STUDIES IN SOCIAL JUSTICE
Volume 18, Issue 4, 873-892, 2024

Interview

Re-worlding through Mourning: A Conversation with Artist and Scholar Eliana Otta on her Project, *Virtual Sanctuary for Fertilizing Mourning*

ELIANA OTTA
Independent scholar and artist, Peru

ANDREA VELA-ALARCÓN
McMaster University, Canada

In this interview Peruvian artist Eliana Otta (see https://eliana-otta.com) talks about her understanding of mourning as an active collective practice disrupting capitalist rhythms, the ethical complexities of working with communities who have been directly impacted by resource extraction, and the rich capacity of multimodal creative projects for instigating the exchange of knowledges and inspiring solidarity. The interview is translated from Spanish by Andrea Vela-Alarcón.

Andrea: In response to the call for papers for this special issue, you submitted two audio recordings, *Nuevo Amanecer* and *Unipacuyacu*,[1] in which you narrate your experience of visiting the communities of three Indigenous Land and environmental defenders – Mauro Pío, Gonzalo Pío, and Arbildo Meléndez – who were murdered in the context of colonial and capitalist resource extraction in the Peruvian Amazon.[2] I know both audios are a component of a

[1] To access the audio recordings please see:
- *Nuevo Amanecer*: https://soundcloud.com/eliana_o_v/nuevo-amanecer
- *Unipacuyacu*: https://soundcloud.com/eliana_o_v/unipacuyacu

[2] Drawing from Max Liboiron (2021), when the word "Land" is capitalized in this piece it is because we understand it as a fundamentally relational and agentic entity. When land is not capitalized, we are referring to a concept grounded in colonial worldviews where landscapes are universal and composed of unidirectional relations.

Correspondence Address: Andrea Vela-Alarcón, Department of Communication, New Media & Cultural Studies, McMaster University, Hamilton, ON, L8S 4LB; email: velaala@mcmaster.ca

ISSN: 1911-4788

bigger project called *Virtual Sanctuary for Fertilizing Mourning*.[3] Could you speak a bit about the project and how the audios fit within its world*?*

Eliana: The *Virtual Sanctuary for Fertilizing Mourning* is a project that lasted a little over two years, with the support of the German organization Driving the Human.[4] The central idea was to create a web platform that would host videos that I would make with a 360-degree camera placed on my head when travelling through Amazonian communities.

The proposal was to create a set of "virtual tours" in the territories that are threatened by environmental conflicts. These tours would serve as a way to connect with the human losses and with other types of losses that are simultaneous and that are linked to the assassinations of these leaders in their territories.[5] The proposal of the project is to expand the idea of loss and to make the case that there is no purely individual loss, but rather that losses occur within a web of links that are very rich, complex, and difficult to disaggregate into fragments.

The idea was that through this web platform and the other elements of the project, we could try to experiment with how collective mourning processes can become, and foster, learning experiences. I wanted to think about how collective mourning has the potential to mobilize a variety of affects and to think about how to expand the consequences and the affective, political, and ethical experiences linked to mourning, indexing their manifestation towards processes that can also be revitalizing and collaborative in the struggles for justice and in the denunciation of violence within these communities.

The videos and the web platform were a strong component of the project presented for Driving the Human, but before that, there were other elements that I had been working on and that were integrated. For example, I had been making drawings that were portraits of murdered environmental leaders, and then with the project and the opportunity to travel several times to the communities, I began to make drawings of elements of the landscape and animals and some objects that represented ways of life linked to fishing or the type of food in the territory. In November of 2022 in Berlin, for the main presentation of this project called *Virtual Sanctuary for Fertilizing Mourning*, and the launch of the web platform called *Luto Verde* (Green Mourning), which is where the videos are hosted, I made an installation combining the various components that I had created. The site of the installation is called *Silent Green*

[3] https://eliana-otta.com/portfolio/santuario-virtual-para-un-duelo-fertilizante-virtual-sanctuary-for-fertilizing-mourning/

[4] https://drivingthehuman.com/de/prototype/virtual-sanctuary-for-fertilizing-mourning/

[5] Eliana's larger project involved four communities in total: Nuevo Amanecer Hawai, where the leaders Mauro and Gonzalo Pío were murdered; Unipacuyacu, where the leader Arbildo Meléndez was murdered; Sinchi Roca where the forest keepers Herasmo García and Santiago Vega were killed; and Puerto Nuevo, where the forest keeper Jenser Ríos was killed. Herasmo, Santiago and Jenser were not properly recognized as leaders but were part of the brigades guarding the territories; in other works, Eliana has also used the term "environmental defenders" for them.

and it's a very specific space because originally it had been a crematorium, and a few decades ago it was transformed into a cultural center. I chose to present the project in a part of the building that was like a dome and had all the walls covered with concavities where the urns with the ashes used to be placed, and they were around the whole space. What I did was to install the drawings inside those concavities, and to supplement the drawing with some objects that I had brought from the jungle: different plants, feathers, seeds and grains. All of them were materials that I had collected, in most cases in the same contexts of the Land defenders' communities, or that had been given to me as gifts. With these materials, I made some kind of offerings in the space where the drawings were.

Figure 1. Virtual Sanctuary for Fertilizing Mourning exhibition space in a former crematorium with 360-degree video projected on the domed roof. (photo: Eliana Otta)

The audios *Nuevo Amanecer* and *Unipacuyaca* could be listened to by the people who entered the installation in that space. These audios provided a way to contextualize the drawings and to link the different elements that make up the stories of the drawings and videos. The audios add other layers to the videos that are not so much narrative or descriptive, but are a bit more experimental. With these audios, my idea was to guide the listeners through an experience that was also a journey, and, in a way, to begin to get to know these territories in the way they were shown to me. So, through the audios, I wanted to expand a little bit on that experience of being received in a place and beginning to access the complexities of that place. The drawings, videos, offerings, and audios allowed an encounter with different sensations, and opened that encounter for the generation of questions towards the context.

Figure 2. Drawing and display of materials from Sinchi Roca community in *Virtual Sanctuary for Fertilizing Mourning's* installation at Silent Green. (photo: Eliana Otta)

Andrea: Of course, the audios were a form of translation of your experience, and through them you changed your role as a visitor and adopted the role of a host.

Eliana: Yes, of course, because in the videos I am always using the voices of the people I interviewed, which are mainly the families of the Land defenders. These audios were an opportunity to use my voice, and to share my experience of having been received. It was a way to transform this experience of being a guest into something that could be shared with other people.

Figure 3. Exhibition visitors listening to sound files. (photo: Eliana Otta)

Andrea: Yes, now it is you welcoming people into your experience, making the degree of connection and relation close. This leads me to think that under the colonial and capitalist gaze, the lives of individuals and communities who act as Land defenders, as well as the lives of other-than-humans, are rendered as disposable. This circumstance is in part because the extractive process requires the erasure of relations, particularly affective ones.

This assumption of disposability results in not many people grieving the lives that have been lost, let alone mourning them. Could you describe how you understand the relationship between grief and mourning?

Eliana: The way I understand it is that grief is how anyone feels when there is a loss. It is undeniable that we feel it, and it's painful, but when the word mourning comes into play, for me, there is a process of work. So, it is not like you are suddenly diving into a sea of pain, but mourning for me is trying to make the experience of loss collective. But even if it is in an individual case,

then mourning would also imply this work that one would do to talk about, to understand, to create stories, to remember, to really work around and through the loss. So, not just inhabiting the pain, or let's say, the grief, but embarking on this process that doesn't mean that it will have a complete end. Because some people would say there are different moments... and some people say mourning is infinite and it's endless.

To come to this understanding of grief, I think it is important for me to mention that this project is very much influenced by the fact that I am living outside of Peru, in Europe, and it is also influenced by the pandemic.

As I was telling you, I had started the drawings long before applying for the Driving the Human call. I had been doing this work without having a specific objective, but it was a way of trying to make a small tribute to these lives that were being lost and that I was following from a distance.

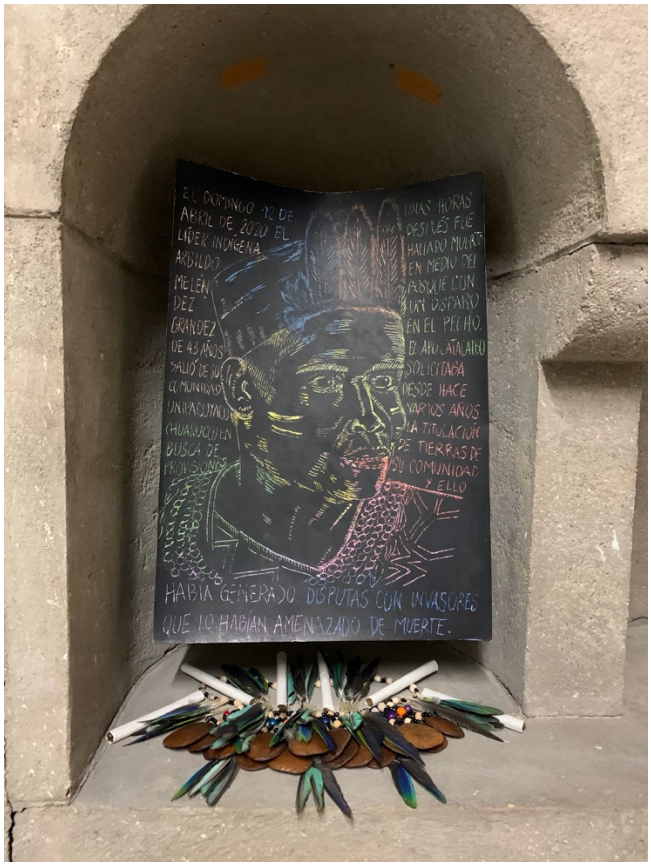

Figure 4. Portrait of Arbildo Meléndez, assassinated leader and Land defender from Unipacuyacu by Eliana Otta. (photo Eliana Otta)

As I always see news about Peru, somehow it struck me that there was not enough media coverage about these murders. Because of this, I started to make an archive and to make these drawings. In the year 2021 or 2020, I did a performance in Lima, at the University of San Marcos, which was a kind of an offering to these assassinated leaders. And all these acts, for me, were like small gestures trying to respond a little bit precisely to that lack of collectivization of mourning in relation to these cases. It was a way of responding that, I believe, demanded much more importance than it is typically given in Peru, and in general, in the world, no?

On the one hand, in recent years there has been a growing awareness of the importance of the Amazon as an integral ecosystem for the planet. But at the same time, people in Europe, for example, have no idea that these kinds of murders happen on a daily basis.

They are always spoken of as threats that may arise in the future and not as problems that are already centuries old in places that are and have been colonies. They are threats that have life-and-death consequences all the time. So, of course, what happens with these dynamics is that in Peru and in many other places with similar conditions, we get used to death in a very terrible way, right, because there is so much death around.

If we think about Peru, part of the problem is that the media and those in power have no interest in us, the people, stopping to deal with the pain, and that was a little bit the logic, with the process of the internal armed conflict, wasn't it? We are told that there was no time to look back, because Peru, it was suggested, needed to progress and improve. There was a lot of the narrative of not opening old wounds when the survivors demanded justice. In Peru, there is this antagonistic vision in which processing this type of trauma is positioned as an obstacle to "progress."

By contemplating this vision, I'm often reminded of the way that Judith Butler (2009) sums it up in the question of what makes a life grievable, and Butler's exploration of why some lives are understood to be more grievable than others. In contexts like Peru, and then during the pandemic globally, it is possible to see so obviously which lives are deemed to be worth more and which are the lives that summon more tears and more mourning processes, and also, which lives can be instrumentalized for certain types of nationalistic discourses, for example, when trying to create narratives of loss that serve to cohere certain types of populations.

And with all this context, the way to describe my understanding of grief and mourning is that I am very interested in the collective work of mourning. This interest is partly because in Peru, there is very strong and sustained work on the part of people who have been directly affected by political violence and who have had a very insistent and admirable process of seeking justice and reparation. But because of this battle for justice and recognition, many times, their own traumas and their own pain have not had a space to be seen or processed. We cannot forget that people in that context were subjected to multiple forms of violence; for example, women who had lost their husbands,

or their children, but had also been raped and did not talk about their rape or did not denounce it, because they had enough work denouncing the disappearance of their husband or child, and seeking justice in those cases, right?

And, as in the cases of the Amazonian communities with which I worked, there is also this overlapping of different traumas and violence that generate a concatenation of losses. All of this reminds us that everything is linked, because they are people who may be mourning someone who has been killed, but who are also mourning that they can no longer fish from the river, or that there are no more trees, or no more animals to hunt. These are intertwined processes of loss that generate a very strong sense of extermination and slow death. And for me, the important thing to think about this distinction between grief and mourning is that I understand the latter as a collective work. So, it's necessary to distinguish between the raw fact of pain and a process of translating or mobilizing it, collectively, into a regenerative force, as proposed by Athena Athanasiou (2017), for example, when discussing the revolutionary potential of loss. It's not only about knowing that pain is experienced simultaneously by *many*, but also working towards mobilizing collective pain into transformative and regenerative interventions in the world.

In that sense, I am influenced by Freud's (1993) distinction between grief and mourning and his definition of mourning as work, as a process that requires verbalizing and working on the meanings of what is lost and realizing how that (what was lost) affects the way we see ourselves and our context and our world. I also think it is important to reflect on how each loss generates the disappearance or transformation of a world. And at the same time, how there is work to be done so that the living can transform that world in a way that allows us to live and perhaps regenerate towards something more fruitful.

But there is also a further distinction to draw, because Freud talked about everything in terms of therapist-patient relationships, one-to-one. And what interests me, and what interests many people in recent decades, is to think instead about how to socialize, collectivize, and make public those processes that are often marginalized, atomized, individualized, discriminated against, and also locked up in the realm of the private, out of shame or for various other reasons. Precisely because we live in societies in which certain losses are not given value, and nobody is going to stop the violence because of what has happened to you, because again, as in Judith Butler's (2004, 2009) framing, certain lives are deemed not to matter, to have been lost from the very beginning. And the current planetary crisis challenges not only Freud regarding the need to think beyond the individual, but also Butler, regarding the need to expand the notions of grievability beyond the human, as Ashlee Cunsolo, Karen Landman (Cunsolo & Landman, 2017) and many scholars from extinction studies and holistic sciences have been claiming.

In this sense, the work of mourning can reverse the operations that render certain lives as not grievable, whether these lives are human or other-than-human. That is to say, it can have an impact on the fact that this is a process,

something to which it is necessary to dedicate energy, time, creativity and specific tasks of symbolization according to the specific loss. I believe that this makes it possible to try to compensate for the diminished value that these lives normally have in the public sphere. And maybe later on, ideally, that perception can be changed a little bit, right?

Andrea: I'm glad you offer me this distinction between grief and mourning. I feel as though your project has a focus on mourning, it pushes the person who engages with it to reckon with grief as a necessary affective condition that accompanies the act and activity of mourning.

You have started to talk about this, so I wonder if you could expand further: to what extent and how do you feel that reckoning with grief and mourning destabilizes the capitalist and colonial processes that are behind the extinguishing of life and modes of living?

Eliana: In Darian Leader's book, *La Moda Negra* (2014), he explains mourning as the act of socially writing down a loss. He talks about how at one time, in all cultures, there was some ritual in relation to the loss of human life. It has always been necessary for peers to recognize that this loss has occurred because this loss is tied to the recognition that this being has existed and that their disappearance makes us miss them and alters the social fabric.

That first gesture of crying, verbalizing or somehow giving space to grief and pain, and perhaps initiating a process of mourning, implies that you are recognizing the value of a life that for capitalism and colonialism has no reason to exist, because it is understood as disposable and therefore can be annihilated, destroyed, disappeared and erased from history without consequence.

However, the gesture of somehow expressing that loss reverses this constant process of annihilation and erasure. And, on the other hand, this recognition in rituals and moments of encounter, of remembrance and reflection, implies extended pauses. For example, in Greece, after 40 days, a mass for the dead has to be held again. And these rituals are prone to disappearance because of the way they interrupt and do not integrate easily with the rhythms of capitalist productivity of the last century, and of all the routines of consumption and production that have intensified in the 21st century, and, moreover, that atomize and fragment society by saying that we are all replaceable. Likewise, these rituals of mourning also have to do with territory, and with the place of people or beings that are being lost in relation to a social and physical fabric and space. Something that capitalist processes also seek to disappear, which is our link with the territories.

For me, recovering every little thing from these gestures of grief and mourning is a way of insisting on generating changes in subjectivities, so that they can become more critical and sensitive to see how losses are not individual. How the bonds, the relationships, the beings and all of us are more precarious and more vulnerable than individualism and entrepreneurship and all those success stories capitalist thinking would have us believe. Doing that

kind of action of paying attention to that direction of collective bonds, somehow boycotts all those capitalist narratives of individualistic progress.

Figure 5. Installation with drawings and objects at an exhibition including *Virtual Sanctuary for Fertilizing Mourning* in ZKM, Germany. (photo: Eliana Otta)

Andrea: Your work aims to intervene in this normative subjectivity and affects that prioritize individualism and productivity. Through this intervention, you open space to interrupt capitalist rhythms and narratives. This makes me think about how your recordings speak of aspects of loss and damage stemming from these rhythms and narratives, but also of dreams, spiritual and affective connections, and desires. In this context, what does it mean to fertilize mourning? How does this turn into a practice where we can nurture spaces of repair?

Eliana: Of course, the fact that it is "fertilizing mourning" is very important. And I, every time I say it in English, I am really thinking in Spanish of "duelo fertilizante," which means "a mourning that fertilizes," suggesting that encounters afforded by initiatives such as this exhibition can foster understanding the work of mourning as sowing regenerative seeds in us. I know that English speakers generally understand the phrase more as if mourners are "fertilized" or regenerated by the collective work of mourning, so there is an interesting back-and-forth between the two possibilities. But yes, I wanted to explore how the stories of the project weave together and could emphasize the

wisdom of the people who live in the Amazonian communities. On the one hand, the exhibition celebrates their incredible capacity for struggle and resistance, but also, it reminds us how their knowledge is threatened by all these problems we have been talking about. For example, in the case of "Nuevo Amanecer Hawáii," in the Pío family the children Beatriz and Víctor always talk a lot about their father's dreams and that they wanted and want to create a community, in their words, a modern one, where there is coffee cultivation with its own processing plant. They want the children to go to school and learn contemporary technologies, etc. It contests colonial discourses about non-European peoples being "backwards" and valuing only traditional knowledges, and the way they are replicated within colonized countries as Peru, having rippling and destructive effects from the centralized and urban capital towards indigenous communities.

Through the project, we try to show all these other dimensions. We try to imagine how the project could be a kind of activator or invitation for exchanges of knowledge. That it could be a fertilizer for the struggles of these territories, but also so that the spectators and interested people could have more avenues along which to approach and learn and awaken their curiosity. Perhaps some of that capacitation could inspire their own struggles and meet their own needs. In that sense, the aim is to fertilize each other a little bit from where we are, no?

Also, I want to think about what it would be like to generate solidarity and bridges of dialogue between people living other realities. The idea was also to fertilize other types of exchanges and mobilities of information. In the case of the communities that participated, they were, in general, very interested in receiving visits and telling their stories. They also saw such work as very political, with the intention that in the future they could perhaps have access to some help from organizations or government agencies or things like that, right? Of course, I think that there are multiple ways of reading the word "fertilizer."

Through this project, I am interested in thinking about the Earth and the processes of revitalization of what we call nature, and how those processes of renewal between plants and animals and all kinds of beings generally challenge modern, western structures, such as the divisions between life and death and the relationships that are built hierarchically. Seeing and partaking in practices of renewal opens space for processes that are more circular, more regenerative, where it is a little more difficult to discern the boundaries between things. It is also in this context that I use the word fertilizer.

This idea of fertilizing mourning was also inspired by the practice of Yana Allpa, which is known as the black earth of Peru and Brazil. It was a traditional practice for the regeneration of the soil in the Amazon, in which organic remains were buried with remains of people who died and with remains of broken pottery. All this was burned in conditions of reduced oxygen, and a black soil was produced in which the carbon did not go out to the atmosphere but went back down into the earth. So, this soil was extremely nutrient-rich. And then, in recent years, archaeologists have been seeing that much of the

fertility of the Amazon has to do with that process, that practice of Yana Allpa, which was also made as an offering to the spirits of the earth. Here, we see how adding this spiritual dimension to the knowledge about agricultural technology and different ways of interacting with the ecosystem generated this richness that is now normally seen and painted as if it were virgin land, unexplored. But we see that there are people who have lived there for thousands of years and have been able to help make the place the bountiful place that it is now. At the same time, I want to mention that I do not want to idealize the Indigenous communities of Peru either, because they also have their own internal conflicts that respond to different interests.

Andrea: Yes! It is so important to interrupt that vision of an empty land, and nature as "natural" without human intervention.

I want to move towards the creative format of your project. As you have told me through our conversation, your project has multiple creative components, including the audio recordings, the videos, the drawings, and the virtual sanctuary. Why is it so necessary to fertilize mourning in the shape of a multimodal creative practice and project?

Eliana: I wrote a kind of manifesto for my thesis on *Fertilizing Mourning* as an idea or concept that I was offering to the world, and inviting those who want to think about it, experience it and explore it together.

Basically, I think and feel that it is a collective task, and that it is materialized through various means in this project. On the one hand, I began with the drawings, because they were something that for me has always been like a kind of first moment of approach to a subject, as a kind of recognition tool, but also for me, drawing has a lot of homage and offering for the kind of work and dedication involved in its making. The drawings and other media somehow had to have that language of homage and offering.

For the open call made by Driving the Human, I had proposed the videos with the 360 camera, because during the pandemic these virtual tours to museums and natural parks had become very fashionable. But normally, the 360-degree camera is on a tripod, so it doesn't move, it's always a still image… well, the camera rotates but it's this stationary eye that belongs to no one. At the same time the natural parks are places where people used to live who were then dispossessed of their land and were expelled with the spiel of preserving a place or with narratives that humans spoil nature, so then they have to be removed so that something beautiful can be preserved, while in fact everything around them is destroyed. I was interested in using the 360-degree camera to inhabit these places with my body and share the experience of knowledge that I had thanks to the people who hosted and received me. And to show, instead, how these people have been living in these places forever and have been able to live there without being the ones who destroyed the place. It was important for me to make use of this type of technology with which I am not at all familiar, and it was a very complex learning process. The whole process of

figuring things out was very hectic and adventurous. The audios were purposefully made for audiences to engage in the exhibition space with the concave boxes. And well, I have also been writing texts.

So, each part of the project involved finding a kind of form through which to translate what I experienced in the Peruvian Amazon to an audience member in the gallery space depending on the context in which it was created or in which it was going to be shown, and the people who were going to see it. I think that certain kinds of objects and media reach certain kinds of people and not others. But they are also, like, different ways of dealing with and experiencing things that are important to me, but I'm not sure how they should be done, right? It is to experiment a little bit in the making and try to find the reasons. And all this work also generates ethical and political questions, and somehow these different languages are giving me clues in different ways.

Figure 6. Amazonian children from Puerto Nuevo community filmed on 360-degree camera looking down on exhibition attendees. (photo: Eliana Otta)

Andrea: There are many reasons why I find your project so generative and, as you just mentioned, your project has diverse scales of relations: the ones that are outward, for those who engage with the audio recordings and the website, and the inward scale of relations that happen between you and your community collaborators.

When engaging with creative processes, especially in complex contexts that are often vulnerable to relations of extraction of histories and knowledge, how does your practice in fertilizing mourning reckon with, or reworld, or repair the relations with the communities you are collaborating with?

Eliana: Well, it's been a long process of learning and kind of trying things out.

The first approach to some of the communities was through a friend, Diego Vizcarra, when I was in the preliminary application stage for Driving the Human. In Europe it was still a bit complicated to travel because of the pandemic. I asked Diego to travel to some communities that I wanted to work with, and, for example, there was one where they said they didn't want to participate because the murder we were talking about was very recent and the family didn't want to talk about it. So, he [Diego] was the one who established the first dialogue with three communities and of those three, two did want to collaborate with the project.

I had tried a lot to coordinate with Indigenous organizations in Peru, but because of the pandemic and the different crises that Peru was going through, at that time, it was very difficult to coordinate from a distance. Finally, Diego took the initiative to knock on the door of each community. And when he arrived in the community "Nuevo Amanecer Hawai," after having walked about four hours, being warned on the way by people he met that this community did not exist, the people in the community were very happy to welcome him because they had never received a visitor who was not from there, and who wasn't from the government.

On that first visit, they began to tell Diego a lot about the fact that people around them said that they did not exist. And so, it was important for them to participate because they wanted to show that they did exist, and they saw these videos as a way of pointing out the work of visibility that they, and above all the leader Mauro Pío, had been trying to establish. In these four communities, each one has a very different history and agenda. Nuevo Amanecer and Unipacuyacu, which are the smallest, are the communities where my collaborator Nuno Cassola and I, with whom I traveled three times to Peru, established closer ties. In the communities of Puerto Nuevo and Sinchi Roca, which are larger communities, there was a lot of kindness and openness to collaborate and receive us, but because of the size, and because of internal conflicts among the members and different tensions that happen in larger places, we did not make such intimate links.

Figure 7. Beatríz Pío and Eliana Otta preparing "picante de cuy" (guinea pig spicy stew) at Beatríz's house in Nuevo Amanecer Hawai. (photo: Nuno Cassola)

From the beginning, a first question I asked myself was a bit like, what is the point of me dedicating myself to this project, when I am no longer living in Peru, when I live in Europe and when at the same time, being from Peru, I am not from the jungle, I am from Lima. However, if I were in Peru and not in Europe, I would not be able to access the funds with which I have been able to undertake this project the way I have done it. If I were in Lima, I would have had to do something much simpler, and I don't know if I would have been able, for example, to make four trips to each community, to record and show work-in-progress, to receive feedback and share the work again when everything was ready. All that is something that surely could not have been done. That material security, those resources, were what justified me doing the project from a distance, doing it from here, and doing it with financing from here [Europe].

And at the same time, it seemed important to me to do this work here because of the issue that I mentioned earlier; that is, when I have been participating in discussions and activities on climate change, and what is called ecology, other participants are usually very Eurocentric and anthropocentric in their orientation to the issues at stake, and they also demonstrate very little awareness of the number of worlds that have been disappearing in a more concentrated and accelerated way in the last five centuries of colonialism.

Figure 8. Walking with members of Nuevo Amanecer Hawai community, guided by Elvis and Víctor Pío, sons of the assassinated leader Mauro. (photo: Eliana Otta)

And then, being in Peru again, somehow, each ethical dilemma was negotiated in each community differently, precisely because each situation was different. For example, in three of the four communities, the second time we went to show what we had recorded on our first visit, they told us that they wanted to appear more obviously Indigenous, that they didn't look Indigenous enough in the videos we had made. They also told us that they wanted to wear typical clothing and asked that we record images where they were doing things more linked to their traditional knowledge of the house, fishing, and handicrafts. This also pointed to an interesting question about the representation and the type of image that one wants to generate and about what Indigeneity is. And how do we link ourselves, being external actors, to that context with that situation, right? But in these cases, of course, I accepted their suggestions, and we recorded more, and they always directed what they wanted to show and who was going to do what. In these situations, I put myself at the service of the vision they had of how they wanted to be shown, and that was for me a fairly obvious answer, but at some point, we discussed it with Nuno, my collaborator, because he found it a bit questionable that they were concerned about looking more Indigenous. But they also often explicitly said that the fact of appearing more Indigenous increased the chances that someone who saw the videos would later want to meet them or help them, or that this could have some kind of positive consequence in that sense, more concrete, material and political. This was an issue that appeared at an ethical level in the sense of representation.

Figure 9. Shooting day at Puerto Nuevo, with people showing their traditional clothes and ways of fishing. (photo: Eliana Otta)

Another thing that I questioned at some point – and we had it very much in mind when I was talking with Nuno from the beginning – was how to choose which equipment to work with. In Davi Kopenawa and Bruce Albert's book *The Falling Sky* (2013) and I think Jeremy Narby in *The Cosmic Serpent* (2009), they describe how in many of these communities the visitors, who are normally white people, are referred to as "merchandise men" because of the fact that they always arrive with all these mysterious and otherworldly objects. And Nuno and I, we were being very conscious that we were going to personify that. I was going to be a "merchandise woman" arriving with my camera and gadgets.

It was a circumstance that did not make me happy, but I had to sacrifice that concern because normally I would not have liked to see myself in that role, but for the project to be realized it had to be done. It was to think how to do it in the most discreet and least invasive way, with all the equipment being smaller and less ostentatious. At the same time, I always explained everything in each community from the beginning. In each case, there was an assembly where we were welcomed, and we explained what the project was about and what equipment we would use. And also, we made it clear that everyone had the right to say if they did not want to appear, or if they did not want something included, or that everyone could show only what they thought was pertinent. The process was always very conversational and consensual. In some cases,

there were interesting and rich conversations, and in other cases it was also fun to see that they didn't give us much importance to these concerns. It was like "yes, you do what you want." Sometimes when that happened, it would make me laugh because I have worked a lot with people in Peru, and in general I am used to working with people like that, but for Nuno this was a bit new. In a couple of meetings where we needed feedback after the videos, people would just say, "Ah, yes, it's nice," and he [Nuno] was expecting other kinds of comments because we had been working for months and to get only that feedback was felt as disappointing.

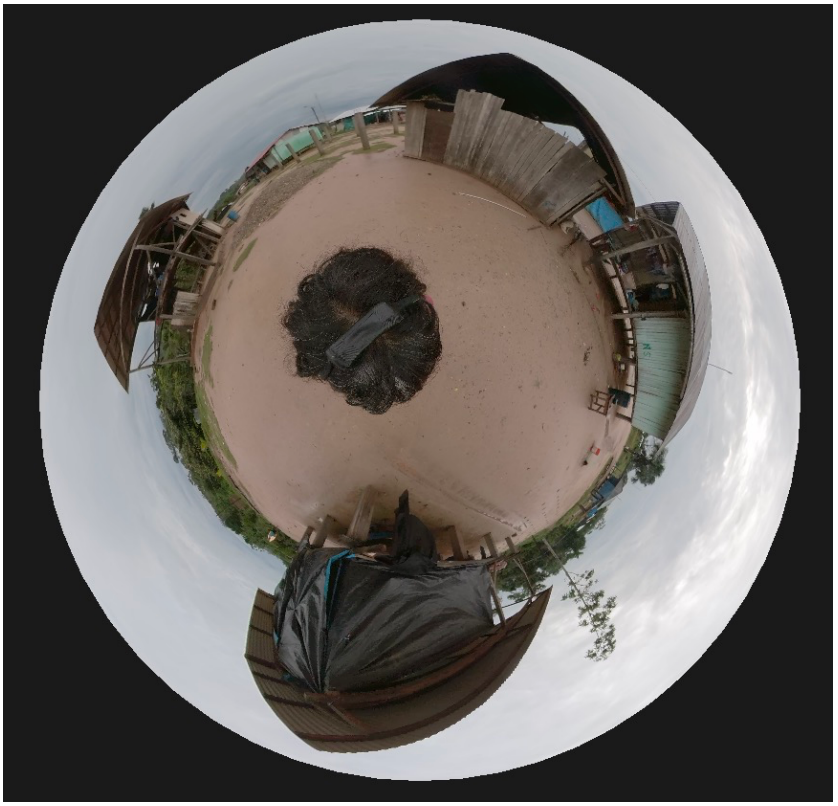

Figure 10. Walking in Puerto Nuevo, overhead view from the 360-degree camera on Eliana Otta's head. (photo: Eliana Otta)

Andrea: Sure, there's this idea that your interest in your work is felt equally by the groups you collaborate with, but that idea of participation and collaborative engagement also has levels and responses that are simple, less involved, and no less meaningful for that.

Eliana: Yes, of course. And then there was also the whole language dimension, because we communicated with people in Spanish and most people were bilingual, but we didn't speak Kakataibo, Ashaninka, or Shipibo. So, when we showed the videos, what always happened was that people were laughing their heads off because they were all making fun of each other. And we didn't understand anything. Then they would laugh and make a thousand jokes, and then they would say to us, "That's nice."

It was to be humble and accept that there are several dimensions that we are going to miss, no? And that we have no idea of how they perceive the project, and also how they perceive us.

Andrea: Exactly, the nuances of collaboration!

Thank you, Eliana, for taking the time to share and discuss your work. The audios and your project as a whole have so many threads and openings to engage with reckoning, repairing and reworlding.

Figure 11. An image created with 360-degree footage taken in Unipacuyacu. (photo: Eliana Otta)

References

Athanasiou, A. (2017). *Agonistic mourning: Political dissidence and the women in Black.* Edinburgh University Press.

Butler, J. (2004). *Precarious life: The powers of mourning and violence.* Verso.

Butler, J. (2009). *Frames of war: When is life grievable?* Verso.

Cunsolo, A.& Landman, K. (2017). M*ourning nature. Hope at the heart of ecological loss and grief.* McGill Queen's University Press.

Freud, S. (1917/1993). *Obras Completas*. Amorrortu.

Kopenawa, D., & Albert, B. (2013). *The falling sky: Words of a Yanomami Shaman*. Harvard University Press.
Leader, D. (2014). *La Moda Negra: Duelo, Melancolía y Depresión*. Sexto Piso.
Liboiron, M. (2021). Pollution Is Colonialism. Duke University Press.
Narby, J. (1999). *The cosmic serpent: DNA and the origins of knowledge*. Tarcher/Putnam.