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To Assemble Is to Think Through This World

Narrative Desire in the Films of Ana Vaz

ABSTRACT Perplexity, understood as an aesthetic category, offers an experience that engages confusion or bewilderment as an artistic tactic. Brazilian filmmaker Ana Vaz experiments with the aesthetic potential of perplexity in a series of short films concerned with historical struggles over land: *Amérika: Bahía de las Flechas* (Amerika: Bay of Arrows, 2016), *Há Terra!* (There is Land!, 2016), and *Apiyemiyeki?* (2019). These works acknowledge a fundamental desire to know, to narrativize, while at the same time resisting a proprietary conception of knowledge, understood as something to be extracted or deployed as a tool for dispossession. Vaz's sweeping camera movements rework the modernist legacies of structuralist film and its entanglements with the extractivist logic of settler-colonialism. Drawing upon the work of Donna Haraway and Maya Deren, Vaz develops a way of assembling or thinking cinematically through movement, while at the same time calling attention to the frame as a partial or incomplete view of what it records. Addressing cinema's involvement in the production of a frontier imaginary where expansion is presumed to signify progress, development, and growth, Vaz's films offer a compelling example of the way perplexity can challenge forms of knowledge framed in terms of the conquest of the unknown, animating instead "other forms of experience-as-narrative" that cannot be claimed or settled as property.

KEYWORDS Ana Vaz, experimental cinema, landscape, extraction, structuralist film, Indigenous territory

The trunk of a drowned palm tree stands out against the sky in the opening sequence of Ana Vaz's short film *Amérika: Bahía de las Flechas* (Amerika: Bay of Arrows, 2016). Shot with a wide-angle lens, the horizon bends gently at the edges of the frame. As Vaz's handheld camera tilts forward, more trees, branches bare, rise from an expanse of water. Suddenly, the camera plunges below the surface. When it reemerges a moment later, the world appears upside down. This radical shift in orientation underscores the unsettling ecological devastation on view, even as it insists on the inadequacy of the gesture to explain or make sense of what we see. With a nod to Donna Haraway, Vaz observes, "*to film is to world and to assemble is to think through this world.*"¹ The mobility of Vaz's handheld camera becomes a means for assembling or thinking through movement, while at the same time calling attention to the frame as a partial or incomplete view of what it records.

Vaz's encounter with the unruly waters that overtake the frame in *Amérika*, and her willingness to dwell with the uncertainty this water seems to embody, aligns her practice with the etymological roots of perplexity—which reference the act of twisting—here

1. Olivier Marboeuf, "Ana Vaz 'Occidente,'" *Vdrome*, March 20, 2016, www.vdrome.org/ana-vaz-occidente.



Still from *América: Bahía de las Flechas* (América: Bay of Arrows, 2016) by Ana Vaz.

recalling not only a reorientation in space, but also the entwining of disparate histories. It also evokes the temporal experience of suspension, as expressed by the phrase “to twist in the wind.” Perplexity, understood as an aesthetic category, offers an experience that engages confusion or bewilderment as an artistic tactic. Vaz experiments with the aesthetic potential of perplexity in a series of short films concerned with historical struggles over land: *América: Bahía de las Flechas*, *Há Terra!* (There is Land!, 2016), and *Apiyemiyekí?* (2019). These works acknowledge a fundamental desire to know, to narrativize, while at the same time resisting a proprietary conception of knowledge, understood as something to be extracted or deployed as a tool for dispossession.

Vaz works at the intersection of experimental film and contemporary art, exhibiting in both theatrical settings and installation formats. While most moving image work tends to suffer when displaced from one context to the other, the fragmentary forms and haptic interactions that Vaz mobilizes allow her work to move easily between the white cube gallery and black box theater. Though it is most often shown as a stand-alone short film, *América* was first developed as part of an installation.² In addition to increased spectatorial mobility, installation formats have also afforded Vaz opportunities to present the work alongside various supplemental materials, concretizing the impression that the film offers only an incomplete or partial view of what it depicts. An early exhibition of *América* included a case displaying bits of coral collected at the site where she shot the film and books that expand upon the histories it cites, including works by Aimé and Suzanne Césaire, as well as Charles Mann’s *1491: New Revelations of the Americas Before*

2. An early version of the work was exhibited in 2016 with Louis Henderson’s *The Sea is History* in the Dominican Republic, as part of the residency that supported the making of the work. Katy Diamond Hamer, “An Island Destination: Davidoff Arts Initiative in the Dominican Republic,” 2016, whitehotmagazine.com/articles/arts-initiative-in-dominican-republic/3399.

Columbus (2005).³ Notably, subsequent presentations of the work have not included this supplementary textual material. The artist's own published commentary operates as another kind of supplement, offering interpretive keys that nevertheless resist the temptation to complete the work. Importantly, rather than orienting the viewer toward what appears on screen, Vaz instead often elaborates on her own disposition and commitments as a filmmaker, including those shaped by her experience of growing up in Brazil.⁴ In what follows, I draw upon these insights while attending carefully to what does *and does not* materialize on screen, to show how Vaz's films are animated by narrative desire that remains heightened by the work's rejection of closure and completion.

Amérika engages "the trope of an 'insurgent nature' on the extractive frontier" that Jens Andermann associates with "the end of landscape," an impulse that he describes as "a hallmark of aesthetic modernity in Latin America for at least a century."⁵ Andermann is concerned with worldmaking practices that emerge in the "aftermath of the world-destroying genocidal violence of the Middle Passage and the Plantation."⁶ He offers readings of recent observational documentaries characterized by the "becoming story of the location," distinguishing this phenomenon from Martin Lefebvre's claims about landscape's appearance on screen whenever spectacle takes precedence over narrative. By contrast, Andermann is concerned with the depiction of a "crisis of place" in which the opposition between narrative and spectacle is itself suspended.⁷ The phenomenon Andermann describes is distinct from other recent films that Catherine Elwes categorizes as "artists' landscape wanderings" that are "untethered to the demands of narrative."⁸ While at first glance, Vaz's work might seem aligned with this mode of artists' cinema, it shares more in common with the long-form observational films analyzed by Andermann. In these films, "animals, things, and materialities become themselves agential and turn into characters in their own right."⁹ Andermann argues that as viewers, we are challenged to follow the development of a story where nonhuman agents might take on a lead role. In Vaz's work, this challenge is compounded by camera movements that unsettle familiar habits of observation and voice-over narration that introduces fragmentary accounts of history. Despite these differences, Vaz shares an interest in the question of how to forge

3. This installation of *Amérika: Bay of Arrows* appeared at 67, a basement gallery at 67 Ludlow Street, New York, curated by Carla Lucini, June 3–5, 2016.

4. Vaz was born in Brasília, Brazil, in 1986. She studied filmmaking at the Royal Melbourne Institute of Technology, Australia, and earned the equivalent of a master's degree in cinema and visual arts from Le Fresnoy Studio National des Arts Contemporains, Tourcoing, France. In an interview, Vaz observes, "when I left Brazil at 17, I was very troubled by the educational system there. Only later did I realize that the educational system I experienced had been designed under military rule, designing a system made for numbing imaginaries." Dirk de Bruyn, "Mobilities Between Place, Sound and Image: An Interview with Ana Vaz," *Senses of Cinema* 98, May 2021, www.sensesofcinema.com/2021/interviews/mobilities-between-place-sound-and-image-an-interview-with-ana-vaz.

5. Jens Andermann, *Entranced Earth: Art, Extractivism, and the End of Landscape* (Northwestern University Press, 2023), 14–18.

6. Andermann, *Entranced Earth*, 15.

7. The films Andermann discusses are *Survive* (2015) and *Los Reyes* (2018) by the Chilean documentary filmmakers Iván Osnovnikoff and Bettina Perut. Andermann, *Entranced Earth*, 218. See also Martin Lefebvre, "Between Setting and Landscape in the Cinema," in *Landscape and Film*, ed. Martin Lefebvre (Routledge, 2006).

8. Catherine Elwes, *Landscape and the Moving Image* (Intellect Books, 2022), 99.

9. Andermann, *Entranced Earth*, 213.

“new alliances under conditions of precarious survival,” which Andermann identifies as a common thread across recent art and cinema from Latin America.¹⁰

In 2016, when Vaz shot *Amérika*, the body of water at the center of the film, Lake Enriquillo, located in the southwest of the Dominican Republic along the border it shares with Haiti, had been rising precipitously for nearly a decade. In that time, the large cattle ranches and banana plantations that lined its shores began to disappear under water. The magnitude of the devastation was unprecedented. Already the largest lake in the Caribbean, at the height of the flooding, the total surface area of Lake Enriquillo grew to double its original size. No one could adequately explain the phenomenon.¹¹ Some scientists speculated that rapidly warming sea temperatures caused by climate change had triggered increased rainfall, causing the lake’s water levels to spike. Others noted the appearance of new underground springs after a large earthquake and the increase of runoff due to deforestation as factors contributing to the lake’s expansion. Local environmentalists pointed to the construction of a nearby dam as the source of the problem. Vaz does not attempt to solve the mystery of the lake’s rising waters. Instead, she develops a distinct formal grammar for depicting this site of ecological devastation in terms of its entanglement with a longer history of colonialism and anticolonial resistance.

After drifting among stands of trees drowned by the rising lake in the opening sequence of *Amérika*, we find ourselves back on land. Here the destructive waters glimpsed earlier have receded, leaving more lifeless trees scattered across a wide plain. Vaz’s handheld camera points skyward and begins to slowly rotate as it moves through this topography of ruin. Rugged, flood-ravaged ground fills the top half of the frame. Clouds gather at the underside of the horizon. A guide walks ahead, silently pointing out features of an otherworldly terrain.¹² The addition of sounds recorded underwater render his body buoyant, as if somehow afloat on dry land. Time moves strangely here. Eventually, at the end of an extended long take, a gruff voice off-screen speaks of revolts and acts of resistance that constituted “the first cry of freedom in America.” Lake Enriquillo, we are told, is named for Enrique, a Taíno chief who in 1520 led a revolt against the Spanish occupation of the island claimed three decades earlier by Christopher Columbus as “La Isla Española.” The guide explains that although Enriquillo was a Taíno chief, he adopted Spanish culture and even travelled to Spain. Encountering the way of life there, he thought to himself, “This can’t be!” The guide’s brief story calls attention to Enriquillo’s inversion of the directionality of Columbus’s voyage and the “discovery” of the “new world,” to explain his decision to fight for the rights of his people.

This narrative of Enriquillo’s revolt is pointedly incomplete. It does not refer to the legal systems instituted by the Spanish crown that led to the expropriation of Taíno land and the conscription of their labor, nor to the disasters that followed—famine caused by

10. Andermann, *Entranced Earth*, 213.

11. Randal C. Archibold, “Rising Tide Is a Mystery that Sinks Island Hopes,” *New York Times*, January 11, 2014.

12. In an interview, Vaz identifies the guide as a forester of Taíno origin named Guaranex. Barbara Bergamaschi Novaes, “Experimenting Post-Colonial Film Landscapes: A Conversation with Ana Vaz,” *Journal of Science and Technology of the Arts* 13, no. 3 (2021): 148.

the disruption of traditional agricultural practices and the spread of deadly diseases introduced by the Spanish settlers. It does not include the colonial rush to extract gold and other resources from the island, nor the turn to sugarcane production once other natural resources were exhausted. There's no mention of Spain's enslavement of people from West Africa to keep the sugarcane plantations running once the Indigenous population began to decline. Nor do we learn that many of those enslaved West Africans who escaped their captors fled to the mountains that surround the lake to join the self-organized band of Taíno rebels who found refuge there, creating an informal community that was able to evade capture by the Spanish authorities for years.¹³

América offers only a partial and fragmented account of the confrontations and escapes that inaugurated the history of anticolonial resistance in the Americas. Vaz describes her approach to narrative as rooted in both longing *and* strategic evasion. In an interview, she distinguishes her films from the work of a previous generation of avant-garde filmmakers, such as Rose Lowder and Marie Menken, who were more interested "in the materiality and structure of the cinematographic device" than in the "narrative desire" that animates her own work.¹⁴ At the same time, her approach to narrative is resolutely resistant to what she calls "official History." She explains, "the master's narrative is a narrative of domestication. And I think that a lot of my films are either witnessing, or trying to move away from this domestication."¹⁵ Pairing incomplete narratives with gestural camera movements that both emphasize and estrange embodiment, Vaz invites the viewer to encounter history by way of sensory engagement rather than as an object of knowledge to be possessed or mastered. The appearance of nonhuman agents (water, trees) on screen challenges the centrality of the guide's presence as the primary source of narrative significance. Furthermore, the movement of the camera invites an encounter with nonhuman modes of subjectivity.

Vaz writes (with Olivier Marboeuf) that "a camera is a perspective and hence a body that can only see partially."¹⁶ This proposition recalls Teresa Castro's suggestion that we think of the camera "as an animated, autonomous agent capable of acting upon others, similar to a subject" manifesting what she calls, after Jean Epstein, a "machinic subjectivity."¹⁷ The implications of this possibility are further explored by the collective

13. Erin Woodruff Stone, "America's First Slave Revolt: Indians and African Slaves in Española, 1500–1534," *Ethnohistory* 60, no. 2 (2013).

14. Vaz, "Experimenting Post-Colonial Film Landscapes," 150. Elsewhere Vaz observes, "When I started making films, I think the most touching and strongest thing for me was my encounter with the American feminist vanguards of the 1970s, in which there was a deep interest in the collapse of the narrative, not only as an exercise in style, but as a need to resituate the narrative within and through a world experience that was often carried out through the body, as in the films by Abigail Child and Sue Friedrich." Guilherme Carréra, "Amid the debris: Ruins of underdevelopment in contemporary Brazilian documentary" (PhD diss., University of Westminster, 2020), 278.

15. "On Expanding Histories and Reversing Narratives: A conversation between Ana Vaz, Tekla Aslanishvili, Sonia D'Alto and Itamar Gov," *NERO*, September 1, 2020, www.neroeditions.com/on-expanding-histories-and-reversing-narratives.

16. Olivier Marboeuf and Ana Vaz, "Conversation Piece," *Non-Fiction 03: The Living Journal* (2021), openacitylondon.com/non-fiction/issue-3-space/conversation-piece.

17. Teresa Castro, "An Animistic History of the Camera: Filmic Forms and Machinic Subjectivity," in *A History of Cinema Without Names*, ed. Diego Cavalotti, Federico Giordano, and Leonardo Quaresima (Mimesis International, 2016), 247–55.

Counter Encounters (Laura Huertas Millán, Onyeka Igwe, and Rachael Rakes) who ask, “How can recording technologies help rebuild or preserve relationships and forms of kinship with more-than-humans?” Overlooked technologies, they contend, “might point to the multisensorial body, to noncognitive and/or nondiscursive communication, and to technologies of nonhuman and nonliving ways of thinking, being, and knowing.”¹⁸ In *Amérika*, the camera becomes a means for animating ways of thinking through movement, offering an approach to knowing differently, while giving rise to an unexpected assembly of living and nonliving elements.

Amérika ends with a remarkable two-minute take. The filmmaker, now surrounded by verdant growth, swings her camera in a dizzying continuous vertical arc. We see her shadow as the camera rushes past the ground and skyward again and again. In the blurred motion of leaves, palm fronds, and grass, we also catch glimpses of a car, the wall of a small house, and other signs of contemporary habitation. Though it is not immediately clear how this site relates to the zones of ecological destruction that have dominated the film thus far, the film’s title offers a suggestive possibility. The “Bay of Arrows” names the cove on the eastern end of the island where Columbus’s ships made landfall in 1493. There, as the guide who appears in the previous scene briefly recounts, “they received them throwing arrows. They darkened the sky with arrows.”¹⁹ Cutting from the dried-up lake bed where these words are spoken to this lush grove, Vaz upends an already defamiliarized terrain, imaginatively refiguring the trunks of trees drowned by Lake Enriquillo into the spines of the arrows that are said to have met the arrival of Columbus’s ships to what is now the coast of the Dominican Republic. The spinning arc of her handheld camera captures shadows that place the filmmaker firmly within the territory she depicts while also giving form to a series of temporal leaps across the island and through time motivated by the film’s engagement with incomplete histories of collective resistance. The terrain we encounter in Vaz’s *Amérika* is littered with ecological ruins, dead trees, which the filmmaker wagers cinema can reanimate as arrows, signifying acts of rebellion not yet fully past.

In *Há Terra!*, a film completed the same year as *Amérika*, Vaz engages with more recent struggles over land while keeping a longer history of colonial dispossession in view. If *Amérika* uses the rotation of the camera to reanimate gestures of resistance to the arrival of colonialism in the Americas, then *Há Terra!* extends this entanglement of past and present to include challenges to internal displacement and the consolidation of land ownership in present day Brazil. The film features a young girl played by Ivonete dos Santos Moraes. Vaz formed a relationship with Ivonete while filming *A Idade da Pedra* (The Age of Stone, 2013), a short film that reimagines Brasília, the modernist capital of Brazil where Vaz was born, as a kind of monumental ruin, a specter existing simultaneously in the past and the future.²⁰ Vaz describes Brasília, a city planned around a single

18. Counter Encounters (Laura Huertas Millán, Onyeka Igwe, Rachael Rakes), “Technological Ecologies of Encounter,” *World Records* 7 (2022): 14.

19. This line refers to the Cigüayo warriors who met Columbus and his crew brandishing poison-tipped arrows.

20. Vaz established a close relationship with Ivonete over the course of a three-month period prior to the filming of *A Idade da Pedra*. However, once the shoot began, Vaz describes feeling the connection they had

central axis, as a place marked by “a re-enactment of a colonial gesture: drawing a cross in the middle of the country signifying a kind of Terra Nullius in order to erect a modernist symbol of forward progress and detachment from the past.”²¹ The founding of Brasília begins with the conception of its site as empty land available to be freely appropriated and developed. Vaz’s cinema unsettles this utopic ideology in ways that challenge the very notion of laying claim to what can be visually surveyed and recorded.

Há Terra! revisits the location where *A Idade da Pedra* was filmed, the sertão, the dry brushland of the country’s northeast region (which resembles the site where Brasília was built). In the previous film, Ivonete plays a character that Vaz describes as “the Kalunga heroine” of the film.²² In *Há Terra!* she plays herself, rather than a fictionalized character. The film opens with a series of searching camera movements motivated by a reciprocal exchange of glances between the filmmaker and Ivonete. As the film unfolds, she goes from being the object of the camera’s predatory gaze to a collaborator, responsible for the film’s sound. She records herself recounting bits of stories from her own life, including a fragmentary account of a conflict with an official who has pushed out local farmers with threats of violence. On screen we see Ivonete’s hand hovering over a grassy patch of land. She traces a line in the sandy soil, observing: “It belonged to some people, some ancient people who lived there, but then . . . There was the mayor, Big Filipe, who sort of bought half of the land, but he . . . wanted everything.” She goes on to explain how he forced people off the land, setting fire to their camps and sending in “henchmen” who threatened to kill anyone who remained once the fires were extinguished.

Ivonete’s brief narration of these events is punctuated by a disorienting refrain that repeats throughout the film and gives it its title, “Há terra!” (“There is land!”). The dialogue is borrowed from *Francisca*, a 1981 film by the Portuguese filmmaker Manoel de Oliveira based on the 1979 novel *Fanny Owen* by Agustina Bessa-Luís.²³ The eruptive force of this declaration draws together an imagined colonial past and political struggles over dispossession in the present. Later in the film we encounter an encampment where the red flag of the Movimento dos Trabalhadores Rurais sem Terra (Landless Workers’ Movement) has been raised.²⁴ Here the camera pans rapidly back and forth across the

established compromised by the intrusion of the camera and crew. The experience prompted her to pursue another collaboration with Ivonete that would explore a more reciprocal dynamic during the filming of *Há Terra!* three years later. Benjamin Burt, “Cities of Dreams and Despair: Utopia and Dystopia in Contemporary Brazilian Film and Literature” (PhD diss., University of California, Los Angeles, 2020), 79.

21. De Bruyn, “Mobilities Between Place.”

22. Filipa Ramos, “Discovering the World” (interview with Ana Vaz), *Mousse* 52 (February–March 2016): 260. The Kalunga are the descendants of people who escaped slavery and forged communities that included members of indigenous groups living in the state now known as Goiás, located in the central-western region of Brazil.

23. In a post-screening discussion at the Harvard Film Archive (HFA), Vaz explained that she included this borrowed phrase as an index of the colonial malaise afflicting the bourgeois class in nineteenth-century Portugal, where the film is set. “Ana Vaz short films introduction and post-screening discussion with filmmaker Ana Vaz and HFA Director Haden Guest,” February 4, 2024, harvardfilmarchive.org/calendar/ana-vaz-short-films-2024-02.

24. The Movimento dos Trabalhadores Rurais sem Terra (Landless Workers’ Movement), known as MST, was established in 1984. The Constitution of the Federative Republic of Brazil secures the right to property considered unproductive (i.e., unused or otherwise uncultivated). The MST cites this legal document to justify the land occupations it stages of large estates or latifúndios. (Nearly half of the land in rural Brazil is controlled by 1 percent of landowners.) Activists set up encampments of tents and other temporary dwellings on large tracts of land left



Still from *Há Terra!* (There is Land!, 2016) by Ana Vaz.

tree line, creating a visual blur that echoes the vertical motion of the camera in the final shot of *Amérika*. In both films, gestural, embodied camera movement seems to motivate further leaps across space and time. Exotic animals appear on screen: tigers, giraffes, leopards, and ostriches filmed at Brasília's zoo.²⁵ At one point, the camera approaches a mysterious round architectural portal, the entryway to a low-slung concrete structure unlike any of the more informal dwellings seen earlier in the film.²⁶ A series of fleeting short takes follow: close-ups of ethnographic texts, feathered artifacts, and nineteenth-century paintings by Johann Moritz Rugendas depicting encounters between Portuguese colonists and Indigenous communities that also include many of the animals that appear earlier. The darting camera movements that open the film participate in a reversal of gazes that calls attention to the act of filming as akin to hunting, surveying, or tracking. The logic of capture that unites these visual regimes is challenged by the steady gaze of Ivonete, who meets the camera's eye without flinching. As Vaz's camera moves swiftly across documents of colonial history in the film's final moments, other broken bits of borrowed dialogue heard earlier continue to resonate: "Where are we? I don't know . . ." Voices and beings that appear out of time, and evidentiary images that seem to resist the probing gaze of the camera animate a series of associations that challenge familiar documentary codes and conventions of narration and illustration. The history encountered here cannot be securely relegated to the past. Cinema is implicated in the project of

uncultivated, forcing a legal contest over ownership rights. For more on the history and tactics of the movement see Wendy Wolford, *This Land Is Ours Now: Social Mobilization and the Meanings of Land in Brazil* (Duke University Press, 2010).

25. Brasília's zoo also features prominently in Vaz's feature film *It is Night in America* (2022).

26. The building, which is located near the entrance of Brasília's zoo, was formerly a library, but in 2016 was transformed into a nursery for rescued animals.

laying claim not only to land, but also in the production of ethnographic knowledge of the people who have dwelled there in the past and those who might occupy it again in the future through collective forms of struggle.

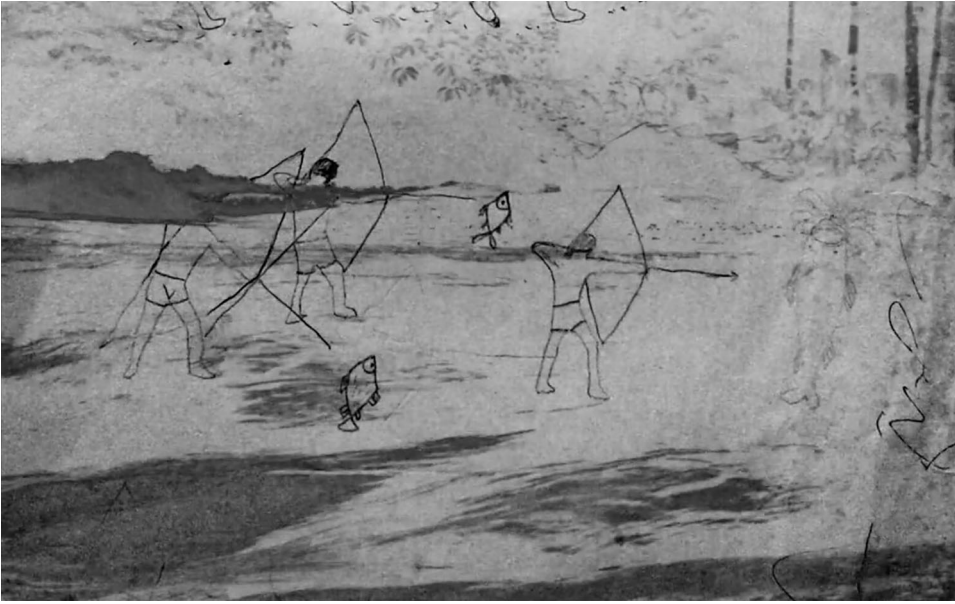
In *Há Terra! Vaz* trains her camera on static images drawn from the colonial imaginary. In *Apiyemiyeki?* she reverses this gaze by animating an archive of drawings made by the Waimiri Atroari, people indigenous to the Amazon, whose images depict what



Still from *Há Terra!* (There is Land!, 2016) by Ana Vaz.



Still from *Há Terra!* (There is Land!, 2016) by Ana Vaz.



Still from *Apiyemiyeki?* (2019) by Ana Vaz.

a handwritten title card identifies as “Objetos Hombre ‘Civilizado’” (Objects of “Civilized” Men). *Apiyemiyeki?* offers an experimental approach to ethnography that might best be described as alter-ethnography, or even anti-ethnography, terms the collective Counter Encounters uses to name films that center “marginalized histories and historical thinking.”²⁷ Here, as in earlier films, for example, when she includes reference to Enriquillo’s report from Spain in *América*, Vaz emphasizes moments where the ethnographic gaze is reversed, laying bare the violent forces that subtend the production of ethnographic knowledge.

The drawings at the center of *Apiyemiyeki?* were produced during a literacy program facilitated in 1985 by the Brazilian educator and activist Egydio Schwade and his partner, Doroti Alice Müller Schwade.²⁸ Guided by Paulo Freire’s philosophy of critical pedagogy, they engaged the Indigenous participants in an experimental bilingual process of learning. The practice of drawing facilitated a reciprocal exchange rooted in the idea that to teach is also to learn, and vice versa. As Egydio Schwade explains in an off-screen voice-over, the drawings began as simple prompts for naming the elements of everyday life in both the language of the Waimiri Atroari, Kiñayara, and in Portuguese. The process soon yielded fragments of narrative, documents of the destruction caused by the military dictatorship’s

27. Counter Encounters, “Technological Ecologies of Encounter,” 14. See also Catherine Russell, *Experimental Ethnography: The Work of Film in the Age of Video* (Duke University Press, 1999).

28. In 1992, Egydio Schwade established the Casa da Cultura do Urubuí (Urubuí Cultural Center), named for the river that flows parallel to the BR-174 highway. Located in the town of Presidente Figueiredo in the state of Amazonas, it houses an archive of three thousand drawings produced in the Yawará village of the Waimiri Atroari during the literacy project he facilitated with his partner Doroti in 1985. Ana Vaz, “Kamña’s Fire, Kina’s Calling,” *Non-Fiction 03: The Living Journal* (2021), <https://opencitylondon.com/non-fiction/issue-3-space/kamnas-fire-kinas-calling>.

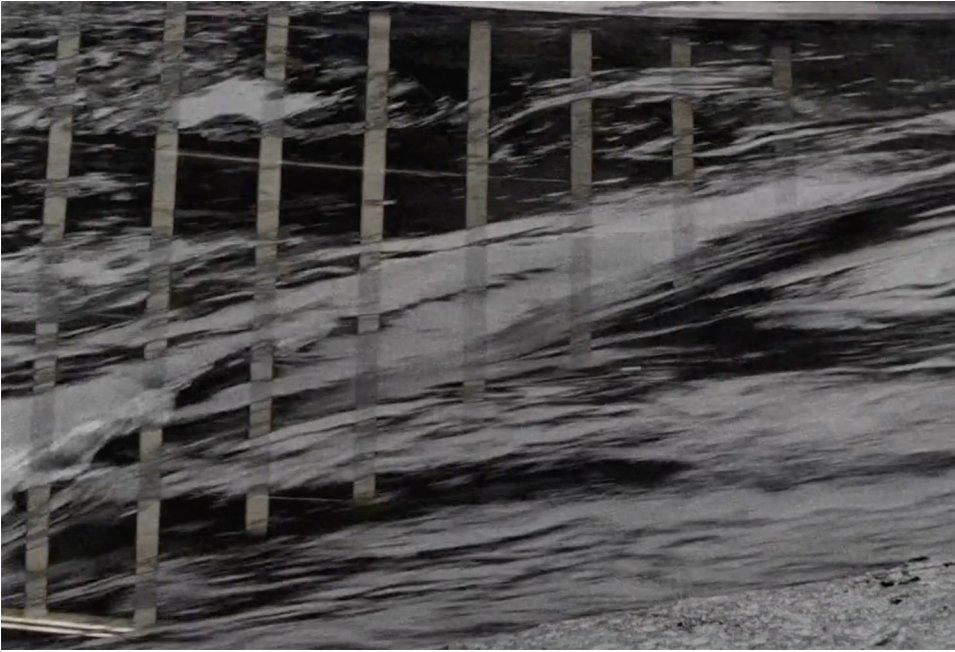
building of a major highway (BR-174) through their lands to facilitate access to tin mines in the early 1970s.²⁹ In the drawings, images of birds, houses, and people give way to scenes dominated by knives, rifles, chainsaws, FUNAI planes, and helicopters. FUNAI (The Fundação Nacional dos Povos Indígenas) is the acronym for the National Indian Foundation, the Brazilian government agency responsible for Indigenous groups that was established in 1967 during the military dictatorship. FUNAI imposed policies of integration on Indigenous communities and prioritized the construction of roads and hydroelectric plants to facilitate the expansion of agribusiness and mining over the needs of the original occupants of the land. “*Apiyemiyeki?*” is Kiñayara for “why?” and refers to the question posed by the Waimiri Atroari (or the Kiña as they call themselves) to the Schwades during these literacy sessions: “Why did the Kamña (civilized people) kill the Kiña?”³⁰ Vaz first encountered the drawings in a report issued by the Truth Commission of the State of Amazonas in 2012 documenting the violent tactics used by the military against the Waimiri Atroari during the construction of the BR-174 highway. As she explains, “The drawings were annexed to the report and testify in simple, inventive, and concrete ways to the atrocities they had suffered, whilst also providing a critical and indigenous perspective on the Kamña (the ‘civilized’).”³¹

As the film unfolds, the drawings appear liberated from their paper supports and reappear, by way of superimposition, in sites that reference violent events recounted off-screen. Schwade recalls one episode in which planes dropped napalm on a large celebratory gathering taking place on the lower banks of a river that runs through the Waimiri Atroari Indian Reservation. During this sequence, the river appears on screen. A drawing of a canoe drifts by, as if moving along with the rushing water that fills the frame. More drawings follow: colorful fish and hunters who appear as if moving through the water with bows and arrows poised to catch the fish. Notably, the drawings in this sequence do not illustrate the events being narrated. Instead, they offer glimpses of existence that defy the violence of the state. Scenes of everyday life among the Waimiri Atroari give way to a dazzling final sequence. A circular pan mirrors the movement of the river. A gridded stone plaza surfaces below the water. The iconic Cathedral of Brasília appears briefly, before being subsumed by reflective panes of glass. Tall windows ring a circular interior courtyard, catching the rays of the sun, which hovers above. This round modernist structure, like the Cathedral of Brasília, was designed by the architect Oscar Niemeyer. Today it houses Brasília’s Memorial of Indigenous Peoples, which itself became a contested site when it was repurposed as a museum of modern art in 1982. (After years of protest by Indigenous groups, the building was finally restored to its original purpose in

29. “Road construction through TI Waimiri Atroari, Amazonas–Roraima, Brazil.” *EJAtlas–Global Atlas of Environmental Justice*, July 30, 2023. ejatlas.org/print/roraima-transmission-line-on-indigenous-land-roraima-brazil.

30. Idelber Avelar argues that the Brazilian military regime’s objective was to populate and occupy the Amazon, which it regarded solely as a source of energy and raw materials, such that the “extermination of Amerindians became official state policy.” Idelber Avelar, “Brazilian Amerindians and the Legacy of the Military Dictatorship,” *Post-Conflict Literature: Human Rights, Peace, Justice*, ed. Chris Andrews and Matt McGuire (Routledge, 2016), 121–22.

31. Ana Vaz, “*Apiyemiyeki?* Manifesto,” Premiopipa, February 2020, www.premiopipa.com/wp-content/uploads/2017/04/APIYEMIYEKI_manifesto_single-Ana-Vaz.pdf.



Still from *Apiyemiyeki?* (2019) by Ana Vaz.

1999.) Vaz's camera movement follows the flow of the river, merging the light bouncing off the surface of the water with the light reflected by the superimposed curtain of glass. *Apiyemiyeki?* opens with a shot that takes us down the highway that bisects the territory of the Waimiri Atroari, a project intended to extend the modernization of Brazil from the capital into the farthest reaches of its northern territories. The film ends where this project began, in Brasília, carried along by a cinematic river of light where signs of survivance persist, what Anishinaabe critic and writer Gerald Vizenor defines as "an active sense of presence, the continuance of native stories" that are "renunciations of dominance, tragedy, and victimry."³² Vaz transforms the Memorial of Indigenous Peoples through this gesture. A museal enclosure where cultural preservation implies the threat of genocidal erasure becomes, through her dizzying camera movement, a beacon of Indigenous futurity.

In a letter to the filmmaker James Benning, Vaz asks, "[I]f we look hard enough, can the past re-emerge? [Y]our films are testimonies to these landscapes, all the while ceasing to be mere landscapes of wild contemplation to become territories, produced, haunted and haunting."³³ Leo Goldsmith situates Benning's work within a tradition of experimental landscape cinema defined by a focus on the natural or built environment that deemphasizes or eliminates the presence of human figures and action altogether. He

32. Gerald Vizenor, "Aesthetics of Survivance: Literary Theory and Practice," in *Survivance: Narratives of Native Presence*, ed. Gerald Vizenor (University of Nebraska Press, 2008), 19.

33. Ana Vaz and James Benning, "Looking and Listening," *Non-Fiction 03: The Living Journal* (2021), openacitylondon.com/non-fiction/issue-3-space/looking-and-listening.

observes, “the filming of the planet’s surface functions as a means of exploring both a set of immediate sensory data and what we might call its ‘embedded’ meaning, its deeper connections with historical, subcultural, or otherwise invisible phenomena.”³⁴ Goldsmith is concerned with the extent to which films belonging to this subgenre of cinema, such as Benning’s,³⁵ are implicated in the project of literal and metaphorical extraction through the presentation of the world’s surfaces as something to be mined for meaning. Goldsmith offers counterexamples of works that subvert this risk by way of additive strategies composed in postproduction. For instance, he cites the visual and auditory textual overlays that appear in Sky Hopinka’s short film *Jáaji Approx.* (2015), including recordings of the artist’s father sharing powwow songs, and a transcription of these recordings using the International Phonetic Alphabet, a system of notation used by linguists and lexicographers. These visual and auditory additions, Goldsmith observes, operate as “bearers of projected meanings: patterns, schema, and grammars that suggest attempts at mastery through interpretation and knowledge but never fully harmonize with the depicted landscapes themselves.”³⁶ As such, he argues, Hopinka’s work stages “a shift away from the notion of landscape as a fixed image for interpretation and meaning-extraction to that of an ever-shifting milieu of interrelation, opening the image of landscape to different modes of engagement and knowledge-production.”³⁷ The drawings of the Waimiri Atroari that appear superimposed on the river that runs through their territory in *Apiyemiyekí?* open up a related field of engagement. Vaz does not reduce this haunted site to a space where the past is revealed or fully surfaced, but instead calls upon the drawings to animate other ways of knowing this place and the lifeways of the people who continue to live there.

Vaz’s disorienting camera movements animate the spaces she films in another way. Vertical loops and circular pans privilege ecstatic motion over more conventional forms of legibility, and in this way also trouble the extractive impulses that Goldsmith identifies with long-take observational filmmaking. Vaz’s highly mobile camera reworks cinematic forms explored by structural filmmakers in the 1970s alongside other strains of experimental landscape cinema.³⁸ Michael Snow’s 1971 film *La Région Centrale*, shot on a rugged mountaintop in Northern Quebec, is perhaps the most relevant example. To produce the epic three-hour film in which “the camera moves around an invisible point completely in 360 degrees, not only horizontally but in every direction and on every plane of a sphere,” Snow employed a specially designed remote-controlled robotic

34. Leo Goldsmith, “Theories of the Earth: Surface and Extraction in the Landscape Film,” *World Records* 2 (2018): 51.

35. See for example *Landscape Suicide* (1987) and *Deseret* (1995).

36. Goldsmith, “Theories of the Earth,” 55.

37. Goldsmith, “Theories of the Earth,” 56.

38. Raquel Schefer offers another important touchstone for Vaz’s work, New Latin American Cinema, particularly Brazil’s Cinema Novo. She cites examples from the films of Glauber Rocha, where the sweeping motion of the camera becomes “the formal expression” of “the process of decolonization” or “non-European worldview, operating as a synthesis between ritual and politics, myth and history.” Raquel Schefer, “Aire, fuego, tierra y agua. El cine de Ana Vaz” (Air, Fire, Earth, and Water: The Cinema of Ana Vaz), *A Cuarta Pared*, April 10, 2016, www.acuartapared.com/es/ana-vaz (English translations by Erica Levin).



Still from *Jáají Aprox.* (2015) by Sky Hopinka.

apparatus, transported by helicopter to the isolated site where the film was shot, chosen because it bore no physical trace of human habitation.³⁹ *La Région Centrale* was to offer an “absolute record of a piece of wilderness” understood as something that “will increasingly become an extreme rarity.”⁴⁰ *La Région Centrale* belongs to the history of cinema’s imbrication with the settler-colonial fantasy of a frontier landscape more commonly associated with the genre of the Western. Snow pushes this frontier imaginary to its absolute limit, envisioning a film that “will be taken to outer space as a souvenir of what nature once was.”⁴¹ He cites his longstanding fascination with his father’s notebooks and snapshots documenting the far reaches of Northern Ontario, produced while working as a surveyor for a mining company in the early 1910s as the inspiration for the film.⁴² Just as the impulse to preserve Indigenous cultures is yoked to the threat of their erasure, the desire to preserve the wilderness (if only as image) is tied to extraction as a destructive force.⁴³

39. Michael Snow and Charlotte Townsend, “Converging on *La Région Centrale*: Michael Snow in Conversation with Charlotte Townsend 1971,” in *The Collected Writings of Michael Snow* (Wilfrid Laurier University Press, 1994), 58.

40. Michael Snow, “*La Région Centrale*, 1969,” in *The Collected Writings of Michael Snow* (Wilfrid Laurier University Press, 1994), 56.

41. Snow, “*La Région Centrale* 1969,” 56.

42. Snow, “*La Région Centrale* 1969,” 56.

43. Kenneth White adds another dimension to this reading when he observes that although Snow chose the site for its remoteness, “complete wilderness with nothing man-made visible,” the landscape north of Sept-Îles, Quebec, where he filmed *La Région Centrale*, “was something other than empty.” White emphasizes the proximity of Snow’s filmic apparatus to the Canadian Forces Station Moisie, also known as Pinetree Line Radar Station Moisie C-33, reading Snow’s “gigantic landscape film” in the context of the infrastructure of Cold War surveillance of the North American terrain. Kenneth White, “Strangeloves: From/De la région centrale, Air Defense Radar Station Moisie, and Media Cultures of the Cold War,” *Grey Room* 58 (2015): 51–83.

Snow describes *La Région Centrale* as “a gigantic landscape film equal in terms of film to the great landscape paintings of Cézanne, Poussin, Corot, Monet, Matisse.”⁴⁴ European landscape painting emerged as a genre in the seventeenth century, at a moment of increased expropriation and extraction, both in terms of the enclosure of the commons in Europe and the colonization of territories overseas.⁴⁵ Gabriel Rudas Burgos reminds us that the first landscapes, properly speaking, were made during the brief colonial period of Dutch rule in Brazil, when Johan Maurits, appointed colonial governor in 1636, led a scientific, intellectual, and artistic commission as part of a larger effort to consolidate Dutch control over sugarcane production on plantations dependent on slave labor.⁴⁶ Oksana Chefranova observes that landscape painting and Cartesian philosophy emerged concurrently, and that both share a preoccupation with perspective, framing, and the observation of nature from “a position of exteriority.”⁴⁷ She associates Vaz’s filmmaking with a practice of “expanded landscape” that departs from the traditional conception of landscape as an object of contemplation.⁴⁸ Vaz herself eschews the term “landscape,” and the promise of exteriority with which it has long been associated, preferring instead the term “territory.” She associates landscape as a genre with the colonizing act of laying claim to “empty” land. The filmmaker explains, “When I’m filming a territory, I try to escape from the notion of landscape. Unlike the landscape, the territory is produced by historical, biological, social, spectral, spiritual relationships, and they are alive; the landscape is never inert.”⁴⁹ Vaz’s approach is closely aligned with what Eduardo Viveiros de Castro identifies as “Amerindian perspectivism,” which assumes a complex order of relations between species rather than the sharp division between human and nonhuman life.⁵⁰

Snow’s use of a remote-controlled apparatus to create *La Région Centrale* insists on the absolute separation of the body of the filmmaker and machine, enforcing another division in which the body is positioned at a remove not only from nonhuman life, but from technology understood as nonliving. He tells one interviewer that he was eager to see the footage he shot when it returned from the lab because he only looked in the camera once while filming. “The film was made by the planning and by the machinery itself.”⁵¹ Vaz, by contrast, is interested in the relationship *between* the camera and the body. She cites Maya Deren as an important touchstone in this regard: “to think of the

44. This description of *La Région Centrale* is taken from a funding proposal Snow wrote for the film. Snow, “*La Région Centrale* 1969,” 53.

45. Denis E. Cosgrove, *Social Formation and Symbolic Landscape* (University of Wisconsin Press, 1998).

46. Gabriel Rudas Burgos, “Landscape,” in *Handbook of Latin American Environmental Aesthetics*, ed. Jens Andermann, Gabriel Giorgi, and Victoria Saramago (De Gruyter, 2023), 274.

47. Oksana Chefranova, “After Nature: The Expanded Landscapes of Ana Mendieta and Ana Vaz,” *Cinéma & Cie International Film Studies Journal* 20, no. 34 (2020): 46.

48. Chefranova, “After Nature,” 49.

49. Novaes, “Experimenting Post-Colonial Film Landscapes,” 148.

50. Eduardo Batalha Viveiros de Castro, *Cannibal Metaphysics: For a Post-structural Anthropology* (University of Minnesota Press, 2014), 49.

51. Snow and Townsend, “Converging on *La Région Centrale*,” 60.

mechanism of cinema as an extension of human faculties is to deny the advantage of the machine.”⁵² Vaz observes,

In the case of Deren’s cinema, what we experience is a reciprocal alliance between the dancing-breathing-watching body and the machine as an accomplice, transforming our perception of conscious and unconscious relationships between the mind and the image, the image and the body, always as phenomena rather than event.⁵³

Deren offers a framework for making sense of perplexity as an aesthetic that embraces incompleteness, animation, and suspension as formal strategies, to generate a distinctly “cinematographic form of knowledge.”⁵⁴ Film scholar Sarah Keller argues, “unfinished, contingent, or liminal states appealed to Deren, and her aesthetic exploited these conditions wherever possible.” Rather than reading the projects Deren left unfinished as failures, she finds in them evidence of “an aesthetic that respects a rejection of closure and completion.”⁵⁵ Keller extends this embrace of incompleteness to Deren’s interest in ritual, an interest shared by Vaz.⁵⁶ She writes, “Practice is the operative word for ritual activity (process, not product).”⁵⁷ Deren’s study of the rituals of Vodou led her to observe “a constant ‘disappearingness’” in acts and objects that take on significance only in the process of performing the ritual—significance that does not endure once the ritual has ended. Rituals must therefore “always be done again.”⁵⁸ Vaz’s interest in ritual intersects with Deren’s where it affords opportunities to “awaken our sensorial perception of time and space in new configurations” through alliances forged *between* the camera and the body.⁵⁹

Vaz’s work offers a compelling example of how the aesthetics of perplexity challenge forms of knowledge framed in terms of the conquest of the unknown, or the impulse to create “an absolute record” of what might otherwise be lost, instead animating forms of embodied knowing that cannot be claimed or settled as property. In *América*, we enter a ruined terrain led by a guide whose historical narrative is structured by ellipses and whose movement through the space is estranged by the rotation of the camera. Fragments of his story animate wild leaps across time and space, allowing us to assemble the world anew through the movement of an arrow traveling against time. In *Há Terra!*, cries from cinema’s past, dislodged from the collective colonial unconscious, erupt as if called forth by violent acts of displacement in the present. Rapid pans across contested land

52. Maya Deren, “Cinema as an Art Form” (1946), cited in Ana Vaz, “Filming the Dark,” *Sonic acts 2019: hereafter* (Sonic Acts Press, 2019), 320.

53. Vaz, “Filming the Dark,” 320.

54. I borrow this phrase from Patricia Feise-Mahnkopp, who takes up Deren’s work in Christine Reeh-Peters, Stefan W. Schmidt, and Peter Weibel, eds., *The Real of Reality: The Realist Turn in Contemporary Film Theory* (Brill, 2021), 256.

55. Sarah Keller, *Maya Deren: Incomplete Control* (Columbia University Press, 2014), 2.

56. In an interview Vaz remarks that filmmaking entails “certain rituals of empathy, of understanding, of misunderstandings, of perplexity.” See “Ana Vaz | 20th Festival de Arte Contemporânea Sesc_Videobrasil, 2017,” December 5, 2017, Videobrasil, site.videobrasil.org.br/en/canalvb/video/2210173/Ana_Vaz_20o_Festival.

57. Sarah Keller, *Maya Deren*, 166.

58. Maya Deren, *Divine Horseman: The Living Gods of Haiti* (1953), cited in Keller, *Maya Deren*, 167.

59. Vaz, “Filming the Dark,” 322.

inaugurate the arrival of animals on screen, nonhuman presences dislocated from scenes of colonial encounter. Linear temporality gives out, unsettling the powerful fantasy of a land unmarked by what has come before. *Apiyemiyekî?* reanimates a terrain of relations between humans and nonhumans that the violent policies of the dictatorship had disavowed. Here the distance between the lands of the Waimiri Atroari and the capital of Brazil is traversed not by the construction of a highway, or even the leap of an arrow, but by a streaming river of light where the Indigenous lifeways of the past, present, and future converge luminously on screen. Vaz calls for “a cinema that embraces the possibilities of other forms of experience-as-narrative to awaken our subjective, libidinal, and political imaginaries outside the inscriptions of the capitalist-colonial unconscious.”⁶⁰ Perplexity names an aesthetic category for describing what “other forms of experience-as-narrative” might feel like in practice. These are experiences that entail ecstatic leaps, repetitions, reversals, evasions, animations, suspensions, and moments of profound uncertainty. The incompleteness of the broken narratives we encounter in these films invites us to dwell with what is not present or made explicit, to register the means cinema offers for assembling thought, confronting us not only with what has been, but also helping us to remain present as entwined in still “unfinished configurations of places, times, matters, meanings.”⁶¹ ■

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60. Vaz, “Filming the Dark,” 322.

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