



ENVIRONMENTAL HUMANITIES  
IN PRACTICE

## Rivers and Reconciliation

Elaborating the Socioecological Memory of War  
through Science and Arts-Based Practices

KRISTINA LYONS

*Department of Anthropology / School of Arts and Sciences, University of Pennsylvania, United States*

**Abstract** This article presents an ethnographic and participatory action research project to reconstruct the “socioecological memory” of the Mandur River watershed in the Colombian Amazon. The objective of this project was to create conditions for community dialogues over the territorial ordering, recovery, and conservation of the watershed in the midst of ongoing socio-environmental conflicts. The author introduces the proposal to engage in what grassroots organizations call “profound reconciliation” along with the ethical stakes of reconciliatory processes that tend to human and more-than-human relations damaged by the interconnected dynamics of structural violence and decades of war. The author presents the environmental humanities-based methodologies that emerged in the collective process to elaborate the memory of the Mandur. The article also discusses the importance of fostering spaces for bettering conflict and offers reflections about the challenges posed for public engaged scholarship when a post-peace accord transition shifts toward the perpetuation of violence and militarized forms of conservation. Scientific and arts-based practices provided distinct evidentiary and speculative tools for analyzing the current conditions of the watershed and imagining future reparative strategies. The article argues that these methods allowed communities to not only diagnose the problems at hand but also hesitantly ask “What else is possible?” in a context of economic precarity, chronic insecurity, and institutional omission.

**Keywords** socioecological memory of war, profound reconciliation, bettering conflict, community-based watershed restoration, Colombian Amazon

**N**eriet Penna, the president of the communal action committee, ushered me to a more secluded corner behind the rural schoolhouse. She spoke in a low tone about the worsening water quality of the Mandur River flowing behind us. Over the last eight years, downstream communities had noticed increased sediment in the river. Bathing and washing cloths had become an ironic experience of *empolvándose* or *embarrándose* (getting

dusty, or getting covered in mud), she said. The cattle had grown sick. Fish were observed refusing to enter the river from the tributary creeks and streams. They turned around and backtracked against the current. Women reported skin outbreaks and a residual oil coating their freshly washed hair. Children were perennially sick because they continued to swim and play in the river given that it was their most immediate recreational area. Neriet's rural community, Galilea, had no other consistent water source for human or animal consumption. Many of the women applied drops of lemon juice to standing water to force as much sediment as possible to sink to the bottom so as to skim water off the top to drink and cook with.

The community of Galilea is located in the rural municipality of Puerto Guzmán, Putumayo, in the Colombian Amazon. It was reduced to three or four families during the decades when crop duster planes doused not only illicit coca plants but also entire landscapes with Monsanto's herbicide glyphosate, a central strategy of the US-Colombia war on drugs.<sup>1</sup> These families endured incursions by two different guerrilla groups since the 1980s and years of retaliatory violence on the part of the Colombian military.<sup>2</sup> A little more than one hundred families had returned or migrated to the area since the 2016 peace accord signed between the national government and then the largest and longest-running guerrilla organization in the Western hemisphere, the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia-Popular Army (FARC-EP). They soon discovered that their sole water source was dying, a river becoming a sand bank (fig. 1).

The culprit, Neriet explained, was the illegal gold mining that had intensified among the upper areas of the watershed. This was not a case of large-scale destructive plundering caused by industrial open-pit mining. Neither was it an instance of molecular-level toxic residues that result from practices of extracting fine gold that often include the use of mercury. The situation had to do with digging. After decades of traditional surface mining, it was necessary for miners to dig down six or seven feet with excavators and dredgers to access the remaining gold deposits. The arrival of the machinery around 2012 changed everything. Neriet's assessment of the situation was shared among all the residents I met living in the middle and lower areas of the Mandur given the widespread acknowledgment that illegal mining was taking place. Yet the fear they felt to denounce the worsening sedimentation of the river was palpable. It was unclear to them who owned the machinery. They wondered if reconfigured narco-trafficking networks and dissident armed groups made up of former FARC members, paramilitaries, and other criminal actors that had proliferated since the signing of the peace agreement were extorting the mining sector.<sup>3</sup> At the same time, these same mid- and down-river communities made a living from cattle ranching, timber extraction, illicit coca

1. Lyons, "Chemical Warfare in Colombia."

2. Cancimance López, *Echar raíces en medio*.

3. Since the formal demobilization of the FARC, dissident groups—the 1st Front of the FARC and, currently, the Carolina Ramírez Front—have operated in Puerto Guzmán and are engaged in territorial disputes with the Sinaloa cartel for control over narco-trafficking routes and the cocaine trade. See Unidad Investigativa, "Los Sinaloa."



Figure 1. Downstream view of the Mandur River in Puerto Guzmán, Putumayo, September 2018. Photograph by the author.

cultivation, and the production of plantain and yuca. Their livelihoods contributed to deforestation with lasting impacts on the water quality, quantity, aquatic life, and biodiversity of the territory.

This article presents an ethnographic and participatory action research project that a colleague, Jorge Luis Guzmán, and I coordinated to support the elaboration of what we called the “socioecological memory” of the Mandur River watershed. The objective of this project, which ran from March 2018 to January 2020, was to accompany communities to create conditions for dialogues over the potential territorial ordering, recovery, and conservation of the watershed in the midst of ongoing socio-environmental conflicts. To engage in this project, we turned to transdisciplinary environmental humanities methodologies that combine science and arts-based practices. In our case, this included activities like water testing, georeferencing maps, and conducting public health surveys alongside drawing, crafting pop-up books, making social cartographies, and developing *radionovelas* (radio dramas). In line with critical interdisciplinary scholarship questioning its methods and forms of research practice, we asked ourselves what different modes of making and communicating were necessary to engage polarized rural publics.<sup>4</sup> We reflected on what curators Tali and Astahovska term the role of art in

4. Jungnickel, *Transmissions*; Lury, *Routledge Handbook of Interdisciplinary Research Methods*.

“communicating trauma and difficult pasts” and the potential of arts-based and scientific practices to act as distinct forms of “remembering” and “dialogue.”<sup>5</sup> In the case of the Mandur, these pasts involved not only human stories but shared stories of conviviality, transformation, and loss between people, trees, birds, fish, sediment, minerals, and water, among other beings and riverine elements.

Our goal in collaborating with the communities of the Mandur was to foment alternatives to militarized conservation strategies, or what Olarte frames as modes of “territorial pacification” that have intensified in Colombia after the signing of the peace accords.<sup>6</sup> In addition, we recognized the operational limits of Reciprocal Agreements for Water (ARA) that are being promoted across several Andean countries. These strategies tend to rely on monetary incentives paid to upriver water guardians by downriver water consumers to guarantee the provision of a vital resource.<sup>7</sup> In the Mandur River watershed, we found ourselves in a context where the right to work of some communities appeared to directly clash with the right to water of others.

More than attempting to reach a temporary settlement between these priorities, it was necessary to foster spaces for the articulation of frustration, disagreement, and “dissent.”<sup>8</sup> As we collectively imagined modes of reconciliation that might complicate antagonistic binaries between downriver “victims” and upstream “victimizers,” the role of memory became increasingly important—not only the memories of human populations in their attempts to reconstruct how a watershed became degraded but also the remembering of rivers, their material force, conjuring of affect, and continuous search to return.<sup>9</sup> The elaboration of memories became a way to cultivate a sense of shared responsibility and attune our collective sensibilities to the presences that manifest through absence.<sup>10</sup> Scientific and arts-based practices provided evidentiary and speculative tools for analyzing the current conditions of the watershed and imagining future reparative strategies. These methods allowed us to not only diagnose the problems at hand but to also hesitantly ask “What else is possible?” in a context of economic precarity, chronic insecurity, and institutional omission.<sup>11</sup>

In what follows, I first introduce the interethnic riverine communities of the Mandur and trace the emergence of the socio-environmental conflicts impacting the

5. Tali and Astahovska, “How to Talk about Cultural Trauma”; Savíc-Bojanić and Kalemaj, “Art and Memory as Reconciliation Tool?”

6. Olarte-Olarte, “From Territorial Peace to Territorial Pacification.”

7. For a description of ARA strategies promoted by the Bolivian-based NGO Fundación Natura, see “Establecer acuerdos recíprocos por agua,” Fundación Natura, <http://www.naturabolivia.org/establecer-acuerdos-agua/> (accessed November 2, 2022).

8. Tironi, “Dissenting.”

9. Toni Morrison writes, “All water has a perfect memory and is forever trying to get back to where it was.” Morrison, *Site of Memory*, 99.

10. I think here with Ann Grodzins Gold and Bhoju Ram Gujar’s reflections about remembering trees and the presences of (absent) woods, *In the Time of Trees and Sorrow*, and also Yael Navarro-Yashin’s reflections on materiality and the phantasmatic in the aftermath of war in *The Make-Believe Space*.

11. van Dooren, *Wake of Crows*, 162.

watershed. The situation in Puerto Guzmán represents a microcosm of the kinds of conflicts affecting peripheral regions of Colombia during its post-peace accord transition. By transition, I refer to the international postconflict transitional apparatus adopted by Colombia's national government to operationalize the 2016 peace agreement that includes a truth commission, a unit for the search for disappeared persons, and a transitional justice tribunal. Next, I explain the proposal to engage in what grassroots organizations call "profound reconciliation," and I outline the environmental humanities-based methodologies that emerged in our process to elaborate the socioecological memory of the Mandur River. I discuss the importance of fostering spaces for bettering conflict, as well as the ethical stakes of reconstructing socioecological memory when reconciliation becomes a proposal to tend to human and nonhuman relations damaged by the interconnected dynamics of structural violence and decades of war. In addition, I offer reflections about the challenges posed for public engaged scholarship when a post-peace accord transition shifts toward the perpetuation of violence and militarized forms of conservation.

#### **When the Right to Work Clashes with the Rights of and to Water**

The Mandur River forms part of the macro watershed of the mighty Caquetá River in the Colombian Amazon. It flows for 63 kilometers and has an approximate area of 48,950 hectares, crossing two-thirds of the municipality of Puerto Guzmán. With 4,656 square kilometers, Puerto Guzmán is the second largest of the thirteen municipalities in the state of Putumayo, which borders Ecuador and Peru in the southwestern corner of Colombia (fig. 2). Eighty percent of the municipality's estimated population of twenty-five thousand people are rural, and there is practically no phone signal outside the municipal town center. The road system is limited and mobility depends on the weather. The majority of communities are without electricity, and no one has access to piped potable water. According to the registries of the rural community action councils (JAC)—the central organizational structure of campesino communities and urban neighborhoods—approximately four thousand JAC members live in the area of the watershed.

The Mandur is an interethnic inhabited watershed with multilayered and multidirectional tensions and conflicts between different sectors. Most of these groups experience economic precarity and intersecting forms of marginalization in what is labeled a sixth category municipality, which refers to low population density and scarce economic resources. This reality makes a model for community-based water agreements reliant on citizen payment for water stewardship and provision largely untenable. "One feels completely adrift out here. Isolated," Neriet confided to me, gesturing toward the precarious wooden suspension bridge that was the single entrance and exit connecting Galilea to an unpaved road forty-five minutes away from the municipal center. "Any armed actor could just come in and . . ." She did not need to finish the sentence.

I began ethnographic fieldwork and to engage in participatory action research projects with peri-urban and rural communities in Putumayo in 2004. Jorge Luis Guzmán, who is an information systems specialist, and I initiated our first collaborative project

Figure 2. Map locating the Mandur River watershed in the Colombian Amazon. Courtesy of Gustavo Rebolledo.



in 2014 to investigate the impacts of US-Colombia counternarcotic policy on the agroforestry projects of rural residents in Puerto Guzmán. The municipality is named after his family. His parents, who arrived in 1958, are considered the first *colonos* (settlers). Their children, including Jorge Luis, started a nonprofit organization in 2018 called Fundación ItarKa that is dedicated to recovering the forests that their family cleared and converted into open pasture upon their arrival to the region. The inauguration of the unpaved road to Puerto Guzmán in 1975 changed the future of the area, bringing *colonos* from neighboring states, families displaced from the interior of the country by the dynamics of the armed conflict, and individuals participating in timber extraction, the search for animal skins, agriculture, cattle ranching, and eventually illicit coca production along with illegal armed actors.<sup>12</sup>

Beyond the campesino populations who settled around the Mandur River, the economies of the communities in the upper areas of the watershed have historically depended on mining. The mining sector is made up of a complex chain of actors, including La Guaca (an organization founded by a group of landowners who allow illegal gold mining to occur on their properties), owners of the machinery, workers, and *barequeros* (gold panners).<sup>13</sup> Communities in the upper watershed argue for their constitutionally

12. Uribe Martínez, "Puerto Guzmán."

13. According to data provided to me through personal communication in 2020 by the municipal secretary of planning, 619 people were officially registered with the Ministry of Mining and Energy as gold panners.

recognized right to work and have successfully organized to resist military incursions and attempts to arrest and prosecute them for their participation in an illegal economic activity. Most of the mining sector recognized that the introduction of machinery contributed to the degradation of the Mandur and that the resulting sediment unfairly harmed their downstream neighbors. They remembered how different commanders of the 32nd Front of the FARC-EP inconsistently regulated the environmental impacts of their mining by obligating them to use filters to reduce the amount of sediment entering the river. However, they signaled that downstream communities were responsible for the heavy deforestation of the watershed and also had a role in the river's diminished water quantity and quality. The Mandur River along with its diverse riverine flora and fauna manifested reactions to this degradation, growing narrower, disappearing from the river banks, and interrupting the everyday activities of watershed inhabitants.

Three *consejo comunitarios* (Afro-Colombian ethnic entities that govern collective territory) located in the watershed area are in the midst of administrative processes to obtain state recognition and collective land titles. The Afro-Colombian population has constitutionally recognized rights to engage in their ancestral livelihoods as small-scale miners. Only some of the gold panners in Puerto Guzmán are Afro-Colombian, and many of them are female headed households that were displaced during the official years of armed conflict. Leaders of these groups were in tension with La Guaca because they argued that the only individuals with legal rights to mine in Puerto Guzmán are members of the Afro-descendant community. In addition, members of the *Nasa guardia indígena* (Indigenous guard) that monitors and exerts legal authority over their collective territories had confiscated several excavators and dredges from the miners, considering themselves to be guardians of the river's right to live, flourish, and return within their *resguardos*.

At the same time, mid- and downriver communities argued in defense of their human right to water while also reluctantly acknowledging that their heavy deforestation of the banks of the river to engage in illicit coca cultivation and intensive cattle ranching was also to blame for the Mandur's current conditions. Their initial reaction to the river's sedimentation was to present a handwritten petition to the mayor and the regional environmental authority, Corpoamazonia. During this same period, they formed a committee to pursue dialogues with their upstream neighbors. The committee quickly disbanded due to rumors of threats of retaliatory violence on the part of the mining sector. Their attempts to organize at the community level and to scale up to request significant government actions were frustrated. When Jorge Luis and I began to visit downriver communities, they were demanding that the military enter the upper watershed to confiscate the machinery and arrest miners before they would consider reforesting the riverbanks, even while acknowledging that the river had grown quieter and more homogenous, less populated by birds and fish, with less shade and fewer microclimates. Downstream residents hinged their hopes on the intervention of *bur-bujas ambientales* (environmental bubbles), which formed part of a national strategy to enhance control over deforestation, illegal mining, and the trafficking of fauna and

flora through rearranged interinstitutional alliances between environmental authorities, police, military, and the District Attorney's office. The militarization of conservation has been a principal state response to the escalation in environmental crimes during the post-peace accord era that notably commenced with the military-led Operation Artemisa in 2019.<sup>14</sup>

Simultaneously, downstream cattle ranchers who engaged in slash and burn techniques to expand their pastures were warned by the military that they would be arrested if they continued to deforest. Deforestation is a particularly pressing problem in Puerto Guzmán. In 2018, Colombia's Institute of Hydrology, Meteorology, and Environmental Studies reported that it was the fifth most deforested municipality in the country. Threats of criminalization intensified after the Colombian government committed to net zero deforestation in the Amazon during the Paris Climate Accords and the Supreme Court dictated Sentence 4360 in 2018, recognizing the country's Amazon as a subject of rights.<sup>15</sup> Despite these demonstrations of national and legal concern for the future of the country's Amazonian forests, an area constituting more than 2,200 hectares of the Mandur River watershed was granted in a concession to the multinational oil company Gran Tierra Energy Company, ignoring rural communities' political efforts to prohibit this economic activity in their municipality.

### Profound Reconciliation

After witnessing the worsening water quality of the Mandur River and listening to the perspectives of Neriet and other social leaders, the inspiration to elaborate the socioecological memory of the watershed came from the work of the grassroots environmental coalition CENSAT Agua Viva. Since before the signing of the peace accords, CENSAT called for methodological strategies to engage in "profound reconciliation."<sup>16</sup> Their proposal emerged from the idea that narrow and polarized binaries between victims and perpetrators may be insufficient analytics for peace-building efforts, given the intersectional nature of ongoing structural violence.<sup>17</sup> It is also premised on the understanding that over five decades of war not only produced human victims but also definitely ruptured human and other-than-human continuums of life and death. These harmed relations now require reconciliatory and reparative attention. In Colombia, there is growing public and legal debate over the way soils, rivers, forests, and territories are not only scenes, but also actors and casualties of war.<sup>18</sup> Such an approach, largely achieved by Indigenous, campesino, and Afro-Colombian victims organizations, departs from the

14. See Presidencia de la República, "Con la puesta en marcha."

15. Lyons, "Rights of the Amazon."

16. CENSAT Agua Viva, *Memoria ambiental y reconciliación*.

17. Shaw, Waldrof, and Hazen, *Local Transitional Justice*.

18. Lyons, *Vital Decomposition*; CNMH, *Narrativas de la guerra*; Lyons, Pinto-García, and Ruiz-Serna, "Hacia una comprensión"; Roa and Urea, *La cuestión ambiental*; Rodríguez Garavito, Rodríguez Franco, and Durán Crane, *La paz ambiental*; Wilches-Chaux, *Base ambiental para la paz*.



conventional treatment of war crimes and mass violence that primarily focuses on humans as actors and victims within liberal legal frameworks concerned with the defense and violation of human rights and international humanitarian law.<sup>19</sup> This includes previous forms of understanding economic violence and disputes over what have been predominantly conceptualized as natural resources in postconflict and peace-building paradigms.<sup>20</sup>

Our project in the Mandur was motivated by the *sentipensar* (feel-think) sociological praxis and research-activist approach organized by scholarly practitioners such as Orlando Fals-Borda.<sup>21</sup> We built upon the long trajectory of conducting historical memory workshops in Colombia with communities in urban and rural conflict zones and the creation of social cartographies and participatory action research methods throughout Latin America more generally.<sup>22</sup> We worked in collaboration with community leaders to define research priorities and prepare accessible materials in the genres and formats most useful to them. We focused on cultivating conditions for dialogue and collective reflection without guarantees that this would lead to permanent changes in livelihood practices or ethical relations with the watershed. The communities themselves had attempted to embark on a similar process that was now locked in a stalemate. Along with Neriet and other social leaders, we questioned if remembering the emotions and potentiality invested in this past initiative might motivate a cautious yet renewed sense of solidarity.

The scenario in the Mandur required engaging in what Zoe Todd calls “watershed-level analysis” that brings to the fore the intraconnectivity of a watershed in all its socio-ecological dimensions.<sup>23</sup> This involves the familial or kinship ties of neighboring human residents who may come to portray each other antagonistically as well as the relations of responsibility and reciprocity between a broad array of riverine beings and elements. In our case, we began by inviting downstream residents to imagine what would occur if the Mandur’s course was reversed, flowing from the deforested Amazonian plains toward the more forested Andean foothills. One conclusion was that there would be no water flowing at all, destabilizing initial assumptions that water quality and quantity were solely determined in a unidirectional manner from up to downriver. Watershed-level thinking entails reimagining spatial and governance scales, given that bodies of water exceed jurisdictional thresholds between municipalities, states, rural/urban divisions, and the borders of interethnic territories. It implies complex modes of decision-making

19. Ruiz-Serna, “El territorio como víctima”; Lyons, “Rights of the Amazon”; Lyons, “Nature and Territories as Victims.”

20. Bruch, Muffett, and Sandra, *Governance*; Cusato, “Back to the Future?”

21. Escobar, *Sentipensar con la Tierra*; Fals Borda, *Ciencia propia y colonialismo intelectual*; Rappaport, *Cowards Don't Make History*.

22. CNMH, *Remembering and Narrating Conflict*; Riaño-Alcalá, “Remembering Place”; Riaño-Alcalá and Baines, “Archive in the Witness.”

23. Todd, “From a Fishy Place.”

that, while prone to friction and conflict, can provide opportunities for creative and community-level approaches to their ordinance, recovery, and care.<sup>24</sup> This said, it is also important to balance community-level accountability with governmental responsibility, so as not to burden already marginalized populations and ignore long-standing structural issues leading to the problems that need to be addressed.<sup>25</sup> Given the lack of response from both municipal and regional authorities and people's general mistrust of institutional actors, our project focused on community needs and autonomous citizen-led forms of action.

Jorge Luis and I focused on the elaboration of memory to facilitate the remembering of the Mandur River rather than focusing solely on the environmental history of the territory or residents' recollections of their everyday and organizational processes in the watershed. Elsewhere, I have referred to the way life retains the memories of harm committed against it as "evidentiary ecologies."<sup>26</sup> Ecologies harbor traces of the wounds of violence even when regrowth and other restorative processes are underway given the impossibility of doing otherwise and in spite of the partiality of their recovery. Campesinos in Putumayo taught me how they engage in practices of *lecturaleza* ("readinature") or learning to follow "nature"—not in the biomimetic sense of replicating or imitating an object external to oneself, but something closer to what Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari conceptualized in terms of following and entering into the flow of "matter-in-movement," of following what is itself still in the making and of relating to moving bodies, both human and other-than-human.<sup>27</sup> Evolutionary ecologist William Balée has written that forests configure a great archaeological archive that harbors inscriptions, stories, and memories of their socio-natural design in the living vegetation itself.<sup>28</sup> A similar idea informs the work of Eyal Weizman and the Forensic Architecture research agency in their endeavor to generate evidence of state violence by observing the built environment and landscapes as mediums of inscription.<sup>29</sup>

Our project with the communities of the Mandur focused on tracing the patterns of landscape transformation and meandering shifts in the river's course as sediment, land, and water negotiated back and forth to literally hold ground, reclaim territory, or give way. In the process, the communities reconstructed a timeline of their efforts to settle and build livelihoods in the watershed, including the socio-environmental impacts of the armed conflict and its nexus with the geopolitical interventions of the war on drugs. The elaboration of these memories attuned us to the multispecies relations that make riverine life. These now damaged or absent relations relayed stories about

24. Grigg, "Misalignment of Watersheds." See also Bocarejo, "Gobernanza del agua" for another example of community-level water management in Colombia.

25. Kimura and Kinchy, *Science by the People*.

26. Lyons, "Chemical Warfare in Colombia."

27. Lyons, *Vital Decomposition*; Deleuze and Guattari, *Thousand Plateaus*, 373.

28. Balée, *Cultural Forests of Amazonia*.

29. Weizman, *Forensic Architecture*.

not only the roots of ongoing conflicts but also speculative visions of different futures for the watershed and its human and more-than-human inhabitants.

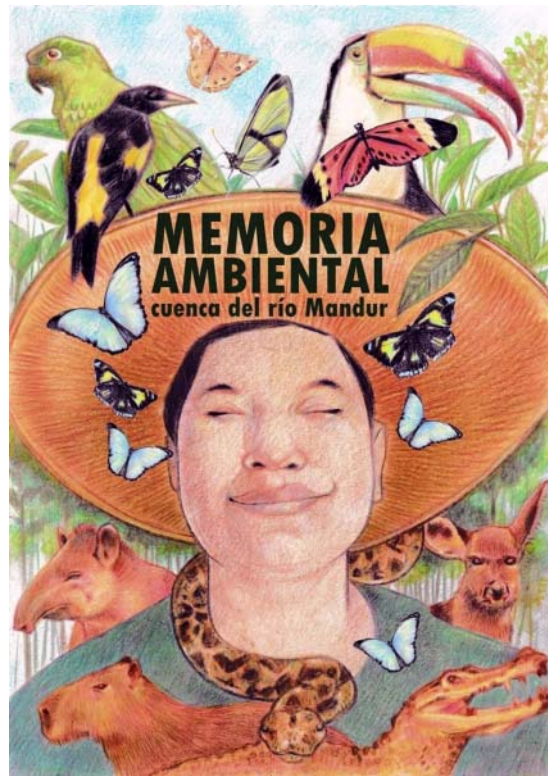
### **Elaborating Socioecological Memory through Scientific and Arts-Based Practices**

When organizing the series of memory workshops with rural communities that had never engaged in such a collective oral or written exercise, we made sure to ask social leaders to invite community elders. This was often difficult, given the forced displacement caused by decades of war, informal land tenure, high rates of migration, and more recent arrival of many families to the Mandur. We attempted to strike a balance between the participation of men and women due to the gendered division of labor among most households. We also invited children and youth to attend in order to incorporate the transgenerational transfer of memories and conflicts.<sup>30</sup> It was crucial to think carefully about the location of each workshop and to hold them in the upper, middle, and lower areas of the watershed with Indigenous and campesino populations, as well as with the diverse groups that formed part of the mining sector. These workshops initially included drawing timelines of important socioecological events, maps of the *veredas* (territorial subdivisions in rural zones), and engaging in a comparative inventory of the flora and fauna as remembered when residents first migrated or were born in the area and the flora and fauna that currently existed. Since many people had difficulty remembering specific dates, the timelines were loosely assembled and based on memories of the diminution in the presence of particular plants, trees, and animals, changing land use practices associated with the arrival of armed groups and impacts of militarization, and community-led building of basic infrastructure, such as schools, roadways, and the founding of JAC.

We also hiked along and boated down the Mandur with residents who told us stories about their changing relationships with the river as well as riverine transformations. We recorded soundscapes of the watershed, tuning in to what was no longer present. The act of collectively remembering the diversity of fish that used to inhabit the river, the number of wetlands and quality of the water, the diverse sounds of birds that used to be heard, sightings of turtles and pumas, hectares of primary gallery forest, or the ways that specific varieties of trees had lined and covered the riverbanks, so much so that they needed to be trimmed back to render the river navigable, opened up the possibility for the articulation of affective attachments that transcended understandings of the river as simply a water source. People begin to share the reasons why they first settled and also remained in the Mandur despite years of violence: fishing, bathing, mobility, beauty, *paseos de olla* (river picnic excursions), the cooler microclimates of the forested riverbanks, the wild animals they hunted and shared the watershed with, and access to water. At the same time, remembering these socioecological relations and loss of many tree varieties and animals, as well as the impossibility to engage in what

30. For discussions about transgenerational transfer of trauma and memory, see Crapanzano, *Harkis*.

Figure 3. Cover of the timeline of the socioecological memories of the Mandur River watershed created in collaboration with the artist Marco Pinto, December 2018. Photograph by the author.



had been everyday activities, provoked some elders to publicly process their personal traumas of armed conflict. This was the first time they shared these ordeals and violent memories with younger generations and more recent neighbors in their communities.

After the first round of workshops, a visiting artist from Bogotá, Marco Pinto, collaborated with us to produce drawings of the timelines and inventories of existing and now absent fauna and flora (fig. 3). We also worked with the volunteer visiting artist group *Mundos de Papel* to design pop-up books with students and Indigenous communities. These activities resulted in popular education materials for the local schools, community centers, and JAC to sustain conversations about the present and future situation of the Mandur. Arts-based practices facilitated ways for youth who had no memory of a healthy river to speculatively imagine a future watershed full of fish, birds, monkeys, deer, recreational opportunities, and clean sources of water for human and animal consumption. They materialized these visions of a recovered watershed in the pop-up book pages (fig. 4).

Hand-drawn maps rendered visible the connections between rural communities and the semi-urban municipal capital, complicating initial reductive binaries between solely upstream miners and downstream victims of contamination. When drawing socioecological cartographies of the river, it became evident to the communities that the municipal dump was most likely leaking contaminants into the Mandur (fig. 5). In addition, we collectively realized that sewage waters produced by squatter settlements—some of which were constructed by families displaced because they lived in risk zones



Figure 4. A page of a pop-up book created by students at the Rural Educative Institute, Las Perlas, Puerto Guzmán, November 2018. Photograph by the author.

vulnerable to the seasonal flooding of the Caquetá River, others due to the dynamics of the armed conflict—were not being properly managed. Assuming arts-based practices as a mode of “dialogue” allowed for a focus on an ongoing process to acknowledge multiple truths without forcing conflict resolution or necessarily mutual understanding. It allowed people to come together to encounter each other’s truths as well as their shared desires for the degraded watershed to be otherwise.

We combined these art-based techniques with a second round of basic water testing. In addition, we designed a public health survey with support from the municipal secretary of health. Our intention was to build correlational data between illness and environmental stressors and to chart the origins and pathways of possible contaminants of the river. Because two educational institutions were located downriver, a basic water test had been conducted by the provincial secretary of health, but the school principal never received the results.<sup>31</sup> The new water test conducted by this same office did not confirm more than the obvious fact that the water was not apt for human or animal consumption, something that residents, cows, and fish already knew well. Both up- and

31. In December 2018, I submitted a request to Corpoamazonia for integral water testing of the river, following the seven parameters established in the National Policy of Water Quality. I received a reply in June 2019 indicating that the institution did not have the technical capacity to conduct such a study nor was it able to engage in testing due to the crisis in public order. The response also explained that basic sanitation issues fall under the jurisdiction of the municipality and not the environmental authority.

Figure 5. Drawing the watershed in Galilea, Puerto Guzmán, October 2018. Photograph by the author.



downriver communities kept an archive of the petitions they drew up and the agreements they had reached with distinct government entities during their prior efforts to find institutional solutions to the degradation of the Mandur. It was important to gather and collectively analyze these documents in order to understand why they had not led to any concrete state actions. Much like the arts-based activities, engaging in these more technical exercises and document revisions created a collective space outside of everyday routines where people could reflect on the conflicts they felt embroiled in and analyze their structural roots.<sup>32</sup> These kinds of strategic activities also created a relative sense of alliance-building and shared concern.<sup>33</sup>

After a few months of engaging in these workshops, we began to notice a gradual shift in the way downstream communities articulated the problem of the Mandur. “Let’s speak truthfully,” several of the community leaders said, encouraging other residents. “Conditions exist to talk with the mining sector. We should unite to avoid conflicts,” other participants said. Rather than only blame the upstream miners, these communities began to reflect on their daily practices and to situate their role in the deforestation of not only

32. Ann-Ware, Lauterjung, and Harmer McSolvin, “Arts-Based Adult Learning.”

33. Shank and Schirch, “Strategic Arts-Based Peacebuilding.”

the river but also its tributary streams and wetlands. The workshops, of course, were not intended to resolve the structural conditions that compelled families to work in illegal activities or legal livelihoods that provoked deforestation. Our preliminary objective was to create conditions for pause and collective reflection with the chance that this might potentiate renewed dialogues between residents who were reluctant to venture up- or downriver, some even claiming that they needed to carry arms to defend themselves from their neighbors.

### **Bettering rather than Eliminating Conflict**

Between October and December 2018, Jorge Luis and I invited upper, middle, and downriver residents to participate in four community dialogues held in Puerto Guzmán, Galilea, and Santa Lucia. At certain moments during these preliminary encounters, visceral tensions exploded between participants. Discourses returned to laying blame on upstream miners and the demand to eliminate gold mining altogether. Several downstream leaders refused to sign attendance sheets because they said that their signatures would represent a tacit approval of mining. During the first dialogue, a group of representatives from the mining sector arrived late and did not introduce themselves by name and community. This almost shut down the conversation and briefly reanimated a climate of fear that people might be infiltrating the meetings to later signal the *gente bocona* (loudmouths). It was necessary to stop the meeting and speak transparently about people's apprehensions and mistrust in order to agree to make changes in behavior and foment mutual respect. It was also important to acknowledge all the sentiments expressed—resentment, distrust, and disagreement—without attempting to curtail them or treat them as obstacles that simply needed to be overcome or, worse yet, as socially pathological. We were motivated by the political and philosophical reflections of Estanislao Zuleta, who wrote, "A better society is one capable of having better conflicts. Of knowing them and containing them. Of living not despite of them, but productively and intelligently in them."<sup>34</sup> Along the lines of political philosophical and feminist thinking, we assumed bettering conflict to entail inhabiting these disagreements while treating the other as an adversary with legitimate concerns that require serious listening and response practice.<sup>35</sup>

Passionate expression and moral protest are inevitable aspects of collective memory work. Memory is always already a composite of dynamically interrelated and conflicted understandings that depend on strong emotions, high stakes, and debated articulations just as much as constructions of shared recollections.<sup>36</sup> Coalition-building potential among residents depended on creating space for transparent engagements over these disagreements, contradictions, and diverse realities. During the course of

34. Zuleta, *Elogia de la dificultad*, 88.

35. Rancière, *Disagreement*; Mouffe, *On the Political*; Stengers, "Cosmopolitical Proposal."

36. Schwab, *Haunting Legacies*.

the community dialogues, downstream residents remembered how they felt living under the gun of the counternarcotic police and crop duster planes that had aerially fumigated the territory with glyphosate. They began to ask themselves how militarizing the watershed in official times of peace would be different from the criminalizing tactics of the war on drugs. Similarly, upstream communities publicly expressed how they would feel if it were their cattle that had to drink contaminated water or if their families had to consume water, wash clothes, or bathe in a river laden with sediment after passing the mining sites. While around thirty-five social leaders attended the first dialogue, over three hundred attended the fourth gathering. Along with the expression of grievances, these encounters facilitated mutual recognition and validation of concerns. In the process, provisional proposals among participants began to take shape. Perhaps most importantly, community leaders affirmed their motivation to, as they said, “keep meeting to dialogue.” They added, “We want to collaborate to build solutions.”

To a certain extent, these dialogues cultivated a growing awareness that all residents have constitutional rights, and hence, obligations to engage in the territorial ordering of their municipalities. This includes determining the use of soils and respecting the social and ecological function of soils and property as well as their integral roles in the protection of forest cover and water sources. The dialogues produced the first exchanges between campesino and Indigenous communities to delimit their respective territories and discuss the different visions they had for inhabiting and organizing life in the watershed. In addition, the Ministry of Culture Seed Fund for citizen radio programs awarded a 2019 grant to our project, *Rivers and Reconciliation*. The project was designed in collaboration with anthropologist and broadcaster, Ángela Jiménez, and the team at the community radio station in Puerto Guzmán, Amazonia Estereo. It produced a series of community radio programs, including *radionovelas*, based on the socioecological memories of the Mandur and also funded a training program for community journalists in Puerto Guzmán (fig. 6).<sup>37</sup>

### **Ethical Stakes of Elaborating the Socioecological Memory of War**

In line with ethnographic work examining how life flourishes in the aftermath of ecological destruction, our project with the communities of the Mandur created modest manifestations of what S. Eben Kirskey, Nicholas Shapiro, and Maria Brodine called “biocultural hope.”<sup>38</sup> Scholars have argued that the elaboration of memory is a social exercise in the present toward the past with a vision of the future. This exercise is always from situated positions that are based on remains, wounds, affects, intergenerational stories, and present political needs.<sup>39</sup> In the wake of mass violence, the idea in dominant memory

37. A soundbite of *Rivers and Reconciliation* can be found at <https://soundcloud.com/user-60326252>.

38. Tsing, “Blasted Landscapes”; Kirksey, Shapiro, and Brodine, “Hope in Blast Landscapes.”

39. Gnecco, “Historias hegemónicas, historias disidentes”; Zambrano and Gnecco, “Introducción.”





Figure 6. Amazonia Estereo radio station. Photograph by the author.

discourses is that the reconstruction and verbal enunciation of memory instills a rational and progressive historical self-consciousness that is assumed to be inimical to the repetition of such acts.<sup>40</sup> This makes little sense in Colombia, where a postconflict scenario does not exist and official truth and reconciliation processes are limited and ongoing. Even when alternative historical memory projects have made shifts toward the local, place-based standpoints and context-sensitive issues or encounters, they have not often contemplated how actors other than humans retain and manifest memories of prolonged mass violence or the complex and enduring socioecological impacts of armed conflict.

Grassroots proposals to take seriously processes of “profound reconciliation” move beyond conventional reconciliatory frameworks conceived of as an intersubjective process or agreement to settle accounts between at least two antagonistic human subjects who agree to depart from violence in a shared present.<sup>41</sup> In the context of our accompaniment of the communities of the Mandur, reconciling with a river became a world-repairing proposal that involved relations between interethnic neighbors, human inhabitants and their territories, and the many beings that once inhabited, may still inhabit, and could again come to inhabit the watershed. Inextricably entangled with the reconstruction of a rural community’s socioecological memory of a river is this river’s memory, one that is shared with minerals, soil, fish, birds, turtles, trees, and other fluvial entities. In a Constitutional Court meeting held in Colombia in 2014, environmental and legal scholar Gustavo Wilches-Chaux presented a concept of the “right of a river to freely

40. Shaw, “Memory Frictions.”

41. Borneman, “Reconciliation after Ethnic Cleansing.”

develop its personality.”<sup>42</sup> He referred to the memory of water and the tenacious reclaiming of channels and beds—expressly, a river’s right to reclaim space from poorly planned human settlement, deforestation, and escalating urban growth. In another short text, Wilches-Chaux elaborated on the right of water to expand during times of rain, to be absorbed by soil, to flow, and to have a place to flow into.<sup>43</sup> I am provoked to understand a river’s changing form and biochemical degradation as manifestations of memory—both the evidence of its dispossession by anthropogenically induced landscape transformation and acts of remedial catharsis.<sup>44</sup> As bodies of water attempt to return and recover lost territory, they also involve—often powerfully oblige—human communities to engage with their restorative processes. How diverse communities react to these provocations is always an open-ended, situation-specific question with a wide range of possible responses.

Rural communities inhabiting the historic epicenters of armed conflict in Colombia, such as the municipality of Puerto Guzmán, are largely disillusioned with the government’s lack of commitment and inadequate implementation of the 2016 peace accords.<sup>45</sup> Peace is not a reality in these peripheral territories where ongoing violence against social leaders, environmental activists, and former combatants exists and socio-environmental conflicts have further intensified. Rather than attempt to resolve aspects of these conflicts through the increased militarization of conservation, riverine communities of the Mandur provisionally renewed dialogues that depended on bettering their modes of inhabiting disagreement and dissent. Elaborating the memory of the Mandur initiated tentative proposals for reparative strategies that did not only focus on ruptured social relations between human neighbors and kin. More profoundly, it led communities to reflect on damaged socioecological relations, including the degradation they continued to afflict upon soils, forests, water sources, and the many beings of the watershed. These damages occur within the constraints produced by years of war, ongoing structural inequality, and lack of democratic mechanisms and institutional presence.

### Coda

The territorial disputes between armed actors occupying Puerto Guzmán in the aftermath of the peace accords resulted in the selected assassination and attempted murder of more than a dozen residents of the watershed between October 2019 and February 2020. What *Semana* magazine characterized as “a caravan of death” affecting social leaders in Puerto Guzmán returned the municipality to the levels of insecurity and cases of forced displacement experienced in the 1990s.<sup>46</sup> Jorge Luis and I were forced

42. *Semana*, “Mocoa.”

43. Wilches-Chaux, *Los derechos del agua*.

44. Lyons, “Rivers Have Memory.”

45. See Arredondo, “The Slow Death of Colombia’s Peace Movement.”

46. *Semana*, “La caravana de la muerte.”

to suspend our project with the communities of the Mandur after lengthy conversations with members of the JAC and an assassination attempt occurred against one of the families most involved in the project when a narco-trafficking group overtook the upper areas of the watershed. Luckily, no one was ever threatened due to their participation in the project. The focus of the violence was explicitly aimed against social leaders and participants in the government-sponsored illicit crop substitution program, PNIS. Months later, in November 2020, Neriet, a leader of PNIS and then elected member of the Municipal Council, was assassinated alongside her husband in Galilea. It was as if a terrible prophecy had been fulfilled, after what she had told me several years earlier when we stood outside her home observing the murky waters of the Mandur.<sup>47</sup>

This article forms part of the process to elaborate the socioecological memory of the watershed. It is an exercise to honor the tenacity of the communities, families, and individuals who spurred renewed attempts to collectively reconcile with the river and each other. It is also a manner of taking stock of a methodological experiment that embraced the role of interdisciplinary environmental humanities frameworks for solidarity-building efforts in conflictive scenarios. Participatory action research projects during times of transition are deeply complex and risky in ways that are both similar and distinct to the uncertainties of all engaged ethnographic research practice. Writing about them entails even less clarity regarding the verb tenses one should utilize or how to describe processes that are emergent, fleeting, and aspirational. Ethnographic writing about the experience of creating conditions for something that is implicitly hesitant and provisional may only be able to articulate the layered mix of affects and initiatives striving to come into existence in the midst of a volatile political conjuncture<sup>48</sup>—hopes and frustrations, unexpected alliances and perpetual disagreements, latent ambiguity and explosive moments of antagonism, periods of seeming relative calm saturated with expectant sentiments for change. Our project with the communities of the Mandur contributes to what João Biehl and Peter Locke call an “anthropology of becoming,” quite literally in the sense of the unfinished and, more specifically, becomings that are violently hampered.<sup>49</sup> Sara Ahmed has written, “Where there is hope, there is difficulty.”<sup>50</sup> She goes on to say that hope does not only or always point toward the future. When it is behind us, hope may still be what carries us through despair, open wounds, mourning, and irreparable loss.

Jorge Luis and I had differential material capacities and privileges that allowed us to protect ourselves from the intensifying violence occurring in Puerto Guzmán. In the best-case scenarios, many members of the riverine communities have been forced to endure and carry on or to abandon their homes, lands, and livelihoods. One social leader

47. See Diaz Peña, “Asesinan una concejal.”

48. Stewart, *Ordinary Affects*.

49. Biehl and Locke, *Unfinished*.

50. Ahmed, *Living a Feminist Life*, 2.

who survived an assassination attempt and fled with his family in the middle of the night later told me that he was most saddened because “the process to recover the Mandur would collapse just when the watershed was beginning to tend to its wounds.” Our original intention of, in Kim Tallbear’s words, “standing with” our rural interlocutors in Puerto Guzmán turned into an act of writing against forgetting<sup>51</sup>—against forgetting community efforts to reimagine reconciliation, against forgetting the memories of the Mandur. I am haunted by the words of poet Bertolt Brecht who wrote from exile when fascism was growing strong in the 1930s, “In the dark times, will there also be singing? / Yes, there will be singing. / About the dark times.”<sup>52</sup> The window of possibility and anticipation in Puerto Guzmán following the signing of the peace accords has dramatically narrowed. Tragic events and impunity left more violent absences in the territory of the Mandur. Perhaps a way to conclude is by dwelling in this contracted space and remembering a raw sentiment expressed by Neriet and other social leaders during the community dialogues: “What happens to the Mandur happens to us,” they said. “We are the Mandur.”

KRISTINA LYONS is assistant professor of anthropology and is affiliated with the Penn Program in Environmental Humanities, the Center for Latin American and Latinx Studies, and the Center for Experimental Ethnography at the University of Pennsylvania.

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51. Tallbear, “Standing with and Speaking as Faith.”

52. Taken from Brecht’s Svendborg poem “Motto,” in Forché, *Against Forgetting*, 27.

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