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Arts of Resistance: Ecologic History and Contemporary Interventions in the Valley of Mexico

Chloë L. Courtney
University of New Mexico

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Chloë Courtney

Candidate

Department of Art and Art History

Department

This thesis is approved, and it is acceptable in quality and form for publication:

Approved by the Thesis Committee:

Kency Cornejo, Chairperson

Kirsten Buick

Ray Hernandez-Durán

Szu-Han Ho

**ARTS OF RESISTANCE:
ECOLOGIC HISTORY
AND CONTEMPORARY INTERVENTIONS
IN THE VALLEY OF MEXICO**

by

CHLOË COURTNEY

B.A., ART HISTORY, AUBURN UNIVERSITY, 2015

THESIS

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Art History**

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DEDICATION

This work is dedicated to my parents, Louwane and Mark, who taught me to persevere.

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ABSTRACT

This thesis analyzes two contemporary artworks concerning Mexico City's complex socio-ecologic history: the installation *The Return of a Lake* (2012), by Maria Thereza Alves, and the performance *Plan Acalote* (2015) by the collective Plan Acalli (Carlos Huitzil and Ehecatl Morales). Mexico City faces land subsidence, flooding, and water shortages. Systemic power imbalances and ongoing efforts to transform a wetland landscape to a city conforming to Eurocentric ideals concentrate these problems in marginal communities. Using strategies of eco-criticism, decolonial thought, and performance studies, I argue that *The Return of a Lake* and *Plan Acalote* link broad social and ecologic problems with the daily realities of Mexico City's inhabitants, restructure perceptions of urban space, and forge community solidarity, imagining future environmental justice in the Valley of Mexico.

Both artworks connect with local communities, creating reciprocal relationships. I consider how these relationships demonstrate art's capacity to reframe discourses of urbanity and the environment. Further, I analyze *The Return of a Lake*'s use of

indigenous cosmology to connect today's struggle for justice with colonial history. Finally, I address the importance of the bodily experience of urban space, and mourning as a response to environmental devastation. *Plan Acalote* and *The Return of a Lake* demonstrate that when community-based artworks are rooted in networks of solidarity honoring local histories of injustice and resistance, they offer new ways of seeing and thinking about extraction and predatory development in colonized places, and support collective efforts toward environmental justice and local autonomy.

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INTRODUCTION

Mexico City, the largest city in North America, is running out of water. City authorities and national commissions on water have permitted the rampant pollution of the valley's surface and groundwater, and the wasteful loss of up to thirty percent of water resources through aging infrastructure. Rather than fostering the sustainable management of the Valley of Mexico's abundant water resources, Mexico City has instead extracted water from the neighboring regions of Lerma-Chapala and Cutzamala since the mid-twentieth century, thus robbing agrarian communities of their water and causing chronic problems through the overexploitation of their aquifers.¹ The overexploitation of an aquifer can destabilize the earth's subsurface: the impact of earthquakes intensifies, and chasms and sinkholes suddenly appear.² Further, the metropolis outsources its untreated wastewater and sewage to the agrarian Mezquital Valley, polluting its water supply and enforcing chronic socio-economic disparities.³ In this way, social and ecologic consequences of the city's prevailing tendency toward extraction and development fall disproportionately on impoverished, largely indigenous communities.⁴

In her 2007 article considering how the decentralization of water in Mexico has

1. Patricia Romero Lankao, "Decentralización y retiro del Estado: ¿Mecanismos

2. Joel Simon, *Endangered Mexico: An Environment on the Edge*, (San Francisco: The Sierra Club, 1997), 64 –72.

3. Simon, *Endangered Mexico*, 74.

4. Lankao, "Water in Mexico City: what will climate change bring to its history of water-related hazards and vulnerabilities?" *Environment and Urbanization* 22.1 (2010): 63, 166, 169-171.

allowed both the state and the private sector to treat water as an economic good rather than as a collective resource, sociologist Patricia Romero Lankao identifies in Mexico's water policies the lack of any means to hold corporations or government entities accountable for the consequences of pollution or of the coerced, unethical extraction of resources.⁵ With the recent executive decrees of June 2018, which lifted previous bans on the corporate extraction of water from 300 hydrologic systems across Mexico, Mexico City's patterns of extraction from its less-powerful neighbors will likely become a national model. The water systems affected by these executive decrees comprise fifty-five per cent of Mexico's surface water, and are now available for concessions to private, for-profit water distribution companies, mining enterprises and fracking, or manufacturing, for example.⁶ This legislation and its consequences emphasize that the history of water in the Valley of Mexico, from the colonial era until today, is part of a larger context concerning the privatization of collective resources.

The state's perspective toward water as an economic good to be exploited through private concessions today is the most recent iteration of extractive systems that have developed since the conquest of Tenochtitlán, and the Spanish crown's gradual but

5. Lankao, "Decentralización y retiro del Estado," 48.

6. Rubén Martín, "En Medio de Campañas, privatizan el agua," *SinEmbargo*, June 17, 2018, <http://www.sinembargo.mx/17-06-2018/3429702>.

persistent efforts to drain the five enormous lakes that once occupied the valley basin.⁷



Figure 1. *Map of the basin of Mexico circa 1519, at the arrival of the Spanish.* [map]. July 17, 2013. Wikimedia Commons via Christine Niederberger Betton, *Paléo-paysages et archéologie pré-urbaine du Bassin de Mexico*, (Mexico City: Centro de estudios mexicanos y centroamericanos, 2009), 500.
https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Basin_of_Mexico_1519_map-en.svg

7. Simon, *Endangered Mexico*, 68-69.

The Mexica built Tenochtitlán (Mexico City's indigenous predecessor) upon interconnected islands that allowed for intensive agriculture, fishing, and ease of transportation, all of which allowed the sophisticated city to flourish (fig. 1).⁸ Draining the lakes fundamentally altered the ecologic and geologic balance of the Valley of Mexico, resulting in catastrophic problems for Mexico City's unique natural hydraulic system. Confronting this history of serious ecological and social damage and ongoing socio-economic injustice, it is important to ask, what ideologies and belief systems perpetuate the continued exploitation and privatization of collective resources for the accumulation of capital, and at the expense of the communities and ecosystems that depend upon those resources? Further, how can contemporary art make tangible the fundamental patterns that structure the interrelationship between colonization and the present eco-political crises? This thesis examines two contemporary artworks rooted in the Valley of Mexico in order to ascertain art's abilities to restructure the way environmental problems are understood within postcolonial contexts.

Brazilian artist Maria Thereza Alves uses a research-based practice to examine issues surrounding capitalism, indigeneity, and the continued effects of colonization. Over the course of her career, Alves has at times been actively involved in indigenous and environmental politics, and these experiences necessarily inform her practice as a conceptual artist.⁹ Her work has taken the form of video projects, social practice, photography, and sculpture. In 2012, Alves developed the project *The Return of a Lake*,

8. Exequiel Ezcurra, *De las chinampas a la megalopolis: el medio ambiente en la cuenca de México*, (México, DF: Fondo de Cultura Económica, 1990), 28-50.

9. Pedro de Llano, "The Return of Quetzalcóatl," in *El Largo Camino a Xico*, ed. Pedro de Llano, (Berlin: Sternberg Press, 2015), 31-32.

an extensive multi-media installation that was first shown at dOCUMENTA (13). Through text, photographs, newspaper clippings, diagrams, and large-scale three-dimensional dioramas, the installation tells the history of Xico, a community to the southeast of Mexico City, which was once located on an island in the now-desiccated Lake Chalco. Alves developed the exhibition in collaboration with the Museo Comunitario de Xico, an autonomous community museum. By looking closely and actively engaging with the flood of information *The Return of a Lake* presents through varied formats, viewers learn how the Spanish destruction of indigenous hydrologic systems and the eventual desiccation of every lake in the Valley of Mexico continue to shape the present.

Due to the immersive experience of *The Return of a Lake*, the complex history it offers, and its many different visual components, photographic documentation fails to represent it accurately. However, images offer a sense of the variety of visual means the work utilizes. For example, Alves represents Lake Tláhuac-Xico with a large geographic diorama that bridges representation and metaphor (fig. 2). A relatively small body of water, Lake Tláhuac-Xico has recently begun to surface where the much larger Lake Chalco was located until its desiccation in the late nineteenth century.¹⁰ It is this rebirth of Lake Chalco as Lake Tláhuac-Xico that forms the cornerstone of Alves's exhibition. Large, cumbersome pipes extend from the surface of the diorama, symbolizing Mexico City's continual extraction of water from Xico. Draped fabric 'mountains' along the walls recall the unique natural geography of the Valley of Mexico. Meanwhile, a portrait series on the far wall, titled "The Heroes of the Lake," commemorates the many

10. Maria Thereza Alves, *El Regreso de un Lago/The Return of a Lake*, (Cologne: Verlag der Buchhandlung Walther König, 2012).

community members and activists involved in defending the community's rights to clean water and freedom from predatory development (fig. 2).



Figure 2. Installation view, *The Return of a Lake*, Maria Thereza Alves, 2012.

In addition, Alves uses small text panels to connect each of the three dioramas in the exhibition with specific events (fig. 3). These small text panels are part of an alternative chronology of Lake Chalco, which Alves developed through collaboration with the Museo Comunitario, and which ties the diverse elements of the installation together. The chronology deftly traverses the decisions of imperial representatives of the government of New Spain, land grants awarded during the Porfiriato, and the current politics of the metropolis. Taken together, the details the chronology offers demonstrate that Mexico City was produced by and continues to be shaped through ongoing systemic resource

extraction that places the burden of the metropolis's consumption on impoverished communities at the periphery of the city.¹¹



Figure 3. Detail, *The Return of a Lake*, Maria Thereza Alves, 2012. Text panel at center reads: “With no financial government support, but under threats and intimidation, the community museum is able to save almost 5000 indigenous artifacts.”

In 2015, an art collective invested in Mexico City's fraught relationship with water created a performance work that symbolically reactivated Tenochtitlán's sophisticated system of canals. Although the performance addresses the same history as Alves does with *The Return of a Lake*, it takes a much different form. For the performance *Plan Acalote*, Carlos Huitzil and Ehecatl Morales (members of the art collective Plan Acalli) and a team of committed volunteer-participants worked together to haul a fifteen-foot long canoe on a simple wheeled trailer from Xochimilco to the city

11. Maria Thereza Alves, “Chronology of the Former Lake Chalco, the Now-Emerging Lake Tláhuac-Xico and its Surroundings, or the Continuation of Colonization Today,” in *El Regreso de un Lago/The Return of a Lake*, (Cologne: Verlag der Buchhandlung Walther König, 2012), 191-218.



Figure 4. *Plan Acalote*, 2015, Plan Acalli.

center, a journey lasting six days (fig. 4 and 5). The performance followed the path of the now-defunct Canal Nacional, which for centuries facilitated the delivery of corn and other produce from agrarian Xochimilco to the populous center of Tenochtitlán. More importantly, perhaps, the Canal Nacional symbolized the integration of the Valley of Mexico's water system in the urban landscape, and persisted, remaining in use long after most of the canals, lakes, and rivers of the Valley had been drained, re-routed, or severely polluted. Images from the performance strikingly illustrate that the urban growth of Mexico City has now completely swallowed up Xochimilco, along with most of Lake Xochimilco and its remaining canals and *chinampas* (irrigated man-made islands). By recreating the route of the Canal Nacional on foot, *Plan Acalote* destabilizes accepted

understandings of urban space by invoking the lakes and canals that once comprised the structure of the city.



© Maleny Cedillo Inclán

Figure 5. *Plan Acalote*, 2015, *Plan Acalli*. Photograph by Maleny Cedillo Inclán.

It is impossible to understand Mexico's ongoing politics of extraction and their consequences of ecocide, inequity, and environmental racism without a critical vision of Mexico's capitalist power relations. This thesis analyzes *Plan Acalote* and *The Return of a Lake*, asking how these works expose, historicize, and theorize Mexico City's ecological history and socio-economic power structures. Further, what role can art play in confronting environmental crisis? Specifically, what histories and patterns can artwork that is situated in and with communities on the geographic, ecologic, and economic margins of Mexico City illustrate, and what are its limitations? *The Return of a Lake* and *Plan Acalote* use divergent formal languages and strategies, yet both Alves and Plan Acalli argue that entrenched, colonial power structures continue to manifest through the environmental injustices that largely indigenous, impoverished communities of Mexico City encounter daily. This research analyzes the strategies that the artworks employ to

reveal and counter the accepted narratives and structures of power regarding Mexico City's development.

A cornerstone of this investigation is the geographic space of Mexico City, and its regulation and control since the conquest. The possibilities for new ways of seeing and being that *Plan Acalote* and *The Return of a Lake* present challenge us to consider what priorities have shaped the development of Mexico City, and what tensions exist in its current structure. Is it possible to imagine the reemergence of the Valley of Mexico's lakes and canals, if not in full, then in part? Which ideologies and worldviews would be de-centered and which would be prioritized with the re-emergence of these bodies of water? Pursuing these questions will reveal how the current material and economic structures of the city promote the accumulation of capital for the wealthy, at the expense of enormous and often irreparable damage to the environment. How can we imagine the continued cohabitation of humans, plants, and animals in a possible future where drinking water is available, where the aquifers are recharged, and where the physical space allows many species to thrive and develop? Further, is such speculation valuable given the current realities at play in Mexico City? I argue that in posing such questions, these artworks offer alternative ways of thinking and being in space, and destabilize accepted understandings of how a city relates to its natural environs.

In sum, this thesis argues that *The Return of a Lake* and *Plan Acalote* link the large-scale social, political, and ecological consequences of capitalist development with the realities of community members by crafting alternative histories; that these artworks restructure our perceptions of the relationship between urban spaces and their water systems, revealing how experiences of place manifest entrenched power structures; and

finally, that both the performance and the installation knit relationships of reciprocity that imagine a possible future of kinship and solidarity in the Valley of Mexico. Despite the political independence of many previously colonized places, today's post-colonial society is characterized by the persistence of widespread racial inequity, and the continued use of colonized lands, peoples, and nations as a buffer zone for those in power (as dumping grounds for waste, sources of cheap natural resources, and inhabitants of lands prone to flooding or earthquakes.) *The Return of a Lake* and *Plan Acalote* offer new ways of relating to, thinking about, and taking action against these persistent injustices. As such, it is vital to recognize their importance, and to create space for a full consideration of their strategies and their successes, as well as their limitations.

Several different publications have dealt with the works *Plan Acalote* and *The Return of a Lake*, contextualizing them with Mexico City's ecologic history and, in the case of Alves's work, placing it within the larger context of her career and current conversations surrounding art and activism. I build on writings that comment on the recuperative nature of these artworks, and incorporate Donna Haraway's theorization of speculative fabulation as a strategy for transforming ways of thinking and relating.¹² I rely upon and expand several of the arguments presented by writers such as T. J. Demos and Pedro de Llano, who have contributed significant essays on *The Return of a Lake*, and of Sofia Carrillo and Pedro Ortiz, who jointly produced the most significant analysis to date of *Plan Acalote*. In the literature review that follows, I describe key publications,

12. Donna Haraway, *Staying with the Trouble: Making Kin in the Chthulucene*, (Durham, North Carolina: Duke University Press, 2016).

indicate which threads of arguments I will build upon, and enumerate the theoretical works that make my arguments possible.

One of the most significant publications on *The Return of a Lake*, T.J. Demos' essay "*Return of a Lake: Contemporary Art and Political Ecology in Mexico*" locates Alves' work within the larger discourse of political ecology and argues that the project connects colonial and contemporary histories, magnifies a local struggle to reveal its broad relevance, and creates "an aesthetics of resistance".¹³ Demos's arguments about the work provide key support for the conclusions I hope to draw – yet the criticism of capitalist urban logics that I identify in Alves's work is beyond the scope of his essay. Another key response to the installation, by Irmgard Emmelhainz, centers on the work of the Museo Comunitario del Valle de Xico and offers an important reminder that the impact of *The Return of a Lake* extends beyond the material limitations of the exhibition—a reminder that has shaped my thinking on the installation.¹⁴ Further, Pedro de Llano's curatorial essay for the exhibition *The Long Road to Xico* points to the importance of *The Return of a Lake* by positioning it within a retrospective exhibition as a culminating work.¹⁵ However, his essay fails to ask what the installation exhorts of its viewers, or what the structure of Alves's working process implies for the art world. In a

13. T. J. Demos, "*Return of a Lake: Contemporary Art and Political Ecology in Mexico*," in *Maria Thereza Alves: El Retorno de un Lago*, ed. Ekaterina Álvarez Romero, (México, D.F.: MUAC, Museo Universitario Arte Contemporáneo, UNAM, 2014), 33.

14. Irmgard Emmelhainz, "Chronicle of a Visit to the Museo Comunitario del Valle de Xico, Or: Cultural Solidarity in the Globalised Neoliberal Age," *Afterall: A Journal of Art, Context, and Enquiry* 43 (March 2017): 46-57.

15. Pedro de Llano, "The Return of Quetzalcóatl," in *El Largo Camino a Xico*, ed. Pedro de Llano, (Berlin: Sternberg Press, 2015): 31-32.

highly critical response to *The Return of a Lake*, Paloma Checa-Gismero accuses the installation of producing systemic power imbalances for the Museo Comunitario de Xico, specifically when the work was exhibited at the Museo Universitario de Arte Contemporáneo in Mexico City in 2015.¹⁶ I engage Checa-Gismero's criticisms by considering how the narrative and relationships *The Return of a Lake* comprises may present decolonial strategies against Mexico City's harmful extraction of water from outlying communities, despite the institutional failings that continue to perpetuate unjust discrepancies in power and resources.

Many of the reviews and publications addressing *Plan Acalote* are brief descriptions of the context of the project, or interviews giving a general overview of the collective Plan Acalli and its aims. The most significant essay to date, by Sofía Carrillo and Pedro Ortíz, accompanied the exhibition *Traducir en acción: dibujo en proceso*, which featured the performance.¹⁷ Curators Carrillo and Ortiz frame the performance as a collective process utilizing art for the self-representation of a community marked by “the abandonment of a traditional ecosystem and economy.”¹⁸ While their understanding of the performance as a manifestation of larger processes is critical to my argument, their reading of the work stops short of naming the systemic destruction of ecosystems and indigenous ways of living as such, and does not examine how and why ecocide takes

16. Paloma Checa-Gismero, “On *The Return of a Lake*,” *FIELD* 1 (Spring 2015): 281-288.

17. Sofía Carrillo and Pedro Ortiz, “Traducir en acción: dibujo en proceso,” in *Traducir en acción: dibujo en proceso* (México D.F.: Ex Teresa Arte Actual, 2015) 5-10.

18. Carrillo and Ortiz, “Traducir en acción: dibujo en proceso,” 9. Translation mine.

place—questions that *Plan Acalote* demands we ask. While some of the publications describing *Plan Acalote*, and many of those concerning *The Return of a Lake* link entrenched social inequity and ecologic destruction with the exploitation of coloniality, this thesis will build on these arguments to show that beyond making these vital connections, both *Plan Acalote* and *The Return of a Lake* propose transformative understandings of the relationship between the metropolis and the natural environment it occupies. Through collaborative, community-based action, the artworks reimagine the city, its inhabitants, and their histories and lives as being intertwined with the Valley of Mexico's water system in a mutually constitutive interdependence.

In making the argument that *Plan Acalote* and *The Return of a Lake* transform understandings of the relationship between urban space and the earth, and that these works reveal and strengthen the workings of community solidarity, this thesis borrows important premises and methods from decolonial thinkers, ecocritical scholarship, and cultural geography. The work of Aníbal Quijano in uncovering the normalized structures of coloniality allows me to ask how works of contemporary art can help create a critical awareness of the interconnected power structures of ecologic destruction, exploitation, and environmental racism.¹⁹ Close attention to the geographic and ecologic space of Mexico City is central to this research. The concepts I deploy both to understand and to trouble the ties between the space of the Valley of Mexico and the power structures that produce and determine it come from cultural geography and social art history, including James Scott's writings on urban space and modernity and cultural geographer Raymond

19. Aníbal Quijano, "Coloniality and Modernity/Rationality," *Cultural Studies* 21.2 (2007): 168-78.

Craib's concepts of fugitive landscapes.²⁰ Eco-critical discourses are necessarily a cornerstone of this research. In particular, I borrow Donna Haraway's concept of sympoiesis, or making-with, and use her conclusions about the importance of "staying with the trouble" in order to argue for the role of contemporary art in understanding and confronting climate change and its manifold implications.²¹ Finally, this research reflects in-person interviews with Genaro Amaro Altamirano, director of the Museo Comunitario del Valle de Xico, Carlos Huitzil and Ehecatl Morales (the members of the collective Plan Acalli), and conversations with Dionisio Eslava Sandoval, founder of the Civil Association Umbral Axochiatl for the protection and recuperation of the *Zona Chinampera* in Xochimilco,²² Edmundo de la Rosa, founder of the civil association De La Rosa for the protection of the Canal Nacional, and Gerardo Hernández Medina, biologist-turned-geographer specializing in the Valley of Mexico.

The first chapter explains the mechanisms and ideologies surrounding coloniality and its related consequences of environmental crisis. Using Quijano's theorization of coloniality, I describe how the works *Plan Acalote* and *The Return of a Lake* reveal environmental racism and coloniality to be entrenched structures fully integrated with Western capitalist modernity. Furthermore, chapter one asks, what is place-based social practice, and what makes it such an effective tool for revealing and destabilizing

20. James C. Scott, *Seeing Like A State: How Certain Schemes to Improve the Human Condition Have Failed*, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1998) and Raymond B. Craib, *Cartographic Mexico: A History of State Fixations and Fugitive Landscapes* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2004).

21. Haraway, *Staying with the Trouble*.

22. The term "Zona Chinampera" refers collectively to the canals, chinampas, and what remains of Lake Xochimilco.

normative ideologies? Here, I adopt Miwon Kwon's characterizations of place-based social practice to an examination of *Plan Acalote* and *The Return of a Lake*.²³

Chapter two explores the question, what does the lake's emergence offer, and what does it demand? Using Macarena Gómez-Barris's theorization of submerged perspectives, and the history of the control of space and water in the city this chapter analyzes how *The Return of a Lake* interprets Lake Tláhuac-Xico as both an opportunity and a demand, and discusses how the installation reveals coloniality and its accompanying ideologies to be embedded in the physical structure of the city.²⁴ In addition, chapter two draws from Donna Haraway's concept of symplectis to consider how *The Return of a Lake* adapts indigenous narratives surrounding the land to forge a collaboration with the landscape.²⁵

In chapter three, I explore the journey that comprises *Plan Acalote*, and how it works to counteract some of the ideologies encoded in Mexico City's structure by evoking and materializing an alternative cultural memory. Here, I understand cultural memory to refer to the set of shared referents, values, beliefs, and memory of a "commonly inhabited and similarly experienced past" particular to specific groups, and which structure the organization of an individual's memory and understandings of self.²⁶

23. Miwon Kwon, *One Place After Another: site-specific art and locational identity*, (Cambridge, Massachusetts: The MIT Press, 2002).

24. Macarena Gómez-Barris, *The Extractive Zone: Social Ecologies and Decolonial Perspectives*, (Durham: Duke University Press, 2017).

25. Haraway, *Staying with the Trouble*.

26. Jens Brockmeier, "Remembering and Forgetting: Narrative as Cultural Memory," *Culture & Psychology* 8, no. 1 (2002): 18, 23-26.

Using performance studies scholar Diana Taylor's understanding of embodied memory and how it can be activated by place, chapter three argues that *Plan Acalote*'s presence in the streets of Mexico City stakes a firm political claim. I also draw from Ursula K. Le Guin's Carrier Bag Theory of Fiction to explore the significance of the canoe, and finally, address the role of mourning in this performance.²⁷ The conclusion returns to contemporary art's importance as a strategy for turning toward a future less imperiled by a continued politics of extraction and the threats of climate change: art not only has the power to expose the structures of coloniality and capitalism, but also to imagine in place of these structures a possible shared future by weaving connections of solidarity and reciprocity with humans and the earth.

27. Ursula K. Le Guin, "The Carrier Bag Theory of Fiction," in *The Ecocriticism Reader: Landmarks in Literary Ecology*, ed. Cheryll Glotfelty and Harold Fromm (Athens, Georgia: University of Georgia Press, 1996), 149-154.

CHAPTER 1: The Floating Capital: remembering the history of water in the Valley of México through *Plan Acalote* and *The Return of a Lake*

For six days in October of 2015, Carlos Huitzil, Ehecatl Morales, and a small group of supporters clustered around an *acalli*, a low, flat, wooden canoe, heaving it forward along crowded avenues (fig. 4). One person stood in the canoe, steering with a long pole in order to keep a straight course, as if the canoe were floating on water instead of rolling across asphalt. *Plan Acalote* brought the canoe into a realm usually dominated by cars and buses, intentionally disrupting the city's traffic patterns. Huitzil and Morales embrace the notion of the canoe as a means to disrupt the ever-present and naturalized systems of urban modernity. The canoe and its parade of supporters symbolically proclaim, there once was water here, and fish, and frogs, and reeds. It demands of viewers, do you remember the water?

This chapter explores the history of water and its regulation in Mexico City, considering how *Plan Acalote* and *The Return of a Lake* embody and activate these histories. In order to understand how *Plan Acalote* and *The Return of a Lake* operate and why the alternative histories they offer are important, the first section delves into Peruvian sociologist Aníbal Quijano's theory of coloniality. I argue that both the performance and installation show coloniality to be a shaping force behind the social and economic fabric of contemporary society. In the second section, I examine some of the prevailing doubts about social practice and community-based art, considering whether such works generate reciprocal solidarity, and if, in doing so, they also unintentionally exploit or disempower marginalized communities. This inquiry is vital to the overall argument of the chapter, since it would be impossible to claim that *Plan Acalote* and *The Return of a Lake* decolonize systems of thought without also asking whether their format

and execution are exploitative. Finally, this chapter considers the strategies the artworks employ to confront entrenched power structures.

Section I: Waterlogged Memories: the history of water in the Valley of Mexico through *Plan Acalote* and *The Return of a Lake*

Diego Rivera's 1945 mural *La Gran Tenochtitlán*, commissioned for the National Palace in Mexico City, shows a panoramic view of the city in its uppermost register. The broad horizons and atmospheric perspective provide a sharp contrast and necessary visual relief from the mass of figures in the foreground (fig. 6). Causeways, tree-lined fields, and populous urban neighborhoods appear to float in the expansive lake system of the Valley of Mexico. In Rivera's imagining of Tenochtitlán before the conquest, the city seems interminable and beautiful. Calm waters dotted with canoes interlace the urban grid. Rivera's rendering of the city aligns with Spanish soldier Bernal Díaz del Castillo's famous account:

And when we saw all those cities and villages built in the water, and other great towns on dry land, and that straight and level causeway leading to Mexico [Tenochtitlán], we were astounded. These great towns and cues [temples] and buildings rising from the water, all made of stone, seemed like an enchanted vision...²⁸

Ecologist Ezequiel Ezcurra describes the systems of water control that made Tenochtitlán's high population density possible, noting that the use of *chinampas* provided carefully controlled irrigation and fertilization. *Chinampas* are irrigated fields constructed either by cutting canals into a narrow strip of land abutting a body of water so that water can seep into the earth from all sides, or by piling mud and sediment from the lake bottom onto beds of reeds until enough earth accumulates to support crops. Both

28. Bernal Díaz del Castillo, *The Discovery and Conquest of Mexico 1517–1521*, trans. Alfred Percival Maudslay, (Cambridge, MA: De Capo Press, 2004), 269.



Figure 6. *La Gran Tenochtitlán*, Diego Rivera, 1945, Palacio Nacional de México.

methods made use of the lake's nutrient-rich sedimentation. Canals also facilitated travel and the transportation of produce. Cities grew up from naturally occurring islands, such as Tenochtitlán, Tlatelolco, and Xico, which were eventually connected by causeways. Ezcurra notes that toward the end of the fifteenth century, "the population of the basin reached one-and-a-half-million inhabitants, distributed among more than one hundred towns," making the basin the largest and most densely populated urban region on the planet.²⁹ Spring water arrived by aqueduct from Chapultepec in the west and Churubusco in the east, and a system of dikes prevented the lake waters from flooding Tenochtitlán.³⁰

Post-contact writings, such as Díaz del Castillo's, that describe the Valley of Mexico in Edenic language geared toward European imaginings of paradise, in fact belie the complex social and ecologic history of the region. Under the Mexica Empire, an oligarchic hierarchy regulated power and wealth, requiring tribute from subjugated

29. Exequiel Ezcurra, *De las chinampas a la megalópolis: el medio ambiente en la cuenca de México*, (México, DF: Fondo de Cultura Económica, 1990), 35.

30. Ezcurra, *De las chinampas*, 36.

towns. The system of intensive cultivation practiced in the chinampas was an adaptation to a much earlier environmental crisis: nearly seven thousand years earlier, during the late Pleistocene, when human populations were growing across the Americas, large mammals including mammoths, mastodons, horses, and camels suddenly went extinct.³¹ Then, approximately two thousand years before the rise of the Mexica, small game became too scarce for reliable sustenance, prompting the domestication of maize and other crops.³² Therefore, the system of chinampas and the importance of maize, beans, squash, and chile as staple nutrients did not represent a people in perfect harmony with the forces of nature. Rather, human modifications to the Valley of Mexico already constituted an intensive management of its ecologic resources, engineered to provide crucial nutrients for the upkeep of a sophisticated and powerful hierarchical society.³³ French geographer Alain Musset writes that the Valley of Mexico owed as much to the mechanisms established by the indigenous populations to control the water levels of the lakes as it did to its unique geography.³⁴ While the pre-conquest Valley of Mexico was far from undeveloped, the structure of Tenochtitlán left space for and anticipated seasonal changes

31. Due to their extinction 10,000 years earlier, when horses arrived with the conquest they were completely unknown in the Americas, and had consequential effects on the ecological balance. See also Robert L. Kelly and Mary M. Prasciunas, "Did the Ancestors of Native Americans Cause Animal Extinctions in Late-Pleistocene North America? And Does It Matter If They Did?" in *Native Americans and the Environment: Perspectives on the Ecological Indian*, ed. Michael Harkin and David Rich Lewis (Lincoln, Nebraska: University of Nebraska Press, 2007), 97-98.

32. Simon, *Endangered Mexico*, 8.

33. Ibid.

34. Alain Musset, "De Tlaloc a Hippocrate: l'eau et l'organisation de l'espace dans le bassin de Mexico (XVIe-XVIIIe siècle)," *Annales. Histoire, Sciences Sociales* 46e année no. 2 (1991): 273.

in water levels, and for the continual replenishing of the underground aquifers.

Following the conquest, the Spanish *conquistadores* and *peninsulares* who descended upon central Mexico found themselves to possess a level of power unprecedented in the history of Spanish exploration, partly because of the hierarchical organization and sophisticated administrative infrastructure of the Mexica. This systemic power, coupled with the European perspective on the environment, prompted the *Desagüe*, or desiccation, of the basin's lakes. It was this major alteration to the landscape that eventually brought about water scarcity, seismic instability, and other environmental factors that contribute to the structural inequalities that characterize the city today.

The desiccation of the Valley of Mexico's lakes exemplifies the workings of coloniality, the ideological system of hierarchical power relations that made possible the European occupation of the Americas and continues to shape events and landscapes across the hemisphere. Understanding the history of Mexico City as one example of this broader system both allows for a more robust analysis of *Plan Acalote* and *The Return of a Lake* and reveals their broader hemispheric contexts. Peruvian sociologist Aníbal Quijano defines coloniality as a global system comprised of two major axes. The first is the construct of race, which is systemically and continually asserted to justify the oppression of colonized peoples in the Americas, Africa, and Asia. The second axis is the coordinated control of labor, resources, and products worldwide.³⁵ The coordination of all forms of labor to produce for a global market with its epicenter in Western Europe was unprecedented before the conquest. Further, it was the influx of silver and gold from the Americas which allowed for, in Quijano's words, "the monetization of the world

35. Quijano, "Coloniality and Modernity/Rationality," 534.

market,” and thus, the global coordination and allocation of all labor, resources and products for the benefit of a small number of European elites.³⁶

Along with its massive impacts on labor, capital, and their organization along constructed racial hierarchies, coloniality is also entwined with knowledge production. The empirical models of knowledge that began to develop in Europe during the renaissance, and which evolved into the ideological foundations for modernity, arose from European violence in the Americas and their efforts to control colonized places and peoples. Empirical thinking and the development of academies to foster and regulate knowledge are products of the European desire to categorize, name, surveil, and dominate the peoples, mineral resources, animals, and plants of the so-called “New World.”³⁷ Scientific ideals and research, along with religious missions, often justified violent coercion and the expropriation of resources and lands. These systems of thought, including the constructs of race and gender, form the ideological backbone of coloniality that supports all of its material manifestations. All told, coloniality is the system of power relations that made global capitalism, and in turn, modernity, possible, and which further affects every level of existence, including identity, knowledge, gender and sex, the nation-state, and perceptions of time and space. Coloniality continues to ramify because the basic power structures of race, gender, and Eurocentrism, and their implications for the control of capital, remain unchanged.³⁸ *The Return of a Lake* and *Plan Acalote* both

36. Quijano, “Coloniality and Modernity/Rationality,” 537.

37. Raymond Corbey, “Ethnographic Showcases, 1870-1930,” *Cultural Anthropology* 8, no. 3 (1993): 338-69.

38. Quijano, “Coloniality and Modernity/Rationality,” 550-556.

identify and deconstruct such power systems, linking economic and ecologic injustices today with the long histories and pervasive ideologies of coloniality. As the following paragraphs and chapters address the artworks and the history of Mexico City's water in more detailed terms, I will return to the ideological underpinnings of coloniality and its close linkages with dominant Western European understandings of knowledge.

The Spanish conception of space began to undo the lacustrine structure of Tenochtitlán from the conquest forward. During Cortés's invasion of the city, his troops filled in many of the canals to allow the cavalry easier access to the city.³⁹ Further, the Spanish destroyed the aqueducts to weaken the city by eliminating its source of fresh water.⁴⁰ After the conquest, European draft animals began to populate the city, and their waste, combined with that of the human population, began to contaminate the waters of the canals. Rather than transporting waste by canoe away from the city, to be used as fertilizer and tanning agents, as the Mexica had done, the Spanish treated the canals as an open sewer system.⁴¹ In the frank words of Maria Thereza Alves, "The Spanish arrived and began to shit in the lakes and rivers."⁴² Problems with flooding occurred repeatedly throughout the sixteenth century, and seemed to confirm the European view that shallow, standing water, such as the lakes and wetlands of the Valley of Mexico, were necessarily fetid and disease-ridden. Musset traces these negative associations with lakes back to the

39. Musset, "De Tlaloc a Hippocrate," 279.

40. Simon, *Endangered Mexico*, 64.

41. Musset, "De Tlaloc a Hippocrate," 279.

42. Maria Thereza Alves, "Chronology of the Former Lake Chalco, the Now-Emerging Lake Tláhuac-Xico and its Surroundings, or the Continuation of Colonization Today," 191-218.

Aristotelian thinking on the properties of water, which continued to influence European knowledge systems in the sixteenth century.⁴³ However, the flooding and disease associated with the lakes in the post-contact period were in fact due to the Spanish invaders' inability to maintain the Mexica hydrologic systems.⁴⁴

Despite the conflicting Spanish and indigenous perceptions of the Valley of Mexico's lakes, the canals of the city remained an important element of daily commerce until the late-nineteenth century, when the draining of the valley was fully realized. Musset goes as far as to assert that the decision to drain the valley was, in part, a strategy to unseat the de facto indigenous monopoly on transportation in the basin. As long as a substantial portion of the canal system remained, transportation by canal was incredibly efficient, and these spaces had persisted as largely indigenous, both culturally and economically. The completion of the Desagüe ultimately made way for the installation of railroads that allowed for the business of moving commercial goods to be controlled by the social and racial elites of the city.⁴⁵ Colonial hierarchies of race, then, played an important role in determining the city's structure. Musset summarizes the situation by asserting that the Desagüe was an economic and cultural choice as much as it was a technical solution to the problem of flooding. In other words, the desiccation of the lakes was not a necessary condition for the continued growth or survival of Mexico City. Extending Musset's conclusions, I maintain that the transformation of Mexico City from a city of canals and islands to an urbanity favoring draft animals (and later, cars) was a

43. Musset, "De Tlaloc a Hippocrate."

44. *Ibid.*, 273-274.

45. *Ibid.*, 278.

move to ‘civilize’ and regulate both the unfamiliar watery materiality of the city and, importantly, the indigenous knowledge systems, networks of communication, and economies integrated with the space itself.

Since the late-nineteenth century, the Mexican state has advocated for industrialization and modernization as the path to national power and status. In his monograph on the history of state cartography in Mexico, historian Raymond Craib characterizes the Porfirian desire to survey and record all land holdings as a means to “spur agricultural development, foreign investment, colonization, and commercial production for the international market,” all part of a nationalist fervor for Mexico to conform to the ideals of western modernity.⁴⁶ In particular, Craib considers how the production of maps reflected the state’s desire to pin down mutable property lines and standardize the complex local practices of managing space and labor; practices which were often illegible to outsiders. As Craib shows in connection with the mapping efforts of the Comisión Geográfico-Exploradora, longstanding communal land holdings were made available to investors and entrepreneurs in order to foster development. The state advocated the transition from *ejidos*, or communally worked lands, to private property with sole ownership. If indigenous communities could not provide documentation for their occupation of lands, or could not determine its boundaries to the satisfaction of the Comisión, their property came under the threat of expropriation.⁴⁷ In addition to the displacement of communities, industrial expansion and its attendant exponential urban

46. Craib, *Cartographic Mexico*, 164.

47. See Craib’s discussion of the division and apportionment of Yaqui lands under Porfirio Díaz, 164-167.

growth also caused irreparable water pollution. The effects of this environmental damage have been largely concentrated in marginalized indigenous communities.⁴⁸ *The Return of a Lake* interrogates these systemic injustices through their specific iterations in the community of Chalco. Despite a byzantine history of dispossession, relocation, and corporate involvement in Chalco, Alves's book and installation clearly explain the individuals, governmental decisions, and local politics that have contributed to ongoing exploitation and oppression in Chalco from colonization to the present.

Alves's installation and book (also named *The Return of a Lake*) present her expansive research, which foregrounds Íñigo Noriega Laso, a Spaniard who emigrated to Mexico in 1867 and put his wealth to work installing railroads, establishing large agricultural operations, ranching, and acquiring land through corrupt negotiations that dispossessed whole villages.⁴⁹ Most notably, he drained Lake Chalco, destroying the livelihoods of the communities along its shores and on its islands. Alves uses a flood of information to demonstrate the extent of Noriega's exploitation, cataloguing all the towns negatively affected by his enterprises; the many companies he owned or had a share in; wells, springs, and rivers he appropriated; hectares of lands he usurped; his agricultural yields and profits; number of people displaced; haciendas under his control; and the disasters and ecocides he caused, such as the deliberate flooding of lands and crops, the contamination of canals and flooding of neighborhoods with raw sewage, and the

48. Simon, *Endangered Mexico*, 72-76.

49. Alves, *The Return of a Lake*, 213.

conversion of rivers into drainage for industrial waste.⁵⁰

After Noriega, the characters in this pattern of exploitation change, but the patterns themselves continue. Alves traces the blatant crimes of real estate development companies like the Ara consortium, which, under contract to build government-subsidized housing, has built shoddy developments on the unstable floodplains of Chalco lacking proper plumbing and sewage treatment infrastructure, and which place residents at risk for displacement and waterborne illness due to flooding. The alternative history also documents the high prices charged by for-profit water delivery companies who deliver bottled water to the communities not served by municipal water infrastructure. Photographs show the model units of the Ara housing development surrounded by water, the illegal dumping of construction waste, and raw sewage flowing through an open-air canal.⁵¹ During heavy rains, untreated sewage washes through the streets, causing dangerous health risks.⁵²

In the exhibition, this information is integrated with dioramas of the Valley of Chalco, a display showing how *chinampas* functioned, news clippings revealing the effects of land subsidence (the sinking of the subsoil), and portraits of community members collectively deemed “Heroes of the Lake.” In the book *The Return of a Lake*, such information is presented in chapters with titles that blatantly reject any comparison with academic research, such as “Shit and the Spaniards and the Canal from Hell (also

50. Maria Thereza Alves, “Some Things That Íñigo Owned (Or Took By Force),” in *El Regreso de un Lago/The Return of a Lake*, (Cologne: Verlag der Buchhandlung Walther König, 2012): 56-60.

51. *Ibid.*, 157-161.

52. María de los Ángeles Velasco, “Se filtran aguas negras en Chalco,” *Imagen Radio*, May 25, 2012, <http://www.imagenradio.com.mx/se-filtran-aguas-negras-en-chalco>

known as the Río de la Compañía)” or “Íñigo Noriega was Not a Good Man and was Bad to His Workers.”⁵³ These pointed chapter titles serve to shape the overwhelming amount of data, research, and anecdotes. They cut through the preponderance of facts, events, and supporting data to create an overarching narrative of capitalist exploitation.

Today, Xico and Chalco comprise one of the poorest regions of Mexico City. Due to the extraction of water from Chalco’s aquifers for consumption in the federal district, the region has been highly subject to land subsidence—the sinking of the subsoil downward into the space once occupied by subterranean water. This sinking makes the region extremely prone to flooding, and also has caused sinkholes and chasms to open.⁵⁴ In 2009, a kilometer-long crack in the earth appeared in San Martín Cuautlalpan after a sewage canal flooded its barriers. The crack, which was up to three meters wide and five meters deep, affected dozens of families living in newly constructed, government-subsidized housing divisions near Chalco. Families were displaced from their homes, and struggled to lobby the developer for safe housing.⁵⁵

The prevalence of industrial waste in the region is another legacy of Íñigo Noriega. The precarious housing conditions, untreated sewage, and industrial waste prevalent in Chalco all reflect an underlying system of environmental racism, which concentrates health hazards in neighborhoods populated primarily by impoverished,

53. Alves, “Íñigo Noriega was Not a Good Man and was Bad to His Workers,” in *El Regreso de un Lago/The Return of a Lake*, (Cologne: Verlag der Buchhandlung Walther König, 2012): 67-70.

54. Simon, *Endangered Mexico*, 88.

55. René Ramón, “Amenaza grieta decenas de viviendas en Chalco,” *La Jornada en línea*, June 3, 2009, <http://www.jornada.unam.mx/2009/06/03/estados/032n1est>

largely indigenous people. Meanwhile, the wealthy metropolis benefits from inexpensive water extracted from Chalco's aquifer, and infrastructure that carries sewage away and keeps industrial waste confined to the outskirts of the city. The social and ecologic disasters continuing to happen in Chalco are not anomalies that fall outside the pattern of relative wealth that characterizes Mexico City. Rather, Chalco and its exploitation are what invisibly and silently make the wealth and prestige of the metropolis possible.

Although *The Return of a Lake* involves the extensive research of Alves and her collaborators at the Community Museum of the Valley of Xico, the installation transcends the bounds of research, going so far as to imagine consequences for past violence and to enact symbolic justice. Importantly, Alves centers the emergent Lake Tláhuac-Xico as the lynchpin of the installation. Lake Tlahuac-Xico is a new body of water emerging in Chalco due to land subsidence. Alves prioritizes the geographic space of the lake: a large diorama of it enables viewers to specifically locate the histories the installation reveals, but also makes the lake and the community of Chalco physically present within the institutional spaces where *The Return of a Lake* has been shown, asserting its existence and importance (fig. 2).⁵⁶ Alves notes that although the lake is polluted, its waters are within the range considered safe for irrigation, and many species of migratory birds have returned to the lake. By centering this emergent lake, Alves and the Museo Comunitario displace the Western, linear model of forward-thrusting progress and development. The lake has returned unexpectedly, despite Noriega's efforts to

56. *The Return of a Lake* was shown in 2012 at DOCUMENTA 13, and in 2014 at the Museo Universitario de Arte Contemporáneo in Mexico City. The work was partially exhibited in Albuquerque, New Mexico in 2017 as part of the group exhibition *Decolonizing Nature*.

eradicate it. Its return demonstrates that continued exploitation, both environmental and social, can elicit strong, counteractive results. Although its emergence has caused problems for many, again bringing the threat of a loss of livelihood to Chalco, it also offers a new opportunity to live with water in a reciprocal relationship.

In several instances, *The Return of a Lake* imagines justice for the Valley of Xico. Critic T. J. Demos has argued that the installation's depiction of Noriega surrounded by flames avenges Lake Chalco and its communities, delivering "a form of socio-environmental and political justice."⁵⁷ Additionally, during *The Return of a Lake*'s



Figure 7. *Íñigo in Flames*, Maria Thereza Alves, wall maquette, 2012.

exhibition at dOCUMENTA 13, Alves and Genaro Amaro Altamirano, the director of Xico's community museum and self-appointed chronicler of the region visited the Museum of Emigration in Colombres, Spain, which lauds Íñigo Noriega as a great entrepreneur. Alves reports that this institution even celebrates the desiccation of Lake

57. T. J. Demos, "Return of a Lake: Contemporary Art and Political Ecology in Mexico," in *Maria Thereza Alves: El Retorno de un Lago*, ed. Ekaterina Álvarez Romero, (México, D.F.: MUAC, Museo Universitario Arte Contemporáneo, UNAM, 2014), 35.

Chalco as an important feat of engineering in one of its informational pamphlets.⁵⁸

Altamirano personally presented a copy of the book *The Return of a Lake* to Santiago González Romero, the museum's director, symbolically returning the consequences of Noriega's actions to their point of origin, just as the lake had returned to the valley.⁵⁹

Altamirano's presentation of the book is weighted with symbolism.⁶⁰ The book itself is a collective document, representing the research, interviews, and writings of various activists from Xico. Further, this encounter between Altamirano and González, with Altamirano symbolically representing Xico, and González representing Spain, was fraught with historical context. The official meeting between the two parties, and the exchange of a gift, seems to recapitulate and parody the colonial encounter: instead of the Spaniard arriving in Mexico and bringing Christianity to the natives, Altamirano visits González and presents him with a new kind of book that could potentially change the museum director's worldview and way of thinking and acting. Like the *conquistadores* upon their arrival in the Americas, Altamirano arrived to González with a mission of evangelization.

Performance studies scholar Diana Taylor theorizes scenarios such as this one as “portable framework[s]” that offer characters, a scene, and thus, “[make] visible, yet

58. Alves, *El Regreso de un Lago/The Return of a Lake*, 7, 9.

59. Maria Thereza Alves, “From the Core of the Earth,” in *Maria Thereza Alves: The Return of a Lake*, ed. Ekaterina Álvarez Romero (México, D.F.: Museo Universitario Arte Contemporáneo, UNAM, 2014): 11.

60. *Ibid.*, 28.

again, what is already there.”⁶¹ She argues that the scenario of the colonial encounter—the moment when the “discoverer” first lays eyes on the “natives”—is built into Western culture and consciousness. According to Taylor, this scenario has been enacted, re-enacted, referenced, and re-performed countless times. While the reference to the colonial encounter is not, perhaps, immediately clear in the symbolic action of Altamirano’s presentation of a book to González, the fact that *The Return of the Lake* reveals coloniality through alternative histories and makes efforts toward recuperative justice, as well as the intentionality with which Alves photographed and framed this action suggest that this is indeed in conversation with the already-existing cultural framework of the colonial encounter. As Taylor argues, the formulaic structure and predictability of the colonial encounter scenario allows “for reversal, parody, and change.”⁶² Confronting the Museum of Emigration with the book thus derails the way coloniality masquerades under legitimizing terms such as progress, development, and modernity.

Section II: Problems and possibilities of place-based social practice

In arguing that *The Return of a Lake* and *Plan Acalote* transform ways of thinking and work against the ongoing consequences of coloniality for the city and its interconnected natural environment, it is important to consider the community-based structure of the works. This section examines the relationships between the artists and the communities in which they work, and also considers the institutions involved in these projects, and the extent to which they dictate the power relationships at play. When *The*

61. Diana Taylor, *The Archive and the Repertoire: Performing Cultural Memory in the Americas*, (Durham: Duke University Press, 2003), 28.

62. Taylor, *The Archive and the Repertoire*, 31.

Return of a Lake was exhibited at MUAC, Mexico City's Museo Universitario de Arte Contemporaneo, reviewer Paloma Checa-Gismero identified a moral problem in the relationship between the large university museum and the small, volunteer-based museum in Xico. Her review documents the Museo Comunitario's campaign to raise funds through MUAC's network when the municipal government of Xico unexpectedly threatened the small museum with eviction from their premises. Checa-Gismero indicated that MUAC's failure to assist the Museo Comunitario in fundraising or in safely housing its collection of pre-Hispanic artifacts all but overshadowed *The Return of a Lake's* supposed signification of a shared struggle against social and environmental exploitation.⁶³ In other words, MUAC was willing to work with the Museo Comunitario when their local struggle provided the content for a compelling exhibition, but not when the smaller institution requested MUAC's solidarity through material resources.

Reviewing instances such as this, when *The Return of a Lake* and *Plan Acalote* fall short of establishing meaningful solidarity with their constituent communities—and potentially slip into exploitative relationships—allows for a consideration of whether such problems negate the meaning of the works. Do problems with the works' ability to generate community-based relationships of solidarity reflect a fundamental flaw within the strategies of place-based social practice? How do *Plan Acalote* and *The Return of a Lake's* missteps inflect their decolonial intentions? And how does exploring these questions offer a more nuanced understanding of Checa-Gismero's criticisms of *The Return of a Lake*?

63. Paloma Checa-Gismero, "On *The Return of a Lake*. MUAC, Mexico City, August-November 2014," *FIELD: a journal of socially engaged art criticism* 1 (Spring 2015): 281-288.

In her book *One Place After Another*, Miwon Kwon traces the growth of community-based art, including the tensions between its avant-garde beginnings and its incorporation by institutions. She notes an important reimagining of the notion of site, once considered the physical and spatial characteristics of a place, to include “consideration of the various systems of power, ideologies, and economies that inform the places and stages of art.”⁶⁴ Related to this is the development of new genre public art, defined as “the ephemeral processes of interaction between the local participants and the artists.”⁶⁵ In Kwon’s view, new genre public art frequently overstates the “unity” of a group in order to produce a “mythic” community. She also observes that artists may choose to work with a well-defined community merely because it is expedient for the artist and her or his vision for a project, without achieving a true collaboration.⁶⁶ Further, Kwon notes the concern of other scholars, such as that of Hal Foster, who fear that artists coming into communities unwittingly adopt the stance of an anthropologist and exoticize already marginalized groups. For Kwon, the notion of community is the crux of the problem. She argues that treating “community” as a “discrete social formation” is reductive and homogenizing. Instead, we should think of community as “a complex relational process” of constructing and reconstructing identity.⁶⁷ In response, she proposes a collective artistic praxis, as an alternative to “community-based” art. Although *Plan Acalote* and *The Return of a Lake* sometimes conform to the problems Kwon notes,

64. Kwon, *One Place After Another*, 3.

65. *Ibid.*, 104.

66. *Ibid.*, 120-137.

67. *Ibid.*, 148.

they also exemplify in different ways the collective artistic praxis she imagines, generating dialogue while avoiding the trap of constructing a mythically united community.

The collaborative structure of *Plan Acalote* began with the driving motivation behind the collective Plan Acalli. Carlos Huitzil and Ehecatl Morales formed the collective in 2014 out of a joint desire to intentionally inhabit the lacustrine space of Xochimilco through the quotidian experiences of living there, as well as through research and praxis on the canals and chinampas, with a commitment to collaborate on artworks rooted in this experience. Morales's desire to connect with this space in an intentional way comes from his identity as an indigenous Xochimilca—he is descended from the cultural and ethnic group that has populated the village since before the conquest. Huitzil, on the other hand, became fascinated with the canals and chinampas after moving to Xochimilco from the urban center of Mexico City. Morales cultivates his own chinampa, travels the canals to sell *pulque* (a beverage made from maguey), and also fosters awareness of the social and ecologic history of Xochimilco through art workshops for children. Huitzil has been involved as a committed volunteer at the Asociación Civil Umbral Axochiotl, where he has worked with a team to transform a disused chinampa into a community space called the Environmental Education Chinampa (fig. 8).⁶⁸

The performance *Plan Acalote* grew out of a dialogue between the artists and Sofía Carrillo and Pedro Ortíz, former curators at Ex-Teresa Arte Actual, an exhibition space committed to supporting contemporary performance art. In conversation with Huitzil and Morales, the four hatched the idea of hauling a canoe from Xochimilco to

68. Interview with Carlos Huitzil and Ehecatl Morales conducted in August 2017.



Figure 8. Chinampa de Educación Ambiental, photograph by Carlos Huitzil, 2017.

Ex-Teresa Arte Actual's exhibition space in the historic center of Mexico City. The artists also decided to incorporate meetings and interviews with community organizations, which expanded the histories, places, and memories that condensed around the performance. Since the artists and curators decided on the framework of the performance before involving other groups, they consequently limited the extent to which community members were able to shape the structure of the performance, or to determine its meaning. In fact, *Plan Acalote* exemplifies Kwon's observation that community-based art often features a community focused on a well-defined issue that can easily satisfy a

particular vision for a project. In this case, the idea of a journey across the city fit well within the curatorial program of Ex-Teresa and especially for the exhibition *Traducir en acción: dibujo en proceso* (*Translate to action: drawing in process*). However, does the influence of the curators and the fact that the structure of the performance served their interests mean that this work was exploitative toward Xochimilco or toward those who participated in the action? Given the way that Xochimilco has been exoticized in the past, and that *Plan Acalote* worked against that exoticization to create a meaningful forum for the concerns of farmers, scholars, and activists connected with the canals and chinampas, it seems the involvement of Ortiz and Carrillo and the way the performance brought together different audiences actually contributed toward a network of solidarity rather than exploiting the knowledge and investment of Xochimilco's communities.

Many of those who know of Xochimilco know it as a tourist zone, a place for leisurely Sunday afternoons, when families hire a painted *trajinera* (a boat designed to accommodate large groups) to float them through the canals, complete with a band to accompany their enjoyment of drinks and a picnic basket (fig. 9). Because of its popularity as a tourist destination, Xochimilco has been classified a “Pueblo Mágico,” a “Magic Village,” an appellation administered by the Office of the Secretary of Tourism to locales that are deemed to have “symbolic attributes, legends, history, transcendent events, daily life; in sum, magic that shines through each socio-cultural manifestation...”⁶⁹ I contend that imagining Xochimilco as a “magic” place of history,

69. “Programa Pueblos Mágicos,” Acciones y Programas, Secretaría de Turismo, January 1, 2016, <https://www.gob.mx/sectur/acciones-y-programas/programa-pueblos-magicos>.

legends and symbolism constructs it as a relic of a bucolic bygone era, removed from its current political realities.

In her critiques of museum practices, anthropologist Shelly Errington has shown that the construct of primitivism, and its association with a distant past, can have dangerous consequences, invalidating the present existence and concerns of those classified as “primitive.” Similarly, naming Xochimilco a “Pueblo Mágico” effaces the knowledge systems of cultivation, water management, and political history necessary for the stewardship of the canals. If tourists perceive the chinampas and canals as magical or ancient, then it becomes possible to enjoy the scenery while avoiding any concern for the political and socio-economic problems the *chinamperos* face (chinamperos are those who cultivate crops and maintain the canals and chinampas.) Advertising that emphasizes Xochimilco as a place of leisure also undermines the activism of groups working to maintain the space not as a tourist zone, but as a community focused on revitalization



Figure 9. “Xochimilco,” Vive CDMX, accessed November 28, 2017, <http://www.cdmx.gob.mx/vive-cdmx/post/xochimilco>

through sustainable agricultural practices, because it invites the institution of policies and practices that ignore Xochimilco's ecologic and agricultural foundations.⁷⁰

Furthermore, the survival of canals and canoes in one limited part of Mexico City makes the urban structure of roads, cars, and public transit seem inevitable by comparison, as if they were the only civilized option. By creating a strong association between canoes and Xochimilco, the tourist industry erases the fact that the vast majority of the area that is now Mexico City was built of chinampas and canals. The lake environment was not an oddity present in one small region, but was instead an extensive, interconnected system spanning the entire valley, including the densely populated urban centers.⁷¹ Thus, by tying Mexican cultural memory of canals and chinampas to Xochimilco (and only Xochimilco), the tourist trade elides the previous extent and importance of the canals. Huitzil and Morales's labor-intensive act of performing the journey from Xochimilco to the *Zócalo* by canoe actively changes the primary signification of Xochimilco (the *Zócalo* is the historic center of Mexico City.) With the arrival in the *Zócalo* of a canoe and a group of people who know the histories of water

70. For example, in the 1980s, African tilapia were intentionally introduced into Xochimilco's canal systems in what is believed to have been an under-informed governmental project that aimed to promote fishing in the canals. While this decision might have supported ideas of Xochimilco as a place of leisure, it has had deleterious consequences. The invasive tilapias eat the native and culturally symbolic *ajolotes* (amphibious creatures endemic to Lake Xochimilco and Lake Chalco), and have almost wiped them out. Moreover, the invasive fish lay their eggs in the roots that support the chinampas, causing chronic erosion. See Luis Zambrano, Gemma Abisay Ortiz Haro and Karen Levy Gálvez, "El axolote como especie bandera en Xochimilco," in *Bioindicadores: guardians de nuestro future ambiental*, ed. César Alberto González Zuarth et al. (México, D.F.: Instituto Nacional de Ecología y Cambio Climático, 2014), 428.

71. Vera Candiani, *Dreaming of Dry Land: Environmental Transformation in Colonial Mexico City*, (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2014): 23-25.

and canals, Xochimilco is no longer a quaint tourist attraction, but instead becomes a provocation; a place where the knowledge of how to prepare the soil, plant, reap, and row has survived, like a seed; a place from which questions about the water and the aquifer spring.

Since *Plan Acalote* invokes and reactivates the eco-social system of chinampas and those who care for them, it might risk constructing the community of *chinamperos*, rowers, activists, scientists, and others who live in Xochimilco as a “discrete social formation,” which, as Kwon warns, would obscure the complex and ongoing relational processes that a community entails.⁷² The community concerned with preserving the lacustrine history, economies, and ecologies of the basin includes dozens of organizations, activists, workers, students, and scholars, all with differing perspectives and backgrounds. With Kwon’s framework in mind, the distinct limits of *Plan Acalote*, neatly defined over six days and unfolding along a pre-determined path, seem to efface the heterogeneous nature of this community. The structure of the performance prioritizes Xochimilco and the center of Tenochtitlán as starting and ending points, entrenching their symbolic associations as agricultural and metropolitan centers, respectively, while seemingly leaving out the histories of canals and water in other regions of the city.

However, on closer examination, *Plan Acalote* extends beyond the linear parameters defined by the curators and by Ex-Teresa Arte Actual: a journey from Xochimilco to the Zócalo, confined to six days to coincide with the opening of the exhibition *Traducir en acción: dibujo en proceso*. In fact, because Huitzil and Morales connected with several different community organizations and many different activists,

72. Kwon, *One Place After Another*, 148.

the performance planted the seeds for a network of solidarity and a collective praxis that continues today. It is possible to glimpse this network through the documentary of the performance, which Miguel Ángel García and Omar Aguilar Ruedas of the video production collective Ruta 3000 produced.⁷³ This film gives a sense of the extent and variety of the communities that claim a strong connection to the Valley of Mexico's lakes and canals, and of their histories—beyond the much-discussed relationship that connected Xochimilco and Tenochtitlán. For example, an interview with María de los Ángeles Sánchez Díaz of Iztacalco reveals the particularities of her community and her strong self-identification with it:

I'm descended from the pre-hispanic inhabitants of the town Iztacalco, of the neighborhood Santiago Sur. Iztacalco is a pre-hispanic town. According to the Codex Chimalpahin, they settled here before Tenochtitlán, in the year of Xecalli...It was a very important place...They grew produce, but above all, poppies...They were the most beautiful flower ever to exist.⁷⁴

Sánchez-Díaz's recounting of Iztacalco's establishment prior to that of Tenochtitlán establishes a history independent of the imperial center, while her description of the poppies grown there points to an autochthonous mythos of Iztacalco. Interviews with community representatives of Santa María Tomatlán, Culhuacán, and Tetepilco, each with particular histories related to the canals and chinampas, convey both the extent and the variety of communities, histories, spaces, and memories of the Valley of Mexico's eco-social environment and its colonized aftermath.

Beyond Morales and Huitzil's experiences of connecting with many different

73. *Plan Acalote*, the documentary by Miguel Ángel García and Omar Aguilar Ruedas is available for viewing by appointment at the Centro de Documentación at Ex-Teresa Arte Actual. Morales and Huitzil have also organized several public screenings.

74. Interview between Miguel Ángel García and María de los Ángeles Sánchez Díaz, recorded in the documentary *Plan Acalote*, time stamp 44:25. Translation mine.

communities during and through the performance itself, some of these connections have developed into reciprocal, generative relationships. For example, the artists have become allies of the Fundación Lopez de la Rosa, which protects and maintains a small stretch of the Canal Nacional, organizing public education and programming to promote the enjoyment of an urban nature preserve (fig. 10). When Morales and Huitzil connected with the organization in the planning process for *Plan Acalote*, they decided to collaborate on a mural project for the canal. As of this writing, Huitzil has developed and executed a small mural in collaboration with the foundation titled *El Vuelo de las Garzas*, and is continuing the artistic exchange with the Fundación Lopez de la Rosa through ongoing plans for a larger mural project (fig. 11). Additionally, Plan Acalli continues to coordinate *derivadas lacustres*, collective experiences of the canals and chinampas, which give writers, biologists, filmmakers and artists interested in the social, political and

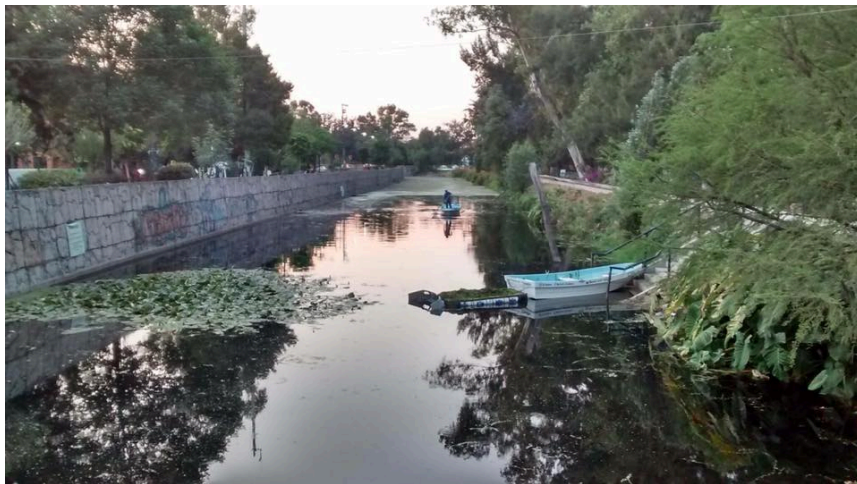


Figure 10. Image showing the stretch of the National Canal the Fundación Lopez de la Rosa has adopted and cleaned of trash and invasive plants. Due to the work of the Fundación Lopez de la Rosa, the National Canal was declared an Open Air Monument in 2012.



Figure 11. *El Vuelo de Las Garzas*, Carlos Huitzil, 2016, located at the Canal Nacional, La Colonia Valle del Sur, Ciudad de México.

ecologic particularities of the *Zona Chinampera* the opportunity to come together for an experience of the lacustrine environment and to their share work and ask questions.

Rather than merely creating a fascination with Xochimilco’s visual and sensorial charms, as the “Pueblo Mágico” tourism campaign attempts to do, Plan Acalli’s *derivas lacustres* invest visitors with the firsthand knowledge that the well-being of Mexico City as a whole relies upon the ecologic health of Xochimilco, since it is an integral part of the larger water system of the Valley of Mexico. By inviting people into the community of scientists, artists, and writers committed to studying and defending Xochimilco, the *derivas lacustres* create a sense of personal responsibility toward the space. In several ways, then, *Plan Acalote* and its continuations build a collective praxis rooted in dialogue.

In the case of *The Return of a Lake*, Alves could be criticized for speaking on behalf of a community of which she is not a part, or indeed, for choosing a community centered around a particular issue in order to achieve her vision for the project, where, in Kwon's words, the community itself "seems to perform a relatively incidental role."⁷⁵ This could seem to be the case with one particular component of *The Return of a Lake*: the creation of a chinampa in Tláhuac, which Alves framed as an important and regenerating aspect of the project, but which offered relatively little for the volunteers from the Museo Comunitario del Valle de Xico who worked and cultivated the chinampa.⁷⁶ What *The Return of a Lake* did accomplish is a prominent and continued reciprocity between Alves and the museum, demonstrating the kind of inclusive and dialogic collective artistic praxis which Kwon advocates. This reciprocity is central to the structure of *The Return of the Lake*. Further, the international success of the installation and the Museo Comunitario's active role in the project have resulted in its collaboration with other institutions, exhibitions, and artists—projects which respect the museum's authority as a repository for Xico's histories and the social and ecologic knowledges they imply.

At every turn, *The Return of a Lake* affirms Genaro Amaro Altamirano, Mariana Huerta, and other museum members to be authorities on the history, geography, and

75. Kwon, *One Place After Another*, 124.

76. In an interview with Genaro Amaro Altamirano on August 8, 2017, he explained that the volunteers who maintained the chinampa were already familiar with the cultivation techniques, and no visitors came to see the site, so this component of *The Return of a Lake* did not provide many learning opportunities. Altamirano and his team respected the process of cultivating the chinampas within Alves's conceptual vision, but to him, it was not an important part of the exhibition.

political struggle of Xico. Notably, Alves includes the museum as a key player in the alternative chronology of Xico that forms the heart of both the installation and the book. The installation features prominent portraits of the key activists, researchers, and museum organizers of Xico, which Alves collectively titles “The Heroes of the Lake” (fig. 12). These portraits function as efficacious representations, invoking the physical and bodily presence of the community members they depict. Finally, the collaboration between



Figure 12. Installation view, “The Heroes of the Lake” photograph series, *The Return of a Lake*, Maria Thereza Alves, 2012.

Alves and the Museo Comunitario has been a generative relationship. In the wake of the exhibition of *The Return of a Lake* at dOCUMENTA, the Museo Comunitario collaborated with a Mexico City-based curatorial collective, de_sitio, to produce an installation of the museum’s work for the 2015 Biennial of the Americas.⁷⁷ Other beneficial institutional relationships have also resulted from the collaboration between the Museo Comunitario and Maria Thereza Alves, such as an ongoing relationship with the Museo Tamayo in Mexico City.⁷⁸ This foundation of reciprocity between Alves and the museum is essential to the installation’s success as an example of a collective praxis that

77. “Biennial of the Americas: Artists Announced for 2015 Biennial,” Announcements, e-flux, posted May 18, 2015, <https://www.e-flux.com/announcements/29514/artists-announced-for-2015-biennial/>.

78. Interview with Genaro Amaro Altamirano conducted July 11, 2017.

transcends the problematic structure of temporary place-based project coordinated by an artist from outside the community in question.

After publishing the previously discussed response to *The Return of a Lake*, which criticized MUAC's lack of solidarity with the Museo Comunitario, Paloma Checa-Gismero returned to consider the installation again. In an essay published in the fall of 2017, which surveys several of Alves's works from across the length of her career, Checa-Gismero seems to revise her original criticisms, offering an analysis of Alves's work that separates the artist's intentions from the actions and inactions of institutions and their culpability.⁷⁹ In this analysis of the structures of power at large in the art world, she writes that the "conditions of an art world whose institutions replicate and naturalize the uneven distribution of wealth...is hostile and deactivating for any attempt at criticism, despite artists' well-crafted and well-intentioned efforts."⁸⁰ In this way, Checa-Gismero redirects her earlier criticisms, allowing space for the validity and critical perspective of Alves's work, despite the institutional inaction and lack of solidarity that have affected both Alves and the Museo Comunitario. While *The Return of a Lake* and *Plan Acalote* seek to question normalized logics, break them down, and imagine new alternatives, the institutions that exhibit these works operate within and according to the very power structures the artists are attempting to dismantle.

The histories and memories that *Plan Acalote* and *The Return of a Lake* make visible speak to the long roots of today's socio-environmental injustices in Mexico City. The works implicate the processes of urban growth, industrial development, the rise of

79. Paloma Checa-Gismero, "Realism in the Work of Maria Thereza Alves," *Afterall: A Journal of Art, Context and Enquiry* 44 (Fall 2017): 54-63.

80. Checa-Gismero, "Realism in the Work of Maria Thereza Alves," 59.

monoculture, and state hydrologic engineering, revealing these normalized processes to be interconnected and mutually reinforcing in their consistent disenfranchisement of indigenous and marginalized communities, and in their persistent profitability for elites and foreign corporations. Additionally, in drawing attention to the lived reality of Mexico City, these works push viewers to perceive the ramifications of coloniality and extractive capitalism as immediate, tangible, and ongoing. Although both works conform to some of the pitfalls common to community-based art, the space they open for ongoing dialogue makes it possible to imagine a lived reality against and in spite of the dominant systems of extractive capitalism. The next chapter further theorizes how the artworks contribute to new ways of thinking about urban space, including our responsibilities toward the natural environments with which our lives and cities are intermingled.

CHAPTER 2: The Emerging Perspective of Lake Tláhuac-Xico

The ongoing resource extraction and predatory development in the southeastern peripheries of Mexico City seem to make a future of environmental and economic justice highly unlikely, if not impossible. Because of land subsidence caused by the overexploitation of the aquifer, as well as torrential rains and runoff from sewage and industrial processes, Lake Tláhuac-Xico emerged around 1988 when water began to collect in one portion of the old lakebed of Lake Chalco. What was once Lake Chalco, one of the five interconnected lakes that characterized the Valley of Mexico before the conquest, has reemerged as Lake Tláhuac-Xico, a much smaller body of water but an important presence nonetheless. Although contaminated with sewage and debris, the lake's murky waters offer a space for thinking and living counter to the extractive capitalism of coloniality.

This chapter considers how Alves and the Museo Comunitario have theorized the lake's re-emergence within the contexts of indigenous epistemologies. Using the ideas offered by theorists Macarena Gómez-Barris and Donna Haraway, I analyze Alves and the Museo Comunitario's co-fabulation with Lake Tláhuac Xico, focusing on the three large dioramas that anchor the installation: the models of Lake Tláhuac-Xico, of the Cerro de Xico, and of the Río de la Compañía Canal. I argue that both Alves and the Museo Comunitario de Xico have theorized the lake's emergence within the framework of preexisting, indigenous knowledge of Chalco, relying on a collaborative method of speculative fabulation to spin stories of multi-species survival and resistance.

In her groundbreaking study of the South American extractive zone, social scientist and cultural studies thinker Macarena Gómez-Barris develops the concept of

“submerged perspectives,” considering muck and mud as sources for both biologic and creative growth. The concept of “submerged perspectives” stems from Gómez-Barris’s argument that it is not sufficient to enumerate and analyze the destructive results of coloniality, race, and capitalism. Doing so, she says, “ignores life that...finds forms of resisting and living alternatively.”⁸¹ Further, thinking of catastrophic social and environmental destruction as a possible future outcome of today’s power systems is a white, Western version of reality, since for many indigenous and Afro-descended peoples “the paradigm of ‘no future’ has already taken place and we are now on the other side of colonial catastrophe.”⁸² Gómez-Barris finds “submerged perspectives” in the “transitional and intangible spaces” that allow for a proliferation of life beyond the grasp, control and sight of extractive capitalism, often despite their location within zones of extraction.⁸³

Lake Tláhuac-Xico, like the “transitional and intangible” geographies Gómez-Barris theorizes, represents an unexpected and uncontrolled consequence of capitalist extraction from Chalco’s aquifers. As the work of the Museo Comunitario de Xico and *The Return of a Lake* demonstrate, the recent emergence of Lake Tláhuac-Xico also signifies the unfolding of new possibilities for the Valle de Chalco communities. Despite its commercial exploitation and despoliation, we can understand the lake, as well as the people and researchers who protect it, as a place of submerged perspectives.

81. Macarena Gómez-Barris, *The Extractive Zone: Social Ecologies and Decolonial Perspectives*, (Durham: Duke University Press, 2017), 3.

82. Gómez-Barris, *The Extractive Zone*, 4.

83. *Ibid.*, 12.

The generative energy Lake Tláhuac-Xico evokes from communities of Chalco exemplifies *sympoiesis*, a productive interrelationship Donna Haraway defines as the making that occurs not in isolation, but rather “in relation to an open system of tangled connections”; a making-with, becoming-with, and rendering capable, to borrow some of her flexible language for describing the way communities and cultures of reciprocal solidarity come to be.⁸⁴ Haraway theorizes that all existence and self-awareness is relational, and that the thoughts of humans are only possible because of the many species of plants, insects, animals and more who populate the earth, living intimately with humans. Despite the ongoing destruction wrought by extractive systems, many plants, animals, and people continue to survive and thrive, speaking and acting from their submerged perspectives. *The Return of a Lake* amplifies the voices of Lake Tláhuac-Xico and its supporter-collaborators, creating a new narrative of resistance.

Section I: Voices of the Land and Water: Memory and Resistance in Xico

Lake Chalco’s reemergence as Lake Tláhuac-Xico brings real risk to its neighbors. The emergence of the lake could cause further flooding and land subsidence, threatening some eighty thousand inhabitants living in surrounding low-lying neighborhoods. These dangers have drawn the attention of institutions such as the Center for Geosciences at UNAM, which has determined that the major underlying problem is the extraction of water from the Valle de Chalco aquifer.⁸⁵ Building from this conclusion, the potential floods that Lake Tláhuac-Xico represents are, in fact, a continuation of all

84. Haraway, *Staying with the Trouble*, 33.

85. Francisco Mejía, “Resurge lago en Chalco y pone en riesgo a 80 mil,” *Milenio Diario*, May 1, 2015.

the floods that have taken place in the Valley of Mexico since the destruction of the indigenous hydraulic system in the sixteenth century. Vera Candiani, in her monographic study of the early years of the Desagüe and its relationship to colonization and nation-building writes of the Valley of Mexico, “the literally fluid nature of the relationship between water and land was an obstacle to the penetration of private property and capitalist social forms and modes of production and actually quite favorable to autonomous and communal forms.”⁸⁶ Since the conquest, however, projects to control the flow of water and to treat it as property that can be owned have worked to eliminate the fluid relationship between land, water, and society that Candiani identifies. They are not always fully successful: as she explains, the state’s complex waterworks have never achieved the absence of flooding, but only the absence of the lakes themselves.⁸⁷

Nevertheless, projects such as the draining of Lake Chalco, or the extraction of water from Lerma-Chapala have still resulted in profits for private investors and power for the state, respectively. Moreover, by extracting water from less-powerful, agrarian communities, or denying them access to water by draining wetlands or polluting rivers, state and private projects violently terminate agrarian communities’ collective use of water and their relationship to it. With the 2018 legislation permitting concessions for private industry, such expropriation is likely to become even more common across Mexico.

Central to Alves’s conception of Lake Tláhuac-Xico as a space of resistance is

86. Vera Candiani, *Dreaming of Dry Land: Environmental Transformation in Colonial Mexico City*, (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2014): 12.

87. Candiani, *Dreaming of Dry Land*, 3.

the way that the water evades and subverts the ongoing attempts of developers and the state to control it. The top-down mode of seeing practiced by nation-states necessarily abstracts the complexity of any society or ecology, potentially giving the impression that only the spaces controlled by the state and corporations exist.⁸⁸ But, as historian and geographer Raymond Craib has shown, land use and practices can differ significantly from what is visible in state documents and records.⁸⁹ As is true of Lake Tláhuac-Xico, sometimes the physical characteristics of the terrain itself make it impossible for the powers that be to measure, quantify, and fix the landscape. Despite the continual exploitation of the Valle de Chalco, Lake Tláhuac-Xico has emerged as a space not fully controlled from above, but instead produced by the intersecting and varied capabilities of geologic and biologic forces, local community members, state policies and corporations, as well as autochthonous Nahuatl myths and ways of understanding society. Far from being idealist about the possibility of returning to a fully lacustrine way of living, Alves and the Museo Comunitario have theorized the lake's emergence in a way that nevertheless imagines the possibility of living within the strictures of the extractive zone without giving one's tacit assent to its politics of coloniality.

The connection between Xico's cosmologies and its topography and lakes far predates Alves's installation, and examining that connection provides a richer understanding for how *The Return of a Lake* functions in dialogue with the specific cultural identity of Xico. A prehistoric volcanic eruption caused the formation of the

88. James C. Scott, *Seeing Like A State: How Certain Schemes to Improve the Human Condition Have Failed*, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1998), 22-24.

89. Raymond Craib, *Cartographic Mexico: A History of State Fixations and Fugitive Landscapes*, (Durham: Duke University Press, 2004).

island of Xico in the middle of Lake Chalco.⁹⁰ The strikingly round shape of the volcanic crater, known today as the Cerro de Xico, gives the island its name: Xico means “navel” in Nahuatl, and the glyph for Xico materializes the importance of the crater’s shape.⁹¹ Figure 13, a satellite image, reveals that the round crater is still a prominent feature of the landscape, providing a barrier from encroaching housing developments. In this image, the crater almost appears as if it were a symbol inscribed



Figure 13. Cerro de Xico, the volcanic crater. Google maps image, 2018.

into the surface of the earth. The glyph for Xico, depicted in figure 14, replicates this bird’s eye view of the crater, and emphasizes its volcanic origins, but also evokes the

90. Leticia Torres Gutiérrez, Carlos Martínez Benítez, and Genaro Amaro Altamirano, “El Problema del Agua en Xico: El Lago de Chalco Desaparece,” *Cuadernos de Historia del Valle de Xico*, No. 20., 12. Reprinted in *El Regreso de un Lago/The Return of a Lake* (Köln: Verlag der Buchhandlung Walther König, 2012): 116-127.

91. Genaro Amaro Altamirano, “Por los Senderos del Tiempo: Los Orígenes de Xico,” *Cuadernos de Historia del Valle de Xico*, No. 3. (Ciudad Xico: Museo Comunitario del Valle de Xico, 2007), 8. Reprinted in *El Regreso de un Lago/The Return of a Lake* (Köln: Verlag der Buchhandlung Walther König, 2012): 82-96.

human body with a suggestion of an umbilical cord. The glyph's layered meanings visualize an ontology of regeneration as embodied in the intimate connections between humans and their natural environment. Thus, the round basin of the crater, once located in the middle of Lake Chalco, informs not only the modes of agriculture and production in the Valle de Chalco, but also the cosmology, origin stories, and cultural identity of the place. With *The Return of a Lake*, Alves repeats and reflects the already-established relationship among community identity, cultural memory, and land.

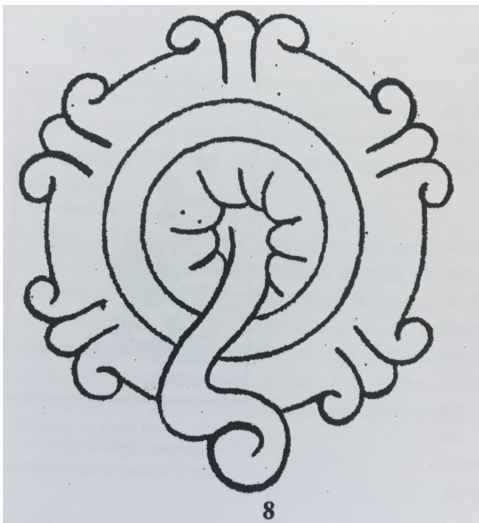


Figure 14. Nahua glyph for Xico, from “Por Los Senderos del Tiempo: Los Orígenes de Xico,” *Cuadernos de Historia del Valle de Xico*, No. 3. 2nd Ed. (Ciudad Xico: Museo Comunitario del Valle de Xico, May 2007), 8. Reproduced in *El Regreso de un Lago/The Return of a Lake* (Köln: Verlag der Buchhandlung Walther König, 2012): 82-97.

As previously discussed in chapter one, the Valley of Mexico is physically embedded with the history of the conquest. The Spanish invaders used the destruction of the Templo Mayor, the cosmologic heart of Tenochtitlán, to symbolize the end of the old order. The construction of the Spanish religious and administrative complex on the exact site of the Templo Mayor, and with stones quarried from the Aztec temples and buildings, further reinforced this transfer of power. Performance-studies scholar Diana

Taylor summarizes the complex field of power relationships and memory manifested in Mexico City's physical structure, writing that the city "functions as the mental and material space providing a framework for individual and collective memory. The buildings and architectural layout remind even the most distracted passerby that this space is a violently practiced place."⁹² Xico, too, is a "violently practiced place," a place where the material experience of being present there is a constant reminder that the structure of development has reinforced the unequal distribution of power. Its violent post-contact history still reverberates in local cultural memory. One particular manifestation of the structural inequalities that plague the physical space of Xico is the Río de la Compañía canal, a focus of *The Return of a Lake*.

Alves's maquette of the Río de la Compañía canal depicts a long tube of repugnant sludge, with small houses crowded into the margins on either side. The diorama shows foam and dark water swirling in the canal (fig. 15). As Alves describes, the Compañía canal was once a natural river, but after the conquest, it became part of the Spanish system for sending sewage and wastewater to the former lake Texcoco. In 1900, Spanish industrialist and developer Íñigo Noriega diverted the Compañía canal to drain Lake Chalco, carrying its waters out of the Valley of Mexico as part of the general desagüe.⁹³

92. Diana Taylor, *The Archive and the Repertoire: Performing Cultural Memory in the Americas*, (Durham: Duke University Press, 2003), 82.

93. Maria Thereza Alves, "Mierda, Los Españoles y el Canal del Infierno* (También Conocido Como Río de La Compañía)," in *El Regreso de un Lago/The Return of a Lake*, ed. Alves (Köln: Verlag der Buchhandlung Walther König, 2012), 44-50.

The canal is still in operation today, carrying untreated sewage, industrial runoff, and rainwater into the Mezquital Valley, where it eventually makes its way to the gulf of Mexico. Alves tracks the multiple instances when the waters of the canal have breached its walls, causing the untreated sewage to flood densely populated neighborhoods, damaging homes and infrastructure, and bearing gastrointestinal, skin, and other diseases.



Figure 15. Maquette of the Río de la Compañía Canal, Maria Thereza Alves. On view at DOCUMENTA, at the Ottoneum. Photograph by Dr. Gerard Haupt and Pat Binder.

Small texts along the length of the maquette commemorate these disasters, enumerating the estimated number of people affected by each instance of flooding. In her words, “Shit and water continue to mix liberally; a Spanish legacy.”⁹⁴

The canal is a reminder of the original Lake Chalco, since the canal’s initial purpose was to eliminate the lake entirely, laying bare fertile farmland for Noriega’s

94. Alves, “Mierda, Los Españoles, y el Canal del Infierno,” 48.

burgeoning venture. The viaduct's continuing status as an environmental hazard shows that Mexico City's transformation has consistently disenfranchised poor and indigenous populations, who encounter daily the paradoxical but connected problems of a lack of affordable, clean water, and a perpetual risk of flooding. Thus, the canal, like volcano and the emerging lake, forms a key node in the network of stories and relationships Alves presents. Where the diorama of the volcano of Xico acknowledges the pre-hispanic origins and identity of the Valley of Chalco, and the model of Lake Tláhuac-Xico imagines possible futures of collaborative multispecies flourishing, the canal, a long stream of contaminated sludge, represents the ongoing cycle of coloniality and the repeated infliction of the colonial wound. Fresh rainwater and lake water become a means to carry away excrement and industrial waste, simultaneously contaminating usable water and sending hazardous pollution downstream, to become another community's problem.

By giving the canal a large physical presence within the installation, Alves tempers her hopeful theorization of Lake Tláhuac-Xico's emergence as a space for resistance. The maquette of the canal contemplates and memorializes the dangerous risks of life in the Valley of Chalco. Drawing attention to the real risks this canal brings, Alves expands how her installation operates. Viewers must gather information from text placards, the installation's accompanying book, and news clippings, educating themselves regarding the status of water in Xico. The continued risks of flooding, contamination, and disease associated with the Río de la Compañía canal demonstrates that the Museo Comunitario's interest in promoting a local awareness of Xico's history is not only to preserve cultural identity, but also to raise consciousness about the still-unfolding ramifications of early twentieth-century instances of environmental racism.

Although Chalco is sometimes assumed to be a squatter community due to its rapid development over the last forty years and its lack of adequate infrastructure, the work of the Museo Comunitario and *The Return of a Lake* reveal the area's long history as an important pre-Columbian community. Alves's use of a diorama representing the Río de la Compañía Canal, in particular, makes a connection between the once-fertile region and its state of abject pollution today. Further, the symbolic connection between the shape of the volcanic Cerro de Xico, the human navel, and the Nahuatl glyph for 'Xico' unseats the division of nature and culture so fundamental to the Western-European empirical thinking that is entwined with coloniality. The idea of bridging the separation between the natural environment and human culture to create a layered understanding of our society will be important in the section that follows.

Section II: Imagining Quetzalcóatl: the role of sympoiesis in *The Return of a Lake*

An important component of *The Return of a Lake* is the maquette of the Cerro de Xico, the volcanic island once located in Lake Chalco. As I will show, with this part of the installation, Alves adapts a legend of the god Quetzalcóatl's entry into the volcano, and transforms the local myth into a generative way of understanding the return of Lake Tláhuac-Xico. As curator Pedro de Llano relays, Alves's inclusion of the serpent god reflects the legend that Quetzalcóatl sought refuge in the mouth of the volcano after a military defeat.⁹⁵ In Nahuatl chronicler de Alva Ixtlilxóchitl's account of the story,

95. For a post-contact account of Quetzalcóatl's refuge in the volcano of Xico, see Fernando de Alva Ixtlilxóchitl, "Quinta Relación: De los Reyes Tultecas y de su destrucción," in *Obras Históricas de Don Fernando de Alva Ixtlilxóchitl*, ed. by Alfredo Chavero (Mexico City: Oficina Tip. de la Secretaria de Fomento, 1891), 54-55.

Quetzalcóatl leaves Xico after a few days' respite, promising to return in 512 years to seek revenge on his enemies. However, de Alva Ixtlilxóchitl notes also that some believe Quetzalcóatl never left Xico. I argue that Alves's dialogic incorporation of this story frames the water and land of Xico as powerful sources of cosmologic wisdom that refuse to concede to the physical constraints of urban development.

In his essay for Alves's retrospective exhibition *El Largo Camino a Xico*, de Llano emphasizes Alves's use of Quetzalcóatl as a figure for restorative justice, asserting that the feathered serpent god "is a sign indicating the birth of a new consciousness and a different way of narrating history."⁹⁶ In this curatorial interpretation of *The Return of a Lake*, the metaphor of Quetzalcóatl's return is a central symbol for resistance to coloniality. Indeed, the visually dense form of the serpent god dominates the space of the installation, emerging from the maquette of the volcano of Xico to form a vertical axis that links earthly, material space with larger cosmologic forces (fig. 16). I extend de Llano's thinking and argue that Alves's adoption of the story of Quetzalcóatl as a framing device for the emergence of the lake functions sympoietically, connecting the newly-emerged lake with the existing myths and cultural knowledge around water, land, and emergence in Xico, as well as with the many actors (both historical and contemporary) who have affected and continue to affect, interpret, and utilize the lake.

With the essay title "The Return of Quetzalcóatl," de Llano invokes weighty Mesoamerican cosmology originating with the Toltecs and later adopted by the Mexica, yet his analysis of Alves's use of Quetzalcóatl in the exhibition is scant—an inappropriate oversight given that the oppression of indigenous epistemologies has been

96. de Llano, "The Return of Quetzalcóatl," 40.

central to the functioning of coloniality. Scholar of religion David Carrasco explains that for six successive capitals in and near the Valley of Mexico, Quetzalcóatl functioned



Figure 16. Installation view, *The Return of a Lake*, Maria Thereza Alves, 2012.

as a symbol of legitimacy, appearing on temple complexes and palaces to establish the authority of the ruler and the ideal urban form of the capital city, and the connection between the earthly ruler and the divine.⁹⁷ Yet Carrasco also shows that because of Quetzalcóatl’s abandonment of his throne and promise of a later return, the deity also “contained the promise of disjunction, collapse, and abdication of order and authority,” all of which played a role in the repeating cycles of prosperity and then destruction.⁹⁸ Before returning to Alves’s use of the deity in conjunction with the volcano and the lake,

97. David Carrasco, *Quetzalcóatl and the Irony of Empire: Myths and Prophecies in the Aztec Tradition* (Boulder: University Press of Colorado, 2000), 8.

98. Carrasco, *Quetzalcóatl and the Irony of Empire*, 5, 178.

let us briefly consider some of Carrasco's conclusions.

The invasion of the Spanish brought chaos and confusion. Coincidentally, cataclysmic chaos had also been prophesied to accompany the return of Quetzalcóatl. Carrasco utilizes accounts of Moctezuma's gift-giving and speeches to Cortés to argue that the expectation of Quetzalcóatl's return, coupled with entrenched Aztec anxieties over their status as relative newcomers in the Valley of Mexico both contributed to Moctezuma's defeat.⁹⁹ While the certainty of Moctezuma's identification of Cortés with Quetzalcóatl continues to be debated in the field, with some scholars arguing that the prophesy of Quetzalcóatl's return was a Spanish invention to gain legitimacy in the Valley of Mexico, the longstanding association between the arrival of Cortés and the expected return of the feathered serpent deity is too significant to be ignored. Because of the cultural associations between Cortés's arrival and Quetzalcóatl's return, de Llano's use of the phrase "The Return of Quetzalcóatl" evokes the moment of colonization—an association which he fails to address directly, and which confuses the issue. Although coloniality has long been a central theme of Alves's work, her use of Quetzalcóatl in *The Return of a Lake* aims to draw attention to the possibilities unfolding in the present, rather than repeating the tropes of the colonial encounter. Instead, Alves's inclusion of Quetzalcóatl in the installation draws upon the deity's ability to provoke a fundamental questioning of the current socio-political order's legitimacy.

In Alves's imagining of Quetzalcóatl, the god appears as a massive serpent emerging triumphantly from the mouth of the volcano of Xico—a much different image than the one de Alva Ixtlilxóchitl provides of a defeated deity sneaking out of hiding to

99. Ibid., 202-204.

gather his few remaining vassals and embark on a long exile.¹⁰⁰ Visually, Quetzalcóatl marks the volcano as a significant place, fortifying the image of Xico as the navel of the universe and a source of life and power. Carrasco's exegesis of Quetzalcóatl's symbolism and importance in various Mesoamerican societies reveals that the deity's power lays in the potential of a return, and importantly, what such a return implies for any current social and political order.¹⁰¹ He argues that although Quetzalcóatl is aligned with the ruling classes and the creation of a legitimate ruler, the serpent god also contains the promise of the eventual failure of governing power structures. Following Alves's imaginative inclusion of Quetzalcóatl, along with Carrasco's insights, it seems that what the arrival of Lake Tláhuac-Xico makes possible is not a return to pre-Hispanic society, but rather, a radical de-legitimization of the current regimes of extraction and profit. The unexpected and uncontrollable emergence of the lake, like Quetzalcóatl, symbolizes and materializes the ongoing resistance of activists and community members in Xico, questioning the legitimacy and viability of the current order and demanding a change in authority. The lake's unstoppable resistance to being drained away—despite centuries of hydraulic engineering projects—suggests that societal structure and our perspective toward the earth and its resources should reflect the shared wisdom of those communities who have long been stewards or cultivators of particular environment, rather than resulting from top-down decisions motivated by economic incentives and not a concern for or knowledge of the earth and its systems.

Similar to Quetzalcóatl's potential to question established regimes, the emergence

100. de Alva Ixtlilxóchitl, "Quinta Relación," 55.

101. Carrasco, *Quetzalcóatl and the Irony of Empire*, 161-178.

of Lake Tláhuac-Xico is a turning point, and thus, is not a utopic or entirely benign event. As mentioned previously, it brings grave risks to many. Carrasco describes the portentous flooding that befell Tenochtitlán before Cortés’s invasion, explaining “Here the waters of sustenance have become the waters of chaos which break in upon the structures of the city and begin to engulf it.”¹⁰² Similarly, Alves’s installation avoids idealizing the lake, and instead carefully enumerates the possibilities of flooding and the spread of contaminants. These potential disasters constitute a grave threat to the communities of Xico. However, the presence of Quetzalcóatl gives this potential chaos a different meaning: Alves and the Museo Comunitario frame the emergence of the lake, coupled with Quetzalcóatl’s ability to question and topple power regimes, as a catalyst for a turn toward interspecies sympoiesis, becoming and thriving together with the water and land, and broadening the cracks in the capitalist system. Returning to Gómez-Barris’s framework of submerged perspectives, the lake’s persistent existence, and its impacts on, with, and through the community of Xico disrupts patterns of thought and writing which ignore the “forms of resisting and living alternatively” already in practice by those for whom ecologic destruction and straitened circumstances are a reality and not a threatening prediction.¹⁰³

Contrary to the urban structure’s tendency to centralize all economic and cultural capital, restricting access along class and racial lines, *The Return of a Lake* supports the decentering of economic and cultural resources. The work is a virtual network of relationships, histories, and sites in the Valle de Chalco, including the crater of the Xico

102. Carrasco, *Quetzalcóatl and the Irony of Empire*, 190.

103. Gómez-Barris, *The Extractive Zone*, 1-16.

Volcano, Lake Tláhuac-Xico, and the Museo Comunitario del Valle de Xico. The network includes poetry and origin stories from Chalco, chinampas and a knowledge of lacustrine culture, Iñigo Noriega's hacienda and the memories of the community elders who worked there, down to the migratory birds that visit Lake Tláhuac-Xico. The installation invites the viewer to enter into this network, but does not amass the cultural power of the Valley of Chalco into one single object, nor does it attribute the network of voices and stories to a single authority figure. Instead, Alves carefully and intentionally uses her position of power within the art world to direct attention to the substantial efforts built by and for the communities of Chalco. Similarly, the structure of the installation mirrors the network of relationships that the dioramas, information, newspaper clippings, and photographs collectively signify: viewers must construct a narrative and draw conclusions from multiple sources, voices, and media.

One of the Museo Comunitario del Valle de Xico's publications discusses the emergence of Lake Tláhuac-Xico as a result of the memory that water carries with it. Not so easily could Iñigo Noriega's drainage system keep the old lakebed of Lake Chalco dry and available for farming and predatory development (both during Noriega's day and continuing today with the shoddy subdivisions of the ARA consortium.) The ancient lakebeds and rivers make themselves known, for "the rainfall and runoff, and the residual waters of human activity, insist in occupying the spaces that they occupied for millennia..."¹⁰⁴ The water retains an embodied memory of the large lakes that once filled the basin of the Valley of Mexico, despite all the changes that have happened to the land.

104. Leticia Torres Gutiérrez et al., "El Problema del Agua en Xico (El Lago de Chalco Desaparece)," 21.

The installation furthers the strength of the water, supporting its memory of the Valley of Mexico through collaborative practice. Together with the ongoing work of the Museo Comunitario del Valle de Xico, and *The Return of a Lake*, the gathering water connects with and embodies the layered histories of colonization, capitalist development, and community advocacy in Xico.¹⁰⁵

105. Genaro Amaro Altamirano, "Patrimonio Cultural y Ecologico de Xico (Una Guía para la Acción)," *Cuadernos de Historia del Valle de Xico*, No. 22. (Ciudad Xico: Museo Comunitario del Valle de Xico, 2006). Reprinted in *El Regreso de un Lago/The Return of a Lake* (Köln: Verlag der Buchhandlung Walther König, 2012): 128-146.

CHAPTER 3: The City and the Body: journeys of resistance and *Plan Acalote*

Despite the importance of the Valley of Mexico's lakes to the structure of the city today, very few people have direct experience or a personal memory of them. Where embodied memory of the lacustrine city does persist, it is distant from the economic and cultural hubs, and constrained by the physical structure of the city. As the previous chapters have demonstrated, Mexico City's lacustrine past reveals that the current structure of the city, and the way it favors extractive capitalism while marginalizing indigenous, impoverished populations on the city's periphery are not incidental consequences of organic urban growth. Rather, the adoption of European models of urbanity both results from race and class-based hierarchies of power and contributes to maintaining those same hierarchies. Through an examination of the performance *Plan Acalote*, this chapter explores why embodied memory is vital to establishing an alternative narrative of Mexico City that reflects the efficacy of the canal and chinampa systems, as well as the socio-ecologic losses their destruction has caused. I argue that *Plan Acalote* shows how public interventions can make tangible the effects of coloniality often obscured by narratives of progress and development. Further, the performance offers an alternative way of thinking and living for those who suffer from the effects of inhabiting a city organized around capitalist extraction and automobiles. This chapter draws from the thinking of performance studies scholar Diana Taylor, and returns to the work of eco-critical philosopher Donna Haraway.

The germinating seed of the performance *Plan Acalote* began with the idea of a journey as a way to think, remember, and make meaning. The artists asked themselves,

what if we were to drag a canoe all the way to the city center?¹⁰⁶ Through conversation and research, Morales and Huitzil developed the idea into an artwork layered with meaning yet open for active community participation. Figure 17 depicts a pamphlet the artists used to publicize the performance before it took place. The layering of a post-conquest map and appropriated Mexica mapping conventions signal the layers of meaning the artists intended to develop with the performance.

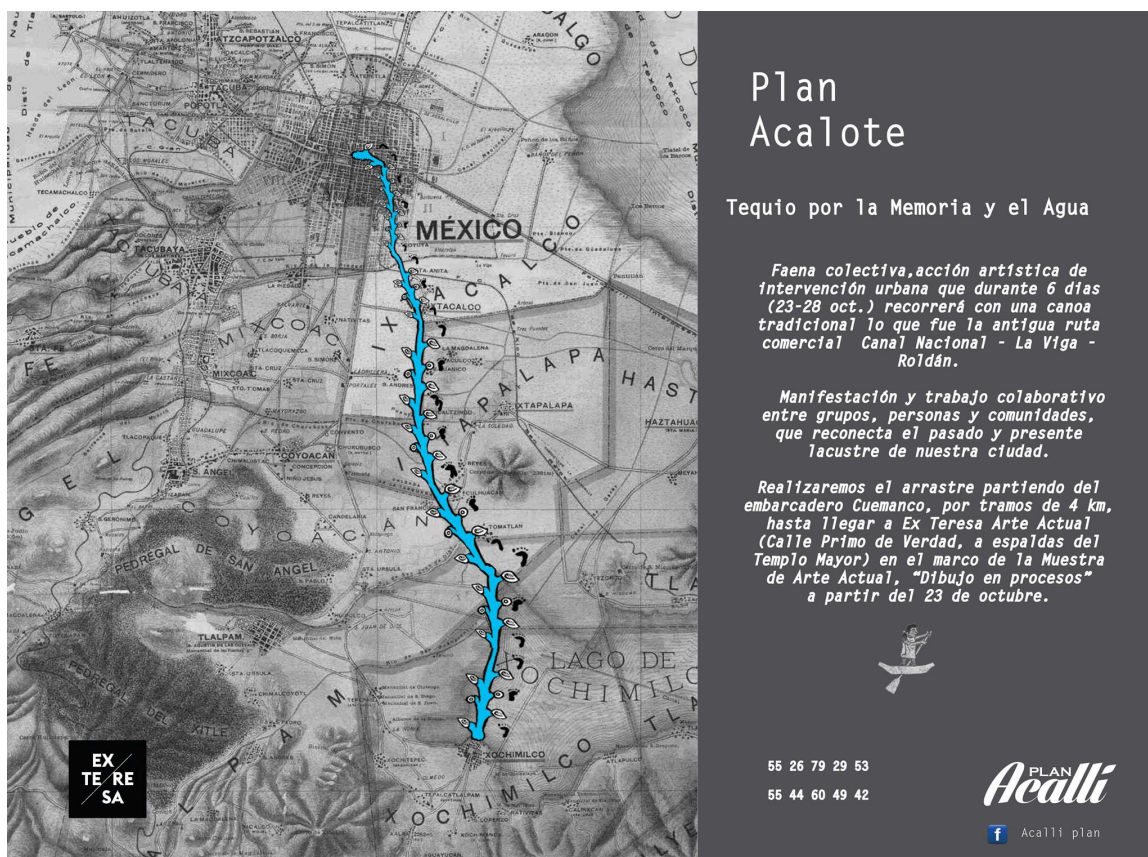


Figure 17. Plan Acalli brochure, publicizing *Plan Acalote*. 2015.

The artists and a team of volunteers started out from the Embarcadero de Cuemanco, the northernmost access point for the *Zona Chinampera* and a buzzing hub for Xochimilco's tourist industry. Each of the six days of the journey was bracketed with starting and ending points that Morales and Huitzil had determined in advance. The

106. Conversation with Carlos Huitzil and Ehecatl Morales, July 12, 2017.

sound of the *caracol* (conch) shell began each day's journey, and a celebratory meal of *pulque* and *tlacoyos* marked the arrival at each stopping point. During the first three days, *Plan Acalote* followed the still-extant portion of the Canal Nacional, traveling through neighborhoods and communities where the presence of the canal has maintained a collective memory of the lacustrine city: Santa María Tomatlán, Culhuacán, and Churubusco. The second half of the journey traversed the highly urbanized space at the city's center. In this chapter, I ask how the labor and embodied presence of *Plan Acalote* addressed the material suppression of agrarian and indigenous knowledges and ways of being through the urban space. What memories does the act of a procession from Xochimilco to the Zócalo evoke, and how do these memories ramify in a cityscape determined by extractive capitalist power structures?

Section I: Embodied Knowledge

The body, bodily movement, and cultural memory are critical to *Plan Acalote*. Morales understands canoes as vessels and catalysts for cultural memory, saying, "It's not an empty boat, no, it is a boat full of all these needs, dreams, memories, and even adventures..."¹⁰⁷ The substance of the performance included not only the actions of the artists but also the embodied participation of all those who dragged, pushed, and hauled the canoe, who paused in the street to ask a question, or who simply watched the enormous canoe move down the street. The "Acoloters," as Huitzil and Morales affectionately call those who participated in the performance, were comprised mainly of people heavily involved in the canals and chinampas in Xochimilco. The labor of moving

107. Interview excerpt from the documentary *Plan Acalote*, created by Omar Aguilar Ruedas and Miguel Angel García of the collective Ruta 3000. Open to public viewing at the Centro de Documentación, Ex-Teresa Arte Actual. Translation mine.

the canoe was arduous and required collaborative improvisation. Morales and Huitzil had hoped to drag the old canoe directly on the surface of the pavement and thereby create a physical scratch that would record the journey. However, the weight of the waterlogged canoe made that impossible from the outset. The team also deemed the method of rolling the canoe across logs to be too unwieldy for the nineteen-kilometer journey, deciding instead to trundle it along on a rudimentary wheeled trailer. This spatial and physical group problem-solving continued throughout the journey, as the group negotiated curbs, steps, and high-traffic areas.

Such shared labor echoes the regular communal efforts needed in order to maintain Xochimilco's canals and chinampas, and to plant and harvest crops. For Morales and Huitzil, participating in community efforts to clear the canals of invasive lilies, to cart mud from the lake bottom to the chinampas, or to plant, transplant, and harvest is an essential element of their practice. Through years of work with experienced growers, they have not only learned how to manage chinampas in a theoretical sense, but also have developed a bodily knowledge as well: the memory and expertise of the hands and arms. The communal effort to drag the canoe to the Zócalo, step by step, references and makes present the embodied labor and knowledge of Xochimilco, and reframes the labor of the *chinamperos* as a means of resistance to increasing urbanization and predatory development.

The presence of one's body in the street, and especially as a participant in a collective journey, is deeply connected to histories of both protest and celebration. In the context of Mexico City, important precedents for *Plan Acalote's* use of the city as a space for both celebration and protest include religious processions, such as the syncretic

celebration of El Niñopan in Xochimilco, and protests such as the student marches of the 1968 movement, the 1999 UNAM strike, and more recently, the 2014 protests of the mass kidnapping and murder of forty-three student activists in Ayotzinapa. Performance studies scholar Diana Taylor's key concepts of the archive and the repertoire, as well as the DNA of performance, offer insight as to how such ceremonies, protests, and performances combine embodied action with historical information to create a political claim.

Diana Taylor asserts that the fundamental contribution of performance studies as an academic field is that it enables a broadening of what counts as knowledge, expanding from the limited view of written language to include performed or embodied knowledge such as music, or the performed expression of gender.¹⁰⁸ Taylor explains that in the aftermath of the conquest of the Americas, writing became disproportionately important compared to other forms of knowledge as a way to generate and maintain power, since only a select few had access to this European skill. Writing, narratives, letters, artifacts, bones and importantly, their process of organization and categorization as authoritative sources comprises what Taylor terms the archive. However, she draws our attention to the knowledge and information encoded in cultural performances such as dance, song, farming and cooking techniques, religious processions, or quotidian practices such as taking the bus to work. This group of practices, distinct from fixed entities like texts, comprises the body of knowledge Taylor has termed the repertoire.¹⁰⁹ Oftentimes, the archive and repertoire are linked: the written script of a play is part of the archive, but the

108. Taylor, *The Archive and the Repertoire*, 16.

109. Taylor, *The Archive and the Repertoire*, 20.

actors' performance of the play can only be experienced live and so is part of the repertoire. It is the process of performing that makes the play present. Taylor explains, "traditions are stored in the body, through various mnemonic methods, and transmitted 'live' in the here and now...Forms handed down from the past are experienced as present."¹¹⁰ Taylor also uses the framework of the archive and the repertoire to develop a nuanced understanding of how certain forms of protest draw from both documentary sources and embodied action to make a political claim.¹¹¹ This idea, which Taylor calls the DNA of performance, provides a way to understand *Plan Acalote*'s dual deployment of an alternative collective memory and repetitive embodied action.

The DNA of performance refers to the way performances (repertoire) encode or manifest information from the archive, thus synthesizing archival evidence on the one hand, and embodied knowledge on the other, to make a claim. Taylor argues that in the case of Argentina's Dirty War, the transmission of the nation's public and private trauma has only been possible through the repeated public performance of evidence from the archive. The Abuelas and Madres of the Plaza de Mayo in Buenos Aires famously process around the public plaza once a week, wearing the state identification cards of their disappeared children around their necks. As Taylor explains, this performance unites the identification cards with the women's bodily movement and repeated presence in the plaza, making a strong public appeal and building a collective memory of the disappeared.¹¹²

110. Taylor, *The Archive and the Repertoire*, 24.

111. Ibid., 161-189.

112. Ibid., 171-177.

The term “the DNA of performance” attests to the importance of the genetic link the Madres claim: they protest not as political activists but as mothers who want to know where their children are. Yet, the term also allows for broader interpretation, which makes its implicit reference to genetics and ancestry useful for the analysis of *Plan Acalote*. Importantly, Taylor also takes care to assert that the genetic aspect of the Abuelas and Madres’ protests does not recuse others from responsibility, but actually broadens possibilities for identification with these political and humanitarian struggles through the appeal to the right of family members to know the fates of their loved ones.¹¹³ Similar lines of genetic relation also come into play with *Plan Acalote*, making Taylor’s articulation of the DNA of performance valuable for thinking about this journey across Mexico City.

In Mexico City, the use of space to maintain the centralized power of the ruling elite is most evident in the Zócalo, the administrative center of the capital and the site of an enormous plaza flanked by the immense Metropolitan Cathedral and the National Palace. These buildings of state and religious power were built atop the foundations of the *Templo Mayor*, the center of sacred and state power under the Aztecs. The Spanish colonizers used stones quarried from the temples to build the cathedral and the administrative buildings, and importantly, forced the Valley of Mexico’s indigenous inhabitants to construct them. Thus, the space itself comprises an archival document of the conquest: it is a physical reminder of the processes of domination and exploitation that produced Mexico City. Further, the destruction of indigenous monuments asserts the

113. Taylor, *The Archive and the Repertoire*, 188-89.

supremacy of the Spanish over the Aztecs, implicitly construing the Aztecs as defunct and ruinous.¹¹⁴

For this reason, *Plan Acalote*'s ending point at Ex Teresa Arte Actual (located on the Zócalo and mere steps from the ruins of the Templo Mayor) bolsters the implicit arguments of the performance. *Plan Acalote* establishes an alternative narrative of the pre-Conquest lacustrine Mexico City, undermining colonial thinking that the lacustrine city was "unsalubrious and unstrategic."¹¹⁵ As such, the performance calls into question the hegemonic understanding that the draining of the Valley of Mexico was inevitable for the march of progress. Instead, *Plan Acalote* considers the agricultural practices of the chinampas to be efficient, productive and epistemologically invaluable. Further, Huitzil and Morales consider the experience of navigating by canal to be restorative, offering a new way of seeing. Perhaps most importantly, the performance establishes the continuity of practices related to the canals and chinampas (and changing versions of them) from before the conquest until now, alongside and in spite of the continued systemic oppression of indigenous spaces and knowledge. Asserting this continuity of cultural knowledge and imagining the benefits of a lacustrine city today directly contradicts the implied narrative of colonization and progress that the Zócalo conveys, as well as the broad international mandate for cities to reflect certain ideals of modernity.¹¹⁶

114. Jacqueline Holler, "Conquered Spaces, Colonial Skirmishes: Spatial Contestation in Sixteenth-Century Mexico City," *Radical History Review* 99 (Fall 2007): 107-109.

115. Holler, "Conquered Spaces, Colonial Skirmishes," 108.

116. See Scott on the authoritarian ideologies of efficiency, urban grids, and the influence of Le Corbusier and Ebenezer Howard. Scott, "Seeing Like a State," 138-146.

The act of journeying from Xochimilco to the Zócalo with a canoe offered a re-evaluation of the predominant narratives of the capital, and of the relationship between the city, its many individual inhabitants, and its waters. The process of creating an archive of conversations and memories of those who interacted with the performance, as well as a visual register of the canoe's path, generates an awareness and resistance to the ever-present but often invisible forces of predatory development and irresponsible consumerism that threaten the environment. By encoding into its DNA aspects of pre-Columbian agriculture, such as the route of the canoe, the importance of indigenous crops, and the extensive integration of the Aztec capital with the geology and hydrology of the Valley of Mexico, *Plan Acalote* resists the predominant image of indigenous ways of living as obsolete. Instead, the performance combines embodied presence and action with a fundamental reliance on indigenous knowledges to make a political claim. *Plan Acalote* calls for the public recognition that Western-European models of development, transportation, and commerce are not enough; they do not offer even the possibility of access to basic human rights for all inhabitants of the Valley of Mexico—only for some. Furthermore, these Western-European models are not the only option. Without indulging in nostalgia, *Plan Acalote* asserts that there are other means of thinking about the city, about its water, transportation and the quality of life. The journey that *Plan Acalote* comprised refuses the city's usual systems of transportation and the barriers they necessarily imply. The act of traveling by canoe over concrete and asphalt is a firm rejection of the city's apparent limitations, and a call to expand ways of thinking about what is possible within the urban environment.

In making an intentional journey through urban space, *Plan Acalote* enters a broad tradition of performance as a means of resistance to state oppression in the Americas. I offer in particular two examples of symbolic journeys which underline the ongoing relevance of performance and intervention as a means of revealing and resisting coloniality across the Americas. Further, these two performances, which come from two different geographical contexts and date from different decades, both demonstrate how the artist's body takes effect and generates meaning through the layering of specific contexts on and around their bodies. In the 1977 performance *Superman 51*, Puerto Rican conceptual artist Papo Colo ran along a New York City highway with fifty-one large pieces of lumber tied to his wrists and strung out behind him in a jostling tangle, until the weight of the lumber became too much to bear (fig. 18). Colo's straining against this impossible burden embodied the injustices, continual weariness, and Sisyphean frustrations afflicting Puerto Rico as a United States territory. While broadcasting a national identity of freedom and equality, the US government treats Puerto Rico as a colony, denying it statehood and inflicting the perpetual mental and physical exhaustion of the colonial wound. It is this mental and physical exhaustion which bears down on Colo, and which he protests with a highly symbolic journey in *Superman 51*. The heavy pieces of lumber represent the seemingly unattainable goal of statehood for Puerto Rico.¹¹⁷ Despite Colo's progress down the highway against the backdrop of New York City, a symbol of the American dream, exhaustion quickly makes forward movement impossible.

117. Rocío Aranda-Alvarado, "Arte No Es Vida: Actions by Artists of the Americas," *Art Nexus* 7, no. 70 (October 2008): 118.



Figure 18. *Superman 51*, Papo Colo. Documentation of performance.

Decades later, in 2003, a performance by Guatemalan artist Regina Galindo again illustrates how intervention in public space, and specifically, the act of a symbolic journey, has functioned as a strategy for political denunciation. In the performance *¿Quién puede borrar las huellas?* (*Who can erase the footprints?*), Galindo walked barefoot from Guatemala City's Constitutional Court to its National Palace. She carried a large white bowl of human blood, repeatedly lowering it to dip her feet, so that with every step of the journey, she marked a bloody footprint on the sidewalk (fig. 19). This blood, spilled deliberately and methodically, refers to the deliberate war crimes including murders and rapes that the Guatemalan government committed during the civil war.¹¹⁸ In taking the blood onto her skin to create footprints, Galindo transforms her body to recall the bodies of all the disappeared, and to denounce Efraín Ríos Montt's candidacy for president. The evidence of genocide under his command following the 1982 military

118. Barbara Schreiber, "Acts of Endurance," *Sculpture* 35, no. 9 (November 2016): 57.

coup in Guatemala exists in the archive, in various documents, written accounts, and most viscerally, in the bodies and bones of the murdered. Yet, it is Galindo's embodied assertion of this archival evidence which constitutes her protest against Montt's political intentions and her claim that Guatemala must have justice. Encoded by physical manifestations of state power including the surrounding government buildings and security guards, Galindo's body becomes evidence, accusation, and a warning of what might happen should the presidency fall into hands stained with blood.



Figure 19. *¿Quién puede borrar las huellas?*, Regina José Galindo, 2003. Photograph by Víctor Pérez.

Superman 51 and *¿Quién Puede Borrar las Huellas?* demonstrate that interventions in urban space enable artists to embody solidarity in a material way. The presence of the body in a live performance operates differently than a verbal or written summary of an unjust paradigm: Galindo and Colo's embodied actions recall histories of violent oppression in a visceral way, and their interventions in public space also connect to longstanding traditions of protest. Similarly, the multi-day journey of *Plan Acalote*

transforms documentary evidence and accounts of the Valley of Mexico's fraught environmental history, offering a new way of thinking about how cities manifest coloniality. At the center of *Plan Acalote* and its intervention in Mexico City was the *acalli*, the canoe. Similar to a human body, the canoe carried particular memories and meanings, shaping the effect of the performance. The next section considers how *Plan Acalote*'s use of a canoe underlies the alternative history the performance tells.

Section II: Canoes and the Carrier Bag Theory of Fiction

A key cultural device used to shape collective memory is the story. One aspect of *Plan Acalote*, and part of what makes its intervention in the cultural memory and physical environment of Mexico City important is the uncommon structure of the story it tells. As Donna Haraway emphasizes, "It matters what thoughts think thoughts. It matters what knowledges know knowledges...It matters what worlds world worlds. It matters what stories tell stories."¹¹⁹ As the example of Xico's epistemic connections to the earth demonstrates, stories are a vehicle for understanding the world and one's place and purpose in it. They carry the ideologies that impact thinking and thus, shape real consequences in the world. Mexico City has long been haunted by stories of the conquest: its identity is bound up with being a lynchpin in the colonization of the Americas. Taylor writes of how the city's patron saint and mythic founder, *La Virgen de Guadalupe*, has a double signification intertwined with *La Malinche*. This legendary Nahuatl woman, supposedly one of twenty virgins given to Cortés, and his lover and translator, is thought of as bearing the responsibility for the entire conquest. Taylor writes

119. Haraway, *Staying with the Trouble*, 35.

that she is despised and seen “as the origin of Mexican self-hatred and racial violence.”¹²⁰ And yet, Taylor also asserts that Malinche is “inseparable” from the venerated Virgin of Guadalupe. Like mirror images, this virgin and mother pervade visual and popular culture in Mexico, constantly reiterating the story of the conquest and the role of betrayal within it.

In thinking through the cultural and political importance of stories, Haraway relies on science fiction writer Ursula K. Le Guin’s “The Carrier Bag Theory of Fiction.”¹²¹ Le Guin argues that fiction has been dominated by particular kinds of tales – of conquest and victory, tales involving heroism, weapons, and war, and the fame of the hero. The prevalent story of the conquest of Mexico fits this mold as well: Cortés, with his boldness, his army, his gleaming weapons, and Malinche’s treachery, toppled the Aztecs in one fell swoop. However, Le Guin takes issue with the constant circulation and reiteration of these hero-driven stories, writing “Before you know it, the men and women in the wild-oat patch and their kids and the skills of the makers and the thoughts of the thoughtful and the songs of the singers are all part of it, have all been pressed into service in the tale of the Hero.”¹²² Her imaginative language speaks to the truth of the continual marginalization of those not seen as heroes. Le Guin asks what would happen if stories were shaped not around the violent events and sharp weapons that arm the heroes, but instead after carrier bags for collecting and giving away seeds. Instead of cementing

120. Taylor, *The Archive and the Repertoire*, 92.

121. Ursula K. Le Guin, “The Carrier Bag Theory of Fiction,” in *The Ecocriticism Reader: Landmarks in Literary Ecology*, ed. Cheryll Glotfelty and Harold Fromm (Athens, Georgia: University of Georgia Press, 1996), 149-154.

122. Le Guin, “The Carrier Bag Theory of Fiction,” 150.

single events like victories and conquests as the substance of cultural memory, perhaps stories could explore the cultural importance of gathering oats (or maize) into bags. Le Guin proposes an exploration of putting things into containers, “into a bag, or a basket, or a bit of rolled bark or leaf...or put it in the medicine bundle or the shrine or the museum, the holy place...”¹²³ and of the repetitive nature of these tasks of gathering, storing up and sharing food, stories, skills, and knowledge.

It is worth exploring Le Guin’s thinking at length because the carrier bag story she describes is precisely the kind of story that *Plan Acalote* tells. Le Guin’s insights make possible the full appreciation of the significance of the canoe as a vessel. Formally, the canoe’s shape reflects the specific characteristics of the marshy lakes of the Valley of Mexico for which it was engineered: its flat bottom and narrow profile glide across undisturbed water and push between tall reeds when necessary. Low sides make loading the canoe with produce or fertile mud from the lake bottoms easier. The canoe’s meaning comes from the labor, rituals, and celebrations which it enables and carries, embodied cultural performances which would not be possible without the canoe. In the context of *Plan Acalote*, the canoe gathers up the six days of efforts, walking, traveling, and hauling performed by the various participants, giving the ephemeral moments lasting meaning and focusing the experiences of solidarity and support around the problem of canals and water in the Valley of Mexico.

However, as much as the canoe gathers, it also scatters. In the journey from Xochimilco to the Zócalo, *Plan Acalote* began to weave new relationships of solidarity and reciprocity between Huitzil and Morales and community leaders working on various

123. Le Guin, “The Carrier Bag Theory of Fiction,” 150.

different initiatives for the preservation of the Canal Nacional, traditional growers in Xochimilco, and the continued viability of the canal system. These connections between various organizations and individuals interested in the histories and politics of Mexico City's waterways are partly a result of the performance's reliance on volunteers. Many of these relationships continue to develop through Plan Acalli's recurring workshops, known as *derivas lacustres*. These *derivas lacustres*, or lake drifts, borrow Guy De



Figure 20. Documentation of a *deriva lacustre*, Plan Acalli, 2017.

Bord's terminology about the insights and reawakening that can occur during a walking exploration of a city with no predetermined agenda or destination; what he termed in the original French, a *derivé*. Huitzil and Morales expand upon De Bord's thinking and posit the *deriva lacustre* as a collective experience, where participants must relinquish their individual control in order to drift with the group (fig. 20). Huitzil believes strongly in the natural environment of the *Zona Chinampera* and in its ability to encourage mindfulness

of the relationships between humans and the earth, offering respite from the feelings of alienation that the urban milieu can create.

Plan Acalli's commitment to these recurring collective experiences, and to nurturing the relationships among artists, scientists, activists, and other community participants speaks to the collective's commitment to continuing the work of *Plan Acalote* beyond the performance itself. By continuing to encourage meditation and discussion on the canals of Xochimilco and their role within Mexico City and its history, Plan Acalli continues to gather experiences, memories, and meaning into their canoe, and also scatters these ideas and histories by making them available through networks of reciprocity and embodied participation.

Section III: Accountability and Mourning in *Plan Acalote*

The history of the Valley of Mexico's sophisticated hydraulic engineering systems is well-trod scholarly ground.¹²⁴ Historian Vera Candiani shows that the Desagüe (the draining of the Valley of Mexico) would not have been possible without indigenous knowledge of the Valley's hydrology, as well as the material appropriation of indigenous canals and diversions.¹²⁵ Yet, as sociologist Guy Rozat argues, many writings on the pre-conquest technologies of the Valley of Mexico continue to operate from the underlying belief that pre-Columbian Mexica society was not as civilized or sophisticated as western

124. See especially Vera Candiani, on the development and operation of indigenous hydraulic systems from the thirteenth century forward. Vera Candiani, *Dreaming of Dry Land: Environmental Transformation in Colonial Mexico City* (Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, 2014), 16-25.

125. Candiani, *Dreaming of Dry Land*, 20.

European societies were at the time.¹²⁶ Broadening Rozat's claims, the underlying belief system that understands pre-Columbian cultures as only semi-civilized also implies that Mexico City as we see it today is the product of western influences more than the result of pre-Hispanic design. Rather, Mexico City today is the product of an ever-continuing negotiation between the enormous human population of the Valley of Mexico, and its ecologic systems. While this negotiation has been taking place for as long as the region has been inhabited, the valley's hydrology has turned inhospitable due to the proliferation of asphalt, the burying of rivers, and deforestation. The city may appear to be far removed from the memory of Tenochtitlán, yet the valley's underground rivers and once-extant lakes continue to assert themselves through the city's fundamental structure and the ongoing problems of land subsidence and water scarcity, as chapter two discussed.¹²⁷

Plan Acalli is highly invested in inhabiting the system of canals, and also revealing and reveling in the instances where the distance between Tenochtitlán, the fantastic floating city of the past, and Mexico City, the modern megalopolis, collapses. Morales' and Huitzil's commitment to inhabiting the canals of Mexico City extends beyond *Plan Acalote* to include other artistic projects, as well as their everyday practices as inhabitants of Xochimilco. For example, the nahuatl word *acalli*, central to Plan Acalli's mission, underlines their interest in experiencing Mexico City as a space of canals and reeds, despite the fact that it may appear otherwise. *Acalli* is the nahuatl term

126. Guy Rozat, "El Redentor Occidental y sus fantasías técnicas," in *Mestizajes tecnológicos y cambios culturales en México*, ed. Enrique Florescano and Virginia García Acosta (México, D.F.: Centro de Investigaciones y Estudios Superiores en Antropología Social, 2004), 261-310.

127. Joel Simon, *Endangered Mexico: An Environment on the Edge* (San Francisco: Sierra Club Books, 1997), 60-90.

for canoe, but its literal translation is “house over the water.”¹²⁸ With this linguistic symbolism in mind, Huitzil and Morales see traveling by canoe as a way to fundamentally inhabit the canal system.¹²⁹ Further, Huitzil and Morales document hidden clues to the city’s water-based past, using small reminders in the visual experience of the city to further their project of imagining a different way of relating to the city, each other, and to hegemonic histories.

Huitzil’s photograph *Germen* (seeds) appears at first blush to depict an urban grid, seen from high above a city (fig. 21). However, what the photograph shows are seedlings growing in a chinampa, divided by parallel grooves in the earth so they can easily be cut apart from each other and transplanted. By momentarily tricking the eye, this photograph questions our assumptions about space and scale, and encourages us to imagine a different way of being in a megalopolis: as a grower, nurturing her seedlings. Similarly, the photograph *Calle Canal Seco*, or “Dry Canal Street” speaks to the ways that the destruction of Mexico City’s once-integrated water system affects every urban experience (fig. 22). Here, the street name *Calle Canal Seco* speaks to the absence of the canal, making its history present and reminding us of the links between the problems of Mexico City today and the previous destruction of indigenous water management systems. Pointing to the evidence of the canals in Mexico City contributes to a collective awareness of the material changes coloniality has wrought. This awareness calls into

128. *Gran Diccionario Náhuatl*, s.v. “Acalli,” Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México (Ciudad Universitaria, México D.F.) accessed March 11, 2018, <http://www.gdn.unam.mx>.

129. Plan Acalli. “*Decolonizing Nature* artist talk.” Public presentation, 516 ARTS, Albuquerque, NM, April 14, 2017.

question our societal biases regarding space, and what is considered urban, or civilized, as well as our perspectives toward natural resources.



Figure 21. *Germen*, Carlos Huitzil, of Plan Acalli. 2016.

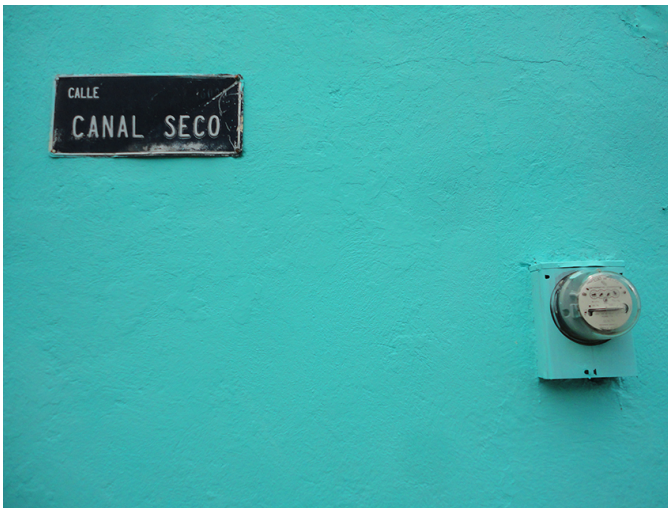


Figure 22. *Calle Canal Seco*, Carlos Huitzil of Plan Acalli, 2016.

By symbolically undoing and actively working against the centuries-long erasure of water, canals, and all the cultural knowledge that accompanies them, *Plan Acalote* fosters a public accountability to water and its distribution in the Valley of Mexico. By bringing a canoe into urban space that is no longer visibly marked by the history of Tenochtitlán's canals, and laboriously and intentionally traveling with that canoe, Plan

Acalli charges the citizens of Mexico City with a responsibility to inform themselves about the area's water resources and examine how they are being used. The presence of the canoe, and the impact of a durational performance intervening in the daily routines of the city proclaim that its infrastructure (both physical and bureaucratic) is not neutral.

The canoe traveling urban streets reminds viewers that the rapid urbanization of the Valley of Mexico comes at a price. Not only did the destruction of the canal system force out populations of animals and plants, but it also damaged and limited vital cultural knowledges, especially those which threatened Spanish colonial hegemony. Taylor argues that although Spanish missionaries argued that indigenous cultural practices were devoid of meaning, their censure of these practices conversely proves their recognition that knowledges surrounding music, farming, cooking, and dance held great power, threatening the growth of colonial authority in the Americas.¹³⁰ From the moment of colonization, various modes of cultural performance in the Americas were censured and prohibited. As Taylor explains, Franciscan missionaries often justified their efforts to ban cultural practices with accusations of idolatry and devil-worshipping, but their motivations included a desire to squelch the cultural knowledge and thereby, the power that different practices encoded. Official edicts prohibited certain kinds of songs, dances, and body piercings, while Spanish chronicles pronounced various dances, music, festivals, or craft skills to be dead or disappearing.¹³¹ Taylor explains, such writings “are all about erasure, either claiming that ancient practices had disappeared or trying to

130. Taylor, *The Archive and the Repertoire*, 33-36.

131. *Ibid.*, 40-42.

accomplish the disappearance they invoked.”¹³² A canoe, retracing a route travelled frequently by the *remeros* and *chinamperos* who cultivated precise knowledge of the water, mud, seeds, and sun in the Valley of Mexico actively resists this still-ongoing disappearance of indigenous knowledge systems.

Beyond *Plan Acalote*'s ability to create a space of public accountability to the Valley of Mexico's natural environment, the performance also creates space for mourning. To better discuss why mourning can be an important response to grave social and ecologic damage, I turn to the collaborative theorization of loss and mourning by Australian eco-philosophers Thom van Dooren and Deborah Bird Rose. Rose and van Dooren theorize animal extinctions in relation to the shared ecological and human communities of which animals are a part, and consider their extinctions as the slow and painful unraveling of these inter-species relationships, rather than as isolated or singular events.¹³³ They take issue with technological responses that try to undo processes of extinction through breeding techniques or genetic engineering, arguing that such zeal for technology passes over the complex realities that cause extinctions. Instead, they emphasize the importance of mourning the loss of animals, and their stories, places, rites, and relationships: “genuine mourning might open us up into an awareness of our dependence on and relationships with those countless others being driven over the edge of extinction.”¹³⁴

132. Taylor, *The Archive and the Repertoire*, 41.

133. Thom van Dooren and Deborah Bird Rose, “Keeping Faith with the Dead: Mourning and De-extinction,” *Australian Zoologist*, 2017.

134. Van Dooren and Rose, “Keeping Faith with the Dead,” 376.

Bringing van Dooren and Rose's conclusions on extinctions and mourning into the discussion of *Plan Acalote* allows for some key differentiations. Just as van Dooren and Rose theorize animal extinctions as a continual struggle to survive despite ever-diminishing odds, rather than a single catastrophic event, it is possible to think about the Valley of Mexico's water-based cultures as viable and active systems that continue to resist the pressures of urban development. Thinking of colonization and the transformation of Mexico City as something done and finished long ago excuses those of us living in the present from contemplating and dwelling with the consequences. The post-contact writings of Bernardino de Sahagún, which Taylor argues prematurely pronounced indigenous culture to be extinguished, or the tourism distinction of "pueblos mágicos", discussed in chapter one, both construct loss and extinction as finished events, skimming over the more complex realities of ongoing erasure. To borrow Donna Haraway's language, erasure is never a singular event, but "a protracted slow death that unravels great tissues of ways of going on in the world for many species, including historically situated people."¹³⁵

One particular loss that *Plan Acalote* addresses directly is that of Ehecatl Morales, who mourns his inability to travel to the Zócalo along the National Canal. Morales, who identifies as ethnically Xochimilca, recalls the stories his grandfather recounted of taking this trip by canoe.¹³⁶ The importance of these stories is such that Morales has experienced dreams and visions of this journey. He sees his heritage and identity as bound to the

135. Haraway, *Staying with the Trouble*, 38.

136. Morales is descended from the Xochimilcas, the group of people who have historically populated the village of Xochimilco.

canals and to this route in particular, and mourns that it is impossible to complete the journey by canal today. However, for him, *Plan Acalote* acts as a broadening of that desire to complete the same journey as his grandfather and ancestors did: the performance allows him to retrace the path, while also bringing the marginalization of the city's waterways to the public eye.¹³⁷

Plan Acalote is both celebration and lament: the lake cultures survive still, and carry rich knowledges, but they continue to come under attack through predatory development and cultural erasure. Plan Acalli's double recognition of the ongoing, yet deeply troubled relationship with water in the Valley of Mexico makes space for dwelling with the realities of extinction, and mourning the intentional erasures of coloniality. For example, in the documentary *Plan Acalote*, Joaquín Ávila, a resident of Tetepilco, recounts a memory passed down from his great-grandfather of overnight journeys that families would take from Tetepilco to Xochimilco via canal, to see friends and spend a day celebrating together. With the elimination of the canal system, these networks of indigenous solidarity could not manifest in the same ways. Taylor describes the colonial prevention of indigenous patterns and the circumscription of their movements as a way to undercut "economic independence, self-expression, and community building," and to undo longstanding collective rituals and memory.¹³⁸ With Taylor's analysis of the role of embodied experience, the significance of the canals' destruction becomes more apparent.

Working against the elimination of the canals, *Plan Acalote* marked and celebrated the spaces, people, and stories that testify to the continued (albeit fragmented

137. Skype conversation with Carlos Huitzil and Ehecatl Morales, March 15, 2017.

138. Taylor, *The Archive and the Repertoire*, 43.

and inconsistent) processes by which the city drives out the water. In the context of van Dooren and Rose's thinking, it is evident that *Plan Acalote* indeed accomplishes something distinct from the fetishization of pre-Hispanic relations to water: it opens space for mourning. The performance is not a call to recreate the water-based infrastructure and economy of the past, nor does it wallow in nostalgia. Rather, it undertakes the serious contemplation of the social and economic fabric that has been lost, and reckons with the fact that governments and corporations continue to relate to interdependent communities of people and ecosystems in the same way as the Spanish colonists viewed the Valley of Mexico in the sixteenth century: through the perspectives of development and extraction.

CONCLUSION

There is no singular way to understand the ecologic history of Mexico City. Any attempt at creating a narrative of the valley's lakes, of Xico, or of the Canal Nacional necessarily involves leaving out alternate perspectives and viewpoints. As philosopher-psychologist Jens Brockmeier and others have argued, there can be no remembering without forgetting. However, in arguing for the importance of performance, installation, and collaboration, and analyzing *Plan Acalote* and *The Return of a Lake*'s ability to reveal ecologic history, make tangible the effects of coloniality, and recognize the submerged perspectives of the Valley of Mexico, this thesis has supported the effectiveness and importance of alternative histories. Alternative histories that raise the voices and proclaim the experiences of those exploited by coloniality—such as the histories at the core of *Plan Acalote* and *The Return of a Lake*—have the power to enfranchise those communities most affected by socio-ecologic destruction, and to create networks of solidarity. In the struggle to make ongoing life in the Valley of Mexico possible, it matters which voices have space to tell their stories; it matters whether people walking the streets of Mexico's capital remember the lakes. Cities and built environments encode the ideologies of the societies they represent. Therefore, it is only by changing ways of thinking about the natural environment, humans, cities, and their interwoven relationships that new ways of living and being become possible. Echoing Donna Haraway, "It matters what worlds world worlds."¹³⁹ It matters what ideas shape artworks, what research motivates communities, and what principles anchor place-based projects.

139. Haraway, *Staying with the Trouble*, 35.

By analyzing their contexts, structures, and the details of their unfolding, I have shown how *The Return of a Lake* and *Plan Acalote* link the large-scale social, political, and ecologic consequences of capitalist development with the everyday realities in which they manifest. Further, this research argued that the artworks restructure perceptions of urban space, and knit relationships of reciprocity that imagine a possible future of solidarity and kinship. Although this study has been limited to the particular contexts surrounding *Plan Acalote* and *The Return of a Lake*, and has been tightly focused on the ways in which these works engaged with local knowledge, the works' implications reverberate broadly in the Americas. While the ecologic circumstances of the Valley of Mexico are unique, the ongoing systemic extraction and the prioritization of profit at long-term costs to communities and ecosystems are not. Crucially, the works illustrate the connections between the socio-economic power structures that have been practiced in Mexico since the moment of the conquest and the material risks that Mexico City's compromised ecologic infrastructure poses now. As the works show, the dangers of life in a city produced by extractive capitalism include flooding, land-subsidence, and inadequate access to water, all of which are experienced most directly by the city's socially and politically vulnerable inhabitants. Further, these effects will only increase with further development of the city's floodplains and the granting of private-sector concessions from Mexico's rivers. This research has engaged with and supported the artworks' critical perspectives on how Mexico City's urban space is organized, revealing that the structure of the city itself promotes an unequal distribution of both natural resources and environmental risk.

Yet, despite the city's structural inequalities, the artworks demonstrate ongoing

life and new understandings of the city. *The Return of a Lake* helps to incorporate the emergence of Lake Tláhuac-Xico into a larger discourse of community autonomy and resilience, uncovering its potential for meaning-making in connection with Xico's specific histories. Working with the Museo Comunitario, Alves theorized the emergence of the lake in terms of the indigenous knowledges surrounding the cosmologically significant Cerro de Xico. Privileging Nahuatl cosmologies as spatial organizers and understanding the water as an agent of change stimulating adaptation to oppressive circumstances deconstructs Western conceptions of urban space. Equally important to reconfiguring the interrelation of the city, the individual, and the natural environment was Plan Acalli's public intervention: traveling Mexico City's streets by canoe, the artists made acutely visible the absence of the canals, lakes, and chinampas. As I have shown, although the canals have been effaced from the material structure of most of the city, the impact of their erasure persists.

In addition to revealing the way coloniality as a socio-economic system and set of ideologies continues today, and thinking critically about how these ideologies affect the city's structure and ecologic impact, *The Return of a Lake* and *Plan Acalote* also reflect practices of dialogue, exchange, and collaboration. Both projects depended upon reciprocal relationships of trust and solidarity with collaborators. As chapter one discussed, the artworks could not effectively critique the extractive practices of coloniality without developing material and conceptual strategies that deconstruct the notion of a single authoritative history. Both the performance and installation rely on collaboration, the sharing of information, and time spent developing reciprocal personal relationships. As such, the lives of these two artworks extend beyond their initial

frameworks. The six-day performance of *Plan Acalote* was not the sum total of that project, and neither was the 2012 exhibition of *The Return of the Lake* the only manifestation of Alves's collaboration with the Museo Comunitario de Xico. As the second half of chapter one discusses, both of these projects live on, as do the collaborative relationships on which they were built.

Considering how the embodied experience of *Plan Acalote* connects with Mexico City's ecologic history revealed the impact of the performance's intentional intervention in the city's space, as well as the significance of the canoe as a vessel of indigenous knowledge, intergenerational memory, and as a tool for thinking beyond late-capitalism.. Critical perspectives from Ursula Le Guin, Deborah Bird Rose, and Thom van Dooren enabled deeper thinking about the canoe's importance in the narrative *Plan Acalote* told. *Plan Acalote's* journey by canoe manifests the importance of mourning and remembrance in understanding the present and decolonizing the future. The work also underscores art's ability to make alternative histories visible, to communicate embodied memory, and to reveal both the violence and the possibilities encoded in everyday, public spaces. The performance, as well as my analysis of it, emphasized the structural possibilities and individual benefits of reconsidering our conceptions of cities and what they should, or could, be.

Given the different ecologic, social, and political contexts tied to the Valley of Mexico's fraught relationship with water, I was unable to give sufficient time and research to every important layer of *Plan Acalote* and *The Return of a Lake*. The analysis of *Plan Acalote* and *The Return of a Lake* I offer has drawn from the work of Le Guin and Taylor to explore the connection between cultural attitudes toward the environment

and prevalent narrative structures. However, the work and practices of both Maria Thereza Alves and Plan Acalli merit further critical consideration of this connection between fiction and cultural attitudes, especially since both Alves and Huitzil have continued to explore fiction's potential to alter perception.¹⁴⁰ Also, although this research reiterates Quijano and Taylor's assertions that the construct of race is deeply intertwined with the system of coloniality, and identifies that racial hierarchies stratify Mexico City's distribution of power, resources, and environmental hazards, my arguments do not focus directly on how the work of Alves and Plan Acalli addresses Mexico's race-based inequalities. Additional research on questions of identity, mestizaje, and indigeneity in the Valley of Mexico and how these artists contend with ongoing racial injustice would benefit future criticism.

The long histories that *The Return of a Lake* and *Plan Acalote* engage show that while ecologic destruction and the suffering it brings are urgent problems, this crisis of environmental exploitation, racial inequality, and systemic oppression has been unfolding for the past five-hundred years. Further, experiencing environmental hazards second-hand, in the abstract rather than the material sense, is a swiftly dwindling privilege as the centuries of damage affect more and more of humankind. I hope that this research draws further scholarship to the work of Plan Acalli, Maria Thereza Alves, the Museo Comunitario de Xico, and other collectives or artists working on questions surrounding the city and its fraught relationship with water. *Plan Acalote* and *The Return of a Lake* move to foster networks of solidarity and patterns of thinking and memory that would

140. For example, see Alves's 2016 work *A Possible Reversal of Missed Opportunities / Uma possível reversão de oportunidades perdidas*.

make possible equitable cohabitation for Mexico City's animal, vegetal, and human inhabitants, but there is much more work to be done.

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