspectives on Thanksgiving can vary widely, and discussions about its history and modern-day implications continue to evolve. My late friend Jon Knudsen was right when he took a very critical attitude toward many aspects of Thanksgiving celebrations.

While I was doing my – extremely organized – shopping and also during the cooking, many memories came back to me. Memories of previous experiences, memories of food (what we now call 'gustemology'), adding layer after layer to the whole experience. From my first Thanksgiving invited by Joanne and Robert Scholes, and Pili and Bob Coover; reflections on the hypocrisy of the celebration towards the natives of North America (at least in one version of the festivity), with Jon Knudsen. So many memories, so many dead friends, so many tastes. Because food is memory. Food is text. Food is matter that speaks by itself in many different languages.

During those days I had the impression that 'Thanksgiving' (its spirit, the monster, Black Friday, whoever) was speaking to me in a language I could understand. The dream of Material Ecocriticism, the principle that matter speaks to us, was coming true. As we know, material ecocriticism proposes basically two ways of interpreting the agency of matter. The first one focuses on the way matter's (or nature's) nonhuman agentic capacities are described and represented in narrative texts (literary, cultural, visual); the second way focuses on matter's 'narrative' power of creating configurations of meanings and substances, which enter with human lives into a field of co-emerging interactions. In this latter case, matter itself becomes a text where dynamics of "diffuse" agency and non-linear causality are inscribed and produced (Iovino, Oppermann 2012, 77-8). Because as stated by Iovino and Oppermann:

> material ecocriticism aspires to be a way of "knowing" the connections, of seeing through narratives, of extending the fields of intelligibility. All narratives that explore and challenge the borders between the "inner" self and the "outer" world in terms of materiality, of causality, of intertwined agency are de facto part of a project of liberation – a cultural, ecological, ontological, and material liberation. Every vision intended to bridge the discursive and the material, the logos and the physis, mind and body, restoring new forms of awareness and conceptualization of our material out-side, is an enterprise of liberation. (2012, 87)

First let's take a look at memory. Later on, to text and language.

2 Memory and Food

Memory is definitely linked to the material world through the senses. The madeleine cake is the symbol of the past that emerges involuntarily. Proust outlines a subjectivity that accumulates memories without realizing it (the madeleine, like any action, is lived naively), a subjectivity that is passively shaped by the world. If analysts speak of "affective consciousness" to describe the emergence of memories, it is to emphasize the non-active dimension assigned to the subject: memories come to him without being invoked. The media remember smell and taste, i.e., it is a sensory activity, not an intellectual one. But later, it is consciousness that re-establishes the thread of memory. Here we have a well-known excerpt from Marcel Proust's novel:

> Mais, quand d'un passé ancien rien ne subsiste, après la mort des êtres, après la destruction des choses, seules, plus frêles mais plus vivaces, plus immatérielles, plus persistantes, plus fidèles, l'odeur et la saveur restent encore longtemps, comme des âmes, à se rappeler, à attendre, à espérer, sur la ruine de tout le reste, à porter sans fléchir, sur leur gouttelette presque impalpable, l'édifice immense du souvenir.
>
> Et dès que j'eus reconnu le goût du morceau de madeleine trempé dans le tilleul que me donnait ma tante (quoique je ne susse pas encore et dusse remettre à bien plus tard de découvrir pourquoi ce souvenir me rendait si heureux), aussitôt la vieille maison grise sur la rue, où était sa chambre, vint comme un décor de théâtre. (Proust 1954, 47)

> When from the distant past nothing remains, after the beings have died, after the things are destroyed and scattered, still, alone, more fragile, yet more vital, more insubstantial, more persistent, more faithful, the smell and taste of things remain poised a long time, like souls, ready to remind us, waiting and hoping for their moment, amid the ruins of everything else; and bear unfaltering, in the tiny and almost impalpable drop of their essence, the immense architecture of memory.
>
> Yet again I had recalled the taste of a bit of madeleine dunked in a linden-flower tea which my aunt used to give me (although I did not yet know and must long await the discovery of why this memory made me so happy), immediately the old gray house on the street where her room was found, arose like a theatrical tableau. (emphasis added)[1]

1 Unless otherwise indicated English translations are by the Author.

Certain objects or smells elicit memory, they develop a connection between past and present. It seems that the past can become the present, meaning that the subject can somehow twist time and break the past/present dichotomy. Proust thus depicts a subjectivity imprisoned in the past and unable to forget. Consciousness is stuck in the past and suffers from its memory. The dominant time in the human condition seems to be the past in Proust's work: "the immense architecture of memory […] immediately the old gray house on the street where her room was found, arose like a theatrical tableau".

Often known as 'Madeleine de Proust', 'The Proustian Effect', or 'The Proust Phenomenon', Proust's madeleine narrative serves as the premises of what we now know today as the contrast between voluntary and involuntary memory. Anthropologist David Sutton (2001; 2010) has used Proust's literary conception in his writings on food, senses, and memory, particular in his conceptualization on 'gustemology'. Gustemology, as Sutton explains it, is a theoretical approach that considers how food and the sensory experience of food become central in studying people and their relations with the cosmos, worldviews, and ways of life (Lee 2023, 2).

If we adopt a gustemological approach, we consider the larger roles that food experiences play in the complexity of human life (Sutton 2010; Korsmeyer, Sutton 2011). While Sutton offers multiple perspectives for using/ applying gustemology as a food inquiry lens (e.g., food as cultural metaphors, terroir and placemaking, etc.), he advocates for memory as a central focal point when studying people's sensorial and philosophical relations with food (Lee 2023, 2). Sutton considers memory as an analogical "sixth sense", not necessarily as a sensorial receptacle but as a creative channel that communicates oneself and the world. By incorporating memory as a sense, one opens up new avenues for understanding people's gustemic lives. Just as how Proust described the madeleine's reverie, Sutton considers memory as powerful vessels buried within us, which once provoked, could "create channels of communication between past and present moments" (Korsmeyer, Sutton 2011, 472).

The intersection between food, memories, and Intangible cultural heritage (ICH) can reveal a lot about a person's identity, especially one's relation to political, socioeconomical, ethnical, familial, and cultural backgrounds (de Jong, Varley 2017; Ingram 2016).

Kai-Sean Lee (2023) has proposed that there are five interlinked constructs in food memory stories:

1. People and communality

   Food activities are highly communal activities that render meaning only when shared with others. When inquiring about food memories, participants never shied away from the meals prepared by their immediate family members, specifically by the mothers of the household.

2. Foodmaking and the body
   Embodied movements extended to different kitchen tools, functioning as extensions of the human nervous system during foodmaking. Through cooking and the "inalienable possessions" one uses, one awakens one's memorial past, creating a channel communicating one's past with the present.
3. Sense and synesthesia
   This includes not only one's gustatory system (taste), but also the olfactory (smell), tactile (touch), auditory (sound), and visual (sight). The interplay among these five senses anchors a memory in sensory – a process known as synesthesia. Synesthesia refers to how one sensory system informs and stimulates another, which collectively forms a sense impression of the particular food item.
4. Emotional reveries
   A myriad of feelings and emotive states, both positive and negative that functions as energies that brings the memory into fruition. The memories of harvesting fruits, the mason jars, the recipe binders, and her mother's handwriting.
5. Evocative sceneries
   It represents the occasions and events in which the memory took place. These sceneries analogically provide a textured backdrop that contextualize the food memories, giving credence to the physical settings of the past. Everyday occasions of the family dinner table, special and celebratory occasions as scenic occasions; outdoor barbeques during the summer; lavishly prepared dishes on Thanksgiving Day and Christmas Day, or other celebrations.

3 Grammar of Food

Now let's pay some attention to food, text and grammar. Calvino's fictional character, Palomar, comes to mind. He is lost inside a Parisian cheese store:

> Questo negozio è un museo: il signor Palomar visitandolo sente, come al Louvre, dietro ogni oggetto esposto la presenza della civiltà che gli ha dato forma e che da esso prende forma.
>
> Questo negozio è un dizionario; la lingua è il sistema dei formaggi nel suo insieme: una lingua la cui morfologia registra declinazioni e coniugazioni in innumerevoli varianti, e il cui *lessico* presenta una ricchezza inesauribile di sinonimi, usi idiomatici, connotazioni e sfumature di significato, come tutte le lingue nutrite dall'apporto di cento dialetti.
>
> È una lingua fatta di cose; la nomenclatura ne è solo un aspetto esteriore, strumentale; ma per il signor Palomar impararsi un po'

> di nomenclatura resta sempre la prima misura da prendere se vuole fermare un momento le cose che scorrono davanti ai suoi occhi.
>
> Estrae di tasca un taccuino, una penna, comincia a scriversi dei nomi, a segnare accanto a ogni nome qualche qualifica che permetta di richiamare l'immagine alla memoria; prova anche a disegnare uno schizzo sintetico della forma. (Calvino 1994, 66-7; emphasis added)

> This shop is a museum: Mr. Palomar, visiting it, feels as he does in the Louvre, behind every displayed object the presence of the civilization that has given it form and takes form from it.
>
> This shop is a dictionary; the language is the system of cheeses as a whole: a language whose morphology records declensions and conjugations in countless variants, and whose lexicon presents an inexhaustible richness of synonyms, idiomatic usages, connotations, and nuances of meaning, as in all languages nourished by the contribution of a hundred dialects. It is a language made up of things; its nomenclature is only an external aspect, instrumental; but for Mr. Palomar, learning a bit of nomenclature still remains the first measure to be taken if he wants to stop for a moment the things that are flowing before his eyes.
>
> From his pocket he takes a notebook and a pen, and begins to write down some names, marking beside each name some feature that will enable him to recall the image to his memory; he tries also to make a synthetic sketch of the shape.

Palomar's situation reminds us that currently there are three different ways of accessing food: through street vendors or specialized food stores such as *macellaio*, *verduriere*, *pescivendolo*, you can get the raw materials: meat, vegetables and fish. To this we could add more commercial venues such as supermarkets (including EatItaly); cooked food: at home or at the restaurant, where the raw materials are fixed, cooked, prepared; a third instance would be pre-cooked (or destroyed) food, such as the one you can obtain at the supermarket.

In the following chapter of Calvino's book, "Il marmo e il sangue", Palomar pays attention to a poster explaining the different parts of an ox:

> In un cartellone al muro, il profilo d'un bue appare come una carta geografica percorsa da linee di confine che delimitano aree d'interesse mangereccio, comprendenti l'intera anatomia dell'animale, esclusi corna e zoccoli. La mappa dell'habitat umano è questa, non meno del planisfero del pianeta, entrambi protocolli che dovrebbero sancire i diritti che l'uomo s'è attribuito, di possesso, spartizione e divoramento senza residui dei continenti terrestri e dei lombi del corpo animale. (69)

> In a poster on the wall, the profile of an ox appears as a map traversed by boundary lines delineating areas of eating interest, encompassing the animal's entire anatomy, excluding horns and hooves. This is the map of the human habitat, no less than the planisphere of the planet, both protocols that are supposed to enshrine the rights that man has ascribed to himself, of possession, partitioning and devouring without residue the terrestrial continents and the loins of the animal body.

An identity aspect linked to food gives rise to the mapping of foodscapes or food landscapes (Atkins 2005), which in the case of tourism, supported by a guidebook or a thousand web pages – disorienting and of dubious credibility –, help us to find the 'typical' food of the place we are visiting. When Pedro Salinas 'discovered' California in 1941, he was horrified to find out that the food was identical throughout the country, including all the customs and gestures that governed the eating ceremony, which led him to conclude that the US was an "ironed" country, with hardly any differences between regions:

> It is curious the terrible monotony of this country. It differs from California to the extreme, from the East, from the Atlantic coast. Light, climate, landscape, everything is different. But the social conventions are the same, or with very slight variations. You are served the same things for tea, you know that you must spend the usual three quarters of an hour, and no more, and when you leave, the same words are repeated. And so on, in everything. […] I think there are two factors that have flattened, so to speak, America. (It gives me the effect of a flattened country, without unevenness, flat, flat, equal). One is education, the other is commerce and industry. […] In Spain. What a delight! To change region, city, sometimes village, was to find something new, typical and original. Each land had its grace, its stamp, which was noticeable even in that. Here, my daughter, the "apple pie" is the only sweet that is served from North to South and East to West. (Salinas 1996, 166)

Nowadays we would call it a 'placeless foodscape'. As explained by Roberta Sonnino, the concept of embeddedness serves to characterize two types of food systems:

> at one end, there is the dis-embedded globalized food system, the 'placeless foodscape' of countries such as the UK and the US; at the other end, there are the more embedded, localized food systems of countries such as France and Italy, where food products appear to be forever rooted in a particular place. (Sonnino 2007)

However, according to Sonnino, local food systems emerge through a dynamic process of spatial manipulation; they are not fixed and perfectly delimited geographical entities, but place is presented as a socio-cultural construct that participants in local food webs may have to constantly negotiate and redefine in order to protect the identity of their products (Sonnino 2007). The concept of placeless foodscape can be applied to pasta and pizza or paella, dishes with profound variations according to location, but which have a conceptual entity shared by millions of people, minus the locals. This is scholarly and entertainingly demonstrated by Luca Cesari in *Storia della pasta in dieci piatti* (2021) and *Storia della pizza. Da Napoli a Hollywood* (2023).

Massimo Montanari has proposed a grammar of food: these would be the conventions that shape the food system not as a simple sum of products and foods, but as a structure within which each element defines its meaning. The lexicon is constituted by the repertoire of available products. Morphology refers to the ways in which products are transformed and adapted to different consumption needs, through cooking practices: concrete gestures and procedures. Syntax is the order of dishes according to criteria of succession, juxtaposition and mutual relationship, defined differently according to cultures and social classes, as well as according to availability. In the syntactic structure of the meal, the complements that may define what eventually precede, accompany, follow, are defined according to the main subjects: starters, interludes, side dishes, desserts. The meal acquires all its expressive capacity thanks to rhetoric, which is the necessary complement of any language. Rhetoric implies adapting the discourse to the subject, to the effects one wishes to elicit. If discourse is food, it is the way it is prepared, of serving it, of consuming it (Montanari 2010, 137-41).

4 For a Theory of Paella

Paella is a traditional Spanish dish that originated in the Valencia region. While it may not have mythologies in the traditional sense, it does have interesting stories and legends associated with its origin. Here are a couple of anecdotes related to the creation of paella. One popular legend attributes the creation of paella to Valencia's farmworkers. According to this story, field laborers would cook rice with vegetables and whatever meats were available to them in a large flat pan over an open fire. The ingredients included rabbit, snails, beans, and various spices. The dish was practical for the workers, as it could be prepared easily in the fields during their lunch breaks. Another version involves the Water Tribunal of Valencia, a historical institution responsible for distributing water among the region's rice fields. The story goes that after their meetings, members of the

Water Tribunal would gather together to cook a communal meal using ingredients like rabbit, chicken, and vegetables, creating what we now know as 'paella'. While these stories add a charming touch to the history of paella, it is important to note that the dish has evolved over time, and there are various regional variations. In its traditional form, paella includes rice, saffron, and a variety of vegetables and meats, but there are countless modern interpretations with different ingredients. The dish has become a symbol of Spanish cuisine and is enjoyed by people around the world.

There are some *terroir* elements (the complete natural environment in which a particular wine/food is produced, including factors such as the soil, topography, and climate) that we have to take into account.

1. Rice Cultivation:
   The fertile lands surrounding the Albufera lagoon in Valencia were well-suited for rice cultivation. Rice paddies became a common sight in the region, providing the essential ingredient for paella.
2. Saffron and Seasonings:
   Saffron, a spice derived from the flower *Crocus sativus*, played a crucial role in paella. It not only contributed to the dish's vibrant yellow color but also added a distinctive and rich flavor. Local spices and herbs were also used to enhance the taste.
3. Social Gatherings:
   As paella gained popularity, it became a centerpiece of social gatherings and celebrations in Valencia. The communal aspect of preparing and sharing a large paella dish became a symbol of togetherness and community.
4. Evolution and Variations:
   Over time, different variations of paella emerged. The availability of ingredients and regional preferences led to the creation of distinct types of paella. For example, seafood paella became popular along the coastal areas, incorporating a variety of fresh seafood.
5. Cultural Symbol:
   Paella became more than just a dish; it became a cultural symbol representing the rich agricultural history of Valencia. It also symbolized the resourcefulness of the people who, with locally available ingredients, created a flavorful and satisfying meal.

Today, paella is celebrated not only in Spain but around the world. It has become a versatile dish with numerous regional and international adaptations. The story of paella reflects the connection between a region's geography, agriculture, and the creativity of its people in crafting a dish that has left an indelible mark on global cuisine.

How do common cultural practices of particular foods and foodways become myth? Food and food practices, as Barthes argues in

Mythologies, become naturalized, dehistoricized, and turned into cultural myth through an endless discourse that disconnects them from actual reality and hollows out the real experience of eating and cooking. This dehistoricization makes them feel so familiar that they shift to a state of being "natural", to what we know as "common meaning" (Barthes 1957, 181-94). Three aspects of Barthesian myth contribute to a critical theorization of food narratives: 1) the slippage of language, 2) the dehistoricization of cultural objects and practices, as well as 3) the use of language to convey assumptions about the concreteness and correctness of cultural practices. Myth has no specific connection to actual concrete reality; it is constructed solely through the use of language and discourse within a particular culture. The extensive and repeated discussion of a particular practice or word is the mechanism that turns everyday practices into myth, and this endless discourse influences the slippage of words and their meanings, in turn influencing the construction of myth. This problem has an extraordinary example in the work of Manuel Vázquez Montalbán, regarding rice in its paella format.

Paella does not exist. In its purest mythical-Barthesian version, the word 'paella' refers to something that does not exist. It is both metonymy and synecdoche. Synecdoche because it summarizes in that word a rancid version of the Spanish identity. Metonymy because it metaphorically substitutes something that has never existed and that has been invented to satisfy (or satiate the hunger of) the tourist imaginary in a version of the cheesiest Spanishness: those yellowish dishes, with a color that is not produced by the effect of saffron, but by a low-quality culinary coloring and of sure harmful effects for the health. I am referring to those photos of unappetizing yellowish rice dishes in any tourist town on the Spanish coast. When paella is transplanted to other latitudes, wonderful things happen, as shown by the menu of this wedding in New Hampshire, which offers four authentic paellas: seafood, peasant, vegetarian and the typically Cuban, Fidel Castro-style paella **[fig. 1]**.

In the prologue to Eating in the Valencian Country, Manuel Vázquez Montalbán acknowledged the difficulty or impossibility of finding paella, that is, its non-existence:

> A fervent supporter of rice, I have been, am and will be a traveler through the Valencian country with a candle in my hand in search of rice dishes sunk by some cultural disaster. Like Atlantis. I am afraid. (Vázquez Montalbán 1981)

On that occasion he explained very well the difference between different ways of cooking rice:

> For most Spaniards, Valencian cuisine is reduced to paella. And if you ask what they mean by paella, they give you the recipe for a

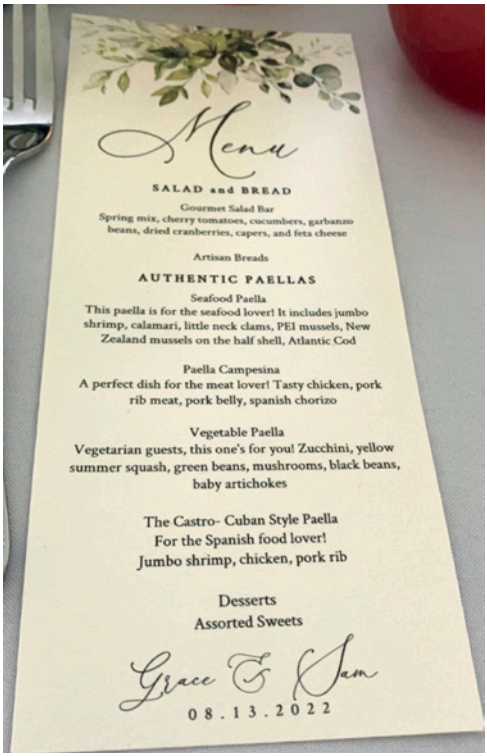

Figure 1
Wedding menu, New Hampshire.
© Alexandre Bou-Rhodes

> dish that no Valencian would recognize as paella. Internationalized paella is a rice stew in which meat and fish are mixed with any vegetable, with the exception of bananas. On the other hand, Valencians only recognize as authentic an inland paella, made with chicken, rabbit and bajocons (very wide beans characteristic of the area). A few snails are added to this rudimentary paella when it is their time, never when they hibernate. (Vázquez Montalbán 1981)

Paella is a complicated word. It refers both to a dish, a way of fixing rice, originally in the País Valencià region; but also to the object, a special kind of iron skillet with two handles that is used to prepare that dish. And allow me a footnote: most people in València speak of *arròs*, not paella, when referring to that dish.

Everyone seems to know what it means to eat paella, when in fact what everyone really knows is the discourse about paella, i.e., we talk about what it means to eat paella, but talking about paella does not equal the experience of eating paella: words try to convey the experience, but can never capture what it means to actually eat it. The metalanguage associated with our food stories, or narratives, begin to

supplant the actual experience. So the conversation about food narratives feels like it replaces the actual experiences with food or the forms of food. As food objects become myths, we ascribe meaning to the narrative that extends beyond the physical properties of the object's ability to provide sustenance. Food and food forms, as they undergo the process of dehistoricization, move from the literal to the figurative, and 'food' becomes 'food narrative'.

Regina Bendix, for her part, has studied the manipulation (from the point of view of the invention of traditions) of the most theoretically genuine elements of a cultural tradition:

> from the perspective of originators and performers, "local color", "tradition", and "folklore" are and always have been open for strategic use, and regarding tourism as the main agent of change would seem to be a misconception. Cultural displays require staging and thus negotiation of some sort […]. Tourism and its concerns simply add a further element in the staging process. (Bendix 2018, 38)

Bendix's commentary helps us to understand the performative aspect contained in the word 'paella' as it evokes particular actions. Brulotte and Di Giovine have studied how food is used to mark insiders and outsiders within ethnic groups; how meanings of the same food change within a particular society according to class, gender, or taste; and how traditions are "invented" for the economic and social revitalization of communities (Brulotte, Di Giovine 2014, 2). The case of paella is particularly useful because it awakens a network of associations and because of its ubiquity, a food landscape, physical or mental and at the same time changing. No Spaniard would ever enter a place like the one in the photo **[fig. 2]**.

Paella is the subject of endless controversies and contradictions. The 2014 polemic about paella is an example of a discussion in *ritornello* that is repeated every few years about the real recipe of this key dish in the Hispanic recipe book (López Iturriaga 2014). See, also, the controversy about the paella emoticon that defined it as "rice with things" (Sánchez Manzanaro 2019); it is one more proof of how a dish of popular origin is transformed into something different.

Talking (or writing) about paella is a dangerous topic on which almost everyone wants to have an opinion. A *parti pris* that brings one closer to no man's land – or paella. The Valencian writer Josep Piera is the author of a remarkable book, *El llibre daurat. La història de la paella com no s'ha contat mai* (2018), in which he proposes a chronological narrative that helps us get to the final recipe for making a good paella. Piera digs into the myths up to the present day mixing fictional data with real ones providing an immense corpus of information that begins when Alexander the Great took rice from Persia to Egypt and Greece up to the present day. Piera analyzes most of

Figure 2
Paellería Gaudí, Barcelona.
@ Enric Bou

the treatises that speak of the various preparations, making comparisons and refuting spurious theories. In 1856, the first great recipe for Valencian-style rice appeared in Paris by Urban Dubois, a famous French chef and, therefore, of worldwide prestige. As he explains in the book,

> Dubois's recipe was pantagruelous: it had beef and pork fillets, ham, sausages, chickens, rabbits, pigeons, partridges, eels, pagillos [common pandora or 'pagell'], snails [...] and even other gluttonies or whims of the south. (Piera 2018, 92)

Piera recognizes the characteristic diversity of this dish when he states:

> Anyone who thinks that in Valencian cuisine you eat the same and only rice dish is wrong; the rice is cooked differently and with a diversity that avoids monotony. The variety of dishes that can be prepared with this cereal is so great that it can be said that there are more than there are days in the year; how there are simple and complicated ones; cheap and expensive; of rich and poor; easy and difficult; traditional and improvised, on Sundays and on Mondays. Valencians eat rice for taste, but also for food needs. That's why we've done with rice what the Italians do with pasta: we eat it every day, but it doesn't always taste the same. (Piera 2018, 99)

His enthusiasm leads him to lyrical definitions, but in which he combines a sense of variety and diversity with the impossibility of finding a single recipe:

> Paella is an exaltation of life, a culinary celebration. In every season, in every place or season of the year, in every house and in

> every kitchen, there are different rice dishes known as paella. Coquinary polysemy. What do we call a paella, then?
>
> Paella is an ancestral meal of the Valencians; for others, it doesn't matter where on the planet they eat it, it is an appetizing culinary exoticism and one of the most appreciated gastronomic singularities, where many find a taste of the Hispanic temperament. There is no canonical interpretation or recipe, but as many possibilities as circumstances, cooks, diners, guests, experts or commentators.
>
> The pan lives in a ceaseless metamorphosis since its origins, and that is why it can be considered a changing representation of humanity. And this is due to the skills of the cook on duty, to the conditions and seasonings of each moment, to the appetite and palate of the diners, to the time and place, the custom, the climate, the consciousnesses and subconsciousnesses […] All the reasons or excuses are valid, since none of them are bad if the cooking point of the rice is right. (Piera 2018, 145-6)

This sample of opinions has one thing in common: they all express the frustration, the difficulty, of defining or finding the real paella. But does it really exist? Literature offers us a possible solution to the enigma.

5 A Reading of 'Paella'

Food is a social event and a myriad of economic, cultural and ethnological interests and variables revolve around it. Decisions about what to eat, how food is prepared, presented and consumed, and with whom to share the table are of radical importance. These three variants express complex relationships of class, ethnicity, religion and gender. Food studies uncover the complexity behind a material aspect of everyday life that impacts and affects multiple social networks, where food is both the material and the symbol by which class, race/ethnicity, sex/gender are socially constructed.

Italian critic Gian-Paolo Biasin, in his study *The Flavors of Modernity. Food and the Novel*, raised an almost obvious point:

> when the novel deals with food, a culinary sign, it adds richness to richness, it superimposes its own system of signs and meanings onto the signifying system, variously codified, of cooking. (Biasin 1993, 3)

In literature, culinary signifiers have a particularly powerful effect. Biasin notes that food in literature serves several functions. Its main purpose is usually mimetic, realistic: "Usually meals are social occasions in extratextual reality, and novelists rightly use them, in

the possible worlds they create, in a narrative function". As Roland Barthes already pointed out – recalls Biasin – the inclusion of seemingly extraneous details serves an important function in narrative fiction: it gives the impression that a scene is "real" and reinforces the illusion that the described world is fundamentally identical to the real world (Biasin 1993, 11-12).

But food also fulfills two other important functions: it has a cognitive function: to stage the search for meaning that takes place whenever one reflects on the relationship between the self, the world and others, or between the subject, nature and history. This reflection is facilitated to some extent by the fact that precisely in food (as in certain landscapes) nature and history tend to be united (17). The other function is tropological: the use of food can contain in itself a whole discourse that can be moral, ideological, affective or social. As Biasin explains, it is

> inherent in the very structure of the culinary sign and of the verbal sign: it is the analogic transformation (metaphor), or the displacement by contiguity (metonymy), or the linking by comparison or similitude, or the arbitrary attribution of significance (symbol), whereby a given food is also other than what it is literally, and this other (a rhetorical figure) often contains within itself an entire discourse. (20)

A discourse can be moral, ideological, affective or social, but when it is expressed within a rhetorical figure it is, above all, a literary discourse, that is to say, an inquiry, knowledge and expression proper to literature, and not to historiography or gastronomy (20).

In *Los mares del Sur* (Southern Seas) we find a definitive example of putting Manuel Vázquez Montalbán's gastronomic knowledge into practice, which at the same time coincides with a key moment in the novel and the resolution of some of the questions surrounding the character of Stuart Pedrell and his mysterious disappearance. It is one of the central episodes, the dinner that Sergio Beser, Enric Fuster and Pepe Carvalho have in the former's apartment. In a small apartment with walls covered with books, the library and the kitchen present a remarkable symbiosis in the development of the action, since the after-dinner conversation is dominated by the readings of some mysterious messages left by the missing Stuart Pedrell. The scene also constitutes the core of the novel. I would add that it also contains in nuce the deep sense of the novel. The scene begins with a strange symbiosis between reading and cooking books.

> Beser vivía en un piso de San Cugat en el que sólo había libros v una cocina. Parecía un Mefistófeles pelirrojo con acento valenciano. Riñó a Fuster por un retraso que ponía en peligro la paella.

– Hoy tomarás una paella valenciana de verdad– le informó Fuster.

– ¿Has hecho lo que te dije?

Beser juró que había seguido todas las instrucciones del gestor. Inició Fuster la marcha hacia la cocina a través de un pasillo lleno de libros. Carvalho pensaba que con la mitad de aquellas existencias tenía asegurado el fuego en su chimenea hasta que muriera. Como si adivinara sus pensamientos, Fuster exclamó sin volver la espalda:

– Cuidado, Sergio, que éste es un quemalibros. Los utiliza para encender la chimenea.

Beser se enfrentó a Carvalho con los ojos iluminados.

– ¿Es cierto?

– Completamente cierto.

– Ha de producir un placer extraordinario.

– Incomparable.

– Mañana empezaré a quemar aquella estantería. Sin mirar qué libros son.

– Produce mucho más placer escogerlos.

– Soy un sentimental y los indultaría. (Vázquez Montalbán 1979, 95-6)

Beser lived in San Cugat, in a flat that seemed to contain nothing but books and a kitchen. He was like a red-haired Mephistopheles with a Valencian accent. He scolded Fuster for their late arrival, which had placed the paella in jeopardy.

'Today you'll have a real paella valenciana', he informed Fuster.

'Have you followed what I told you?'

Beser swore that he had followed his mentor's instructions to the letter. Fuster began walking through the book-lined corridor towards the kitchen. Carvalho mused that with just half of such a stock, he could have a fire in his grate from now until the day he died. As if sensing what was in the detective's mind, and without turning round, Fuster warned:

'Careful, Sergio, this guy burns books. He uses them to light the fire.'

'Is that true?'

'Absolutely'.

'It must give extraordinary pleasure'.

'There's nothing to beat it'.

'Tomorrow I'll start to burn this shelf. Without even looking at what books are there'.

'It gives even more pleasure if you choose them'.

'I'm a sentimentalist, though. I'd be sure to reprieve some of them'.

The description of Professor Beser's kitchen is remarkable. And it is not the only one in the novel. In another episode, when Carvalho

enters Stuart Pedrell's apartment-hiding place in the San Magín neighborhood, as a good detective, he establishes an exhaustive control of the bookshelves and the kitchen. Both, in clear contrast with Sergio Beser's, present a desolate aspect. The two kitchens, Beser's and Pedrell's, seem to confirm what Imma Forino has highlighted in the section "Uomini in cucina", where she reflects on the transformation of the domestic kitchen due to the appearance of single male cooks as seen in films such as Billy Wilder's *The Apartment* (1960). Cooking in front of others "assumes an important significance not only in terms of self-presentation and self-revoicing, but also for the purpose of a recipe". She quotes an excerpt from Noëlle Châtelet's book, *Le corps à corps culinaire* (1977):

> there is no dish that is not suitable to be commented on, assimilated. Judged, by all who will later consume it. Instead, the city boy, a true servant also relegated to the most remote of the seats, is angry at not being able to take part in the joy of his just-arrived guests, and his work becomes a punishment. For that matter, punished are also the guests who stand still and disheveled, their nostrils irritated by an aroma whose origin they cannot specify. (Forino 2019, 345)

This is exactly what takes place in Sant Cugat's kitchen: it is a choral act, starring only men pontificating about paella.

Then follows a discussion that has been going on since time immemorial in that immaterial border (between Valencia and Catalonia) of the paella foodscape about whether it should be cooked with or without onion. Sergio Beser is from Morella, an excarlist and mountainous place, far from the sea, and he finds himself in that gray area of the dividing line, a sort of DMZ that separates the paella parallels. When Beser tries to convince Fuster with bibliography on the paella that onion can be used, this one claims: "Don't come to me with books by people who are not from Villores. *Morellano de mierda*. I am guided only by popular memory" (Vázquez Montalbán 1979, 96). The consultation of the bibliography on rice is presided over by Fuster's declamation of the well-known "Oda a la paella" by José María Pemán:

¡Oh insigne sinfonía de todos los colores!	O noble symphony of all the colors!
¡Oh ilustre paella	O illustrious paella
por fuera con su blusa de colores,	with its colorful blouse on the outside,
quemadita por dentro con ansias de doncella!	burnt inside with maidenly eagerness!
¡Oh policromo plato colorista.	Oh polychrome colorful dish.
que antes que con el gusto se come con la vista!	that is eaten with the sight rather than with the taste!
Concentración de glorias donde nada se deja.	Concentration of glories where nothing is left.
Compromiso de Caspe entre el pollo y la almeja.	Compromise of Caspe between chicken and clam.
¡Oh plato decisivo:	O decisive dish:
gremial y colectivo!	both individual and collective!
¡Oh plato delicioso donde todo es hermoso	O delicious dish where all is beautiful
y todo se distingue, pero nada está roto!	and everything is different, but nothing is broken!
¡Oh plato liberal donde un grano	O liberal dish where a grain
es un grano como un hombre es un voto!	is a grain as a man is a vote!

This bibliographical interlude closes with Beser's acknowledgment of his terrible mistake:

> 'You were right. Onion isn't used in the paella of the people of Castellón. It was a lapse. A catalanism. I'll have to go to Morella. I'm in urgent need of a refresher course'.
>
> 'Ha!' exclaimed Fuster, as he threw the onion into the rubbish bin. 'I made myself quite clear. Half a kilo of rice, half a chicken, a quarter-kilo of pork shoulder, a quarter-kilo of peas, two peppers, two tomatoes, parsley, saffron, salt, and nothing else. Anything else is superfluous'. (Vázquez Montalbán 1979, 97)

Curiously, in Beser's self-criticism and Fuster's final reprimand, linguistic terms such as "catalanism" and "foreign word" are used, further strengthening the link between books/bookstore and cuisine that characterized the beginning of the scene. Then they begin the process of cooking a paella. This transformation becomes an authentic theatrical performance. But first, Fuster has a surprise in store for Beser, as he has brought him *flaons* (a dessert that already appears in the first Catalan recipe books, which establishes a tradition that continues to this day), one of the fundamental sweets of Morella's cuisine:

> 'Flaons! Did you make these for me, Enric?'
>
> They embraced like two compatriots meeting at the South Pole, and explained to the by now inebriated Carvalho that flaons are the absolute best patisserie to be had in all the Catalan lands. Throughout the Maestrazgo, they are made with oily dough, aniseed and sugar, and filled with curd cheese, ground almond, egg, cinnamon and grated lemon peel.
>
> 'My sister sent them yesterday. Curd cheese is very awkward and goes off very quickly'. (Vázquez Montalbán 1979, 97-8)

Figure 3 Flaons de Morella. © Enric Bou

The cooking goes on at a good pace and they act out one of the best known popular phrases about the preparation of paella: "Fins el fum serà bo" (even the smoke will be good). This is how they finish the preparation:

> Beser and Fuster caught the aroma coming from the paella.
>
> 'Too much pepper', Beser suggested.
>
> 'Wait till you taste it, idiot', replied Fuster, bending like an alchemist over his retort vials.
>
> A few snails to add the final touch. That's what's missing. Pepe, today you'll have a real paella from its homeland, the one they used to make before fishermen corrupted it by drowning the fish in roux'. (98)

The mention of an "authentic country" may refer to the *petit pays*, that is, to Morella, but it may also be an impossible abstraction of the place where the "authentic" paella is made, that foodscape impossible to define as Mackendrick pointed out. It indicates, on the other hand, that there is a strong link between the dish and form, the recipes for cooking it and the gestures (which no recipe book manages to reproduce) to prepare it, as well as with its geography/locality.

The paella episode continues and as soon as the cooking is finished, they move on to the tasting. The narrator, with great philological fidelity, insists on a typical anthropological aspect of the way of eating paella in a rural environment, tasting it directly from the container in which it has been cooked:

> They put the paella on the kitchen table, and Carvalho prepared to eat it country-style, without plates, simply demarcating a portion of territory within the container. In theory it was a paella for five people, whose only effort would be to keep themselves well lubricated. They finished the five-litre bottle of wine, and began another. Then Beser brought out a bottle of Mistela de Alcalá de Chisvert for the flaons. (Vázquez Montalbán 1979, 98)

The preparations in the kitchen, the tasting, the large amount of wine ingested (a five-liter carafe and they start a second one) put them in shape for the inspired literary analysis that will reveal itself as the beginning of the resolution of the mystery associated with the South Seas.

The three functions, according to Biasin, of the presence of food in a literary work are thus fulfilled: the mimetic-realistic one, a group of friends cooking paella; the cognitive function, which stages the search for meaning about the relationship between the self, the world and others, when the different ways of cooking or versions of paella are confronted; and finally the tropological function: the use of food contains a moral, ideological, affective or social discourse, here it is the key to solving the mystery of a detective novel.

The chapter has a single purpose: to reveal the meaning of these quotations, a mixture of notes from a suicide and messages in a bottle thrown by a castaway. But at the same time, the characters present an authentic review of the components of the paella foodscape: ingredients, cooking methods, tasting methods and complementary literary references, which bring us closer to an interpretation of its cultural meaning. In fact, a contrast of places, small homelands, petit pays, abroad, Catalonia, etc. is proposed. And also an 'authenticity' of paella according to the geographical proximity to the place of original invention. Through the discussion of the practice of paella we also note that the foodscape varies according to the change of the natural landscape (what the land/sea/orchard offers) and the distance from the place of consumption.

6 Paella Meanings

In this brief tour through the different versions, the complementary and contradictory meanings of the word 'paella', of its mythification, in the gastronomic and detective work of Vázquez Montalbán, we find a construction of a foodscape, which in part coincides with the most common clichés, because paella is practice, memory, fiction. The foodscape constructs a portrait that is not only gastronomic and that goes beyond the world of gastronomy. Vázquez Montalbán's wisdom makes us understand this complex food landscape. But at the same time it serves to confirm this author's use of cuisine as a metaphor for

culture and its hypocritical content. For as Terry Eagleton (1997) has reminded us, food is infinitely interpretable, as gift, threat, poison, reward, barter, seduction, solidarity, suffocation. In the specific case of this novel, paella as a concept, its mystery and multiple versions, and the performance of the preparation, function as background to the key moment of the novel: the resolution of the meaning of the mysterious literary quotations that Stuart Pedrell has left as decoys that may explain his disappearance. The parallelism between cooking and reading, between recipes and literary quotations, becomes the method for the resolution of the mystery about the secret life of the industrialist. But, at the same time, perhaps without knowing it, Vázquez Montalbán also unveils the mystery about the non-existence of this mythical dish. Non-existent and only realized in the kitchen and imagination of each one of us, gourmets and readers. As I have highlighted above, Barthes looked at the inherent dehistoricization of food because of its status as myth. Paella feels so familiar that it shifts to a 'natural' state of being, to what we know as 'common meaning'. If paella is one of the pillars of the gastronomic identity of Spaniards, the conclusion of Pemán's poem ("Oh liberal dish where a grain is a grain | as a man is a vote!") alerts us to something unsuspected. Thus, by delving into the concept of paella, not only does an (inter)national myth about the quintessence of Spanish culinary identity fall, but it helps us to conclude that this identity is as disintegrated and individualistic as each of the grains of rice on the plate.

This problem is inscribed in the reflections proposed by Lucy Long, according to whom culinary tourism is not only food for tourists, but

> the intentional, exploratory participation in the foodways of another – participation including the consumption, preparation, and presentation of a food item, cuisine, meal system, or eating style considered to belong to a culinary system not one's own. (Long 2004, 21)

With Spanish hyper-regionalism, each region (and people) claims its particularism, as defended by Carvalho, who demystifies the idea of a national gastronomy and "is against accepting the existence of national-state cuisines" (Vázquez Montalbán 2002, 47). Culinary tourism is practiced not only when we travel, but also at home, or when we dine at the ethnic restaurant around the corner. Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett has called the heritage labeling of fragments of culture a "value-added industry" (Kirshenblatt-Gimblett 1995, 370-2). In 2004 she coined the term "metacultural production" to refer to the process that includes attitudes, values about traditional cultural expressions and their instrumentalization. As I mentioned before, it is frustrating and difficult trying to define or find the real paella. Because it does not exist. Reading Vázquez Montalbán's culinary essays and novels allows us to get closer to a possible solution of the enigma.

7 Conclusions

Serenella Iovino and Serpil Oppermann, in their "Introduction: Stories Come to Matter" in *Material Ecocriticism* (2014), declared that "there is no simple juxtaposition or mirroring between nature and culture, but a combined 'mesh'". Their thesis is that culture and nature become a hybrid compound, coagulating, to use Haraway's term, into naturecultures. This natural-cultural plexus is the key to our world and, therefore, the starting point of any critical analysis (Iovino, Oppermann 2014, 5-6).

The case of paella shows us that it is not only a dish that is prepared in the País Valencià, but something much more convoluted. The act of ingesting food is an act of exchange of different bodies (human and more than human) but which in turn carry stories of colonialism (rice comes from Persia), pollution (vegetables contaminated by toxic waste), manipulation of traditions. Similarly to a such as chocolate that can 'speak' as a symbol of a military defeat, as Pardo Bazán does.

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Stories Come to Matter: Water, Food, and other Entanglements
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Eating Under Water: Speculative Jewish Gastronomy in Venice

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Abstract This essay explores the intersections of food, culture, and resilience through the lens of speculative Jewish gastronomy in Venice. It begins with general reflections on the nexus between food, religion, and ecology, before examining the project *La cucina ebraica del futuro* (Future Jewish Cuisine), which reimagines traditional Jewish Venetian menus from an ecocritical perspective. The text reflects on how food serves as a site of cultural memory and environmental speculation, highlighting gastronomy's dual role as a material and symbolic medium for addressing environmental challenges, envisioning sustainable futures, and negotiating identity under precarious conditions.

Keywords Foodscapes. Venice. Jewish foodways. Speculative gastronomy. Environmental Humanities.

A Jewish woman struggles for survival in the heart of war-ravaged Europe. She flees barefoot the fury of the Nazis into the forest, surviving on scraps, peels, and rotten meat. One day – the conflict is nearing its end, but, as she remembers it, it is precisely at this stage that many succumb to starvation – a Russian farmer rescues her, offering a piece of meat.

The woman, reduced to skin and bones, refuses this gift. Decades later, she recounts this episode to her mystified grandson, raised in the peace of affluent, overfed America.

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> "He saved your life". "I didn't eat it". "You didn't eat it?" "It was pork. I wouldn't eat pork." "Why?" "What do you mean why?" "What, because it wasn't kosher?" "Of course". "But not even to save your life?" "If nothing matters, there's nothing to save". (Safran Foer 2009, 16-17)

Se niente importa. Perché mangiamo animali? (If nothing matters. Why Do We Eat Animals?) became the Italian title of a book that, in English, is simply titled *Eating Animals*. Its author is the Jewish American writer Jonathan Safran Foer, the grandson who, starting from his grandmother's wartime stories, weaves a profound meditation on our relationship with meat and his own choice of vegetarianism – a difficult, and not always rigorous, decision. Ten years later, in his broader meditation *We Are the Weather*, he makes it even clearer that rethinking how we eat is essential to counter our devastating environmental predicament:

> Climate change is the greatest crisis humankind has ever faced, and it is a crisis that will always be simultaneously addressed together and faced alone. We cannot keep the kinds of meals we have known and also keep the planet we have known. We must either let some eating habits go or let the planet go. It is that straightforward, that fraught. Where were you when you made your decision? (Safran Foer 2019, 71)

The grandmother's anecdote is important for various reasons. The Jewish principle known as *Pikuach Nefesh*, 'the safeguarding of life', prioritizes saving human life above almost all other commandments, including the dietary laws of *kashrut*, as Esther Farbstein (2007, 282-3) shows precisely in relation to war events. However, in her dire situation, the young woman is asserting that what must be safeguarded is not only bare life, but also inner, spiritual life, a sense of self. Her act resonates with Jacques Derrida's philosophical meditation originally titled "Il faut bien manger", a French phrase which can mean "One must eat well" (as reads the English translation), but also "it is really necessary to eat", "it is necessary to eat well", or even "one must eat the good" (Costantini 2020, 2):

> "One must eat well" does not mean above all taking in and grasping in itself, but *learning* and *giving* to eat, learning-to-give-the-other-to-eat. One never eats entirely on one's own: this constitutes the rule underlying the statement, "One must eat well". It is a rule offering infinite hospitality. And in all differences, ruptures, and wars (one might even say wars of religion), "eating well" is at stake. Today more than ever. One must eat well – here is a maxim whose modalities and contents need only be varied, *ad infinitum*. (Derrida 1994, 282)

"One never eats entirely on one's own". The woman passes on to her grandson, who lives in a radically different situation, the example that the limits humans impose on themselves can be a fundamental resource, even in extreme circumstances. Arguably, we all live in extreme circumstances of a different kind. Just as Safran Foer's grandmother faced moral dilemmas in her context, contemporary food choices are shaped by ethical considerations on a planetary scale:

> scientists estimate that the global food system, particularly meat production and consumption, is responsible for 37 percent of total greenhouse gas emissions, showing that what people may once have considered a *personal* matter of diet is in fact *planetary* in its biospheric impacts. (Shukin 2021, 141)

The concept of limits as a device to safeguard all lives is also invoked by one of the most authoritative intellectuals to have brought the climate crisis to the forefront against all forms of denial and repression:

> it is impossible to see any way out of this crisis without an acceptance of limits and limitations, and this in turn, is, I think, intimately related to the idea of the sacred, however one may wish to conceive of it. (Ghosh 2016, 160-1)

Amitav Ghosh's reflection is part of his broader call to value the contribution of religious movements to the indispensable global mobilization against anthropogenic climate change. For Ghosh, a secular writer from a Hindu background, religious organizations have the capacity to awaken consciences, transcend the short-sighted geopolitical interests of nation-states, recognize intergenerational responsibilities, and imagine nonlinear changes outside of economistic or technocratic thinking dictated by optimistic trust in sustainability (161). Admittedly many religious organizations are complacently embedded within the political and economic systems polluting the planet, and some are even actively engaged in climate change denial; yet Ghosh's overall point is important also as a reminder that exclusively technocratic solutions to the crisis are, at best, wishful thinking.

Inspired by these and other thinkers, the Venice-based Beit Venezia – A home for Jewish culture, an independent foundation promoting international Jewish culture, launched a series of projects starting in 2018, dedicated to the connection between Judaism and ecology, under the motto "Living Under Water". The reference is to a joke, a time-honored form of Jewish critical thinking:

> *God announces the arrival of a new flood within two weeks to punish the evil of humans. Imams invite the followers of Islam to accept the will of Allah; the Pope calls on Catholics to repent of their sins*

> *and pray for the second coming of Christ; rabbis make an appeal to Jews: "We have fifteen days to learn how to live under water".*

Beit Venezia invited artists, scholars and activists to take this joke literally by collecting Jewish ideas and practices that address the environmental crisis, demanding urgent technological, cultural, and religious responses. Faced with the planetary challenge, we need to reinterpret our past, present, and future imaginaries, and Jewish culture, in its rich plurality, can and should, among others, offer a significant contribution both internally and externally, drawing from a painful history of catastrophes and traumas, resistance and resilience, as suggested by the joke. In recent times, new ecological thoughts and practices have emerged, drawing on the resources of Jewish tradition to adapt to the darkest scenarios but primarily to understand and transform our world (Krone 2024; Brumberg-Kraus 2024). "Living Under Water" has involved thinkers and artists who have come to Venice to observe and represent the crisis from the specific perspective of a city at the edge of climate change, with the inexorable rise of the waters only temporarily slowed by powerful but overly expensive and obsolescent technologies. Beit Venezia's premise is that to think 'in' Venice is to think not only 'about' Venice as much as 'from' Venice about (at least) all coastal cities. As Salvatore Settis argues, Venice is

> a thinking machine that allows us to ponder the very idea of the city, citizenship practices, urban life as sediments of history, as the experience of the here and now, as well as a project for a possible future. (Settis 2016, 170)

In this light, this open-ended project was meant from the start to disseminate its outcomes as far as possible. "Living Under Water" has so far produced a zine, created in both print and digital forms (Arnovitz, Bassi 2019), an exhibition at the Jerusalem Biennale in 2019, an exhibition in Krakow in 2022 as part of the most important European festival of Jewish culture, and a book of essays and artworks in both English and Polish, including various Jewish perspectives on the environmental crisis (Arnovitz, Bassi 2022) **[fig. 1]**. The latest installment focused on food, considered as an area where heritage, emotions and ecology interact very intensely. This is eloquently explained by the eighteen-year-old Sigmund Freud in a letter to his friend Eduard Silberstein in 1874:

> People are wrong to reproach religion for being of a metaphysical nature and for lacking the certainty of sensory perceptions. Rather, religion addresses the senses alone, and even the God-denier who is fortunate enough to belong to a *tolerably pious family* cannot deny

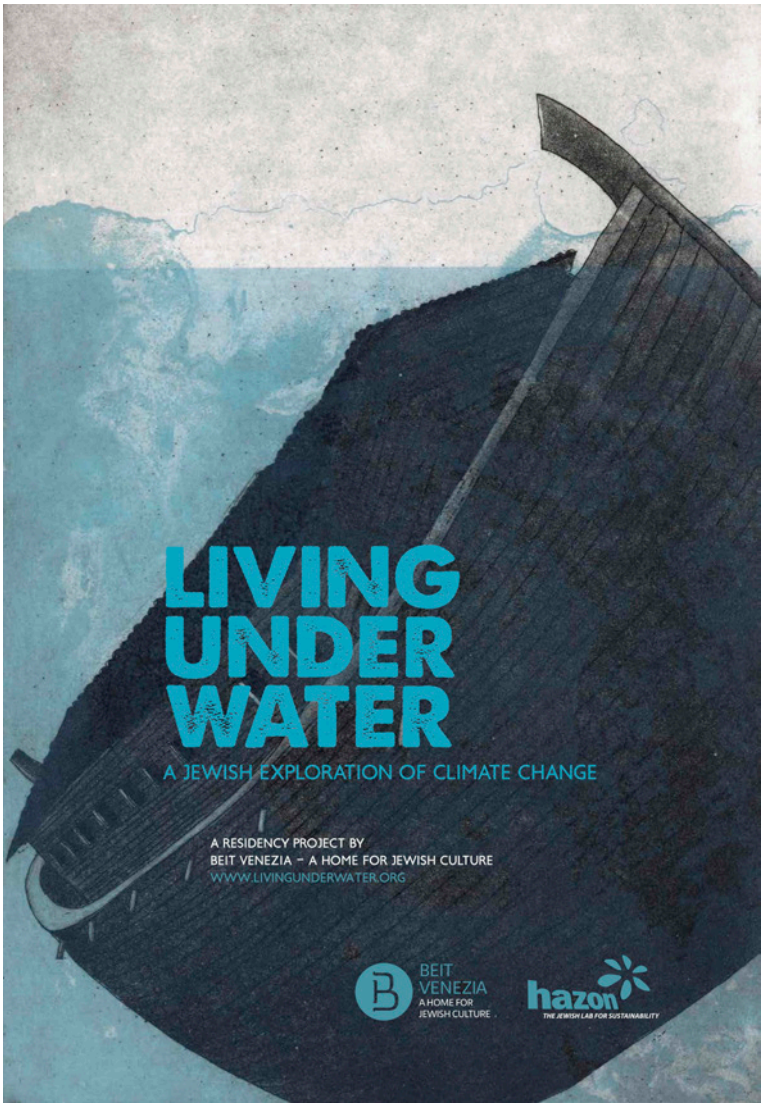

Figure 1 Cover of the *Living Under Water* zine

> the holiday when he puts a New Year's Day morsel to his lips. One might say that religion, consumed in moderation, stimulates the digestion, but that taken in excess it harms it. (Freud 1989, 62-3)

Unlike Safran Foer's anecdote on desperate times, Freud's piece of juvenilia helps us to examine the nexus between food and religion under normal circumstances. The material and physiological aspects of religious events, closely linked to sensory and emotional dimensions, often escape those who promote alternative diets based only on ethical or scientific arguments. These well-meaning attempts frequently ignore how, for many people, foods are primarily a matter of identity rather than mere convenience or habit. In other words, how can people be persuaded to eat more sustainably if that clashes with their beliefs, traditions, and emotional memory?

Beit Venezia addressed this crucial issue by seeking to imagine the future of the Italian Jewish culinary tradition, embodied by Giuliana Ascoli Vitali Norsa's *La cucina nella tradizione ebraica*, a popular book first published in 1970 and reprinted multiple times since. This rich cookbook shows how Italian Jewish culture is in fact a mosaic of diverse and intertwined traditions, making its cuisine extraordinarily varied in a country where food is also a strong cultural value. Today, many books and websites celebrate this culinary gold mine, partly driven by the exotic fascination with Italian gastronomy, but they are unlikely to include ecological reflections. And yet the future of food coincides with the future of the planet, and the Jewish dietary laws of *kashrut* can also function as a powerful reminder of our limits toward the world and a constant exercise in evaluating what we eat, including its hygienic, sanitary, and symbolic conditions. To these ancient rules, it is now essential to add a new awareness of the environmental impact of food, reflecting on Jewish history as the millennial story of a people that originated as a group of climate migrants who found refuge in Egypt and were reborn under the sign of catastrophic natural events, with seas parting and pandemics affecting human and non-human beings. *Kashrut* traditionally focuses on ritual purity and religious observance. In 1979 Rabbi Zalman Schachter-Shalomi, the founder of the Jewish Renewal movement, coined the concept of *eco-kashrut* to broaden traditional rules to include environmental ethics, emphasizing sustainability and justice in food production. This modern adaptation aligns with the principle of *tikkun olam* (repairing the world) by addressing the ecological impact of industrial agriculture and unsustainable practices. For example, choosing locally sourced or organic foods and avoiding products tied to deforestation or exploitation reflects an *eco-kashrut* mindset. This approach not only reinterprets ancient traditions for contemporary challenges but also reinforces the role of food ethics in global sustainability. *Eco-kashrut* is also one of the many religious ideas and practices contradicting the

pervasive stereotype of a monolithic Judeo-Christian tradition that advocates the human dominion over nature, inspired by an extremely influential and often misread article by Lynn White Jr. (1967).

La cucina ebraica del futuro (The Jewish Cuisine of the Future), a project supported by a law of the Veneto Region that promotes the dissemination of Jewish culture and realized in collaboration with the Museum of Jewish Padua, aimed to offer a small symbolic example of how a gastronomic heritage could bring people together, fostering dialogue between cultures, and connect the past, present, and future from an ecocritical perspective. The project involved three artists with complementary skills. Miriam Camerini, a performer, theater director, scholar of Judaism slated to become the first ordained Orthodox rabbi in Italy, was the indispensable guide to Jewish dietary laws, as evidenced by her book *Ricette e Precetti* (2019). Marco Bravetti, an experimental chef with bold creativity and a strong multicultural sensitivity, contributed his Venetian culinary knowledge and his guiding concept of 'limits' to the new Jewish field, in which he immersed himself with curiosity and enthusiasm. In 2021 Bravetti curated a special event called *Tide Tables*, in collaboration with cultural historian L. Sasha Gora (one of the authors of this volume) and food designer Katinka Versendaal. It is worth quoting the philosophy of this experiment in speculative gastronomy, which took the fascinating form of a four-course meal and a public event, because its format provided the inspiration for *La cucina ebraica del futuro*:

> One part meal and one part investigation, TideTables: Venetian Speculative Gastronomy casts food as a critical means with which to experience Venice and its lagoon. The table becomes a means with which to understand Venice's past and present and to shape its future. Reflecting on watery worlds, we – a chef, a cultural historian, and a food designer – speculate answers to Elspeth Probyn's question: "can we eat with the ocean?" In turn, we wonder: can Venice eat with the lagoon?
>
> In and out and up and down, this meal shadows the rhythms of the tide to ask: What does it mean to eat with something? What does it mean to eat with the tide or against it? And can we invite the lagoon to the table? These questions relate to larger debates about how human appetites change climate and how climate change, in turn, influences human appetites. (Versendaal, Gora, Bravetti 2021)

Andi Arnovitz, an American visual artist who has lived in Israel for many years, built on her previous residencies in Venice to enrich the final publication with evocative images that help visualize the future of food. In 2018 Arnovitz spent four weeks in Venice as the lead artists of the *Living Under Water* zine and witnessed an exceptional high tide, which would only be surpassed by the catastrophic *aqua granda* of the following year.

Figure 2 *Tide Tables* at Ocean Space, Venice (2021)

For all three participants, through their different media and forms, storytelling was a fundamental component of the experience, serving both to illuminate the historical layers going of local food and to explain the future scenarios that can help the readers and eaters to accept the innovative recipes, in spite of the unusual ingredients.

The project began with a visit to some Venetian Jewish families, who cooked for the participants and shared with them the memories and meanings of specific dishes. This first stage was crucial to explore the emotional component of food. The next step was the selection of two traditional menus from Ascoli Vitali Norsa's book, one for the winter and one for the spring seasons, corresponding to two different festive moments on the Jewish calendar. In the third stage Marco Bravetti reinvented the two menus in terms of future food sustainability. Each menu featured three recipes, offered both in the traditional version from *La cucina nella tradizione ebraica* and in Bravetti's experimental reinterpretation. The first menu was prepared for Shabbat, the weekly day of rest in Judaism, starting on Friday at sunset and with dinner as its first meal. Commemorating and re-enacting the seventh day in the creation of world and prescribing the suspension of all working activities, the Sabbath symbolizes and embodies that sense of sacred limits informing the project (Heschel 2005). The menu was then put to the test in a performative moment, which constituted the culmination of the residency. In her tried-and-true format "Shabbat for All", Camerini led Friday-evening dinner with a mixed audience of Jews and non-Jews, following the usual ritual accompanied by music, readings, and reflections. Helped by his invaluable team from Tocia!, the "food and community"

platform that he founded, Bravetti cooked and explained the process that led him to conceive and transform the traditional recipes into their future-oriented versions, striking a delicate balance between maintaining traditional symbolic meanings and adding new environmental elements. Finally, the whole project coalesced into a book, *La cucina ebraica del futuro* (2023), elegantly illustrated by Andi Arnovitz **[fig. 3]**.

As Camerini explains in her insightful introductory text, in Venice and Ferrara it is traditional to eat once a year a dish that celebrates the passage of the Jewish people through the Red Sea, corresponding to the Sabbath reading of Chapter 15 of the Book of Exodus, also known as *Shabbat Beshallach*:

> And Moses stretched out his hand over the sea, and the sea went back toward morning to its full flow, with the Egyptians fleeing toward it, and the Lord shook out the Egyptians into the sea. And the waters came back and covered the chariots and the riders of all Pharaoh's force who were coming after them in the sea, not a single one of them remained. And the Israelites went on dry land in the midst of the sea. The waters a wall to them on the right and on their left. (Ex. 15:27-8; Alter 2019, 272-3)

This dramatic story of freedom from slavery was commemorated and exorcized in a pasta dish called *frisensal*. While its origin and name, as for many traditional foods, cannot be located precisely, Camerini vividly explains its ingredients and symbolism:

> The tagliatelle are the waves of the sea, the pine nuts are the spears and swords scattered in the sea, and the raisins are the wheels of the chariots. The meatballs and pieces of goose sausage are even the drowned pursuers. Frisensal is also called Pharaoh's Wheel. (Camerini 2023, 27; transl. by the Author)

Bravetti's reimagining of the recipe goes hand in hand with Camerini's philosophical reconfiguration:

> For our Venetian Shabbat […] we decided to explore the story and its theatrical–gastronomic representation by imagining a new world, where the victors don't necessarily have to consume their defeated enemies, but where the true victory, as the entire narrative of Exodus teaches, is not death but a birth – the emergence of a people liberated from the maternal womb that nourishes yet imprisons, toward a new, adult, and independent life, free from resentment, conscious of memory, and carrying its own traditions but journeying toward a new, free land, to teach us all how to be no longer slaves to our history but narrators of ourselves. (2023, 27; transl. by the Author)

Figure 3 Cover of *La cucina ebraica del futuro* (Damocle, 2023)

While for the second menu, connected to the spring season and the feast of *Pesach* (Passover), Bravetti made a completely vegetarian choice, in the case of the winter *Shabbat Beschallach* he took a different route. He engaged with the most humble ingredients of the Venetian lagoon, respecting seasonality and locality to create his *Frisensalmastro*, in one of his characteristically witty and thought-provoking puns, a fusion of the traditional, enigmatic name with *salmastro*, the brackish waters of the lagoon.

> Instead of focusing on the memory of the past from the original recipe, I tried to look toward the future – the threat of the looming climate catastrophe but also the hope that we can somehow avert it. (Bravetti 2023, 50)

The chef had already reinterpreted traditional religious foods such as *castradina*, a mutton dish eaten in Venice on the very popular Catholic Feast of Madonna della Salute, celebrated on the 21 November to commemorate the end of the plague epidemic in 1630-31. Once a simple food supplied by Dalmatians in times of penury, today *castradina* relies on meat imported from New Zealand with a heavy ecological footprint. Bravetti shifted all the traditional meat ingredients of *frisensal* toward the briny flavors typical of the lagoon: "what Venetians call *freschìn*, that smell of stagnant or marshy water, like the fish market when it's closed" (50). Reclaiming the poorest fish, which are also at risk of extinction due to climate change, Bravetti made a fish broth and raw mullet meatballs. Another signature element of his cuisine, typical of the lagoon landscape but nearly absent from Venetian cooking, is seaweed. Including seaweeds in *Frisensalmastro* was a paradoxical act: first because traditional Venetian cuisine was much less based on fish than today's restaurant menus might suggest (Pes 2007), and secondly because the lagoon's seaweed is too polluted to use directly and has to be imported from healthier ecosystems. However, seaweed represents a possible and desirable future:

> If we were capable of redesigning our relationship with the landscape, we could use seaweed, and it thus becomes a stimulus to imagine a lagoon emerging from environmental threats. (Bravetti 2023, 51; cf. Pezzola 2024)

With powdered seaweed, the tagliatelle in the recipe turned green, and the dish was decorated with a composition of lagoon herbs and samphire:

> Instead of immersing ourselves in the Red Sea, we immerse ourselves in the Venice lagoon, hoping that it too will transform and lead us to a future free from environmental threats. (Bravetti 2023, 51)

Venetian foodways reflect centuries of adaptation to environmental constraints, offering insights for sustainability today. The city's historical reliance on the lagoon for fish, salt, and other resources underscores the importance of localized, ecologically attuned food systems. Venice also illustrates the challenges of balancing cultural heritage with environmental responsibility, particularly in the face of climate change and overtourism.

Field studies of Venetian foodscapes, combined with dialogues with local food professionals and activists, reveal the tensions between preserving traditions and embracing innovation. Our Jewish Venetian case study highlights how local practices can inform global discussions on food sustainability, and by way of conclusion, I draw on Jonathan Brumberg-Kraus's observation:

> Insofar as Jewish food rules and rituals have some sort of relationship – direct or indirect, conscious or unconscious – to sacred Jewish texts and traditions, they are a kind of 'culinary midrash'. Midrash is a Jewish mode of talking about and applying texts creatively and imaginatively to re-'tell' (the medium need not be restricted to words) new cultural-historical situations, informed by the interpreter's new contemporary ethical and cultural sensitivities. (2024, 3)

Beit Venezia's project on the future of Jewish food can be considered a culinary midrash on our precarious environmental condition. Bravetti's *Frisensalmastro* and his other recipes may not be easily replicated by inexperienced hands, and *La cucina ebraica del futuro* was not conceived as the typical cookbook. It was created to foster conversations between Jewish thought, Venetian traditions, and environmental ethics, inviting readers to reflect on how their own food choices intersect with cultural and ecological sustainability. It is offered as a contribution to the fascinating mosaic emerging from the project of a Venice food Atlas (De Marchi et al. 2023). And it is a journey that encourages us to revisit all traditions, to value their meaning, and to have the courage to transform them, reminding us, as Safran Foer says, that we can change the world before breakfast.

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The five paper in this volume reflect current topics of discussion under the umbrella of Environmental Humanities. Attention is devoted to ecocriticism, and more specifically to two subfields: Blue Humanities and Food Studies. The contributions are focused on two key entanglements: water and food, both of which serve as critical examples of how matter and meaning are intertwined. The texts are aimed to deepen and broaden the discussion about meaning and matter, emphasizing the significance of stories and imagination while outlining the vast network of agencies that shape our world.

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